

Grace Evangelical Church
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Sunday, February 3, 2008
"The Royal Priesthood"
Joshua 21

Our text today in Joshua 21 brings up the subject of priesthood. For the tribe of Levi in the nation of Israel was the priestly tribe. As our text indicates, the tribe of Levi was given 48 cities with pasturelands (Joshua 21:41-42), with 6 of those cities set aside as cities of refuge. In fact the tribe of Levi was not given a piece of property as the other tribes of Israel were given. The LORD was to be their inheritance as Moses had told the nation in Deuteronomy 18:1-8. This was reiterated in Joshua 13:14 & 33; 18:7; cf. Numbers 18.

Such thinking seems so far removed from us in this 21st century. What does this all mean and how does it apply to us today in our high tech world.

I. The meaning of the word priest.

The word priest means one who performs sacred rites. He represents people before God, and then ministers to people on behalf of God. He is really a mediator, or go-between between God and man in spiritual matters. Such assumes the need for man to have a go-between between him and God.

II. A brief history of the priesthood.

To understand what is happening in Joshua, and to make application to us today, we need to go back to the Book of Genesis, for everything that God does for us today has its origin in the Book of Genesis. This means the Book of Genesis must be trustworthy and reliable, without error.

Now I realize that there are many today who say that the Book of Genesis, especially the first 11 chapters of Genesis are just a nice story with no factual history. Yes, they are just myth. If that is true, then the rest of the Bible is also a myth. What is said about Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross, in His death and bodily resurrection are also a myth. In fact, Christ taught in Matthew 19 that God made them male and female in the beginning, referring to the creation of Adam and Eve. Jesus believed Adam and Eve were historical people who lived in time. The Apostle Paul also believed that Adam and Eve were real as we read Romans 5 and I Timothy 2.

1. Adam and Eve

A quick consideration of Genesis 1 & 2 tells us that Adam was given the privilege and responsibility by God to care for His creation and to represent Him in world. Adam was to be a king, to rule over the creation. He was to be prophet, to tell forth about God and about His creation. Adam was also to be a priest, for he had direct access to God and he was to minister to his wife Eve and to his family. Adam had direct fellowship with God without interruption. He and Eve were living in a state of creaturely holiness.

Of course, that wonderful position and experience in the Garden of Eden, as they daily fellowshiped with God in caring for the Garden, abruptly changed when Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation of Satan. In disobeying God, various consequences came upon Adam and Eve, the creation and Satan himself.

In that process, God made the promise of the Redeemer in Genesis 3:15, while also killing animals, clothing Adam and Eve, but in that process blood was shed. What happened was that Adam who was to be a priest to and for God lost that position and privilege when he sinned, and God stepped in and became the priest for Adam in order that forgiveness could be provided for him and Eve. Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden of Delight.

The wages of sin is always death, as the Bible teaches, physical and spiritual death (Romans 6:23). The wage that sin brings, death, can only be taken care of when a life is given, for the life is in the blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission or forgiveness (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22).

2. After Adam and Eve

After leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve started to have a family, out of which came the human race. Then we find that man had regained his position as priest as Abel and Cain brought offerings to the Lord. Later Noah offered burnt offerings to the Lord (Genesis 8:20.). Abraham also built an altar to the LORD (Genesis 12:7). In Genesis 22:13, Abraham offered the ram "for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son."

In like manner Job offered burnt offerings for his children, and likewise by divine direction for the three "comforters" when the great trial had passed (Job 1:5; 42:8).

Melchizedek was "priest of God Most High" (Gen 14:18), where a specific person is called a priest.

Isaac "built an altar there and called upon the name of Yahweh" (Gen 26:25), as did Jacob (Gen 33:20).

In these cases priestly acts were performed by the patriarchs in their capacity as fathers of the family or heads of clans. From the beginning, priesthood with its acts of expiation and of worship was thus recognized as a divinely-instituted office. But in pre-Mosaic times there was no special class of priests recognized. It seems that the father of the family acted as a priest before God.

But the question that comes is, "Why did God pick one particular tribe out of the nation of Israel to be the priestly tribe, representing the people before God and ministering to their spiritual needs?"

3. During the time of Moses.

(1) Exodus 28:1-3.

We discover that God told Moses on Mt Sinai to establish a succession of priesthood in the nation of Israel through a single family, the family of Aaron who was a brother of Moses and of the tribe of Levi.

