

Jesus as Priest

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Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Rhiannon. And it'd be worth keeping that passage open in front of you as we dig into it a bit this morning. We're carrying on this short series, as I said, as we approach Christmas, thinking about the roles, the functions, the offices, as they're historically called, of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king.

We love to celebrate Christmas, as Eamon was speaking about just earlier. We love to make much of the arrival of Jesus, God himself, come to our world.

And so these few weeks, we get the chance to think perhaps a bit more deeply, or perhaps a bit more specifically, we might say, about the work that Jesus carried out, those roles he came to fulfill.

We began, as we said last week, by looking at Jesus as prophet, one who speaks God's words to the people. That was the role of prophet that Jesus fulfilled and carried out to the perfect degree, that incredibly, into this world of noise, of confusion, of conflicting ideas and messages, that God has spoken finally and definitively to us, to humanity, through his son, Jesus Christ, has spoken in revealing himself to us, what he is like, and also spoken by calling us to a response to him.

Those two roles of the prophet. And we saw those in Jesus' first words in Mark's gospel, remember. It said, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

[1 : 3 8] Jesus announcing this message, this good news of what God is doing, that God is active, that God is working in his world, and then calling for that ongoing response of repentance, turning to him, Jesus as prophet.

Well, this morning, as we said, we're looking at Jesus as priest and how Jesus fulfills that role, another of these roles that is laid out for us in the Old Testament. We'll talk about some of the things that priests did.

They might seem a little bit weird to us as we look through them this morning. That's okay. We don't need to worry about that. But they will help us see how Jesus has fulfilled that role as priest.

So it's worth kind of highlighting here this morning, I'm not a priest. Some churches still use that term, but it's not really kind of accurate. We don't need priests anymore in the biblical sense of the word, because Jesus has perfected and has fulfilled that role for us.

We're going to look at how he does that this morning. It's worth saying, perhaps as we start, that whatever your relationship with God, as we come this morning, whether you're just kind of finding out about Jesus and the Bible, asking those kind of questions, and those are great questions to ask, and we're really glad you're with us if that's you, or if you've been a follower of Jesus for a long time.

[2 : 5 8] And again, we're really glad to have you with us if that's you as well. But it might well be that you don't really think this morning that your most pressing need, or the most important thing that we could talk about, or the most practical thing, or the thing that will get you most excited looking forward to Christmas, it might well be that speaking about Jesus as a priest wouldn't figure that highly on that list.

But I do hope, and I do pray that this morning we'll get to see that wherever we are on that spectrum, from not knowing God to having walked with him to a long time, and whatever is happening in our lives, whatever things we have on our minds, that actually Jesus as priest is incredibly good news.

Jesus as priest is vital for all of us. Jesus as priest is something that genuinely makes a difference as we live our lives day by day.

So this is a huge topic, loads we could say. I say we're going to kind of zoom in, try and stay fairly focused on those verses from Hebrews that Rhiannon read for us, or we'll dip in other places as well.

But two main elements highlighted here about Jesus as priest that we're going to look at, particularly Jesus as priest in contrast to, or over and above those that came before him who had been given that priestly role.

[4 : 21] And we're actually going to take them in reverse order. That means we'll start with verse 26, reading on. And what we see here is Jesus, the perfect priest who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice.

Jesus, the perfect priest who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice. So in the Old Testament, that's the part of the Bible before Jesus was born. In fact, right back in the book of Exodus, that's the second book of the Bible, until God establishes this office of priest.

And certain people were appointed and were anointed for that role. And there's lots of stuff in the Bible about what that meant and the specifics of what they were to do and how they carried out that job.

But really, kind of at the heart of it, the key to that role, the summary perhaps was this, that the priests mediated between the people and God.

The priests mediated between the people and God. And they did that, first and foremost, through offering sacrifices. So there was a lot of sacrifice.

[5 : 31] There was a lot of kind of blood and guts involved in being a priest. We see that in verse 27 of Hebrews 7 there. It says the former priests would offer sacrifices daily.

And we could read again about all those different sacrifices earlier on in the Bible, the different ways that they were done. It's fair to say if you were a bit squeamish or went sort of pale at the sight of blood, a priest wouldn't have really been the job for you.

Because every day, without fail, there were animals sacrificed to God on a special altar by the priests. On certain days, at certain feasts, at certain occasions, and at times like the anointing of a new priest or before the priest would carry out some special ceremonial task before God, well, on those days, even more sacrifices would be made.

And it's good for us to kind of stop and pause here and just realize that we can't really imagine, we can't really get our heads around, but we probably can't really overstate just what an important and what a central part of life these sacrifices were to God's people.

