

# Priests and Levites

Numbers 3:1–13

The title of my sermon this morning is “Priests and Levites.” It occurred to me that we ought to start with the basics: What are priests and what are Levites, and show this from the Bible, and not assume that everybody knows already.

In the Bible, the word *priest* denotes *one who offers sacrifices*. The Hebrew word for priest is כֹּהֵן. It comes into English as the last name Cohen. It is a common Jewish surname, and is the most common surname in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Many of those bearing that name today may be direct descendants of the priests of Jerusalem who rejected God’s Messiah and called for him to be crucified.

Verse 3 of our text this morning says, “These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the *anointed priests*, whom he consecrated to *minister as priests*.” It is important to understand this verse as we begin to look at this chapter. You’ll notice that the word “priests” is used two times in this verse—once as a noun, once as a verb. The first is in the phrase “anointed priests”—the only occurrence of this phrase in the Bible. The word “anointed” is a form of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” the Anointed One. The Levitical priesthood under the law of Moses prefigured the coming of THE Anointed One *par excellence*, our Lord Jesus Christ. Both the Hebrew “Messiah” [מָשִׁיחַ] and the Greek “Christ” [Χριστός] mean *anointed one*, generally, anointed with oil in a service of consecration—oil being representative of the Holy Spirit—but in the case of Jesus, anointed by the Spirit himself, descending upon him at his baptism.

The second occurrence in verse 3 is in the phrase “whom he consecrated to minister as priests.” In the Hebrew the phrase translated “whom he consecrated”<sup>2</sup> is literally “whose hand he filled,” referring to Aaron’s instructing that animals for sacrifice be put in his sons’ hands so they could help him in the priestly work.

Old Testament priests were anointed with oil in a special ceremony that consecrated them into the priests’ office. This ceremony is prescribed in Exodus 29:1–9. This is an important cross-reference, and we do well to take time to read it:

“This is what you shall do to them to hallow them for ministering to Me as priests: Take one young bull and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers anointed with oil (you shall make them of wheat flour). You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, with the bull and the two rams. And Aaron and his sons you shall bring to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall wash them with water. Then you shall take the garments, put the tunic on Aaron, and the robe of the ephod, the ephod, and the breastplate, and gird him with the intricately woven band

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cohen> accessed 5-1-26

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the marginal note in the first printing of the KJV, 1611.

of the ephod. You shall put the turban on his head, and put the holy crown on the turban. *And you shall take the anointing oil, pour it on his head, and anoint him.* Then you shall bring his sons and put tunics on them. And you shall gird them with sashes, Aaron and his sons, and put the hats on them. The priesthood shall be theirs for a perpetual statute. So you shall consecrate Aaron and his sons.” Notice especially verse 7, “You shall take the anointing oil, pour it on his head, and anoint him.”

Another cross reference: in Exodus 40 we read: “You shall put the holy garments on Aaron, and *anoint* him and consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. And you shall bring his sons and clothe them with tunics. You shall *anoint* them, as you *anointed* their father, that they may minister to Me as priests; for their *anointing* shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations” (Ex. 40:13–15).

Notice that both the high priest Aaron and his sons were *anointed* as priests—that is, set apart as priests to God in a special ceremony. Aaron’s sons couldn’t just wake up one morning and say, “I think I’ll be a priest.” Any unauthorized person who approached the tabernacle was to be put to death (Num. 3:10)—the tabernacle was to be protected from defilement at all cost.

The bottom line: Under the Old Testament, the Aaronic priests (“Aaronic” means *belonging to the descendants of Aaron*, Moses’ brother, who was chosen by God to be the high priest of Israel, which foreshadowed the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Prophet, Priest and King). This is summarized in our Shorter Catechism, (THP p. 969):

“Q. 23. What offices doth Christ execute as our Redeemer? Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.

“Q. 24. How doth Christ execute the office of a *prophet*? Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.

“Q. 25. How doth Christ execute the office of a *priest*? Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.

“Q. 26. How doth Christ execute the office of a *king*? Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.”

*Christ* is our Prophet, Priest and King. As Prophet, he teaches us the truth, as Priest, he offers up himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and as King, he rules and defends us. How blessed we are to belong to Christ!

As I mentioned a moment ago, in the Bible, the word *priest* denotes *one who offers sacrifices*. Ultimately, it is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered himself as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins.

Hebrews 10:10–12 teaches that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had *offered one sacrifice for sins forever*, sat down at the right hand of God.” When Christ had offered himself as a sacrifice for sins, his work was complete, so he “sat down.”

