

PRIESTHOOD AND LIFE

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CHAPTER ONE

THE NATURE OF PRIESTHOOD

Reading: Heb. 2:17-3:1; 4:14-5:6; 7:26-8:2; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6.

You will recognise that these passages all bear upon one matter, and that is the matter of priesthood. I have it very much on my heart that we should be occupied for this little while with this great matter of priesthood and life, for those two things go together priesthood and life; the one is unto the other. We are very well aware that the one all-inclusive issue of the ages and of the eternities is that of life. We can gather everything into that matter, all the purposes of God from eternity to eternity, all the ways of God through the ages, all the interventions of God in history, all the revelation of God in Christ, and all the dealings of God with His own people. All these things - and that is a very vast range and a mighty depth of fullness - are gathered into the one matter of life, known to us in New Testament language as eternal life. It has become the one great critical issue and question, the most critical matter with which anyone can have to do - this matter of life, eternal life, divine life.

In the Scriptures throughout from the beginning to the end, two things are found in pairs — sin and death; righteousness and life. Immediately sin appeared, death ensued, and then, without any announcement or explanation, without any teaching or doctrine on the matter, sacrifice, the shedding of blood, and an altar came in as related to sin and death. Sin had entered, death had followed. "Death by sin; and death passed upon all men" (Rom. 5:12), is the

1

statement. Then, I repeat, no teaching, no explanation, but an act, the immediate introduction of sacrifice in the shedding of blood and almost as immediately an altar is before us in connection with sin and death. And these things — sacrifice, shedding of blood, the altar — stand for righteousness and life over against sin and death.

And then another factor appears. This sacrifice, this shedding of blood, this altar, brings in priesthood quite spontaneously, for whoever makes the sacrifice, sheds the blood, builds the altar and serves at it, is a priest whoever he is, and God was the first priest. In the case of Adam and his wife, there was quite clearly the slaying of some beast to provide them with a covering, and, if the symbolism means anything, then God was the first priest to do the slaying to make provision for the covering. From that time onwards it is taken for granted, and this whole matter grows and grows until we have a very elaborate and fully developed priestly ministry.

What a priest is

A priest is not appointed to an office; priesthood is not something official. It is not a cult, a class, an order, among men. A priest is simply one who stands on the ground of righteousness by means of an incorruptible life offered to God, and, standing upon that ground of righteousness and incorruptible life offered to God, the operation and working of death is arrested, nullified and set aside. Death as an active thing is overpowered because the ground of death has been taken from beneath it, which is sin. Incorruptible life, incorruptibility, has set aside corruption. Righteousness has taken the place of unrighteousness. The fruit of sin, therefore, cannot be borne; and the fruit of righteousness can be borne, and it is life. And anyone who ministers on the ground of righteousness, anyone who stands on the ground of incorruptible life and spiritually functions on that ground is a priest — a priest unto God and a priest for God, so that priesthood and life always go together.

What, in the Old Testament, because it is but a matter of types, of symbols, is an external system, an order, an official matter

among men, always dealing with outward things, in the New Testament is passed over in a spiritual way. It is stripped of all that which is merely external and official and transmitted to the church through Christ as a spiritual vocation, so that the church takes the place of Israel. You remember the Lord Jesus said, "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt. 21:43). And then Peter, writing to the spiritual Israel — said, "You, who in time past were no people, but now are the people of God'' — you are a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, the nation which has taken the place of the historic Israel, the earthly Israel, which forfeited its great mission and vocation to be God's minister of life in the earth. The church has now been put in the place of Israel to be the nation and the royal priesthood to fulfil this spiritual vocation. So John, right at the opening of his great apocalypse, bursts out with this doxology - he cannot wait till he sees the saints in glory; he must come out with it at once — "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us ... priests unto his God."

Now, with all the wonderful unveiling of truth in this particular connection, both in the Old Testament and in the New, which is something to occupy and ravish our hearts for a lifetime more, the sum of it all is this. As members of Christ's Body, we stand in relation to Him as the great High Priest in heaven as His priests or sons here, to make fruitful and effectual that high priestly work which He is carrying on in the heavenly sense. Let me put that a little more simply, perhaps in more words. In the Old Testament, you have Aaron and his sons. Aaron fulfils the ministry of the High Priest through his sons. In the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, you have Christ as the High Priest, and then, although there are other titles given to believers, among them there is this one - His sons. He calls them 'holy brethren'. He says, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren", but then He also says, "I and the children whom God hath given me", but then, though brethren and as Father and children, there is this added - "bringing many sons to glory". Christ is here in a spiritual sense not only as our elder

Brother, but as our spiritual Father, that is, the One through whom we have received life, to whom we owe our standing in the family.

The nature of spiritual priesthood

Now, it is as through us, members of Christ, that this great High Priestly work of His which is going on in heaven has to be made effectual here, and again when we ask what is the meaning, the significance and value of Christ's continual High Priestly work, the answer is, to set life over against death, to nullify the reign and operation of spiritual death. In a word, the church, from God's standpoint, is here on this earth with one all-inclusive purpose, and that is to minister life on the ground of righteousness, to destroy the operation of death by setting righteousness over against sin and therefore life over against death. The church's great conflict, the church's supreme conflict, the great warfare of every member of Christ, is with spiritual death, and the more spiritual you become, the more in touch with Christ you live, the more you function in a spiritual priestly ministry, the more terrible and awful does spiritual death become in your realization. You will not become sentimental about death if you are a priest. You ask any priest or Levite of the Old Testament what he thought about death, and you will not have him waxing poetical and talking about death as the great friend, the lovely messenger, as the poets do. Oh no, death is the enemy of God and of all God's interests. The supreme triumph of God in Christ by the cross was in the overcoming of death and the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. And when we speak of the last enemy, it is not only the last on the list, but also the consummate enemy, the enemy in which all things, all other enemies, are gathered up. It is with that that you and I have to do and are called to do, and this is the very essence and nature of spiritual priesthood.

