

Priests of God

Ezra 8:24-36

Understanding how the Old Testament applies today is not always an easy task, but it isn't as confusing as we sometimes make it today. That is especially true with regard to the category of law, God's law. The moral law of God, summarized by the ten commandments, clearly and obviously continues in our age as the definition of our duty and responsibility before God. Jesus himself affirmed, and even intensified, those commandments, being sure that no one could hide behind the hypocrisy so characteristic of the Pharisees.

When it comes to the Old Covenant laws regarding the nation of Israel, our *Confession of Faith* well explains the status of those civil laws today, noting that they "expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." So the general equity of the law remains, the general principles of justice and civil righteousness continue to be valid, but the laws themselves expired when the nation was destroyed. And the ceremonial laws, those laws of the priestly sacrifices and ordinances for worship, are a third category. As they prefigure Christ in the form of shadows and types, our confession declares that, "All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament." In other words, no more animal sacrifices. No more Levitical priests. No more temple worship in Jerusalem. No more shedding of blood.

And why not? Because now we have Jesus! So, writes the author of Hebrews,

Heb. 8:13 "In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

Further explanation follows,

Heb. 9:1 "Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary."

Even further, we read that this whole arrangement of an earthly temple was...

Heb. 9:9 "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

So the Old Covenant ceremonial laws are no longer practiced, for they are obsolete. Abrogated. Ended. Because they all point to Jesus. And so we study them in that context, the context of what it is they point to. That is especially evident this morning as we study the priests of God. Remember when Ezra reviewed the people of Israel who were returning to their land, that there had been a shortage of priests.

Ezra 8:15 "Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there."

He took care of that problem and called for some ministers for the house of God. And he prayed, with fasting, for God's protection and blessing upon the journey. That's where we pick up the story this afternoon.

v.24

There is something obviously noteworthy about these priests, and that's where we begin today.

I. PRIESTS ARE HOLY TO THE LORD.

v.28

So what does that mean? Everyone could probably answer that holy means to be set apart, and that would be exactly correct. The word means to be devoted, entirely consecrated for a very special use or purpose. Holy to the Lord means that the priests were set apart to do the work of the temple, to do the work we now call “worship.” Their purpose in life was defined by the service which they would offer to God in his temple. They were holy. And as we have seen before, this book emphasizes,

A. The priority of temple workers.

The importance of their presence among the people. The necessity, absolute necessity. Above everything else. The identity of the nation of Israel was to be worshipers of God. The identity of the nations of Israel was directly and immediately tied to the presence of their temple. And the temple was nothing without temple workers.

I have emphasized the importance of this before, but let me stress it again. This was the importance of the temple, made so clear by the words of,

2 Chron. 7:1 “When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. 2 And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD’s house. 3 When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshiped and praised the LORD, saying: “For He is good, For His mercy endures forever.”

The glory of the Lord filled the house, and so they offered sacrifices. The very next verse of 2 Chronicles, “Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord.” And further, verse 6, “the priests attended to their services.” “The priests

stood at their posts.”

You simply cannot underestimate the importance of those temple workers, for they were the ones who carried out the prescribed worship of God in his holy house! Service to God is all about worship. The holiness of the priests was all about worship. The identify and purpose of God’s people was completely connected to the worship which they offered to him in his house. That’s why these temple workers were so significant.

Ezra makes it clear just how important they were.

v.24-25

v.28

So what does that have to do with us? This is how Peter makes that connection.

1 Peter 2:4 “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

To whom is Peter speaking? Christians. Believers. Saints scattered throughout the regions of Asia Minor. By implication, he is speaking to Christians everywhere. He is addressing us here today. And here is how that Old Testament ceremonial shadow and type is fulfilled. The holy temple of the Old Covenant becomes the holy church of the New Covenant. “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house.” That’s the New Covenant temple, God’s house. The church. And Peter continues his description, describing the church as “a holy priesthood.”

