

A Priesthood Made Ready for the Future

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The Melchizedek Priesthood

An edited transcript

We have previously looked at one or two aspects of the Levitical function of the Aaronic priesthood, but I want to begin to look at the expression of the priesthood in the future. There is clearly an Ezekiel temple. In Ezekiel 40 and from there on, it talks about the configuration of such a temple, its lineaments and its proportions. It is given in such remarkable detail that it is hard to imagine it being just an allegory. Surely it must be something actual and that will exist in the redeemed Israel. Some believers have a difficulty with that because it talks about the restoration of sacrifices performed by priests. I have heard estimable men of God, who hold so jealously the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God, say, "No there cannot be another temple; there cannot be a resumption of sacrifice." But does it mean that such a sacrificial ministry invalidates the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ? Or does it memorialize it?

Just as the history of sacrifice prepared Israel for the Lamb that would come without spot or blemish, and whose blood would be shed as a once-and-for-all, it is quite possible that a sacrificial ministry would be resumed in the millennial Israel, not to replace that sacrifice of the Lamb, but to be a memorial and reminder, to bring us back to a deepened appreciation of what has been given. It cannot be a substitute, and will detract nothing from the efficacy of the Lamb's sacrifice, but rather enhance it.

If this is true, there needs to be a priesthood to perform sacrifice. I am therefore directing your attention to Ezekiel 44 and to the last chapters of the great prophet. Ezekiel is a prophet both of judgment and restoration, like Jeremiah and Isaiah. They were prophets that did not withhold themselves from bringing the oracles of God. They spoke of a future judgment of such severity that included expulsion and exile from the Land, and they were the same prophets to whom the privilege was given of speaking of restoration and return. If you withhold yourself from the one, you will be denied the privilege of the other. If you do not want to speak of hard things, you will not be able to speak of glorious things, and so we have here a wonderful example of their obedience. We see how in remarkable detail God did not withhold from Ezekiel the word of restoration by which the book of Ezekiel is concluded.

In chapter 44: 5-8, it talks about the House of the Lord:

And Jehovah said unto me, "Son of man, mark well, and behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears all that I say unto thee concerning all the ordinances of the house of Jehovah, and all the laws thereof; and mark well the entrance of the house, with every egress of the sanctuary. And thou shalt say to the rebellious, even to the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: O ye house of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations, in that ye have brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to profane it, even my house, when ye offer my bread, the fat and the blood, and they have broken my covenant, to add unto all your abominations. And ye have not kept the charge of my holy things; but ye have set keepers of my charge in my sanctuary for yourselves."

The index of Israel's condition is always to be located in the condition that prevails in the temple and with the priesthood. God has not forgotten that in the age of Israel's apostasy a great abomination had taken place in the holy place. The priesthood had been turned into a profession by men who had no Aaronic qualification at all. Priest were politically appointed as a reward for those who 'played the game' and trafficked in the holy things. And God has not forgotten. There will be a penalty, an enduring penalty for those who have allowed that desecration. To allow the house of God to be defiled and profaned is to slur God and to cheat the nation of a standard by which its own testimony is to go forth to the nations.

It is interesting that Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the court of the Gentiles. He said: "My house should be a house of prayer for all nations." Instead of going to any other aspect of the temple where he might have displayed the same kind of protest, He went to the court of the Gentiles. It was in this very place that the faith of God, the purposes of God and the very nature of God itself were being profaned by turning the holy thing into a business: "You have made My house a house of merchandise, and therefore you have robbed the nations of the very thing that would have established their sanctity. You have denied them access to Me that was supposed to have had its origin with you and which would have been an example and model to the nations lest they themselves would fall into the things that are profane. For the priest shall teach the people (or nations) the difference between the sacred and the profane." But if priests themselves become profane, become money-lenders and money-changers and turn sacrifice into a form of profit, then what can be hoped for?

This is what the Lord is lamenting and condemning. "You have not kept charge of My holy things; but ye have set keepers of My charge in My sanctuary for yourselves." In other words, they serve your own purposes. We can see something like this today where contemporary worship, more often than not, is serving the purposes of men or church meetings and establishing an 'atmosphere' conducive to our spiritual enjoyment. But let us not call that worship. Any act which is not exclusively for God, but serves the purposes of men by whatever name it is called is ipso facto no longer worship. Worship is exclusively a priestly service unto God, for His benefit, His blessing, His delight and His honoring, or it is not worship at all. But in our time, has not praise and worship become a kind of 'business' all of its own displaying its 'worship leaders and teams'? Does it not seem that Churches are more noted for their worship, when it is nothing much more than enjoyable and uplifting music? But when it has the purposes of man in mind, His temple is being desecrated. Are we not guilty now of the same sins as Israel was then?

Thus saith the Lord Jehovah, "No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into my sanctuary, of any foreigners that are among the children of Israel" (Ezek. 44:9).

Circumcision of the flesh is the critical *sine qua non*, the absolute vital necessity for any approach to God. You cannot come before Him in your flesh. We are reminded that the Aaronic priest was not allowed to ascend to

the altar in order to make sacrifice with anything other than a ramp, lest in lifting his leg to the next step, something of his flesh would be seen in the parting of his garments. A ramp was prescribed that he could go up in a gradual ascent, that no flesh would be revealed.