You can take up the Word of God and move through that Word and bear this whole thing out. You see the breaking in of death again and again because of sin, and then you will see the breaking in of God with blood, with sacrifice, and arresting that work of death and destroying it and bringing life into its place. You see how John is led to put this matter. "Unto him who loveth us and washed us from our sins in his own blood and made us priests ...". Washed us and made us priests. Priesthood is the ministry of life, the ministry of life from the Lord to others. The priest stands in relation to life. That is the positive side of priesthood. He is dealing with death all the time, but he stands on the side of life against death and all the time he is having to counter death everywhere wherever he finds it. We cannot minister life until we can say, "and washed us from our sins", and even the Lord Jesus, as we have read in Hebrews, had to come on to that ground. Yes, tempted in all points like us we are, sin apart, nevertheless He was made sin for us. He, who knew no sin, was made sin and in the offering of Himself a sacrifice He who was made sin was delivered from that sin and entered upon His great priestly work of ministering life to believers.

If you rejoice in the first part of the truth, the statement, "unto him that loveth us and washed us from our sins in his own blood", (and I trust everyone is rejoicing in that, that we find our hearts rise in worship and praise to God at the very sound of those words because they mean something to us in an inward way) are you quite sure that you are functioning in the second, for the first is supposed to lead to the second. There is something wrong if we just stand in that part, and do not go on to the other - "and hath made us priests unto his God". Maybe the word 'priests' gives you some difficulty and you cannot bring your mentality from some picture of what you have been accustomed to thinking to be a priest - oh, the tragedy that 'priest' has been dragged down on to the level which it occupies now! If you have difficulty in that matter and the word 'priest' carries you into this horrible system of things known among men, let me then paraphrase it, "unto him that loveth us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us ministers of life unto his God", God's ministers of life. That is what it means.

Spiritual authority

And there is a great spiritual authority about this. It is not ecclesiastical authority, it is spiritual. Do you remember what the apostle said, that if one shall sin a sin which is not unto death "he shall ask life for him"? (1 John 5:16). Here is one standing on the ground of righteousness by faith through the blood of the Lord Jesus, and here is another who is suffering as the result of sin, and this one standing there for him stands in the position of a priest spiritually, and has the authority, the right, to go to the fountain-head of life and ask life for this one. O Lord, I ask Thee to give life for this one! That is priestly ministry, and who will say that that is not a needed ministry? There is no ministry needed on this earth today more than the ministry of spiritual life. Any kind of ministry which does not have that as its result is a failing ministry. If we minister any truth and it does not issue in life, then we are beating the air. Everything, we said at the beginning, in God's thought, intention, ways, in His dealings with us, has this matter of divine life, eternal life, bound up with it, and that is the test. Does it mean life? Then it bears the stamp, the hallmark, of God. If it does not mean that, it is lacking in the one essential. So we are all, from God's standpoint, intended to be priests, and, to understand the meaning of that, we are intended to be ministers of life, divine life, God's own life to others who are needing that life.

There is so much bound up with this matter which I think, if you stay to consider for a little while, will impress you tremendously. You see the great reign of death from the beginning on through the ages and today the reign of death, spiritual death. But oh, the working out of that, the terrible activity of that in the physical realm! Multitudes and multitudes now almost daily being hurled into eternity, death sweeping over the earth. Why? Because of unright-eousness, because of sin, and what is the sum of all sin? — the setting aside of God's Christ, the minister of life, who is Himself the life. And there is no meeting of the situation at all until we come again and minister Christ in terms of life. Men are not wanting us

to preach about Jesus Christ in doctrine. What they are needing is the impact of the living Christ in terms of life.

You can understand why it was that Satan and all the powers of evil set themselves against Israel - because the presence of that nation on this earth in right relationship with God declared effectually, positively, actually, that sin and death do not reign universally in God's world. It declared not something that talked doctrine, explained truth was present, but something which itself was a mighty living offset to sin and death to counter it, and while Israel was there on the earth in that right relationship with God, there was the evidence, the proof, that sin and death were conquered. Well, Israel was destroyed in its testimony and set aside. The church has been brought in to take Israel's place on a larger scale, it is true, a much larger scale in the heavens and in the earth, for this one object of being here present in God's universe for a testimony, and that is called the testimony of Jesus. John says, "I was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the ... testimony of Jesus", and throughout the book of Revelation that phrase occurs and recurs - the testimony of Jesus.

The testimony of Jesus

The testimony of Jesus is the testimony of life triumphant over death. So John opens his Revelation with that: "I am He that liveth; I became dead; and behold, I am alive unto the ages of the ages, and I have the keys (the authority) of death and of Hades."

It is the presentation of the Lord Jesus there, and that is the testimony of Jesus. "I became dead and I am alive unto the ages of the ages, and I have the authority over death and Hades!" That testimony was deposited in the church at its beginning, and how mightily did it uphold that testimony and bear that testimony among the nations. But the book of the Revelation opens with the covering of the ground of the church, and the one thing that is brought by the living Lord, the risen, eternally living Lord, against the church, was concerning this testimony of Jesus. "You have ... (this and that,

you have many things that are quite good), but ..." It is not works, it is not patience as such or endurance; it is not things, but this one central supreme matter of an impact of life over death — that is the testimony.

That has to be taken up by the ministry of priests, ministers of life. They, as the book of the Revelation makes perfectly clear, will meet the first mighty impact and onslaught of death, but they overcome because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, all true to the original basis of priesthood. They are meeting the dragon in full force, the power of death, and the one great business is the naked assaults of the power of death spiritually continually. And it will be so to the end. But if it is so, that in itself is tremendously significant. The day when you and I get out of that battle will be the day when we have lost our vocation, lost our priesthood, lost our testimony. These things must go together, for the testimony is not a testimony of truth, the doctrine or interpretation of Scripture. The testimony is the registration of life, the power of His life present which says, Here at least death is not lord! Here at least, wherever death may be reigning, here death does not reign! Death meets a challenge here and death has to fight for its ground here. That is the testimony. It is something very practical and something very actual and while we are in that battle, we know that our ministry is alright.

