
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

LECTURE 12: PRIESTHOOD

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

30 LECTURES

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21 CHAPTERS OLD TESTAMENT · 9 CHAPTERS NEW TESTAMENT

Old Testament Lectures:

1. Introduction
2. Creation
3. Fall
4. Noah
5. Abraham
6. Patriarchs I
7. Patriarchs II
8. Exodus
9. Sinai
10. Tabernacle
11. Sacrifices
- 12. Priesthood**
13. Inheritance
14. David
15. Psalms
16. Solomon
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21. Restoration

New Testament Lectures:

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24. Resurrection
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28. Application
29. Mission
30. Glory

Lecture 12

PRIESTHOOD

Lecture Theme:

God dwells among his people, but he can only be approached through an appointed high priest who offers an acceptable sacrifice for sin.

Text:

“And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:11–12).

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 12

Did you ever notice the difference between a child’s storybook and a normal adult book? A child’s book often has large colorful pictures that take up most of the page with only a few simple words at the bottom. By contrast, an adult book is often full of a solid text of words, page after page after page, with few or no pictures. This is another way of illustrating the character of the Old Testament ceremonial system. It was God’s vivid picture book for a people underage. The colorful pictures conveyed God’s revelation of the coming Person and work of Christ. But in the full light and knowledge of Christ coming, the picture book, the Old Testament ceremonies, was put away in place of the mature and full revelation of God in the New Testament.

We continue the exploration of these Old Testament ceremonies in this lecture, bringing to completion the connections of the tabernacle, the sacrifices, and the priesthood, which form one whole package. Who were the priests, and what was their role in Israel? How do Aaron and his sons relate to Christ? What service did the priests perform, and what does that reveal about the gospel? What theology was taught through the Old Testament ceremonial feasts, and how do they relate to God’s inspired story of redemption? Where does the New Testament believer find his high priest? What effect does this have on the Christian’s access to God? We have seen that sin bars the way into God’s favorable presence, so what is to be done? What is necessary to gain access? The answer is twofold: what is needed is a sacrifice and one to offer the sacrifice. And we covered the former, sacrifices, in the previous lecture. In this lesson, we will focus on the second, the necessary provision of priesthood. And of course, we study these Old Testament shadows to see the revelation of the Person of Christ.

You may have noticed that we will have spent 12 whole lectures, including this one, covering only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The question is: why? Well, it’s not because the other portions are any less important, but it is because the Pentateuch provides the foundation upon which everything else that follows is

built. We could rightly focus on other emphases, but this course is on biblical theology, and I cannot emphasize strongly enough how essential and indispensable it is to have a deep understanding of the first five books of the Bible. We will cover 12 lectures, and we will have only touched on and highlighted a handful of themes. We have sought to provide you with basic tools to go further and deeper. So, in this lecture, first of all, we must consider the priests.

The dominant theme running throughout the whole book of Leviticus is holiness. Holiness is a defining mark of God's character as seen in the cry of the angels: "Holy, holy, holy." Holiness includes two aspects. One is separation: separation from what is sinful. The second is purity: being sinless, being spiritually pure. So, the Bible tells us that God is holy, but it also tells us His law, His ordinances, His priests, His altar, His feasts, His vessels, His oil, the priestly garments are all described as holy. When the priest appeared before the people, the message of holiness would have been visible. Why? Because the priest wore a golden plate on his forehead with the words engraved, "holiness to the Lord."

Furthermore, God specifies the necessity of the holiness of His people and entering God's presence. The holy priesthood was part of that provision. God Himself appointed the Old Testament office of priesthood. In other words, the church government of the Old Testament, just like the New Testament, was not an innovation of human origin. It was received by divine prescription. Not only is this made clear throughout Leviticus, but Hebrews 5:4 also confirms it. It says, "And no man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron." So, not just any Israelite male was permitted to pursue the priesthood. God restricted it to the tribe of Levi, and He divided the families into various classes with distinct responsibilities. You had, of course, the high priest, which was the highest office drawn from among a class of priests and composed of the direct descendants of Aaron. The high priest had functions not shared by any other, including entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, for example. But then there were the general Levites, the rest of the tribe, and they carried out a variety of functions. Some were scattered across the land with the purpose of teaching God's people His Word and Law. Others had designated functions associated with the worship in Jerusalem, such as singers and players of instruments, and porters, and a variety of responsibilities associated with the sacrifices and other aspects of tabernacle and temple worship. These men were set apart as priests by the application of oil. In other words, they were anointed with holy oil when consecrated to their sacred service.