From this point of time onward the priesthood in Israel was confined to the family of Aaron.

No hereditary priesthood seems to have prevailed in patriarchal times. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Melchizedek, a priest of the highest rank, had neither predecessor nor successor in his great office.

Through God's direction Moses designated the Aaronic family (the tribe of Levi) as the priestly family in Israel, and he prescribed the garments they should wear, the sacrifices they should offer both for themselves and for the congregation, their maintenance, their domestic relations, and their conduct toward their fellow Hebrews.

(2) A history of the tribe of Levi.

A brief history of the tribe of Levi tells us that Levi was the son of Jacob by Leah (Genesis 29:34). In Genesis 34:25-31, Levi and his brother Simeon were involved in murder trying to right a wrong. When Jacob blessed his sons, he called Levi, a son of cruelty who would be divided and scattered in Israel (Genesis 49:5-7).

Evidently God in His grace saw something in Levi and his family that his father did not see. For as God told Moses on Mt Sinai to designate Levi as the priestly tribe, we find this event taking place in Exodus 32. When Moses came down from the Mt, he found that Aaron had let the nation of Israel build a false god, a molten calf, to replace the true and living God. Moses was so furious that he broke the two tablets of the ten commandments. He stood in the gate of the camp and said, **"Whoever is for the LORD come to me!" (Exodus 32:26).**

Who came and stood before Moses? The sons of Levi. Whether or not they were involved in helping to make the calf idol, we are not told. We are told that when Moses asked who was on the LORD'S side they responded positively and came to the Moses. They, then, helped Moses carry out the judgment of killing three thousand men for becoming involved in idolatry. (Exodus 32:28).

The sons of Levi – stood for the LORD in the midst of idolatry.

In another passage in Numbers 25;5-8, Phinehas, the son of Aaron, the priest took the life of Israelite and the Midianite woman because of his involvement in idolatry with Baal.

Again the Levitical tribe showed a real zeal for the LORD, His character and His word.

Numbers 25:13 then adds that Phinehas' family was promised the high priesthood in Israel. They would have a perpetual priesthood.

The curse of Levi had been turned into a blessing due to following the LORD with righteous action.

God knew their heart and selected Levi to be the priestly tribe for the nation of Israel.

Moses in Deuteronomy 33:9-10 puts it this way.

“They observed God’s Word and kept His covenant. They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your law to Israel. They shall put incense before YOU, and whole burnt offerings on Your altar.”

In Numbers 3, there are directions to the three sons of Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari in regard to the tabernacle itself.

The Gershonites were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes—and everything related to their use (Numbers 3:25-26, KJV).

The Kohath clan were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the article of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use (Numbers 3:31-32, KJV).

The Merari clan was responsible for the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts, bases, all its’ equipment and everything related to their use, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes (Numbers 3:36-37, KJV)

Numbers 18 also gives the LORD’S instructions to Aaron, the High Priest, concerning what the sons of Levi will do in assisting the High Priest. Then we have some more directions in Deuteronomy 10.

Note then

(1) The Privileges and Responsibilities of the Levitical priestly tribe.

- **They were to teach the Law – The word of God. They were to make the Law of God known to the people. They were to be teachers explaining to the people what the Law meant.**
- **They were to take care of the altar. That is they were to guard the tabernacle, clean the furniture. Take care of the sacrifices. They were responsible for the purity of the worship life of the people**
- **They stood before the LORD to minister on behalf of the people (Deuteronomy 10:8-9). They were intercessors for the people. They offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. They were a channel of taking others to God.**
- **They blessed the people (Deuteronomy 10:8). They were a channel of taking God to the people, of making God and His word known to them.**
- **The LORD was their inheritance, which was carried on through as they entered the Promised Land as the Book of Joshua indicates.**

(2) The qualifications of the Levitical priestly tribe.

They could begin serving as a priest at age 25 and then serve until age 50 (Numbers 8:24-25), although they could still assist in the work of the tabernacle. They were to be without physical defect and marry a virgin, while keeping their lives pure before the Lord, and following the stipulations that God gave them (cf. Leviticus 21; Numbers 8).

4. During the time of Joshua onward.

All the above would be carried out by the Levitical priestly tribe in the time of text in Joshua around 1400 B.C. The Tribe of Levi would receive their 48 cities and settle into carrying out their different duties and privileges. The LORD was their inheritance.

How does this all apply to us today in this 21st century??