They were so important, so central, so vital. And the priests were the only ones allowed and able to offer these sacrifices. And in a lot of ways, maybe that feels like a bit of a kind of an alien world to us, doesn't it?

[6 : 58] Maybe that feels very primitive, very kind of old-fashioned. Maybe it even seems a bit shocking or uncomfortable, maybe. Maybe when we think about a priest and sacrifices and all these things, it just feels so far away from our experience that we wonder, as we said at the beginning, well, how on earth could this be of any relevance to us today in 2023?

Well, to get to grips with those questions and ultimately to see why Jesus as priest is so important and so eternally relevant, we need to get to grips with these sacrifices.

What were they all about? What was the point in them? How could they be such a central thing when they seem so strange to us? Well, really, they were there as a constant visual and kind of visceral reminder of the distance between a holy, perfect God and sinful, fallen humanity.

Now, these sacrifices were there to show day after day after day that humanity cannot just kind of waltz up to God, and that we can't be casual with God. In fact, we don't even deserve to be in God's presence because there is this huge problem.

We are sinful people and God is a holy God. And that means we are all people that have done things wrong. We have rejected God's good rule over us. Because of that, we haven't loved others as we should have.

[8 : 30] Actually, that kind of harsh truth that when we think of the pain and the suffering in our world in some small way, even though we might have done lots of good things, we've also, all of us, personally added partly to that sorrow around us.

If you perhaps don't like to think of that, kind of the classic way, I suppose, of getting to grips with that is to imagine, isn't it, all of your thoughts, your words, your private actions projected up on a screen for everyone to see, projected kind of onto the side of a building somewhere with a big arrow pointing down, and you have to stand in front of all of them.

And there's people walking past. You know, how do you feel? Well, all of us, wouldn't we? We just want to kind of disappear into a hole in the ground. It's a nightmare scenario. But that's the fact is, because we are sinful people, and also along with that, that God is not a God who will just ignore all the wrong in our world and the wrong that we get up to.

Again, we've spoken before about how actually that's a really good thing, because if God was indifferent to evil, to sin, to things that hurt others, we would have no hope, would we, of change in our world.

We'd have no hope that God would act to deal with those things. And so it's good that God wants to put that right, and yet also it's a problem, because as we've just said, that wickedness finds a root in all of us.

[9 : 55] And that is the situation that these constant sacrifices are reminding the people of the gap between God and us, and that the only way for that gap to be bridged is for the penalty, is for the consequences of those sins to be paid, and that penalty means death.

And that penalty means the shedding of blood. And that penalty means sacrifice. And so ultimately the people are to see these ongoing, repeated sacrifices and think, actually, that is what I deserve if I get too close to God.

They're to be reminded we can only draw near through the sacrifices God provides. And perhaps one of the reasons these sacrifices do seem so alien to us is not just because it's a very different way of doing things in a different world, although of course it is, but actually perhaps they seem so alien to us because a holy God can seem so alien to us as well.

Perhaps they seem so alien to us because we don't recognize how big a gap there is, how big a problem we have when we come to approaching God. And so in the New Testament, the priests spent a lot of time performing these sacrifices, performing them over and over again, the constant reminder of what is needed for sinful people to come before a holy God.

And actually that included the priests themselves. They had to make sacrifices for themselves before they could donate to God to make sacrifices for others, before they were able to act as mediators because these priests weren't perfect either.

[11 : 41] And yet, having said all of that, our passage in Hebrews says, doesn't it, that Jesus didn't need to do that. It says he has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those other people.

Well, we just spoke about that being so central. So how can Jesus be a priest if he doesn't seem to carry out this kind of fundamental part of the role? Well, that verse continues, doesn't it?

Since he did this once and for all when he offered up himself. And so Jesus is so unique as he is both the priest and the sacrifice.

He offers up himself as he dies on the cross as the Lamb of God. Jesus, the perfect priest, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice, the fulfillment of that priestly role, the fulfillment of the sacrifices, which means that they have now come to an end.

So I don't need to be kind of standing out in the porch sacrificing lambs so that we can come into here to worship God this morning. That's good news because I would hate that. The hotel would hate that.

[12 : 59] But it's only, it's important we remember, that's not just because that's a weird old-fashioned thing. It's only because we gather in light of Jesus's perfect once-for-all sacrifice that he made on the cross.

Jesus is the sacrifice who truly deals with sin. So the blood of lambs, of goats, of bulls couldn't really stand in the place of humanity that the life of an animal could never really be an adequate substitute for the life of a man or a woman, a girl or a boy.

They were kind of visual aids, really, I suppose. But Jesus comes, God himself, but truly, fully human. And so he's able to stand as that sacrifice in our place.