Let me provide the big picture at this point so that we are connecting the dots in our study of the history of God's redemption. There were three primary offices in the Old Testament, and each of them required sacred anointing when they entered their respective offices. There were prophets, there were priests, and there were kings. Now, the New Testament word *Christ* is the equivalent of the Old Testament word *Messiah*, and both words mean *the Anointed One*. So, if you put that together, the title *Christ* in the New Testament is really an abbreviated reference to the fulfillment of these three offices, to the One Who is God's ultimate Anointed One. The title *Christ* points to the final prophet, God's final Word, the great High Priest and the King of kings, all found in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God also appointed holy ceremonial clothing for the priest to wear when serving in the holy place, and we cannot consider here the significance of the details, but let me highlight the prescribed breastplate, as it relates closely to one important function of the priesthood. The priests were ordained to make intercession on behalf of the people. Interestingly, the breastplate consisted of 12 precious stones or gems, and each stone had a name of one of the tribes of Israel written on [it]. These stones were placed in the breastplate, and the breastplate was placed over the heart of the high priest. As he entered into the holy place to appear before the Lord to make intercession for the people, he carried the names of the 12 tribes visibly before the Lord. This is a beautiful picture of all that Christ does as our High Priest and bearing His people upon His heart before the eternal throne, as we shall see further, in a moment. Well, that introduces us to the priests.

Secondly, we need to give some attention to their service. The priest was a mediator representing the people before God. He was appointed to present gifts and offerings, sacrifices, intercessions, and the people themselves before the Lord in pursuit of reconciliation and the expiation of sins. As we saw in an earlier lecture on the regulation of God's worship, we see again here that the priests were restricted in their service by God's permanent law of worship. God only permits acts of worship that He has appointed or commanded, and this language is woven throughout the description of the preservice. For example, [in] Exodus 31:11, we see that phrase, "according to

all that I have commanded thee shall they do.” That theme is carried through this section. All through the fine details of divine worship outlined, for example, in Leviticus 8 and 9, we see the repeated words, “as the Lord commanded, as the Lord commanded,” and that prepares us for Leviticus 10 because in Leviticus 10, we have an example of the violation of this principle by Nadab and Abihu. In Leviticus 10:1–3, we read, “and Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified,” made holy, “in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.” Even though it was his own sons, [the] glory of God took preeminence.

Well, this remains a lesson for the remainder of history to the present day. In every last detail, we must only offer acts of worship to God that He has explicitly commanded in His Word. You think in the New Testament [of] the reading of God’s Word, the preaching of God’s Word, prayer, the singing of Psalms, the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, and so on. So, what did God appoint in the Old Testament ceremonial worship? What did He prescribe? And what theology do we derive from this revelation? Well, we can only highlight a few examples. In addition to the daily morning and evening sacrifices, as well as the sacrifices brought by the people day by day, God also appointed special holy days at which sacrifices were offered. He required all the men to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The Bible says they did so in order to appear before the Lord. That’s the language, and this language is important for the remainder of Scripture. They did so to appear before the Lord. He also provided a special selection of Psalms that they would sing on their way to meet with God in Jerusalem, which we call the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120 to 134. We will consider these feasts briefly, though devoting a little more time to the first and last ones that we will cover.