What ministry do you want? Do you want to be running about giving addresses everywhere, preaching, doing Christian work? Well, that may be alright, but the real ministry, is the ministry of priests. And the ministry of priests is the ministration of life, the setting of this life in the risen exalted Lord over against the power of spiritual death so that death registers the presence of life and has to do something about it. Now, is the presence of spiritual death where you are concerned in your sphere of life, feeling it unnecessary to do anything about you, to take account of you. It is saying, in effect, 'Look here, we have got a dangerous person here, if we are not careful, we shall be losing our ground here, we must give them a bad time, try to drive them out, make things impossible for them!' If that is your experience, that is good, that is right, you are priests. But if you as a child of God can just be anywhere and nothing and no one takes any account of you and you do not meet anything, it is time to look into your priesthood to see what is the matter.

You see, after all we are members of Christ's Body. Now, when He was here, His presence did mean something. Evil spirits could not hold their peace, keep silent or be inactive. They had to do something about it. They gave themselves away. Evilly actuated men and women were dragged into light by His presence without His saying anything. He brought everything into the light and things became active only by His coming into a place. Christ is here; He is as much here on this earth today as ever He was in those days. He is here now in His Body, His spiritual Body, the church. We are members of His Body, says the apostle, and He has come again in the power of His Spirit to be resident in His Body, in His members. The presence of Christ in His Body must mean today just as much as it meant when He was here alone, and that means that things will begin to take notice, to become active, to fight, to oppose, because there is really something dangerous to their kingdom.

Well, I have no doubt that most of you know something of this, but what I am wanting to say to you is that it must be like that if there is to be a testimony. Do not go out and try to make yourself a nuisance to everybody and everything and think that unless you are upsetting everybody there is something wrong with you. You can go with the apostle — "If it be possible, as much as in you lieth, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). He knew what he was talking about when he said, "as much as in you lieth". He knew there comes a point where when you have gone as far as you can, the devil will see to it that you shall not have an easy time with people. No, you need not try and make yourself a nuisance, either to the devil or anyone else, but if you really are in living union with your Lord and standing truly in your spiritual vocation as a priest - you need not take the title — but standing in the value of His risen life, you will meet it, and the meeting of it will be your certificate. You will then be by that very antagonism of the powers of evil certified a true priest unto your God.

But remember, it is life, always in terms of life, life for those who need it, life against death reigning around, life as witnessing against the work of him that has the power of death, the devil. You can test everything by that one thing - life. Test everything, test your own experiences, test your own registrations, test your own sensations. Are you haunted by fear? Do fears have a large place in your life, in your experience? What is the effect of fear? Death! Where does it come from? God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of love and of a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7). Fear hath torment, perfect love casteth out fear (1 John 4:18). Fear is a work of death. Then you should call your fears into guestion and challenge them. That is what I mean. Test everything by this matter of life. All that goes on in you of controversy. What is the outworking of it? Death! Well, why not end the whole thing? There is a ground upon which all controversies are settled. It is the ground of His righteousness by faith. May the Lord teach us what it means to be priests — ministers of life unto our God.

THE LEVITE PRINCIPLE

Reading: 1 Chron. 15:1-2, 12-15, 25-27; 16:1.

In this meditation we shall, as the Lord enables us, focus our attention upon one aspect of the great matter which we more comprehensively or generally considered in our previous meditation, namely that of priesthood and life. We saw how these two things are kept together and given very much prominence right through the Word of God from its beginning to its end, noting again that the great matter of time and of eternity is this question of life, divine life, eternal life. Upon it all the purposes of God rest; with it all the movements of God are bound up. It is the big question. Right through the ages, the world is divided into two — those who have this life and those who have it not, the living and the dead.

I am not going back to link up with the previous chapter, but probably we shall get a fair idea of what is meant as we come to this fragment which is brought into view with 1 Chronicles 15. You note that here David makes a reference to what had happened — "Because ye bare it not ... the Lord made a breach upon us." Most of you are familiar with the story which is gathered up into that statement, how, three months earlier, David in consultation with the leaders of the people, devised a plan for bringing up the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem, decided upon doing this thing, and how they would do it. They made a new cart and put the ark thereupon and put the cart and the ark in the charge of two men, and when the cart came to a certain uneven part of the road and the oxen stumbled, one of the men, Uzza, put forth his hand to steady the ark, and it was then that God made His breach upon them and upon the whole proceeding, and smote Uzza so that he died there before the Lord. David was grieved with the Lord that day and turned aside to put the ark into the house of Obed-Edom. It was there for three months, doing nothing, everything at a standstill, except what was going on inside David himself, and that was a very salutary and profitable thing from which we might learn very vital lessons.

David started by being offended with, or grieved with, the Lord, but you know when we get into that frame of mind or state of heart, one of two things is going to happen, and which of those two things depends upon what sort of people we are. On the one hand, we can become bitter, sour, awkward and nurse our grievance and hold our offence against the Lord and really sulk. If we pursue that course, we find that that is the way of death and the way of deepening darkness. There is no way through there, and we shall stay there for ever unless we change our minds and our attitude. Well, if that is the kind of person we are, that is the way we shall take, and that will be the end of everything. There are a lot of people like that on the earth today. They have become upset with the Lord, offended with the Lord, grieved with the Lord, and being disposed that way, they nurse their grievance and they just get into a backwater, into a cul-de-sac. And many of them stay there for a long time, months or years, and some are bitter and sour to the end of their lives. All dates back to some offence with the Lord.

Or, if we should be like David, not incapable of being grieved with the Lord, not incapable of being distressed because of the way in which the Lord deals with us, even being offended, but having something other in us which, once we get over the worst patch, the immediate disappointment and perplexity, begins to take this attitude — Well now, the Lord did that, what kind of person is the Lord? Is He arbitrary, is He spiteful, is He peevish? Does the Lord do this sort of thing just to gratify some whim of His, just to hurt us? Surely the Lord does things on principle and right principle. The Lord has a very good reason for what He does and, although for the moment, I do not see where I was wrong, while for the

12

moment I am convinced that I was perfectly sincere, honest and very devoted in what I sought and it was for the Lord - if these two things, my way and the Lord's way, come into conflict, then it is for me to give the Lord the benefit of the doubt. I must suspend my own conclusions and begin to enquire as to whether, after all, I may have been wrong, at least admitting the possibility of my being wrong! It depends on what kind of person we are whether we will admit the possibility of being wrong, even when we feel so deeply and strongly that the course we have taken was in devotion to the Lord, for there is no doubt about it that David was devoted to the Lord. There is no doubt that David put his devotion into a most thoroughgoing enterprise. There is no doubt about it that David wanted the glory of God. There is no doubt about it that David's heart was set upon God having that upon which His heart was set, that His ark, His testimony, should be in a certain place of advancement and attaining. And yet with all David was wrong; and being the man that he was, he was ready to open the matter, though in the darkness, bewilderment and perplexity. Under arrest, he gave God the benefit of the doubt, and said, I must enquire anew, I must go back over this way; I must find out where I was wrong, because I am quite certain the Lord is not wrong.