Do we have this kind of sensitivity? And would it not affect everything we are in God? God abhors flesh, especially in the holy place. And ironically, nowhere is flesh more conspicuous than in the holy place! We might get away with it in casual fellowship, but to seek to serve God in the flesh or to use the flesh, our own carnal minds, heart or will in what we think is serving the purposes of God is, in my opinion, desecration.

But the Levites that went far from me, when Israel went astray... (Ezek. 44:10)

The same core of people, who stood at Moses' side, subsequently themselves erred and turned from that place of consecration to allow the temple, the thing that they should have guarded, to become a court in which the uncircumcised trafficked for themselves. God has retained a memory of that and is now pronouncing a judgment that these Levites will never again be allowed to minister unto Him. This violation is so profound that it seems they are millennially and eternally cut off from ultimate priestly service, but will have a more limited jurisdiction. Because the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable, He cannot remove altogether the Levitical calling.

God will limit this priesthood in such a way as to always remind them of their historic error, and to remind us to walk before God rightly and in a priestly demeanor. We cannot allow any flesh in the holy place, or any misuse of the holy place for our ends however much we invoke the name of the Lord. In fact, to use the phrase 'in the name of the Lord,' when our own religious purposes are being served is itself desecration. Is it not itself the very height of profanation? Better that we not use that phrase than we should use it so as to justify some activity of ours in the flesh and for ourselves. By invoking His name, are we not deepening the profanity and deepening the desecration?

These are things given for our instruction upon whom the ends of the age have come. It is wonderful to look back to the past and the origin of priesthood and to gain some sense of what that meant. How else shall we walk out our own Melchizedek calling unless we understand the constituent elements that distinguish priesthood? We read that after all of the

preparations for the priesthood: the washings, the sprinkling of blood, the putting on of the vestments and the carefully prescribed use of the anointing oil, and before they could begin their service, they waited seven days at the door of the tent of meeting. Seven is the number of completion.

If there is anything that yet remains after all of the requirements that would have reduced any human impulse to get into the act and to use God's holy calling as a place for self-aggrandizement, it had to be submitted to seven days of waiting. If there is any itch to be seen in service or to be acknowledged and recognized, all of which would contradict what priestliness means, it would die during those seven days. Further, it was to be performed in front of the door to the tent of meeting where all Israel would be instructed by the example of the priesthood before them, which is exactly the purpose of priesthood.

Out of the twelve tribes, God took one, and gave them the sole function of priesthood. They were not to engage in merchandising or farming. Their sustenance came from those who brought their offerings. They had no inheritance in the Land. God said: "I am your inheritance." They were to be a separated presence in the midst of the twelve tribes in order to affect the conduct, the attitude to, and the respect for the God of Israel. His sanctity was to be maintained and preserved by one entire tribe (the tribe of Levi). In the same way Israel itself as the 'nation of priests and light unto the world' was to serve that same purpose for the nations. Israel as the center, by its example, was to model for the nations what ought to be its attitude and conduct towards God as it is exhibited by this priestly nation in its midst.

When the twelve tribes set up their tents in the wilderness, the tabernacle of God was set in the midst, with the priesthood and the eleven tribes surrounding it as an example to the whole nation. But the nation itself is yet intended by God to be an example to the nations. Something organic is lacking in the divine provision of God for the nations that could only be provided by a people called Israel in their calling as a 'nation of priests and a light unto the world.' In the absence of that priestly service, the world languishes in darkness. The nations are currently suffering their present condition because a priestly nation is not in its midst serving its function. Perhaps there is an unconscious resentment for that failure, and may well be an underlying cause of latent anti-Semitism in the nations. Perhaps they

intuit without any biblical knowledge that the Jews have failed to be to them what God had intended.

If that is a root cause of hatred of the Jew, out of resentment for failed priestly ministry, what then is the answer? Surely it is for the Jew to come into his destiny and calling, and to be to the nations what God intended that he should. Instead of resentment and hatred called anti-Semitism you will have Gentiles washing their feet, bearing their burdens, hewing their wood, drawing their water and being to them a supportive people appreciating and glorying in the grace of God that has come through a people restored to their calling of which they will be the beneficiaries. The nations will be changed by this ministrations, by a priestly people teaching them the difference between the sacred and the profane.

What does it take to maintain this difference in ourselves as priests? How do we keep alive the sense of the holy? How do we recognize what is profane, and how do we discern that which contests against the holy and seeks to threaten it, if not eliminate it? Can we discern something destructive, even though it might parade as being outwardly virtuous and as being morally right? It is one thing to recognize apparent evil, but real discernment makes a divide between what is merely good to that which is holy and perfect. Anyone can understand blatant evil, but a priest is so acutely honed to appreciate and to maintain the holiness of God that he flinches and instantly recoils at anything that purports to be virtue, purports to be clever, purports to be right and to be desired as good, because he knows that that is the deepest threat to that which is holy. Therefore, he will find himself in painful circumstances, sitting in charismatic congregations where everyone is having a ball, where everybody is singing and laughing at the top of their voices, and he is strangely churned up on the inside. He senses something grievously wrong; that the worship is hollow; that it is not being directed to God but rather it is serving human and religious purposes.