The first Old Testament holy ceremonial feast is Passover, and we’ve seen reference to this earlier in our lectures at the time of the Exodus. Passover and the feast of unleavened bread, which was connected with it, was instituted back in Exodus 12, and we read more about it in Leviticus 23:4–8. God appointed this feast at the time of the Exodus, and He required them to continue to celebrate it in order to commemorate Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage at the time of the Exodus. So, its origin is connected with the 10th plague, as you will remember, in which God promised to destroy the firstborn males of every house, unless they applied the blood of the Pascal Lamb to their doorframes. That night God passed over the homes shielded with blood. This salvation through judgment initiated Israel’s redemption and deliverance. The feast of unleavened bread was connected with Passover. Israel was to eat unleavened bread for seven days to recount the bread made in a hurry when they were brought out of Egypt in haste, and they were also told to offer a burnt offering each day.

Well, if you fast-forward to the New Testament when Christ ate the last Passover with His disciples on the evening before His arrest, we are told in Matthew 26:30 that they sang a hymn. Now, this word *hymn* is used in the titles of the Psalms, but they sang a hymn when they went out to the Mount of Olives. The Jews sang the Hallel psalms, that section that’s found from Psalm 113 to 118, on these occasions, and [these] would have been the words sung by Christ and His disciples. Imagine the Lord Jesus Christ singing Psalm 118 as He went off to His arrest and crucifixion. Think of the words in verses 22–23 and 27, “The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” It goes on, “bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar.” [It’s] powerful to think about those words in that context. The Passover signified and pointed forward to God’s ultimate provision in the person of Christ. So, we read in I Corinthians 5:7, “For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.” He is God’s Pascal Lamb. His blood covers His people and delivers them from their sins. We can sing in Psalm 32:1, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

[The] second feast that we will consider is the feast of Pentecost, sometimes called the Feast of Weeks or Harvest. This too is found in Leviticus 23. This was appointed to be observed 50 days after Passover, and it occurred on the first day of the week, which would eventually become the New Testament Sabbath. The people presented an offering of grain out of joy and thankfulness for the Lord’s blessing on the harvest. Notably, in Acts 2, it was on the day of Pentecost that the risen Christ poured out the Holy Spirit, and 3000 souls were converted and baptized. We will consider this further when we come to the New Testament, the connection between Pentecost and what took place next. The third feast is the Feast of Trumpets. This feast was a day of memorial, the text says,

before the Lord accompanied by repentance and consecration to the Lord. The people ceased from their work and offered an offering made by fire. Perhaps it was a memorial of the long blast of the trumpet in Exodus 19 when Israel was summoned before the Lord at Mount Sinai to receive His Word and Law. Interestingly, the New Testament begins with the angelic announcement of the coming of the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the birth of the Savior, and we will hear of this imagery again at Christ's Second Coming. In I Thessalonians 4:16, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first."

Fourthly, we have the feast of Tabernacles. This is the third and last of the annual feasts that required pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which we mentioned earlier. At this feast, the people offered various burnt offerings and gifts and free will offerings before the Lord. It entailed a weeklong celebration of fall harvest, coupled with making temporary shelters of branches to remember how God cared for His people during the 40 years in the wilderness. And we are told [that] they did so to rejoice before the Lord their God.

The fifth feast that we will consider is the Day of Atonement. This was the highest and the most solemn holy day of all. In fact, it is referred to as the Sabbath of Sabbaths, and it was at the very heart of Israel's calendar and national life. It was the high day of cleansing from sin by substitutionary atonement. On this day the Israelites were told to afflict their souls. This is an expression of repentant sorrow, often with fasting. The high priest would wear simple linen clothes rather than his normal elaborate garb. The annual ceremony involved two sets of offerings: a sin offering for the high priest in his house, and then a sin offering for the people; and then secondly, a burnt offering for the high priest in his house and another for the people. In between the two sets was the ceremony of the scapegoat.