See what had happened. Here was something which, so far as the ultimate issue was concerned, was very dear to the Lord's own heart. It had to do with the Lord's own testimony, the Lord's own interest, and to have that furthered, and reach its ultimate consummation, was a right, proper and good thing. And yet, with all that perception of God's purpose and with all that sincere devotion to the realisation of that purpose, the whole thing came under arrest, into death, and was turned aside and held up under a pall of death, or, what was said here in another part in recounting the story — "the time was long." For a long time, a wearisome time, delay — no movement, no development, no progress, all held up. Why? Well, David was wrong after all, but David, being the man that he was, was ready to take the attitude, 'After all, I may have been wrong; if God has done this, God must be right, and, inasmuch as God and I are not one in this, I must be wrong.'

Beloved, I pause to make much of this on the way, because it is a tremendous thing to be adjustable. Everything may hang upon our willingness to be adjustable, and everything of divine purpose, divine intention, all that the Lord's heart is set upon, the ultimate glorious satisfaction of the Lord to which we may be honestly devoted, the whole thing may be held up for months or years. It is not because our motive was wrong, or that our perception of God's purpose was wrong, but because we were wrong in the way, in what we did, in order to reach that end, in the situation in which we brought ourselves, because we came into the picture. That is the point. We came into the picture somewhere, somehow. We were in this thing after all. That is going to be proved before we are through. Because a hand which was not the hand of God, but which was, though indirectly, David's hand, came upon that testimony, the ark, indirectly - for Uzza's hand after all was David's hand, for David put him in charge and was the responsible one for this whole thing, and he knew it — because the hand of man came in into a divine thing, all was stayed -a very solemn reflection.

Government by the Word of God

Well, this exercise went on in David's heart, and what happened? Being the man that he was before God, and being adjustable — and may I say again here in parenthesis, how often in his life it was necessary for David to adjust himself, how often did he make that adjustment with glorious ends, glorious issues. I think David is one of the outstanding people in the Bible in whom the great virtue of adjustableness is found. Probably that is why he came to the throne, and that is our great lesson. What did David do once he had got away from the initial bitterness of his position? He went to the Word of God, such as it was in his day, for there was no more than the beginnings, the first books of the Bible, but they were enough. He went to the Word of God; he went to see exactly what the Word of God said about it. I am going to press these points. We can get a kind of general idea about the Word of God. We can be carried along by a superficial impression of what the Lord wants done, and when we come to investigate closely, the Word of God is very particular and very precise, not only as to what the Lord wants, but as to how He wants it and exactly the means to be used in its realisation. David had got his heart full of divine purpose and then went ahead to devote himself to it and made this tremendous mistake. When he came back to investigate, he found the purpose not enough. God prescribes how that purpose is to be reached and prescribes it in great detail.

And so, in reading back in the Word of God, he discovered this. Oh, God says here that the Levites alone are to bear the ark, God has appointed them to bear the ark for ever! Oh, that was not something just for the days of Moses, that was not just something for New Testament times. When God prescribes, He prescribes on the basis of eternal principles, not temporary measures. Within any prescription of God, you will find a principle which goes outside of time and has its home right in the very moral nature of God. "None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them hath God chosen to carry the ark of God ... for ever." "Because ye bare it not at the first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us." Death intervened where the Levites were left out. Death came in when the priests were set aside. Death triumphed when God's principle of priesthood was not recognised, was not honoured. Priesthood and life always go together. Leave out what is represented by priesthood, and you will have death every time.¹

In this case the holy presence of God, represented by the ark, was at stake. The primary function of the Levites was to see to it "that there be no wrath upon the congregation of the children of Israel" (Num. 1:53), which meant, for example, to stop any unauthorized person from entering the tabernacle and touching anything that was holy, or to check whether a lawsuit was carried out in an honest way, in order to prevent God's wrath coming upon the people of Israel. This, in turn, was directly linked with the foundations of God's covenant with Israel, the redemption of the first-born sons. That implied that God had not chosen Israel for its own sake, but for His Name's sake and to serve His purposes — they were His posession.

The Levites

Then we must know what these Levites are. Who are they? What are they? What is this principle in the very moral nature of God which is embodied in Levites, for Levites are living spiritual principles right out of God's heart.² Those principles may be in persons, but the persons can never be priests or Levites without the principle being rooted in their very being. Then what are they? Where and when did the Levites first come in? Do you remember? Moses had gone up into the mount. He was there forty days and forty nights, and the people got weary of waiting and, before the expiration of the time, they turned to Aaron and said, Make us gods, for as for this Moses, we know not what is become of him. And so Aaron took all their golden earrings and made this image and they worshipped. "These are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4), and at that moment Moses began to descend the mount. The Lord said to him, 'Get thee down, for the people have broken loose!' He came down, saw and heard, dashed the stones of commandment to the ground, came to the people and into the camp, took account of the whole situation, took the tent right outside the camp and pitched it, stood before that tent of the Lord (not the tabernacle now, but the earlier tent, something evidently recognised, a sort of interim meeting place), and standing there, cried to the whole company, 'Whoso is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me!' And all the sons of Levi came,