Priests unto the Lord are not stamped out on an assembly line into some kind of religious calling; they don't wear titles or dress in an appropriate attire. Priesthood is something to be nurtured, even jealously guarded, because evidently the Levites, who were called to this and who served a specified purpose, lost it so grievously. They allowed, or participated with, the uncircumcised and allowed them even to come into the holy place to perform their trafficking in the very place that God had reserved for Himself as sanctuary, the place of His dwelling and the place of His presence.

That is how far priests can fall. If they do not maintain the sense of the holy and are not able to discern the things that are profane, then they will fall and fall grievously. If the sense of the holy is lost, there is no hope for humanity. If this is not maintained, where else can we expect the sanctity of God to be acknowledged, revered and maintained? As the priest, so also the people. God is ploughing deeply regarding this theme in order to insert something into our inner man, lest we fall back again into the lassitude that governs the many. We must maintain our distinction as Melchizedek priesthood. If we do not maintain it, what can the Church be to Israel? How shall it move Israel to envy, to jealousy, if it itself has become profane?

The Levites that went far from me, when Israel went astray, that went astray from me after their idols, they shall bear their iniquity (Ezek. 44:10).

The key element is the relationship with the Lord. Thought they kept their title as priests, and seemed outwardly and externally to function, yet they went away 'from Me.'

Yet they shall be ministers in My sanctuary, having oversight at the gates of the house, and ministering in the house: they shall slay the burnt-offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister unto them (Ezek. 44:11).

There is a place for them, but it is in the outer court. It has its focus in the maintenance of the buildings, in the cutting up of the sacrifice. They can hew and hack, but they cannot come up to God. They serve in the externals, but God will not allow them to minister unto Him. They have forfeited that by their sacrilege. God does not completely abandon them, but gives them a necessary function, though the highest function will be denied them.

"Because they ministered unto them before their idols, and became a stumbling-block of iniquity unto the house of Israel; therefore have I lifted up My hand against them," saith the Lord Jehovah, "and they shall bear their iniquity" (Ezek. 44:12).

The wages of sin is death. God may forgive, but there is a consequence that remains. God is jealous for Himself, not because He is egocentric, but because He knows that if He is desecrated, men will lose, or will never have, the sense of Himself. It is the sense of God that is the foundation of the Church, brought by true apostles and prophets. They don't bring that sense by a technical posturing or because they know the 'principles' by which the Church is established or its problems are resolved. The foundation they lay is

God Himself. They came, trailing clouds of glory with them. They bring the sense of God, because they come to the Church out from the holy place, from a place of communion in the knowledge of God. Even when they are not explicitly speaking of those things, they are still communicating the underlay, the tremor of God, the sense of Himself.

That is why Paul's sharing of the gospel left men eternally without excuse. When he was on Mars Hill, confronting the intellectuals and philosophers, we read that some 'clave to him and believed while others said they would hear him again in this matter.' One such occasion with Paul was so much the testimony of God that not one of them who heard him will be able to stand without excuse in the Day of Judgment. They all saw Paul and what he really represented, but all quite differently. Some just saw a Hebrew man in ordinary garb, who seemed so ordinary and undistinguished from a Greek philosophical perspective. But what he said was given of God. Some cleaved to Paul and were saved. They cleaved to him because the man was the message; he was the thing in himself. This is the apostolic, prophetic and priestly distinctive. An apostle is not a title one wears, but something wrought by God in the one who is called, whose profoundest function is to communicate the sense of God as God. That is the essence of the priestly call.

A true priest labors to fight against profanity in the House of God, not primarily in the world. He discerns the genius of God as God, the sense of Himself, and is so imbued by that so as to effect everything that issues from him whether he is speaking explicitly about God or not; he is yet communicating the sense of God. That is why people were afraid of Paul. Though he says that his presence was nothing impressive, he yet brought the sense of God.

They shall not come near unto Me, to execute the office of priest unto Me, nor to come near to any of My holy things, unto the things that are most holy (Ezek. 44:13).

The architecture of the temple was modeled after the dimensions given to Moses on Sinai for the tabernacle that was carried in the wilderness for forty years. The various parts of it like the poles, the coverings and the furniture were borne only by Levites. David forgot that when he thought of moving the ark of God on an ox-cart. A man, not qualified, touched it and perished, as it had to be borne, not on an ox-cart, but on the shoulders of priests. It was their function to bear the holy things.

There was an outer court where the brazen altar and the water of washing were. It was here that the sacrifices were killed, cut up and washed, and then burnt as a sweet smelling savor unto God. There was much activity in the outer court, many priests, much scurrying, much physical activity. The Levites were allowed to continue to perform in that place. Then there was the inner court. Not so many priests were to be found there, only a few replacing the showbread or keeping the menorah lit and handling the incense of anointing. Then there was the most holy place. There was yet another veil, and only one priest was allowed there, the high priest. Even then he was only allowed in once a year to atone for his own sin and that of the nation on the Day of Atonement, bringing the blood of a lamb without blemish to be sprinkled on the Mercy Seat.