The height of the ceremony came when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies. The one and only time that he did so each year was on this day, the Day of Atonement. He entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle blood upon the mercy seat on the top of the ark of the covenant. In addition, lots were cast to designate a goat for Jehovah and a goat for Israel, the first being sacrificed in its blood used to cleanse God's house. The second goat was the scapegoat. The priest placed both hands over its head and confessed all of Israel's sins and rebellion. It was then led into the howling wilderness, never to be seen again, and it was symbolically loaded with Israel's sins. In addition to the spiritual meaning regarding the sacrifices, which we considered in the last lecture, we see in the scapegoat, another picture of Christ, the One Who would bear away the sins of God's people.

Scripture describes this in various ways. It says, God remembers our sins no more (Hebrews 8:12, 10:17); He casts our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17) and into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19); He separates our sin from us as far as the East is from the West (Psalm 103:12). All of this language is connected to what is pictured in the scapegoat. The Day of Atonement signified God's provision of atoning sacrifice, reconciliation with God, and the way of access into God's acceptance and presence. We have not explored all the details of these feasts, but you can see that God filled them with savory gospel truths that pointed to their fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. That brings us to our third point, the perfect priest.

How can a sinful people approach a holy God? The answer is through a God-appointed priest offering an acceptable sacrifice. This is beautifully fulfilled in Christ. Think of how the two things are brought together in Christ. He is both the Sacrifice that is being offered and the Priest Who is presenting the sacrifice. Both are bound up in Him. In Hebrews 7:27 it says, "Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself." Chapter 10:12 says, "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God." Christ offers the sacrifice of Himself and makes intercession for His people. Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 12 question 31 speaks of Christ as "our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of His body, has redeemed us, and [makes continual intercession with the Father for us]." Shorter Catechism question 25 says the same. Hebrews, the book of Hebrews, speaks at length of the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of Aaron. As we saw in Lecture 7, Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek and not that of the tribe of Levi.

Earthly priests and priestly service and ceremonial feast days and ordinances were fulfilled by Christ. And therefore, they are completely abrogated and put away in the New Testament church. The Christian church should not have earthly priests and vestments and altars and incense and those Old Testament holy days, like Passover and Pentecost, and the other elements of ceremonial worship. All of these would detract from and be an affront

to the superiority of the glory of having Christ Himself. Colossians 2:17 says that these things were shadows of things to come, but the body is of Christ. Christ is the only Mediator between God and man. The New Testament sanctuary and Holy of Holies is not found in a room anywhere on earth like the tabernacle and temple. We now have the true sanctuary, which is located where our High Priest is found, in heaven itself, Hebrews 4:14, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God."

New Testament worship does not contain earthy symbols, which would be far too paltry. Our worship is heaven-centered because our worship is transacted in the heavens themselves. Though the New Testament is simpler in its form than the Old Testament, it brings far greater glory with it because it transpires in the heavens each week, when the Lord's people meet together before the throne upon which Christ sits and with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We must resist all attempts to drag into New Testament worship the priest craft and ceremonial elements seen, for example, in the Roman Catholic Church and, sadly, among some Protestants who follow them.

Christ continues to serve as the High Priest of His people forever. He intercedes continually, and He does so with compassion and sympathy. Hebrews 2:18, "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted." Hebrews 4:15, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." We read in Exodus 19:6 God saying to His people, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel." By means of the Levitical priests, Israel would learn how it as a nation could approach God through a priestly ministry. This comes, of course, to fulfillment in the New Testament as seen in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

We read in I Peter 2:9, speaking to the New Testament Gentile church, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." And in Revelation 1:6, "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father." The Old Testament material that we have covered enables us to understand this concept. Every believer has direct access into the presence of God, into the Holy of Holies, without an earthly priest or mediator. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." And while believers do not offer bloody sacrifices, we do consecrate our whole lives to Christ. Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

In conclusion, this lecture brings our brief consideration of the first five books of the Bible to a conclusion. God has delivered Israel from bondage, established them as a nation, and provided them with the tabernacle sacrifices and the priesthood, signifying God's presence with them and the means of finding acceptable access to Him. But Israel is still in a howling wilderness. They are not yet in the land God promised. In the next lecture, we will consider the theology of God's revelation in connection to the land and the inheritance that it signifies.