

**HEBREWS 20  
(Hebrews 5:1-4)**

**THE NATURE OF LEVITICAL PRIESTS  
By Ron Harvey  
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**INTRODUCTION**

We have entered now upon the longest section of the book of Hebrews and it will extend from chapter 5 through chapter 10. And in this long section we will deal with the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

I have found this to be a most important subject from both a doctrinal and a practical standpoint. It is important doctrinally because our very salvation hinges on the priesthood of Christ.

You see, we cannot approach a holy God without a priest. We must have a priest in order to come to Him. If we come without a priest we will be utterly rejected.

Anyone who went behind the veil in the tabernacle was killed. That is, anyone but the high priest. Only he could approach God and then only after he ceremonially cleansed himself. And he represented the people before God.

But the days of human priests were all before Christ. Christ is that great High Priest. And when our great High Priest appeared, there was no more need for human priests who had their own infirmities and their own sins and who were nothing but types anyway.

But our great High Priest has passed into the heavens where he ministers as our priest before an austere and holy God. And he has sat down there at the right hand of God to serve as our perpetual High Priest. And therefore we can come boldly to the throne of grace, because our most beloved Priest is there covering us with the sprinkling of his blood.

Now I have found that the most precious things of God are the very things that Satan tries most to pervert. And Satan has tried to foster the

idea that we do not have a great High Priest in the heavens. And Satan has corrupted the doctrine of the great High Priesthood of Christ throughout the world of Christendom.

In Roman Catholicism and in the Episcopal Church and of course in Judaism and in many other religions around the world, there remain human priests who act as mediators between a holy God and sinful men. And by doing so, they set aside the solitary grandeur of the Priesthood of our Savior Jesus Christ. By doing so, they say that Jesus is not the mediator between God and man. Not only do they not recognize him as the only true priest, but they deny the sufficiency of his atonement because they claim his atonement is not sufficient in itself, it must be administered and managed through human priests.

The Methodist church which is the bedrock of Arminianism and all other Arminian churches make the fundamental error of suggesting that Christ is everyone's priest. They say that he is the priest of all men. But since all men are not saved, this doctrine severely dilutes the efficacy of the priesthood of Christ.

Let me just say, if Christ mediates for you in heaven, then your sins are forgiven by and through his mediation and you are accepted by God on Christ's account. If Christ mediated for all men, then all men would be saved. But Christ mediates for his people with an efficient and sufficient mediation. And he saves all his sheep thereby.

Remember that when Aaron laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat, he confessed all the sins of the people of Israel. He did not confess the sins of the Canaanites or the Amalekites, but the sins of Israel only. This is selective mediation.

I want to point out that already in the book of Hebrews we have been acquainted to the priesthood of Christ.

*Wherefore, in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

Hebrews 2:17

*Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession.*

Hebrews 3:1

*We have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.*

Hebrews 4:14

Before we move on now to a more detailed study of priesthood, it should be noted that the Lord Jesus is designated as a *great High Priest*. (v.14)

He is better than any priest that had ever gone before. Never was there and never can there be another priest like Him. He was the only one ever designed to be the true priest. All other High Priests before him in Israel were mere figures of Him. All other priests after him are mere imposters. How can there ever be another priest after the greatest of all has come.

Any religion that offers another priest to mediate between God and man has denied Christ and has fallen into grave apostacy.

Now we come to chapter 5 of Hebrews and we will take a look at the first four verses.

*For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.”*

Now those four verses contain a general description of the Levitical high priests. This was the design of God for human priests before Christ came. And it was so designed so that it would typify and picture the true priesthood which Christ would display.

And so, let's look at the,

## Characteristics of the Levitical High Priest

### I. He must be human. (“taken from among men,” v.1)

Not much needs to be said here. But notice that it says, “every high priest taken from among men.” (5:1) The first absolute requirement of the Levitical priesthood was that a priest must be human. An angel would not be a fitting priest to represent men before God because an angel did not have the nature of men. And angel never experienced the sufferings of men and therefore he could not relate to men with compassion. Thus, the number one requirement of a priest is that he must possess the same nature as those whom he represents.

Listen to the words of John Calvin.

“It was necessary for Christ to become a real man, for as we are very far from God, we stand in a manner before Him in the person of our Priest, which could not be were He not one of us. Hence, that the Son of God has a nature in common with us does not diminish His dignity, but commends it the more to us; for He is fitted to reconcile us to God, because He is man.”  
John Calvin

### II. He is for the benefit of men. (“for men,” v.1)

This is the very business of a priest. He works for the benefit of others. This is the heart of mediation. The priest does the work on behalf of others.

Now this was the great truth that God taught the Israelites. Sinful men cannot directly approach a holy God. This is a most important concept that must be understood by a sinner before he can be saved. He must understand that there is a great breach between him and God. And God will not allow him to approach directly.