His garment was fringed with bells that jingled and a rope tied around his waist. If those bells stopped jingling, and he died in the most holy place because of some infraction or presumption on his part that he thought to get away with, or was unconscious of, or taking a liberty and not maintaining the sanctity required of the high priest, then he would be struck down dead. The sacrifice could not therefore be performed and Israel would remain in its sin. The whole nation held its breath that the bells would not stop jingling. The high priest was in preparation for this function all the year long. It was so sacred because the whole destiny of the nation hinged on this one function of coming into the holiest place.

The inner court that preceded it was illuminated by the seven-branch menorah, but the holiest place had no illumination that was external. It was not open to the sky as the outer court. It had no burning menorah as in the inner court. Its illumination was God himself, the Shekinah glory, the presence of God in the holiest place of all. God declared that He would meet with the priest above the mercy seat and between the cherubim.

They shall not come near unto me, to execute the office of priest unto me, nor to come near to any of my holy things, unto the things that are most holy; but they shall bear their shame, and their abominations which they have committed (Ezek. 44:13).

This should make us to want to fear and revere God. How would you like to suffer this fate because of an indiscretion on your part, or a lack of high seriousness in regard to your call? Or you have allowed yourself to traffic in lesser things that would permanently keep you from the holiest place of all and you are condemned to a kind of lesser activity, though kept from the

ultimate? And that would be your shame forever. These are serious cautions that we need to consider.

Their being confined to a lesser activity will always be for them a continual remembrance that they violated against the holiness of God. Though He has forgiven us our sin, there is a judgment that we have to bear, namely, we will be kept from ministering unto Him. We can minister unto men, we can cut up the sacrifice, can burn the wood, we can prepare the incense, we can light the candles we can tidy up, but we cannot come into the holiest place of all to minister unto Him. And yet, it is in that place that the sense of God is communicated. "There I will meet with you," He says, "and something of My very self will come into you as you approach Me." This is ultimate privilege, and from here we are going to go on to talk about how we have access today to the holiest place of all. Can we come into that presence and find a sense of God and from that place go out into the places of calling, whether it is Singapore, Argentina or New York, and bring something of the sense of God that is to be found there and there alone?.

"Yet will I make them keepers of the charge of the house, for all the service thereof, and for all that shall be done therein. But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near to Me to minister unto Me; and they shall stand before Me to offer unto Me the fat and the blood," saith the Lord Jehovah, "They shall enter into My sanctuary, and they shall come near to My table, to minister unto Me, and they shall keep My charge" (Ezek. 44:14-16).

Who are these sons of Zadok? Zadok means righteous, hence priests of righteousness. They may well be a remnant, a minority from among the priests who did not violate the sanctity of God and who kept His charge. Their eternal reward, as the others had an eternal shame, is summed up in the statement, 'they shall come up to Me' and 'they shall minister unto Me.' The others could minister to men in the outer court, but the sons of Zadok, who kept their integrity, who were not 'one of the boys' or who would not 'go along with the crowd,' retained their priestly integrity.

To keep their priestly integrity when Israel went astray is the distinction that God is rewarding. It is one thing to keep it when conditions are conducive to priestliness, but to keep it when conditions are hostile and adverse is all the more a priestly keeping. Even now, the character and conditions of our age are adverse to Zadokite priestliness. To maintain this kind of integrity before

God in an exclusive separation in the honoring of Him, when everybody is into the current fashion, obtains ultimate reward. And how many fashions are continually being presented: 'the body of Christ,' 'the five-fold ministry,' 'power evangelism,' 'church growth,' or the movements that franchise apostles and give them districts and titles where you are welcome to 'join the club' and share in the reward of it! But to keep yourself and your integrity from all that is reserved for true priests.

The requirement of keeping our integrity demands the prayer, the fellowship and the correction of those with whom we are joined in like calling. In my opinion, we cannot keep a Zadokite integrity except in close fellowship or community. We all have blind spots; we can all drift, and we need someone who knows us well and sees in love something at its inception. Are we in an atmosphere where a brother or sister can call our attention to it? If not, it will not be long before that thing will harden beyond the point of remedy. We need to speak the truth often one to another in love. We have things that we cannot perceive about ourselves, which can only be seen by another, but they have to be in a frequency of relationship by which the subtlety of change can be noted at its inception.

When I come to this subject, I often think of my return to my Pentecostal assembly in New Jersey. While having been away for a few years, I was invited to speak on a Sunday morning. I learned the Saturday before that the three most prominent and spiritual women in the congregation had all freaked out and had forsaken their husbands. They had become whores and engaged in the most astonishing immoral conduct. And so the next morning the Lord put a message on my heart about detecting sin while it is yet today, because tomorrow is already too late.

I said: "Why is it that you did not observe something at its inception, maybe the first air of flirtation? You do not have to wait for full blown whoredom to be shocked out of your skin. Why weren't you acute enough and close enough in proximity to begin to discern the first signs of something that gives a caution in your heart? Shouldn't your love for that person be willing to be misunderstood and be an offence? Out of love, could you not have felt the necessity to say, 'I don't know what it is; I can hardly express it, but I am disturbed. I am seeing something in you that I haven't seen before. There is a lightness about you, and you seem to show yourself in a way that draws the attention of men that makes me concerned. Are you aware of that?'"