III. The Priesthood in our day.

If we follow through the Levitical priesthood, we find that it was still functioning in the time of Jesus Christ. Since the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Titus in A.D. 70, the Levitical priesthood has not been in operation. But that is not the end to what God has done for us.

1. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament provides us the direction that we need.

It tells us Jesus Christ came not from the tribe of Levi but from the tribe of Judah and has become the High Priest who is made after the order of Melchizedek. In fact Levi's great grandfather, Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek, telling us that Levi yet unborn was involved.

This means that Christ is superior to the Aaronic priesthood and able to fulfill the Law of Moses in His life, and pay the penalty for breaking the law (the old covenant) in His death, ending the law covenant. The Christ was buried and conquered the grave to provide us a new covenant through His blood.

Jesus, as the true High Priest, becomes the offer of the sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself, as He gives His life, to pay the penalty for breaking God's law which is death.

The Old Testament priests had to offer sacrifices daily, and the high priest went into the Holy of Holies once a year to offer sacrifice for his sins and the sins of the people. Christ, as the perfect high priest, made one sacrifice for sin for all time for each of us and to satisfy the righteous demands of the holy God through His death on the cross, his burial and bodily resurrection.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 9:11-14.

"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

Then the writer of Hebrews reiterates what he just said in a little different way in Hebrews at the end of Hebrews 9 in verse 24ff:

"For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own. Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

Don't miss what is being said in these verses.

We started our message showing how Adam was to be a priest with God and to others. He lost that position because of his sin before God. God in His grace intervened, provided forgiveness through the sacrifice of the animal in shedding its blood. As time moved along various heads of families acted as a priest offering sacrifices. Eventually God picked the tribe of Levi in the nation of Israel to be priests for the people at that time with one high priest. Coming to the time of the New Testament we discover the Levitical tribe was still operating in the temple then existing. Eventually, the temple and Jerusalem were ransacked by Titus in A.D. 70.

Question. Is there a priest for the people? Is there a go-between between God and people today, yes, between God and us. Is there someone to represent us before God and provide us spiritual instruction.

Various religions have different ones who act as priests and spiritual leaders.

But the biblical revelation holds up Jesus Christ, as the true High Priest, who is not only the second Adam, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves before God, but He is the true High Priest because He came from God as His eternal Son to show that the Old Priesthood and worship system in the Old Testament would be fulfilled and terminated, which they were through His eternal death,

burial, and bodily resurrection, opening up for us a whole new way to God, not through an earthly tabernacle, but through Himself, who is the Way the Truth and the Life, the only way to God.

Hebrews 10:19ff puts it this way.

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He (Christ) inaugurated for us through the veil, that is His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. . . ."

What does this mean for us today?

2. You and I can be priests of our God, our heavenly Father.

1. How do we become priests of the true and living God?

By accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, admitting to Him that we have sinned against Him and ask Him into our lives to be our Savior. As many as received Him to them He gave the authority to become the children of God, even to them who believe in His name (John 1:12).

2. What happens when we accept Christ as personal Savior?

We become a royal priesthood (I Peter 2:9)- -Meaning that the believer is a priest of the highest excellence – a priest of the most high God. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood – talking about all those in the true church of Jesus Christ today, but also individually, all believers are priests before God. It's been called the priesthood of believers. We can go directly to God through Jesus Christ our High Priest who has opened up God's very throne room to us.

The believer has direct access to God the Father through the High Priest Jesus Christ.

3. What's involved in being a priest of the biblical God?

(1) We present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2).

"I beseech you, brethren, (pens the Apostle Paul) by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

Christ made the final sacrifice for our sin on the cross, His burial, and bodily resurrection. That's why we don't bring a lamb to church on Sunday morning. Christ is the lamb of God who takes our sin away when we trust Him as personal Savior.

We bring ourselves, all of us, body and spirit, and present ourselves totally to God to be used by Him as He guides and directs us by the Holy Spirit. We present ourselves to Him to let Him be the Lord of our lives.

That means as Romans 12:2 goes on that we don't let the world squeeze us into its mold but we are transformed by the renewing of minds so that we may prove what the will of god is that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is decision for holy living in thought, word, and deed. Why do we seek to keep ourselves pure? We have dedicated ourselves to God. We are his property. We have laid ourselves on His altar, and told Him we will do His will as He directs us through the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. When I am not living for the LORD, my thoughts are not His thoughts, and my words are not His Words, and my actions His actions, then I have forgotten that I am a priest of the Most High God.