The perfect sacrifice who ends all sacrifices so that we can be forgiven. And so I hope we see there that Jesus as priest is the most eternally relevant, necessary, joyful message because it's through his perfect sacrifice of himself that we're able to know that actually our big problem of sin, that big gap, has been dealt with.

And that through him, through Jesus, that we can draw near to God. And really that is the heart of the gospel, isn't it? That God doesn't say, well, you know, you've messed up here and here and here, but if you just do this and this and this, then you can make things right and you'll get into my good books.

[14 : 27] I know the gospel and what Christmas is all about is that God himself came to make that sacrifice. God himself came in Jesus Christ and offered up himself for us.

And the incredible result of that, as we've said, is that we can know genuine forgiveness and through that, draw close to God. And it's so important that we never get tired of saying that. You know, let's never kind of sit here and think, well, this is just the basics.

We kind of know this. We need to move beyond that because actually each of us, however good we might think we might be, however hard we might try, however many times you might have heard this message, even on our best days, remember that left to our own account, there is this huge chasm between God and us due to our sin.

Even on our best days, however long we have been walking as a Christian, that still we are completely dependent on Jesus as that perfect sacrifice to bridge that gap.

But also the other side of the coin as well, each one of us, however bad we think we've been, whatever events in our lives we have, whether in the past or the present that we're so ashamed of, that we hate to think about, even on our very worst days, it's so important that we never forget this, that if our trust is in Jesus, as he offered himself up as that sacrifice, that sacrifice is sufficient for our forgiveness and to bring us back to God.

[16 : 00] Jesus, the perfect priest, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice and nothing else is needed. One final thing in terms of this perfect sacrifice before we move on.

If we were just to turn over the page into Hebrews in chapter 9, we would read this in verses 13 and 14. It says, For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serving the living God.

There's a lot in those verses and we're not going to dig right in, but basically sort of saying, well, if you thought this old system was good, that these animal sacrifices were in some way able to make you ritually clean, well, how much better is the sacrifice of Jesus that truly cleanses us inside and out and to what end will to purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

We see here the result of Jesus' sacrifice is not just forgiveness. That's not the end of the story. But from that foundation, that call, having been cleansed, having had our consciences purified to serve the living God.

Jesus' work as priest doesn't just make us God's people. Having done that, it moves us to live as God's people, joyfully serving him. And we respond to what Jesus has done by fully living for him, not to earn his forgiveness, but because he has granted it to us.

[17 : 49] Jesus, the perfect priest, offering himself as the perfect sacrifice. So there's one of the two major focuses from these verses in Hebrews chapter 7 that we're looking at as we see how Jesus carries out this role of priest for us.

The second then, and remember, we're working backwards through our verses a little bit, so this is verses 23 down to 25 of Hebrews 7. But our second main point here is this, Jesus, the eternal priest, intercedes for us in the presence of God.

And here we move from what Jesus has done as priest, the thing that is finished, that once-for-all sacrifice, to Jesus' ongoing work as a priest on our behalf.

Jesus, the eternal priest, intercedes for us in the presence of God. Let's just try and kind of unpack that a little bit because again, this is one of these big emphases in the New Testament and yet it's perhaps not language or perhaps not a concept that we think about that much.

But again, I really want us to see that this is just amazing news for us and will really, I think, change the way that we approach our lives, our weeks, our days. Let me read those verses again.

[19 : 01] It said, the former priests were many in number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office. but he, that's Jesus, holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

So the writer is saying there that in the Old Testament the priests had this unfortunate habit of dying. Now, I don't think they died anymore kind of frequently than anyone else, but they would die and so new priests would be needed and there was this kind of constant cycle that went on and that might seem obvious.

Really, the point he's making here is if the person or the people you're relying on to connect you with God keep on needing replaced, well, you might come to question, well, how strong, how reliable is my connection?

You know, you imagine you live on an island connected to the mainland by a bridge and that bridge keeps on falling down and it's okay because they replace it each time, but you might kind of wonder, well, how reliable is that link to the mainland?

[20 : 13] How connected really are you? And so here the writer to the Hebrews holds out this contrast that Jesus is a permanent, Jesus is an eternal priest.

Jesus is the only priest we will ever need. He holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever, the only one that we need.

And what is Jesus doing forever? Well, he's not making sacrifices again and again and again. He's offered up himself once and for all. We've seen that, that's done.

So what does Jesus' ongoing priestly work mean? Well, we read that he is now interceding for us in the presence of God. Well, that's an excellent question and I'll answer that question right now.

What does that mean, interceding? It means that Jesus is speaking to God on our behalf. It means that Jesus is mediating between us and God.