I often say to congregations: "Can you tell your pastor, while there is yet time, that his voice is changing? That his manner and style of speech has gone from a conversational reality to a kind of affected, ministerial style?" When that hardens, it is already too late to bring him back to the place of reality. He himself is unaware that he has moved from the one to the other, unless someone will draw his attention to a subtlety that they hear even in the resonance in his voice. A lot depends on your acute discernment, not a spirit of suspicion, but a spirit of discernment, which will only be factored in love. God will never allow you either to discern or to express your discernment if it comes out of a critical spirit that wants to be exalted at the expense of another.

My indictment that Sunday morning was against the whole fellowship: "You are merely shallow Sunday saints. You are not in that frequency of relationship, nor have you the courage for truth and love by which correction might have come early enough to have saved those women from walking in that way and ending up in the calamity that has come. It is our personal responsibility to maintain Zadokite integrity, but we cannot do it alone.

Those who are most susceptible to falling into error and losing their calling, going from being a true prophet to a false, are those who need this kind of correction more than others. But if they are surrounded by a paid staff, who more often than not are afraid to suggest that there is a need for correction, then those men will drift into a place of increasingly becoming affected and false. Their staff will withhold the correction because they do not want to bite the hand that feeds them. We have to seek a fellowship of kindred souls, kindred spirits, who are jealous for this thing. Where two or three are gathered in His name; it doesn't take many, but it does take two or three of a very particular kind: real saints, who would not withhold speaking the truth in love.

Likely such a small knit of life will be at first faltering and inconsistent, even somewhat fearful because they have not been this way heretofore. They had only been in the world, and in the world they are self-conscious and privatistic. They have not known how to express their hearts openly. You will teach them by your example. They will look at you suspiciously and you will bring a new crisis to their life concerning what faith means. Your priestliness and your prayer will bring them progressively into a place where they will be that for you and you will be that for them. This will be a real birthing. Everything in the world, the flesh and the devil will conspire against it. There

will be a real contest and struggle and you will be on your face before God in the holy place in tears and praying for their souls.

Do we love correction or do we resent it when it comes? I will never forget an episode in Japan with my Japanese interpreter when I visited the movement he was a part of. Before hundreds of people, he was made to stand up to face an indictment from the founder of the movement, Professor Toshima himself. He received this indictment, and his head dropped. I could not understand what was going on because it was all in Japanese, so later that night I asked him, "What happened when you were required publicly to stand because evidently there was some kind of humiliation?" "Well, Professor Toshima thought I was sleeping, and he was publicly berating me for falling asleep while he was speaking." I said, "But you were not sleeping. You were greatly moved, I could see that." He said, "That's right, Art. I was so moved that I could not keep my head up. My head had fallen on my chest, which he misconstrued as having fallen asleep." I said, "Well, why didn't you just protest, and tell him that he had gotten you all wrong?" He said, "No, Art, I needed that."

I tell you, dear saints, that movement was holy, holy, holy, because they received correction, because they continued in a spirit of humility, because they knew their frailty as men. The remarkable thing is that it was a Japanese movement, of the one race and culture in the world that is best known for 'saving face.' Their whole culture is groomed into not allowing the truth of your life to be shown to others, or even to acknowledge it yourself. But this movement was exactly the opposite. Everything was true, everything was expressed, and everything was known.

We are to be vigilant like that and willing for humiliation. Even if the correction is not correct, even if the person lacks that acuity of really and finally identifying the point, we are still to receive it and try to understand the intent of their heart and be grateful that someone loves me enough to seek to administer correction, even though it may a bit blunt or not expressed as artfully as we would like. What if the correction is clumsy? What if it is crude? Are we connoisseurs that demand the correction come to us on such terms as we can receive? If so, we are already in trouble. Receive it in whatever form it comes and be grateful for it.

"They shall come near to me to minister unto me; and they shall stand before me to offer unto me the fat and the blood," saith the Lord Jehovah (Ezek. 44:15).

The two most vital aspects of the sacrifice are not the hide or even the meat, but the fat and the blood. This is what constitutes the sweet smelling sacrifice or offering. The fat is the symbol of rest and the best of a condition that issues out of rest; the hide is burnt with the dung. What we would consider of value, the Lord allows to be burnt, and what we would have discarded as waste, the Lord cherishes as the most valuable, the fat and the blood.

"They shall enter into My sanctuary, and they shall come near to My table, to minister unto Me, and they shall keep My charge. And it shall be that, when they enter in at the gates of the inner court, they shall be clothed with linen garments; and no wool shall come upon them, while they minister in the gates of the inner court, and within. They shall have linen tires upon their heads, and shall have linen breeches upon their loins; they shall not gird themselves with anything that causeth sweat" (Ezek. 44:16-18).

Linen is the garment of righteousness. Nothing was to be worn that could cause sweat. Sweat or exertion would indicate the effort of man.

"And when they go forth into the outer court, even into the outer court to the people, they shall put off their garments wherein they minister, and lay them in the holy chambers; and they shall put on other garments, that they sanctify not the people with their garments. Neither shall they shave their heads, nor suffer their locks to grow long; they shall only cut off the hair of their heads" (Ezek. 44:19-20).