² In an allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures as presented here, Old Testament types can be given a spiritual counterpart in spite of inconsistencies when applied in other instances in Scripture. Hence the author takes the liberty to attach a principle to the Levites, at least to this occurrence in Exodus 32. The New Testament text does not confirm that the principle the author wants to communicate is represented by the Levites, although by 'mirror reading' Hebrews 7 we may conclude that the Levites do have spiritual significance. Apart from tabernacle care and worship, the intention of Levitical ministry was to teach the law (see 2 Chron. 18:8-11, Neh. 8, Ezek. 22:26, 44:23), knowing that this could never bring the people of God to perfection, because at the same time they had to guard the sanctity of God and protect the people from being stricken dead by the holiness of God. Perfection would mean that there was no need for such protection! In that way the Levites represent the absolute necessity of Christ's priestly ministry, in order to bring God's people to perfection, that is — in this case — unhindered fellowship with God, the ability to come with boldness into His holy presence. The Levites are the guardians and constant reminders of that truth.

and Moses said, Gird every man his sword upon his thigh and go in and out, slay every man his brother, every man the friend that is in his heart, every man his neighbour! I like that way of it being put. And they did it, went through the camp slaying their own kith and kin, their own brothers, their own neighbours and the friends that were in their heart, the bosom friend slain. Then, it was then, that the Lord said, 'The Levites from now on are chosen, are appointed, to bear the ark!' That is how they came in first of all.³

What is the principle? Inside of the Israelites, there was that of their own souls which, rising up and taking possession of them, caused there to come about a link with that whole system of spiritual iniquity lying behind idolatry, paganism, all heathen worship and the very Egyptian priesthood which had been smitten already by God with death in Egypt. For the firstborn in Egypt belonged to the gods, were the priestly company, and God had smitten the firstborn with death in Egypt, because of the link with that whole system of spiritual iniquity in the heavenlies lying behind the expression of it in idolatry, paganism, heathenism, and in the hearts of Israel. In the soul of Israel, there was that which, rising up, asserting itself and getting the mastery, led them again into that association with the spiritual system set against God to draw worship away from

³ This is the author's paraphrase. The KIV reads, 'For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day' (Ex. 32:28-29). The verb translated 'consecrate' is in the Qal imperative mode. It is difficult to see how this could mean that the Lord ordained the Levites for tabernacle service at this point, though the LSB seems to suggest it with, 'be ordained'. The specific functions of the Levites is not described until after the tabernacle was constructed, viz., Num. 3 and 4. The LXX reads, ἐπληρώσατε τὰς χεῖρας ὑμῶν', 'You filled your hands' (Aorist Indicative), meaning, 'You consecrated yourselves.' The Scriptures do not explicitly tell that they were given the task of bearing and caring for the ark and the tabernacle because of their obedience here, but it says that Moses promised them that the Lord would give them a blessing that day. It cannot be said with certainty that this blessing equals their ministry. Moses does not specify what the blessing is (but see Deut. 33:9-11, where 'Massah' and 'Meribah' may not refer to the two events of Moses smiting a rock, but to the events of the golden calf and the immorality at Baal Peor; see Deuteronomy, Daniel I. Block, NIV Application Commentary). Throughout the Scriptures the Levites do not consistently serve as an example of radical obedience or 'the work of the cross', which makes it difficult to maintain that they embody a spiritual principle. The history of the sons of Korah, for example, does not attest of an outstanding moral character. Therefore, reading this article, we have to take into account that the author seeks to encourage the reader to serve the Lord at any cost. For that purpose he uses the obedience of the Levites as an illustration.

God. Now that is what it amounts to, and the Levites had slain with the sword everyone who became, by their own souls, associated with that system of spiritual iniquity. Death, you see.

But, you say, you cannot speak of that sort of thing today, and especially to a company of Christians! That is very extreme! But I want to say to you that is not so extreme as you may think. What is it that inside everyone of us which, once it gets up, asserts itself, gets into a place of dominion over us, leads into a position where Satan has an advantage, where God is at a disadvantage, and where spiritual death comes in and there is arrest to the great divine purposes in our lives? What is it? It is much more simple than you may think from what I have been saying. It is what the New Testament calls 'the flesh', that is all, but it is a terrible all.⁴ The flesh — Romans 8:2: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death." What follows? "They that are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit."

You notice the change over. "Because ye bare it not at first, the Lord made a breach upon us"; "God helped the Levites that bare the ark", and the difference is that the Levites are here.

You and I do not know our own motives really, we do not know our own hearts, very often we do not know what it is that is actuating us very often. You say, 'Then we ought not to be judged!' Oh,

⁴ The Uzza story is sometimes interpreted, as it is here, as an example of having good intentions to serve God, but at the same time being unaware that it is not (fully) according to His will, which is, subsequently, described as 'the flesh over against the Spirit'. The editors think it more appropriate to speak of carelessness in this case, rather than 'the flesh'. The Bible calls it 'his error' (2 Sam. 6:7). It is, of course, a matter of terminology. Anything that does not have the Spirit as its source, energy and support can be called 'the flesh', but in this case it cannot be said that Uzza or David were 'after the flesh' or had 'the mind of the flesh'. Obviously their hearts were not 'hostile to God' (see Rom. 8:7). It is an important observation though, that the Chronicler brings in the requirement of Levitical ministry for the transportation of the ark as the thing that David failed to remember and indirectly caused Uzza's death. In the record of 2 Samuel of the events the Levites are not even mentioned. The Chronicler seems to want to emphasize the role of the Levites, which would verify the thought that the Chronicler's main concern is the restoration of temple service in accordance with Davidic concept, in preparation of and anticipating the restoration of the Davidic kingdom (which is the Kingdom of God, the reign of the Messiah). The Levites play an important role in this process of restoration. In that context here the Levites do show the dire need of the Holy Spirit in order to serve God in a way that pleases Him.

but the Lord has prescribed, that is the point. It is in the word of the Lord. Some of us know guite well exactly what Uzza knew and what the Levites came to know, in experience; for years serving the Lord in our own energy. With what result? Very little spiritual result, very hard going, testimony not making much progress, very little fruit, feeling all the time that the Lord was not really in this, not with us, no life here, no liberty here.⁵ What a grind! And yet no one dare challenge our sincerity, our earnestness, our zeal. Why, if David danced before the Lord with all his might, well, we were in this work of the Lord with all our might, and yet after so long, coming to the place where it had to be confessed that this did not bear the mark of God being in it. Coming to the Word of God finds out what is wrong. Read Romans 6. The whole prescription is there: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death" (v. 3,4a, KJV). Crucified with Christ! Oh, I thought that meant that our sins were taken away, were forgiven, we were saved from hell. No, that meant that we were taken away from the realm of nature's dominion as well as of Satan's dominion. We died. The prescription is there. Well, never a prescription worked like that. It was a change over from death to life, from bondage to liberty, from a closed heaven to an opened heaven.