(2) We can offer the sacrifices of praise (worship) to our God (Hebrews 13:15).

"Through Him (Christ), let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

This morning as we praised God together in the singing we were giving the sacrifice of praise to our God. It can happen in song. It can happen just by praise God with your voice. Try on some of the Psalms for praising God. This is what Ephesians 5:18ff is all about – being filled with the Holy Spirit we have a new tune of praise to our God and a new thanks, giving our God thanks in all things that He is in control and working out His plan for our good and His glory.

(3) We can make sacrifices to our God by doing good and sharing (Hebrews 13:16).

"And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased"

This is a fantastic verse, for it tells us that worship is a lifestyle. Serving the LORD, regardless of the task if done in the attitude of Christ's selflessness and in the power of the Spirit, is a sacrifice to the true and living God, which causes Him to be pleased or takes pleasure in. Sharing means using one's means to help those in need.

WOW! Cogitate on that for awhile today. Giving a cup of cold water in the name of the Lord causes God to smile and be excited in his heart.

Why? God is a servant God as portrayed completely in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. What did the Lord say? I always do those things that please my Heavenly Father. God the Father was excited and had pleasure in His Son's obedience. God responds the same way when we serve Him in selflessness and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we as adults grasp this truth we will never be the same again. When our children and youth grasp this truth, they will never be the same again. Since what each of us does in the power of the Holy Spirit brings pleasure to God, means that God is vitally interested in whatever I do that's in His will.

But there is more that is involved in being a priest of the true and living God.

(4) As priest of the true and living God, we can proclaim (tell forth) the excellencies of Him (Christ) who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Peter 2:9).

What does that mean?

As priests we not only bring the sacrifice of our lives, the sacrifice of praise on our lips, in addition to our sacrifice of worship in our service for Him, but we are also to tell forth Christ's excellencies, or His uprightness, His gracious acts through our life and words.

The priest not only comes to God, but he also speaks for God to others.

Put this in light of what the Old Testament priest was to do in this regard.

- **He was to be a teacher of the law of God, or the Word of God. I take this not just to be in a closed setting, such as a classroom, but to be able to know God's Word so that He can talk about it when the opportunity comes. In other words, as a priest of the living and true God, we should have a working knowledge of the Scripture so we can talk about it intelligently.**

What's of interest in this light in the book of Hebrews which is really a presentation on the Priesthood of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of believers that the writer tells his readers that by this time they ought to be teachers, but they needed someone to teach them the elementary principles of the oracles of God. As a result, they have come to need milk and not solid food (Hebrews 5:12).

We don't have to be walking Bible encyclopedias, but we should know why we believe what we believe, and be able to explain what we believe. Can we explain why we believe the Bible is the Word of God without error in the original documents? Can we explain the Trinity? Do we know the difference between Christianity and other religions? Why is salvation by grace through faith and not by works? How do I know that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and what does that mean for me? What is God's plan for the future?

Where does such teaching really start? I believe that it starts in the home. In Pre-Mosaic days as we considered briefly in this message, the father was the priest in the home. Although there was the priestly tribe of Levi in Moses day and beyond, the father was still the head of the home, and in one sense the priest of that home.

In fact, H. Page Williams has written a book by the name of "Do Yourself A Favor, Love Your Wife." He writes that one of the privileges and responsibilities of the father is to be the priest of his home.

It is not preaching but in love being an example of Christ and His Word. It's taking time for instruction as opportunities arise, sometimes more formal than others. It is building a relationship with the children when they are small giving them an appreciation for the Word of God as well as good literature. Deuteronomy 6 is instructive regarding how to have a home where the Word of God is honored. It is exposing the children to that which gives answers to the Christian faith and its uniqueness over other beliefs. It is living a life for God that matches what one says.

- **The Old Testament priest took care of the altar and guarded the sanctuary.**

For us today that means as priests of the true and living God we guard our hearts for out of it are the issues of life as Proverbs 43:23 tells us. Paul told the Corinthians that he kept his body under subjection lest he be disproved or lose his heavenly reward (I Corinthians 9:27).

Paul told Timothy to flee youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness (I Timothy 6:11; 2:22).

As priests of the true and living God, we are to continually guard the sanctuary of our souls.