No external appearance of a supposed priestliness or prophetic-ness where you look like the wilderness prophet and fulfill the romantic imagination of others or yourself. There is nothing about you, regarding hair, long or short, that either shows celibacy or external separation. Keep it ordinary. Keep it neat. Do not wear anything outwardly that gives any indication of a supposed spirituality; for that is false; that is unclean.

"And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezek. 44:23).

They shall teach the difference between the holy and the profane, between the sacred and the common. They shall do so not only by what they say, but by what they are.

"And in controversy they shall stand in judgment; and they shall judge it according to My judgments: and they shall keep My laws and My statutes in all Mine assemblies; and they shall hallow My Sabbaths" (Ezek. 44:24).

The priesthood was originally not only the office of intercession and sacrifice but of the teaching of the Law; that when the priesthood failed, the rabbis took over and established the whole legal system which is the basis of present-day Judaism. In my opinion, this is contrary to the spirit of the Law which says that only a priest could rightly administer.

"And in the day that he goeth into the sanctuary, unto the inner court, to minister in the sanctuary, he shall offer his sin offering," saith the Lord GOD. "And it shall be unto them for an inheritance: I am their inheritance: and ye shall give them no possession in Israel: I am their possession." (Ezek. 44:27-28).

They are freed from ambition, from acquisition of goods and properties. They shall eat of the offerings alone. It bears a remarkable correspondence to the prescriptions given at the first. What was prescribed and instigated at the first shall be carried into the millennial and eternal future.

All we have said is preparation for the ultimate calling, namely, 'ministering unto Him' in the holiest place of all. This is the nub of the matter, and a distant cry from the external priesthood that hacks up the sacrifice, takes care of the buildings and church programs and anything else that address the needs of the people. Have you ever wondered how much our present-day Christianity is people-oriented? Is not its focus on the needs of the people? How many of the most successful churches of today have begun by canvassing neighborhoods, door-to-door, to find out 'what their needs are,' or 'what can we do for you' or 'Do you need a bowling alley? Well, we will have one in the basement of the church. Do you need counseling for this or for that? Your children?' The needs of the people have become the whole foundation of the Church, and these churches have become enormously successful, but that is all outer court activity. How can they communicate from that place the thing that is essential to the true life of the congregation?

Our concern should be for the holiest place of all. How can we come into that place and abide there? We as priests need to offer mankind something beyond what they need as they perceive it, but according to the need as God perceives it, which is, at heart, the communication of God as He is in

Himself. We can only get the sense of that in this holiest place; but how shall we have access? Formerly it was only open to the high priest once in a year.

The book of Hebrews gives us answer. We are now going to consider this, and I suspect our faith is going to be tested. It is one thing to read what we now have before us to consider, but the real issue is whether we have the faith to believe it for ourselves. God has opened a new and living way by His blood; the veil is rent, and we are bidden to come and to enter because He has made a way once-and-for-all. We can come into the holiest place, and there He will meet with us. We can live out from that place because a High Priest has gone in before us to make a new and living way by which we can also enter and abide. Have we a faith to believe for that? That is to say, to actually enter in. A whole generation perished in the wilderness who could not enter for their unbelief. Yet God bids us enter, that is to say, appropriate and come into this place. The veil that kept out the people was rent from the top to the bottom. Are we accessing?

Let us look at Hebrews 6: 13-20:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself: "I will most certainly bless you, and I will greatly multiply you." And so, after waiting patiently, Abraham obtained the promise. For men swear by something greater than themselves, and for them a confirming oath ends every dispute. Because God wanted to show His unchangeable purpose even more clearly to the heirs of the promise, He guaranteed it with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope – like a sure and firm anchor of the soul – that enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner, because He has become a 'high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.'

This sequence holds a remarkable mouthful. Here is intimated that this hope, especially in an age of tumult and upset, oppression and persecution, is that anchor set within the holy place. It is in the sanctuary of God; it will never be touched; it will never be affected by any outward tumult or disturbance. It is the basis for our peace, our security, our instruction and our confidence. It is a hope set as an anchor steadfast within the veil or behind the veil.

In our observation, it would seem that many believers have fallen short of this reality; we have appropriated the blood for sin but we have not appropriated the fullness of what was wrought by the death of Jesus. When He gave up His spirit and said, "It is finished," in that moment, the veil was rent in the temple. It was a six or nine inch thick covering that kept out the curious and the unqualified from the place of Gods holy presence. I am suggesting that there is something that has to do with His death that opened up a new way of access into God, into His very presence, which is also the requirement of priesthood.

Jesus abides as a priest forever because He is without ancestry, beginning or ending of days. We who are identified with, and who are in Christ, are invited to share in His Melchizedek priesthood to the degree that we are sons. He is more than the provision of a sacrifice of blood for sin; but by His sacrifice the veil is rent, and there is an opening now by which we ourselves can enter the holy place as priests in Him. In fact, if we do not enter that place, what are we communicating when we go before men?

Chapter seven describes this Melchizedek priesthood. *Melech* is king and *Zedec* (from *Zadok*) is righteousness. *King of righteousness* and *king of peace*. Verse 3 reads that he was without father, without mother, without genealogy, with neither beginning of days nor end of life; but resembling or in the form of a son of God, He remains a priest forever.