The death of the cross

We must be careful that we do not take anything for granted. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. What is necessary for God to commit Himself, to go on with His work? What is necessary unto life? The cross, the death of the cross, the position of the Levites. Do you think that it was easy for those Levites to do

⁵ It may be helpful to add that periods of spiritual dryness and unfruitfulness in the Christian individual and in the church cannot always be attributed to a fundamental dominance of the flesh. Such times may be allowed or even orchestrated by the Lord to test and purify the believer's faith or as a way of discipline. The author rightly warns against introspection in these matters (see under the next subheading). The Holy Spirit will make it clear whether such a period is part of the normal course of spiritual growth or something more serious that has to be dealt with by repentance (ed.).

that work that day? Don't you think that with every stroke of the sword upon the bosom friend that it was not a stroke upon their own heart? The Levite suffered as much as anyone that day. It was costly work. The thing first of all entered into their own soul. Is it not an impressive thing that when you come to Hebrews chapter 4 which is recounting Israel's wandering in the wilderness and saying that we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief, that the following quotation is frequently used, "Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness"? They could not enter in. Is it not very merciful that right at that point there comes in this — "The word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."?

If this sounds difficult and complicated, let me say that you can have a very definite transaction with the Holy Spirit in which you lay it reverently but definitely upon the Holy Spirit as a charge and a responsibility that He sees to it that this life of nature is dealt with so that you are not actuated or governed by it, but know what it is to be governed by the Spirit.

Do you know what the Levites are now? Do you get a glimpse of what a Levite is? That is how Levites came in and that is how they came into relation to God's testimony. You see, death, the ground of death, meant life because there was the ground of life. Priesthood and life.

Well, Uzza — David — God making a breach. You can see quite clearly that this does not apply just to people of the world, carnal, unsaved people. Here are people very devoted to the Lord caught this way, the very testimony to which they are devoted brought to a standstill. Why? Because of this undiscerned, unperceived mixture in us and the false, wrong elements, God denied elements having some influence over us, after all. We cannot deal with them, and I do not ask you to turn inside to begin analysis, introspective occupation. All I ask is that you will recognise what are obvious facts set forth in the Word of God that all this is possible and it may be the explanation of a great deal of delay, lost time, a life purpose under arrest, a divine intention being held up. All that simply because we are not willing to take the position - I may be wrong, after all! In this or in that or in some other way, I may be wrong! At least, I will open the question with God and ask the Spirit that, as I go to the Word, He will open my eyes, He will cause me to see that the Word of God says this and means this, that I have no general conclusions about things or general impressions, but that my position is exactly as prescribed by the Lord. And if I find it is not, then I will at least seek grace, whatever the cost of shame to me, to say I have been wrong, mistaken. I confess it. David was such a man of humility that he could come out and say in effect, Look here, we were all wrong, not in what we desired, intended, not in our purpose and in our motive, but there was sufficient wrong about how we did it and what we did at that time for God to break in and bring the whole thing under His smiting hand, under death! Now we must put this right and have it according to God's prescribed ordinance, and what is it? Priesthood and life! We will get nowhere unless we are Levites, with all our soul influences and dominations smitten out of the way of government, not our souls put to death so that we are soulless people, but where what we are by nature since Adam's fall, where that governs and influences us (we do not know that until we come under the hand of God) is put out of the way.

Well, there are some good 'Levites' in the Bible. The Lord Jesus was a 'Levite'. But if you are not prepared to take Him as an example, you feel that is much too high — you may pass on to His great servant, Paul. And I think, apart from the Lord Jesus, there was no greater 'Levite' than Paul in all the Bible; oh, a 'Levite' indeed! Why, he is fulfilling his priestly ministry today on a tremendous scale. I ask you, how much life have you got through Paul? Oh, the life, the vitality, the eternal, divine energy, that has come into this universe through Paul is a tremendous thing to reckon with. What it has meant to the church and what it has meant to the enemies of the church! You cannot handle Paul, you cannot shut Paul down, for he has life! Ah, but remember how it came about. Read again the first six chapters of his second letter to the Corinthians, and you have the whole story. "I would have you know what great afflictions befell us in Asia ... we despaired of life, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead, who delivered us out of so great a death." "We have this treasure in a vessel of fragile clay that the exceeding greatness of the power might be of God and not of ourselves; we are persecuted, pursued ... cast down ... always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus" — and on yet with a catalogue of adversities and sufferings in all spheres and connections. Here is one who knows the working of the cross. Saul of Tarsus would never have said that - "we should not trust in ourselves." No, just the opposite. He has the right to take 'the sword' to the Corinthians and he did it. But he did it with a very sad and soft heart. It hurt him just as much to write that first letter as it hurt them, probably more so. And if ever there was a fulfilment of the figure of Ezekiel's vision, the river deepening and broadening all the way and everything living wherever the river cometh, Paul is that fulfilment, deepening, broadening and being more and more vital as the years go on. I think Paul is far more vital today than he was in his own day.

Well, it is the Lord Jesus after all, it is not Paul. It is the Lord Jesus having His way and He never gets His way until we have got out of the way, and that is a Levite who gives the Lord a way by the deep inworking of the cross.

There we stop just now, but big issues may hang upon the Lord's word, tremendous things, whole life purposes, divine intentions. It does behove us to get before the Lord and do this very least thing. We should say, Lord, I have never been ready to think that I was wrong, that I was mistaken. I have been so convinced my way has been right, but if you are limited because after all, though I cannot see it, I am mistaken in anything. And, while my heart is set upon your end, my way is not according to your mind, reveal it, and I will seek grace to admit it, whatever it costs. I will confess and say I have been wrong wherever I have said I have been right! That will give the Lord a clear way, and even the years that the locusts have eaten may be restored. The Lord can do more in a very short time when He gets a clear way than He can do in many years without that way.