And we are to do what priests have always done, “to offer up

spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Do you see how directly that language parallels the work of the temple and the work of the temple workers of the Old Covenant? So as we study the Old Covenant priesthood, the reality of the matter is that we are now the holy priesthood. We are the priests, all of us. We are all holy to the Lord, set apart to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We are the priests, you and I. We are holy, everyone of us. This idea is often described as,

B. The priesthood of all believers.

The New Testament minister of the gospel is not a priest, one who offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. He is a servant, a minister, to proclaim God’s word and shepherd God’s people. He is to rule and exercise authority as one who will give account. But he is not a priest. I am not a priest for you, just a minister of the word.

The Elders are not priests, not as Elders. Together we rule. Together we govern and administer the keys of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus’ name. But we are not priests by virtue of being elders. We are all priests by virtue of being Christians. We are all priests by virtue of being believers in Jesus Christ, who is the one and only true high priest, the only Mediator between God and men.

Sometimes God’s people today forget that. They think that someone else offers their sacrifice of worship for them, that the minister of the pastor does it for them, as if standing up front is the only way to offer your service to God or exercise your gifts. No, beloved, the glory of the New Covenant house of God is that we are all priests and we all offer our gifts together!

So we don’t recruit the special descendants of Levi to be the temple singers. We are all the temple singers, and please keep that in mind whenever we sing. You are functioning as a priest every time we sing together as a congregation. Every time we pray together as the body of Christ.

And you are holy to the Lord! That is your purpose and your calling and your identity as well. One of the worst things that can happen to an otherwise solid and faithful church is for people to become passive. Spectators. Listeners. Observers. Instead of joyful, active and exuberant participants. So when we sing, sing to the Lord as a holy priest. Whatever the element of our worship is, it is each one of you, joined together, who functions as a holy priest.

You are holy to the Lord, for if you are a believer, then you are a priest. Secondly,

II. SACRIFICES OF WORSHIP ARE HOLY TO THE LORD.

Set apart. Devoted to God’s service. Given to him for his pleasure. The sacrifices of worship which we offer are holy to the Lord. They are not ours, ultimately not for our consumption or our comfort or pleasure or satisfaction. They belong to the Lord.

One obvious example is your tithe. It belongs to the Lord. It is holy to the Lord, set apart for him. The prophet Malachi would even declare the word of God this way,

Mal. 3:8 “Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.”

Sacrifices of worship are holy to the Lord. So also our singing. Thus our worship is described by these words in,

Col. 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

We sing to God. We sing for his pleasure, for his honor. Our voices are holy to the Lord, because we offer them as holy sacrifices to God, what the book Hebrews describes as the fruit of our lips.

Heb. 13:15 “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. 16 But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

Sacrifices of worship are holy to the Lord. And thus,

A. Sacrifices of worship have great value.

Just look at how that value is specified in our text this afternoon.

v.26-27

Very, very expensive. And the role of the priest was to bring those valuable sacrifices into the temple. That’s simple enough, isn’t it, for Ezra and the priests who came back to their land to rebuild the temple. Take the valuable sacrifices into the temple and offer them to God.

B. Sacrifices of worship are brought into God’s house.

v.29

They did.

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And God protected them through this dangerous journey, and everything was counted, weighed, and recorded.

v.31-34

It’s a challenging thought, isn’t it, that in a sense, the sacrifices we bring to the Lord today are counted, weighed and recorded. So we should consider these sorts of challenging questions, Did you bring all the sacrifices you could? Were you well prepared for worship? Did you receive the invitation to worship with sincerity? Have you sung with all your heart, counting every verse, every word, as a sacrifice of your own lips to be weighed and recorded by God? And for those who are not here...well, obviously, there is no sacrifice to count or record.

What a marvelous privilege He gives us, to be called priests! What a marvelous honor and duty. What a high calling, and what great importance is ours, for you and I, we, are all priests in the house of God today offering our valuable sacrifices to him. He counts them, weighs them, and records them, for God is seeking worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

So bring in all your sacrifices of worship. Bring them into God’s house. Don’t forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some. But come. Come often. Come eagerly and earnestly. And bring those valuable sacrifices for God to count, weigh and record. Bring those sacrifices with which God will be pleased. Come as priests into the holy temple of our great God. We do nothing less every time we gather for worship.