Now that Christ has “put away sin by the sacrifice of himself,”<sup>3</sup> there is no need for another sacrifice for sins. Actually, even to suggest such is blasphemous, for it implies that Christ’s sacrifice of himself was insufficient; that something more is required. It implies that those who put their faith and trust in Christ for salvation may not be saved after all. It is a denial of the gospel, the good news of salvation. No one can be saved apart from Christ. Nobody can appoint himself to be priest. Nobody can appoint himself to the office of minister of the Word, either.

A week ago the Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario had a two-day meeting in part to examine three men for the office of minister. These men were brought forward by our Candidates and Credentials Committee, which had thoroughly examined them in English Bible, apologetics, the Westminster Confession of Faith, Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and Directory for Public Worship. Each man had written an exposition of a biblical text and an essay on a theological theme. Each man had preached a sermon before presbytery. Now, the last part would be a theological examination on the floor of presbytery, before 45 ministers and ruling elders. The exam was conducted by a man appointed by the committee, covering all areas of theology: the doctrine of God, the Trinity, creation, man, the Fall, sin, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, heaven and hell, etc. Each man was expected to answer each question, giving biblical and confessional support for his answers. When the examiner was finished, the floor was opened for questions, which could be asked by any minister or ruling elder present. Afterward, presbytery would vote to arrest the exam, then sustain it. All three men’s examinations were approved unanimously. The first of the men was ordained this past Friday evening, the second will be ordained later this month, and the third will be ordained on the first of June. These ordinations are part of the fulfillment of Jesus’ words, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus taught his church to pray that God would send forth laborers to teach his Word and announce his gospel. All of us have a part in telling other people about

---

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 9:26

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 9:37–38

Christ, but the church needs faithful men who are specially trained and ordained to the teaching office. May God increase their number!

So the whole priestly system of the Jews was a type and shadow fulfilled in Christ. The levitical priests prefigured the great High Priest who offered “one sacrifice for sins . . . once for all” (Heb. 10:10, 12). We who trust in Christ are even now “kings and priests unto God” (Rev. 1:6, 5:10). We have free access to God in prayer, and we offer up sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving and grateful service day by day. But there is no more offering up of animal sacrifices—something for which we are eternally grateful. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament came to an end with Christ, the perfect sacrifice. The blood of bulls and goats can *not* save us. Only the blood of Christ can save. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). By the way, the dispensationalists who teach that animal sacrifices will be reintroduced during an earthly millennium are just plain wrong. Now that Christ has come as the perfect sacrifice that washes away our sin, it would be an affront and insult and slap in the face to the Lord of glory to suggest that animal sacrifices be reintroduced. Now that that which is perfect has come, that which is in part has been done away. No animal sacrifices ever again, even as a “memorial”! Christ himself has given his church the biblical way to memorialize him, and that is through the Lord’s supper: “This do in *remembrance* of me.”<sup>5</sup> Let’s not try to improve on what Christ has given. The church will continue to remember Christ as we observe the Lord’s supper every week.

So up to this point we have considered priests. So now, what about Levites? Let us continue reading at verse 5: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Bring the *tribe of Levi* near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. And you shall give the *Levites* to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel. So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

The word *Levites* might sound strange to your ears, but notice that “the tribe of Levi” (v. 6) are called “the Levites” (v. 9). Levites are persons belonging to the tribe of Levi. So it’s not as difficult a concept as you might think.

Remember the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (grandfather, father, son). Jacob’s name was later changed to Israel. His sons are called the children of Israel. His first four sons by his wife Leah were Reuben, Simeon, *Levi*, and Judah.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Memorial* and *remembrance* are from the same root, and are essentially synonyms.

Jacob had twelve sons in all, and only one daughter, Dinah, who got mixed up with a young man that was not from the covenant people. It might have seemed fun at the time, but she had to live with the consequences the rest of her life. The Bible says: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?”<sup>6</sup> God wants his people to marry “only in the Lord.”<sup>7</sup> If two young people truly committed to Christ get married, they will experience a lifetime of happiness, no matter what their outward circumstances. As Paul said, “For me to live is Christ.” Ultimately, that’s the only thing that matters.