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Reading: Heb. 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1-6; 7:26-27; 8:1-3.

As introduction I want to come back to this great dominant thought of priesthood. I would just ask you to allow your minds to stand back and view in quite a general way this whole matter as in the Word of God, that is to realize anew what a large place the Word of God gives to the matter of priesthood. In both Testaments, from beginning to end, this is something which is kept almost continuously in view, and, realizing that fact, just to ask one comprehensive question. What does priesthood therefore mean, or what is a priest, especially now thinking of the High Priest. What is the divine thought in the High Priest?

The person of the high priest

We will begin by considering the man himself, the High Priest. What is it that constitutes him a priest? When you look into the Word for the answer to that question, you will see that the High Priest is a double or a twofold person. On the one side, there is God; on the other side, there is man. "He is taken from among men" is the word we have read; taken from among men, but he is also appointed of God. There is the Godward side and there is the manward side of the High Priest and in his own one indivisible person, we find God and man brought together Inasmuch as it is priesthood, that union is brought about by means of the blood of an offering without spot, without blemish. An offering in the Old Testament which, being spotless, is taken to represent in its blood an incorruptible life, a life without corruption, and that blood is the ground which makes the priesthood capable of functioning. When we speak of the priesthood functioning, we simply mean this, making the union between God and man a living thing, a vital thing, something that is not just formal, not just theoretical, but actual and real; God and man verily and truly in living fellowship, in living communication. It is a tremendous thing, and when you see what the man-ward side means and speaks of and when you see what the Godward side represents, this priesthood becomes a marvellous thing.

We think of Job's cry when he said,

"He is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, That we should come together in judgment. There is no umpire betwixt us, That might lay his hand upon us both" (Job 9:32-35).

Job's cry for an umpire who is a man is answered in the Lord Jesus as High Priest. Here, on the one hand, is the great Judge, the God of infinite holiness and righteousness, a God who must uphold truth and integrity and perfection, who cannot come down for a moment from His high, exalted place of perfect holiness, to recognise, or accept anything evil or wrong. There He is in the perfection of His unassailable righteousness. On the other hand, here is a man, a man accused and rightly accused, a man who has fallen from that divine standard and who is actually and positively contrary to that standard and quilty before that great Judge in holiness and righteousness. There he is accused and under condemnation, and these two can have nothing in common, they cannot even look at one another. What is going to happen is deadlock, there is no way out. This is God, very God; this is man, very man; and the difference is not only the difference of God and man, but of state, and by reason of the difference of state, inward state, they can have nothing to do with one another. There is deadlock. And yet,

God's great purpose and hope is centred in that man, and how is He to realise it? And that man's only hope of life and of purpose is centred in that God. What is going to happen? Job said, He is not a man, as I am; that puts us apart. The answer is in the High Priest in whose very Person the two are made one; He is the umpire. The Lord Jesus comes into the breach, into the gap.

Try to picture the great chief Lord Justice of the land in all his pomp and robes of office. There he is enthroned with all his dignity and authority, and here is the poor sinner, a criminal, in his presence, the despised lawbreaker. And imagine someone coming into that hall and putting his hand on the shoulder of the great Chief Justice and his other hand upon the shoulder of the poor criminal and saying to the great administrator of the law, I am going to clear up your case for you! — and to the other man, I am going to clear up your case for you, and when I have done my work, you two will be gripping hands and be one for ever. Imagine something like that happening. But that is exactly what the Lord Jesus has done and that is exactly the meaning of His High Priestly work, because in Him there is very God on the right hand and very man on the left hand, and by virtue of His precious blood, He has dealt with the cause and the case and the condemnation, the sin and the quilt, and all that is done with and dismissed, and the great God and the great sinner are brought into everlasting fellowship in the Person of the Lord Jesus who is both. That is a simple summing up of what we have read in those passages in the letter to the Hebrews. That is priesthood in virtue of blood which represents a life which is without corruption or sin, offered to God for His satisfaction.

The fact remains that you and I have got to satisfy God, and the only thing that will satisfy God, being what He is, is a life without corruption, a life without any sin in it at all, a life in which you cannot trace iniquity. God demands sinless perfection as His irreducible minimum, but we can never provide that in ourselves. That will never be found in us, but God has found a way, and in virtue of His own blood, His own sinless perfect life without a trace of corruption, He has satisfied God as Man in that offering. That is our offering, and it is in the High Priestly Person and work of the Lord Jesus we come into the place of divine satisfaction. God is satisfied. That is priesthood in a word.

The function of the high priest

And we are led from the person to his function. What is the function of a priest? The function of a priest is to bring into rest of heart. The Lord Jesus is set before us as the High Priest. I would suggest to you that you read your Gospels again with this in view and trace the priestly line or feature through the gospel in the Person of the Lord Jesus. You will find that it is a new clue, a new revelation. When He said, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls," He was speaking as the priest, as the High Priest. Rest unto your souls; I will give you rest. The letter to the Hebrews in its early chapters is occupied mainly with that question of rest. You know that whole chapters are given up to it. "They could not enter into his rest." "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God." Israel failed to enter into God's rest.

The interesting thing here in these chapters 3 and 4, is that you have a strange interchange. You begin, "Consider the apostle and High Priest." You begin with the High Priest and before you get very far you have gone from the High Priest to Joshua. Suddenly, without warning, you find Joshua is brought on to the scene, and then again, without any warning, you change back to the priest again, and in between the first mention of the priest and then the continuation regarding the priest, there is this — "If Joshua had given them rest ...". If Joshua had given them rest, but Joshua could not give them rest, he did not bring them into rest. Why? Now we believe that Joshua in the Old Testament is a type of the energies of the Holy Spirit to bring the people of God into their full inheritance, all God's thought for them, to God's rest. And if we keep to that type we are going to say this tremendous thing, that, just as Joshua failed to bring them into rest, the Holy Spirit Himself is incapable of bringing anyone into rest without the priestly work of the Lord Jesus. Joshua became dependent entirely upon the priest and when the priestly work failed, Joshua's whole work broke down as leader of the people concerning His rest, and when the priestly work fails, the Holy Spirit is helpless in the great purpose of God. We are not brought into God's rest by the Holy Spirit apart from the High Priestly work of the Lord Jesus, but because of it. The work of the priest is to bring into rest.