This is our privilege in Him. This is how we obtain a priestly status even though we are not descendants of Aaron. We obtain Melchizedek identification to the degree that we are in Him, and to the degree that we are without father and mother, ancestry or beginning or end of days. Some ask, "What do you mean by that? I clearly have a father." We answer by other questions, "Where is your attachment? Where is your identification? Have you broken free from those things that would keep you in the earth?"

We read elsewhere that if He was in the earth He would not be a priest at all – Hebrews 8:4. He is in a transcendent place, and we are offered a union with Him in that place of transcendence. This is something beyond nationality, beyond denominationalism, beyond Americanization, beyond every other kind of thing that would keep us rooted and identified with earthly things, with culture, with man and institutions. Priests must be transcendent and above earthly consideration. They are heavenly like Paul who could say, "I have my citizenship in Heaven."

Does that mean that on earth Paul was irrelevant? No, he was enormously relevant and significant, all the more because he was heavenly minded; because he had the actuality of his true identity, not as a Jew – though he could say that he was a ‘Hebrew of the Hebrews.’ His identity was not ethnic, nor of a racial origin, but an identification that was in Christ. So long as we are in Christ, we are in His priesthood also. Are we separated from those earthly entanglements that would keep us down? Are we in a heavenly place, having access even to the presence of the Father by which we have obtained counsel and wisdom to function? Can we therefore be sent out from the fellowship without any agenda or program, but just trust in the Life that is within us? The renewing of the presence of God from the holy place will affect how we will speak at our own ‘Mars Hills.’

Paul never sent letters in advance to say that he thought he was going to be passing through Athens, and could they arrange a Saturday night meeting with the philosophers. Or could they arrange for him to speak especially with those who were influential with the Greek civilization, because this was the first time that anything like this will ever come to them. None of that! Paul was brought to Mars Hill, not by himself, but by circumstances; he was fleeing persecution. This brought him to Athens; and while he was taking a walk, he saw that the city was wholly given to idolatry. It says his spirit was grieved and so he ‘reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with them that met him.’ Someone heard this ‘babbling’ speaking about resurrection and so they brought him up to Mars Hill.

A door of utterance had been opened by the prayers of the saints for Paul. Caught up by circumstances in an unanticipated place, he found himself right in the middle of the glory that was the Greek civilization. Athens was the seat of philosophy, ethics, mathematics, physics and all of the great pursuits of civilization. Humanism itself had its birth in Athens, and it was to this class of men that Paul was now going to face. What would he say?

"Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, I thank you for the privilege that has come to me today. I do not want to offend against your traditions." No, he did not say this at all, but rather, "On my way here, and passing your monuments to your gods, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious, and your monument to the unknown God is really an excuse. The truth of the matter is that you do not really want to know God. You prefer to have him as unknown. Therefore you can continue in your vain and

immoral pursuits. It is convenient for you not to know God in case He might interfere and infringe upon your enjoyment. But this unknown God to whom you worship in ignorance, I declare unto you.” (Paraphrased).

This is Paul in a divine boldness, because once he declares it, they are finished; they can never again claim ignorance. To hear from an apostle about the God who is God is to leave you without excuse before that God at the Day of Judgment.

Then he went on to speak: *“God has overlooked your times of ignorance, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent. He is not impressed by temples made by the hands of men, for the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof, and He is also the creator of the heaven and the earth, including Greece and Athens. You need to acknowledge the God who has created this piece of turf upon which you are standing and which you think is yours as a playground for your sports and intellectual activities. God has allowed you your vain presumptions, but now He calls all men to repentance, for He has appointed a day in which He will judge all men and indeed the whole world, by the man whom He has raised from the dead, even Jesus Christ.”* (Paraphrased)

Paul knew that these men knew nothing about the resurrection. They had never heard the name of Jesus. Surely it was an outlandish message? Paul’s message was not even appealing to the intellect of men, so that they could, as philosophers, identify and begin to consider. In fact, Paul was violating everything that intellectual men hold dear. His word was a colossal offence to rationality itself. Couldn’t Paul have thought of something better to say?

But Paul opened his mouth. It is just like Jesus at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount. He gathered His disciples and opened His mouth and taught them. The same God that gave Jesus the words of the great oracle of the Sermon on the Mount gave Paul his message on Mars Hill. His audience had the power to put Paul to death; they could have been so antagonized by this threat and insult coming from a Hebrew that he could have died on the spot. In fact, one of those who ‘clave to him and believed’ did die on the spot on the Mount of Martyrs that is today in Paris (Mont Martre), where the French now have art exhibits. The disciple of Paul, who came to him on Mars Hill and was saved, subsequently was sent by the same God into a pagan Europe to die on another hill, proclaiming the same kind of message to the pagans there; and that is where he died.

Paul's message that day was altogether priestly, defying analysis. By critique and examination you would think it was the worst thing to be spoken. Some biblical scholars even say that Paul missed the mark in Athens because no great church was raised up by Paul as in Philippi and in other places. Therefore he really missed his opportunity by suggesting that 'God had made of one blood all races of men and established the bounds of habitation that they might seek after God if haply they might feel after him and find him.' Shouldn't Paul have given them some gospel formula on how to be saved?!