And dads, I believe that God holds us responsible for guarding the sanctuary of our homes. Along with his wife he seeks to guard the home from the attitudes and teaching of the world, yes, to discuss issues and see how Christianity speaks to them; to encourage involvement of the family in various responsibilities around the home; to help stimulate excellence in school work, while knowing what the children are studying at school; and to encourage the children's walk with the Lord.

In the process, the dad, as priest seeks to build self esteem, respect, and honor for his wife and children.

Just a reminder, this morning, dads, that you are essential to the family. A study was done of 1500 college student drop outs. Two things stood out, marked isolation from their fathers and a lack of motivation.

Dads, enjoy being the priest of your home. It can be challenging but also rewarding.

- **The Old Testament priest went to God on behalf of himself and his people.**

As priests of God, we have direct access to the throne of God through Jesus Christ to bring all of our needs, headaches, and heartaches (Hebrews 4:15-16). Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, sympathizes with all of our weakness.

As priests of God we can also intercede on behalf of others.

Dads I trust you are daily interceding for your wife and your children, yes, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, praying for their salvation if that has not yet happened. If they know the Lord praying that God would keep them from the evil one, for their discernment, for wisdom, and for strength to do the Lord's will and glorify Him.

Do we spend time praying for those in our family and others we know who have different needs. As priests of the true and living God, we have access to the Lord's throne room at any time.

- **The Old Testament priest blessed the people.**

As we mentioned, the priest would serve the people and minister to their spiritual needs, bringing God's encouragement to them.

How can we bless others?

Smalley and Trent suggest 5 different ways to bless our family.

1. Meaningful touch.

A pat on the shoulder, or a couple holding hands.

Those young children need the parents' hugs. Even the grand children need a hug from the grand parents.

Dads, don't be afraid to hug your kids.

Marilyn Monroe in her early years was shuffled from one foster home to another. A reporter asked her as an adult one time, "Did you ever feel loved by her foster family?" "Once, was her reply, when I was about 7 or 8 years of age. I was watching a woman putting on her make up, she reached over and patted my cheeks with her rouge puff. For that moment I felt loved by her." The story goes that Marilyn Monroe had tears in her eyes when she remembered that time. Why? The touch was meaningful to her. It gave her a sense of love and being accepted when her should was dying for some kind of love.

2. Speaking words of verbal blessing.

Words of appreciation such as, you did a great job. That was a great meal. You're terrific. I am praying for you. I love you. Praise the child's effort when sometimes the achievement may not be what they expected. Find something to praise even in the negative.

3. Attach high value to one being blessed.

Speaking words of blessing is done because you value the person to whom you are speaking. You honor that person because they are made in the image of God, and if in the family relationship they are your sons and daughters. Tell them that they are the greatest, and mean it.

4. Picture a special blessing.

Certainly, we don't know in particular what God has in mind for our children as he gives them to us. One Jewish mother, Sidel, was walking down the street pushing a stroller with her infant twins. As she rounded the corner, she saw her neighbor, Sarah. "My what beautiful children," Sarah commented. "What are their names?" Sidel replied, "This is Bennie, the doctor, and this is Reuben, the lawyer." She believed that her children had a special future.

Yes, we can not predict what the future has for our children, but we can encourage them to set meaningful goals, and help them with the Lord's help to develop Christian character as they come to know Jesus Christ with the potential to serve Him.

5. An active commitment to fulfill the blessing.

The believer, as God's priest, needs to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to give the blessing to members of one's family, and to others, and to engage in helping them become what God wants them to become. It's easy to say, "Wait until another weekend!" When action should be taken this weekend to develop a relationship with one's child or children in helping them develop a certain skill.

What a privilege and responsibility God gives the believer in Jesus Christ as individuals, then, for our dads, our moms, our children, our youth, grand parents and great grand parents.

- **The Old Testament priest (s) had the LORD for his inheritance.**

For the believer in Christ today, the Lord is his or her inheritance (cf. Ephesians 1:18; I Peter 1:3-5). When the believer arrives in heaven, the Lord will be his or her inheritance. He is all the believer needs in time now and will be for all eternity. Praise the Lord!

So where do we begin being a priest for the living God?

Right where we are in our individual lives, our family lives, with husband and wife, with our children, and children with each other. Being a priest to people in the work place, at school, and in the neighborhood.

A priest of the living and true God becomes involved with people and with life bringing God's love to people who are really starving to be given a word of praise and encouragement.

Let's be priests this week to minister to others where God puts us. Let's be royal priests, priests of the highest excellence, to the glory of God.