I hope you sense in all of this the importance upon our corporate identity. It is not helpful for Christians to limit the application of the gospel to a personal and private expression of their faith. It is not helpful when God’s people consider the church to be unnecessary, even unimportant. Or worse,

irrelevant or detrimental to their Christian life and vitality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For we are all priests in the household of God, what Paul defines as “the whole building,” “a holy temple in the Lord,” and “a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”

So bring your holy sacrifices into that house and offer them to God in his holy temple, this place where he dwells among us. And with that, finally, let me offer a description of several of those priestly offerings, using the language and symbolism of the Old Covenant.

III. PRIESTLY OFFERINGS IN THE HOUSE OF GOD.

Three specific sacrifices, again in the language of the Old Covenant with specific applications in our own experiences within the New Covenant. First,

A. Sin offerings.

v.35

I'll come to the burnt offerings in a minute, but first sin offerings. The meaning and purpose of that offering is obvious and clear, it was a sacrifice of atonement in order to satisfy the punishment earned by sin. The big word is propitiation, a sacrifice that satisfies the requirements of the wrath and justice of God. For more explanation, turn with me to,

Lev. 4:13 ‘Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which should not be done, and are guilty; 14 when the sin which they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a young bull for the sin, and bring it before the tabernacle of meeting. 15 And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD. Then the bull shall be killed before the

LORD. 16 The anointed priest shall bring some of the bull's blood to the tabernacle of meeting. 17 Then the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the LORD, in front of the veil. 18 And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar which is before the LORD, which is in the tabernacle of meeting; and he shall pour the remaining blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. 19 He shall take all the fat from it and burn it on the altar. 20 And he shall do with the bull as he did with the bull as a sin offering; thus he shall do with it. So the priest shall make atonement for them, and it shall be forgiven them. 21 Then he shall carry the bull outside the camp, and burn it as he burned the first bull. It is a sin offering for the assembly.”

That describes the offering which secures atonement, and this is the sacrifice which is no longer needed today, for when Jesus offered the perfect sin offering of his own body, he declared, “It is finished.”

Heb. 9:22 “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. 23 Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another— 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

So Jesus has put away sin, once and for all. In all the offerings we offer, then, there is no sin offering. There is no

propitiation, no satisfaction of God's wrath. Jesus did all of that for us. There is no merit, no atonement, no earning forgiveness. That has all been done by Jesus. And it is ours by faith.

But there are two others sacrifices mentioned here in Ezra 8, both of which do continue. The first are the,

B. Freewill offerings.

v.28

A freewill offering was one made as a vow, a personal commitment. Not necessarily required by the statute of the law, but one given, "freely." Without obligation. Without necessity. Just given in love. Even in human relationships, those are typically the most cherished gifts. Not the obligatory gifts, even at Christmastime. But those given freely and spontaneously, as a pure act of love. That's the idea of a freewill offering we give to God!

There is a familiar New Testament example of this principle.

2 Cor. 9:6 "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."

I believe God does require a tithe, but the principle of our giving goes well beyond that legal obligation. "God loves a cheerful giver." One who gives "not grudgingly or under compulsion." One who gives "as he has purposed in his heart," a freewill offering.

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Finally, then, are the,

C. Burnt offerings.

v.35

The burnt offering was also called a whole offering, and the particular feature of this sacrifice was the idea that the whole animal was given to God, representing the whole-hearted and complete devotion of the worshiper. The whole animal was burned, representing the fullness of the whole life of the worshiper being offered to God.

This is my favorite of all the Old Testament offerings, because it most fully describes both the sacrifice of Jesus and the sacrifice which we offer as we trust in him. Jesus' sacrifice was a sin offering, as I have already emphasized. But it's also a burnt offering. So Paul exhorts us in,

Eph. 5:1 "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

There it is. A fragrant aroma. A burnt offering, wholly devoted to God. The sin offerings didn't have that fragrant aroma, but the burnt offering did. And that is the offering that Jesus sacrificed to his father, the burnt offering of his own life, given wholly and entirely to his father. And that is the broadest sense of the sacrifices that we offer as well, as Paul writes in,

Rom. 12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Therefore, people of God, priests of God, offer that sacrifice this very day. Offer to God the whole of your life. Offer to God the whole of your body as a living sacrifice. Offer to God everything. Your body, your life, is to be a holy sacrifice. For as priests, you are holy to the Lord!