**Example: Remember when Adam sinned, it says, “So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.” (Gen.3:24) In other words, the tree of life came to represent God himself and man was driven out and he was not allowed to approach the “tree of life.”**

**Example: Remember when God came down upon Mt. Sinai, the people were told not to approach Him. “And thou shalt set bounds upon the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death.” (Exodus 19:12)**

And by this we see that men cannot approach a holy God.

**Example: We saw the same thing in the tabernacle. There were the outer courts for the people and there was a holy place for the priests only. And then there was that Holy of Holies where no one could go except the high priest once a year.**

So, the Jews were shown from the very beginning that God is unapproachable except by a designated priest.

There is a great and simple principle stated in Isaiah 59:2.

*Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.*

And so, the great purpose of the priest was to go before God on behalf of the people because the people could not go into Him.

And the great purpose of Jesus Christ in being the True Priest was to go before God on behalf of his people.

So you see in verse one, a priest must be human and his purpose is for men.

But note carefully,

III. The ministry of the priest is to God.

The work of the priest is for man, but it is to God.

This is the unique work of a priest. A prophet represents God to us. A priest represents us to God. A prophet comes to us on behalf of God. A priest goes to God on behalf of us.

And so the work of a priest is to go to God and to appease Him. The

work of the priest is to meet the requirements of holiness and to offer this holiness to God on behalf of the people.

Now Aaron, being a sinful man himself, couldn't possibly meet the requirements of holiness morally, but remember Aaron was only a type of Christ. And God allowed Aaron to make himself holy ceremonially and then Aaron could meet with God ceremonially on behalf of a ceremonial people.

But Jesus, our great high priest, met with God with all the requirements of holiness and he offered God perfect holiness and perfect righteousness and he offered it on behalf of his people. Jesus himself met the divine requirement of holiness and then satisfied the requirements of justice on the cross and then he marched into heaven and offered his own sacrifice for his own people.

So you see how the ministry of a priest is for men but to God.

Now we also see from verse one another characteristic of a Levitical Priest.

IV. He offers gifts and sacrifices to God. (v.1)

This is the chief function of a priest. He offers gifts and sacrifices to God.

Now first of all, the priests offered gifts to God. This would seem to be more in the nature of thanksgiving and praise and those little gifts to God that were pleasing to Him. But sacrifices were propitiatory gifts. The sacrifice of lambs on the altar were not only pleasing to God as other gifts, but were appeasing to Him. The blood caused God to pass by the people and not kill them.

But the lesson here is that the mere presence of a priest is no peace-maker between God and man. The priest better come with a gift and a sacrifice.

**Example: Men, if we get in serious trouble with our wives, then we better come home with a gift, hadn't we? She is angry and it helps to have a gift to appease that anger.**

But God also requires a gift to appease his anger. To put it another way, God requires a gift to appease his justice. You see, God's justice requires Him to administer justice to sinful men. And if God is to be appeased, someone has to pay the penalty.

And so a priest must bring a sacrifice for the people.

Jesus came to God offering a sacrifice. In fact when Jesus was hanging on the cross, he was acting in the capacity of a priest and he was performing a sacrifice. And he offered that sacrifice to God because every priest must come with a sacrifice.

*For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices; wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer.*  
Hebrews 8:3

Even Christ, if he desires to be a priest, he must bring a sacrifice. And Christ brought his own body and his own blood as a sacrifice for the sins of his people.

Now we see the next requirement of a Levitical Priest.

IV. He must share infirmities. (v.2)

Now the high priest in Israel was always a man who shared the same infirmities as those he represented. How unfeeling he would be if he did not have infirmities himself.

Aaron and all other high priests of Israel were men of weakness. They suffered sickness. They suffered pains. And they suffered that old nature of sin. And because they could relate to the people in this way, they were more able to have compassion on them.

This is one of the great characteristics of priests. They are compassionate. The very purpose of their office is to represent the people. And because they are one of the people and because they also are touched with infirmity, they are disposed to be compassionate.

Now notice here that the people whom the priest is to represent are described as ignorant and out of the way. This is a twofold description of sinners. They are ignorant and they are out of the way.

One of the functions of the priest was to instruct the people in the law of God and in the way of God. The priests were teachers. And their job was to instruct the ignorant. All sinners are ignorant.

*The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble.*

Prov.4:19

And all sinners are out of the way. They have turned away from God's way and have gone their own way. And they are thus "out of the way."

And the job of the priest is to have great compassion on them and to teach them and to bring them as best he can back into the way but in the end to go before God with a sacrifice and represent them.

At the end of the day, we are all counted among the ignorant and those that are out of the way. And thank God, a compassionate Christ is our great High Priest and he is well acquainted with our infirmities and he takes his own blood to heaven on our behalf.

V. He must be ordained by God.

To be a legitimate priest, one must be called by God. Now when it says, "No man taketh this honour unto himself" (v.4) it is talking about the office of high priest. It was an honorable office. And because it was an honorable office, God clothed Aaron in the most beautiful and glorious garments. And the people would see and recognize the high office. This was a man who would have the highest honor of approaching God once a year and representing the people to God.

But no man was qualified for such an office unless he was called of God. (v.4)