So back to the Levites. God says, “Bring the *tribe of Levi* near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him.” The Levites were to *serve* Aaron and his sons. The work of selecting, preparing and offering up animal sacrifices was hard work, and Aaron and his two sons could not do it alone. There were the twice-daily sacrifices—one in the morning, one in the evening. On the sabbath there were seven sacrifices. Additionally, there were sacrifices when people sinned. When a person sinned, he or she had to bring an animal sacrifice and confess their sin over it. The animal’s throat had to be slit, and the blood, which represented life, had to be drained out, collected in a bowl, and sprinkled on the horns of the altar. It was hard work, and it had to be done day in, day out. People sin. They actually sin quite often, so there were a lot of animals slain. When we sin, our sins need to be covered over with blood. How thankful we are that the blood that all the animal sacrifices under the Old Testament prefigured is the blood of Christ. Peter refers to it as “the *precious blood of Christ*, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). When you sin, there’s only one thing that can wash away your sin, and that is the precious blood of Christ. You may think that you can wash away your own sins, but you can’t. John says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son *cleanseth us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7).

Now there is one text that says, “arise, and be baptized, and *wash away thy sins*, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16), but notice the wording: “wash away thy sins, *calling on the name of the Lord*.” You simply cannot wash away your sins by your own effort. If the Lord has impressed on your heart that you are a sinner—that you are defiled and impure and filthy in the sight of a holy God, and that the only way you can ever stand before him is to have the awful stain of your sins washed away, so you can be clean and pure and holy in his sight—then that is a good thing. And what you need is to wash away your sins. And the only way you can do that is by calling on the name of the Lord. You cannot save yourself. The

---

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. 6:14

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 7:39

only One who can save you is the Lord who loved you and cared about you so much that he came to earth to die on the cross for you.

The other day, as I drove in my car I took a bite of a juicy apple, and one drop of that juicy apple dripped onto my light-colored slacks and left a mark. Of course I grabbed a Kleenex and tried to blot it up—and yes, most of it was soaked up—but there was a residue, and I was aware that there was still a little spot on my slacks. When I got to my destination I wondered if everyone in the room could see that spot on my slacks. I was very self-conscious about it. Our sins are like that. When we sin, we are conscious that we need cleansing. And the only thing that can cleanse us from our sins is the blood of Christ.

Under the Old Testament, when a person came under spiritual conviction of sin, what he had to do was bring a sacrifice—a perfect lamb or goat or some such other clean animal. He had to bring it to the priest—tie a rope to its neck and lead it to the tabernacle and present it to the priest. There would be a Levite there—a male member of the tribe of Levi between the ages of thirty and fifty who helped the priest in his priestly work—who would help to prepare the animal sacrifice, and tie it up so it couldn't run away, and lift it up onto the altar and hold it there while the priest—Aaron or his sons—held up a knife and slit its throat. It was a gruesome sight. One of my grandsons gave me a favorite picture of himself at the Critter Barn, with his hand on a perfect, sweet lamb. His sister also recently went to the Critter Barn and “her” lamb—the one she had been working with every week, feeding her and brushing her, and cleaning her stall—recognized her and came over to her. Those lambs are adorable, and the children are proud of them. But just imagine those same animals tied up on an altar of sacrifice, their throats slit, blood gushing out of them, their life ebbing away—think of the repulsive sight of death, the awfulness and realization that the death of a substitute was your only hope of forgiveness.

That is the reality of sin, dear ones. Sin defiles. Sin is ugly. Sin cannot be simply glossed over. It must be dealt with by the death of a substitute. It is what we call *substitutionary atonement*. “The soul that sinneth, *it shall die*. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Ezek. 18:20).

“The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). If you have sinned—and you have—what you deserve is death. You have a choice. You can do nothing, and ultimately end up in hell for the sins that you committed, or you can repent of your sins, ask God's forgiveness, and look in faith to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who alone can wash away our sin. One day, as he was preaching in the wilderness, John the Baptist saw Christ on the edge of the crowd, and he called out, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me

comes a Man who is preferred before me.”” He was referring to the Lord Jesus, who is the fulfillment of both the priest and the lamb—the Sacrifice and the Sacrificer. John the Baptist is like the Levite who helped the priest at the tabernacle, who said, “Let me help you take your sacrifice to the altar. I’ll hold it in place while the priest slaughters it, and you lay your hands upon it. This is your only hope for forgiveness.” Under the new covenant we no longer need to take a perfect lamb to be slaughtered and give its life for our sin. Christ has given his life. “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . He was buried, and . . . He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup> As the hymnwriter put it, “O sacred Head, now wounded, / with grief and shame weighed down; / now scornfully surrounded / with thorns, thine only crown; / O sacred Head, what glory, / what bliss ’til now was thine! / Yet, though *despised* and *gory*, / I joy to call thee mine.”

Christ is our Great High Priest who is offered up for our sins. The Levite has two jobs, as verse 7 of our text shows: he attends to the needs of the priest, but he also attends to the needs of “the whole congregation.” He assists both priest and sinner.

Let us be *Levites*, finding joy in serving, leading needy sinners to Christ! Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 15:3–4