Why did Paul speak about the earth and the bounds of habitations of men for the purpose of the seeking after God? Was it not because that was the message God gave him out of the holy place. It is not necessary to know in advance what is appropriate. Paul never came back to Athens as far as we know. It was a one-time visit and a one-time speaking for which men in the hearing of it would be eternally responsible. Where did Paul get that word? Where did he get any of the words that he spoke or that he wrote in his epistles? Only in the holy place, the holiest place of all to which he had access.

He is the author, by all reckoning, of the book of Hebrews. Some Bible scholars say that it does not seem to be Paul's authorship because Paul does not usually write like that. In his other epistles he does not use this style of language. But what these learned men do not always recognize is that Paul could speak in any manner of ways, and what was appropriate in the book of Romans might not have been called for in the letter to the Hebrews. The same inspiration that came for the book of Romans likewise came for the book of Hebrews; it was the same source, the place where God is enthroned, where God meets with the soul and gives instruction for the sons of men.

To receive instruction from this place is not necessarily what we would think is the appropriate thing to say. And if you want to maintain your reputation, then yes, you also have the option of functioning out of your humanity and cleverness. But, when life and death or the issue of judgment and eternity are at stake, we cannot rely on our own cleverness or any past preaching experience. Past words that God Himself has given you are no justification for us to pick up a message that was blessed and given, and to think that it is appropriate in another place. Every moment is a new moment, a once-and-for-all, and only priestly ministrations will suffice. Where do we obtain it? We are not sons of Aaron, but Gentiles. We come with a history of ethnic

and racial backgrounds. We are loaded with baggage that colors everything we think and say and do. Yet, we need to come to the place that Paul found, where you count everything you are as dung, and that your ancestry, upbringing and genealogy have no significance; we need to come to a place where there is no beginning nor ending of days, and that we are in an unbroken continuum with that which had its origin in the earliest expressions of God and His view of the world. That is true priestliness!

Is our distinction that of a son resembling the Son of God? Are we in His grace and priestly ministrations? The veil has been rent; we are bidden to enter into the holiest place of all and there to find whatever is needful out from God's own presence. How would you like to enter, not just once in a while, but to abide there continually? Though you are in some physical locality, is that where your essential being is? Or is it continually in the holiest place of all? Only out from that place will the Lord express, in His own wisdom and will, what is appropriate at any place or time. That is the heart of the matter and the heart of priestliness.

This kind of priesthood is not ministerial professionalism, where you work a 9.00 to 5.00 job. Not to enter the holy place is an affront to the great privilege that the Lord has bestowed before us in rending the veil that has kept us out previously. He has made for us by His blood and by His death a new and living way, and He is bidding us to come. Not only come, but to abide, to live and move and have our existence.

Hebrews 7:15 speaks about the power of an indestructible life and a priest resembling Melchizedek; one who has become a priest not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent but through the power of an indestructible life, for it is attested of him: "*You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.*" There is a forever-ness, there is an eternity, there is an unbrokenness, because it is the power of the indestructible life; it is the power of the God who is infinite and Himself, endless. It is out of that life that this priesthood is performed.

We can be priests forever, not just at the high moments, but in ordinary conversation or when speaking the truth in love to someone in the fellowship. Surely this must be exhausting you might say, but not if you are serving and functioning out of the indestructible Life. In fact, if you are not carried by the indestructible Life, you are not in the priesthood. It is intrinsic; it is one and the same.

Have you the faith to enter? Faith is an act. What a pity to be an outer court minister, to attend to the needs of men, hack things, cleaning up and taking care of the furniture. But to minister unto God is the truest ministry unto men. You will have something to bring in the form of the very essence of God, the very nature of Himself, that which is perfect.

For such a high priest became us, holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people: for this he did once for all, when he offered up himself. For the law appointeth men high priests, having infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was after the law, appointeth a Son, perfected for evermore (Hebrews 7:26-28).

Now in the things which we are saying the chief point is this: We have such a high priest, who sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all (Hebrews 8:1-2, 4).

There is a separation from earthliness and the power of the earth.

Chapter nine continues in the description of that greater priestliness effected by Jesus, not *"through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption"* (v. 12).

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the way which He dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh; and having a great priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience: and having our body washed with pure water, let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not; for He is faithful (Hebrews 10:19-23).

Let us hold fast; the anchor is set within the veil, in the holiest place. Let us approach with a true heart, with full confidence, full assurance. He has opened for us, through the veil of His own flesh, a new and living way. We have confidence to enter; and if we have confidence to enter, we have confidence to remain. It is not a flitting thing, on today and off tomorrow. The same confidence by which we enter is the faith and confidence by which we abide. We abide priests forever in the power of the indestructible life. It

is a whole new dimension. It exceeds the Aaronic priesthood, which was limited by men's ageing and dying. The Melchizedek abides forever beyond father and mother, beyond ancestry. It is abiding with the Son as a son. It is the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. We need to hold fast that confession of our hope. Amen.

Transcription by Lars Widerberg

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