[21 : 12] It means that Jesus is representing us to God now and always. And he will never stop doing that. This is perhaps something we don't often think about in terms of the work of Jesus, but it is incredible.

It means if we've trusted Jesus in his sacrifice for you in your place, it means that right this moment, Jesus is in God's presence, seated at the right hand of the Father and he's saying, you see that guy there?

You see that girl there? You see that person over there? They are all people who have been cleansed, forgiven, purchased through my blood.

Jesus is saying that time after time after time. There is this constant reminder in the heavenly places for each individual who trusts in Jesus, of Jesus saying, my sacrifice is sufficient for that one, for that one, for him, for her.

And so we sometimes forget or we doubt that what Jesus has already done, his sacrifice in our place, we kind of forget that that really is all we need. we perhaps doubt that that really is perfect enough to cover every sin we ever have done, ever do, and ever will do.

[22 : 33] And because we do still sin, and we always will, well, the devil gets in and makes us question, well, are you even one of God's people at all if you've done that? You know, how could God love you after you've done that again?

You know, what makes you think God would want anything to do with you? And yet, there's moments when we hear those questions, we can actually be certain that God will never turn away from us because Jesus is interceding for us.

Jesus is representing us. Jesus is pleading our case, which is a final case, a finished case, because of his completed sacrifice at this very moment and for all eternity.

and it's important to say here, it's not that God the Father is kind of reluctant in any way to look on us as his people. It's not that he's begrudging that, absolutely not.

There's no wedge here between God the Father and God the Son. This is all God's plan from eternity, but as one author puts it, the intercession of Christ is his heart connecting our heart to the Father's heart.

[23 : 45] It's an incredibly personal thing. It shows us that personal nature of our salvation. Jesus wasn't just a sacrifice, but he wasn't quite sure who would take advantage of that or who would benefit from that.

No, having made that sacrifice for his people, Jesus continues as their priest by constantly bringing them to God in prayer. One of our daughters, when she was a little bit younger, would often pray and she would say this, Dear God, I pray for all the people that I know and all the people that I don't know.

Amen. And, you know, it's fairly all-encompassing, I suppose, to be generous, but probably not. You wouldn't say that personal in terms of a prayer. And yet, incredible to think that right now Jesus is bringing our deepest needs before our Heavenly Father.

Jesus is bringing our darkest secrets before our Heavenly Father. and He is saying, I've made the perfect sacrifice on their behalf.

It is this incredibly personal salvation and relationship that Jesus makes possible. And ultimately, that is why we're able to pray. You know, we don't think of this, Jesus' intercession for us and think, well, if Jesus is doing that for me, He'll be better at that than I will, so I just won't bother.

[25 : 09] No, we can pray. We can bring things before God with genuine confidence because we draw near to Him through Jesus and we join with Jesus as He intercedes on our behalf.

It's like if you find yourself at church, you know, you're standing next to someone who's really good at singing or at least is kind of really kind of belting it out. You know, you don't just say, oh, that's fine. You know, they've got this bit covered for me.

Actually, as they sing, well, you have the confidence to sing out all the more as you follow their lead even if that might not be something that you're particularly good at. That's what it's like with Jesus interceding for us.

Knowing Jesus is perfectly and permanently interceding for us means we're able to come before God knowing He's not going to say, oh, sorry, who are you?

Oh, sorry, you've not been in touch for a while. Sorry, what are you doing here? Oh, sorry, I heard you've done this or that. I'm not interested in you anymore. but actually knowing that God our Father welcomes us as He is constantly being reminded joyfully of our place in His family through the work of Jesus.

[26 : 18] And so we are able to delight to come into His presence in prayer. We are able to come into His presence and pray with great confidence even when so often the words fail us or our minds wander or we're not sure what to say.

But we do pray and we pray with confidence because Jesus is interceding constantly for us and that leads us to those great words then of verse 25.

Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Now, the point of Jesus as priest, the reason the book of Hebrews makes such a huge deal of it is to encourage us that Jesus will save and will never let go of all those who trust in Him, that He will save to the uttermost, that it is His work from beginning to end and He will complete His work.

And it's good as we close by remembering that this is an invitation for everyone. Jesus is the perfect priest who offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice and everyone is invited to accept that.

[27 : 34] Jesus' sacrifice in our place, the forgiveness, the cleansing, the ability to come to God in relationship with Him because of what Jesus has done and that incredibly, as we do that, that Jesus continues that role as our permanent priest interceding for us in the presence of God and making sure that we are never forgotten, never ignored, never left, but can have that joy now and for all eternity of knowing our place with God as His people, not through our efforts, but through the sacrifice of Jesus, our perfect priest who continues to intercede for us.

Let's pray. Let's pray together.