The High Priestly work of the Lord Jesus is that by which through faith the whole of God's purpose is going to be realized in you and in me, the whole of God's purpose by reason of His High Priestly work, and what is revealed here is that not only is the priestly factor the means of bringing us out of Egypt, out of the world, out of the power of darkness, out of the realm of Satan and sin to be God's people, but the High Priestly work sees us through the whole journey in the wilderness and takes us right over into the ultimate fulness. It is the High Priestly work which lies behind the whole course from beginning to end.

The order of Melchizedek

Now all this in the letter to the Hebrews, which brings it into the eternal realm, out of the time realm entirely, the change from the Aaronic priesthood to the order of Melchizedek, the Melchizedek order of priesthood. What is that order? Oh, not as we talk about priestly orders here! It is a spiritual order. In certain ecclesiastical realms and systems you have this order of priests and this order of monks and so on. Not that sort of thing. It is the order of Melchizedek as a spiritual order. What is it? Look again.

"Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life ... after the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7:3-16).

"He is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever lives" (Heb. 7:25).

And that word 'uttermost', as you know, does not mean 'down to the bottom', though it includes that, but 'unto the end, for ever'. Able to save right on for ever them that draw near unto God through Him. Why? Because this is an eternal thing, a timeless order, is the order of Melchizedek. It is the power of an endless life. This priesthood has to do with life forever.

What you and I have got to understand is this, that there is a High Priest now in the heavenly sanctuary performing His ministry in relation to us here which bears right down upon the full and entire course of God's thought concerning us. Put that another way. Upon what do we depend for the realization of God's full thought? Our effort, our struggles, our knowledge? No, nothing like that at all. We depend upon what He is doing in the presence of God now. We depended upon that to save us at the beginning to deliver us from condemnation and guilt with all its consequences, but we rest upon that just as much every day of our lives and we rest upon that for all that is to come. And if only we had a livelier apprehension of the wonderful High Priestly work of the Lord Jesus now, we would have more rest unto our souls. You are afraid of what is going to happen to you, afraid that you may fail, afraid that you may fall, not get through. That is not with you, that is with Him. Am I to be careless? Oh no! The apostle gives us our place in Gal. 2:20.

"That life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me."

What is it? Faith in the High Priest; that is all. That is enough day by day. He is going to do the rest. He ever lives to do this. Do you think you that He will fail? Not while you trust Him. He will not fail. It will be you who fail if you do not trust Him. He abides faithful even if we are faithless.

His High Priestly work is complete, eternal, comprehensive and goes right on to the end from the very beginning. We should have faith in the Lord Jesus as our High Priest who is now active on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary, who has passed through the heavens and is engaged upon this work there before God. That High Priestly work is the basis, not just of our conversion, our salvation as we think of it in those more elementary terms of coming to the Lord, but of the full salvation right on to glory. That is what He is doing for us now, securing it in virtue of His precious blood. Eternal life, with all that is wrapped up in it, is ours by reason of this work that the Lord Jesus is doing now for us. He ever lives to make intercession for us. I do not think we know, realise, and have the real joy and peace that might be ours if we could only grasp this and were alive to the fact that while Jesus as the Son of God is enthroned on the right hand of the Majesty on high and occupies every other capacity in heaven, He is there as High Priest.

You know, on that low, base and, of course, entirely wrong level, the Roman church has something to teach us. I wish that you and I had in the right realm of the proper kind the same condition of detachment that Roman Catholics have in their wrong realm. They simply go to their priest and put the whole thing on him and that is the beginning and end of it.⁶ They go and put the thing on him, and he has got to take the whole responsibility. They do not bother any more about it. You find they are people without very much trouble, as a rule, as to sin. Now I say that is all wrong in their realm. There is no vital link between them and the Lord which means progressive holiness, but you must say that they are people who are not very much bothered about questions along that line. But there is something that is right in the right realm that you and I need to get hold of, that the Lord Jesus — while faith is fastened upon Him as the High Priest, while we live this life in the flesh by faith in the Son of God — is taking responsibility for us now and for ever. He is taking responsibility there in His own blessed wonderful Person. We have no reason whatever to ask one question as to our standing, our acceptance, our fellowship with God.

I do not know how you have grasped this. I see here the key to so many problems. I see here the secret of rest. I see here the answer to Satan. You see, Satan was the accuser in the days when the garments of Joshua were filthy, when the priesthood was in a

⁶ Roman Catholics do have to say prayers of penance for their sins (ed.).

bad state. Satan stood at his right hand to accuse him, but when they took away the filthy garments and clothed Joshua with clean garments and put a fair mitre upon his head, the great word went out — "The Lord rebuke thee" (Zech. 3:2). The answer to Satan's accusation is in the High Priest. Who shall say his garments are not white and spotless and his mitre fair? Satan has no power when the High Priest who is right is over us. It was Israel which was suffering because of the priesthood, and we come into the good of the High Priest who is right before God. Ask the Lord to lead you into this. There will be rest unto your souls when once you have grasped the significance of Jesus passed through the heavens. "We have such a High Priest." May the Lord teach us more about it!

THROUGH PRIESTHOOD TO THE THRONE

Reading: Gen. 37:5-11,18-19; 41:37-44; 42:3-6,10; 43:20,26,28; 44:16,18-19; Heb. 2:9-11,15,17; Rev. 3:19,21-22.

We are being led this time to the matter of priesthood and life. In this meditation one other phase of this matter will occupy us, which is, 'through priesthood to the throne'.

Priesthood and kingship a spiritual matter

Before we come immediately to speak about that, may I just say this one further introductory word. It becomes very necessary for us to try to free our minds, our mentalities, from an impression made by words and phrases which would just rob us of the real meaning and value of such. This applies to so many matters and it can be seen particularly or peculiarly in the two words which I have just used — priesthood and the throne. Now, our mentality would give a certain complexion to the term 'priesthood', and then in the same way to the term 'the throne'. The thing can immediately become very objective and be framed by our minds into something which is an object outside of ourselves to which we may come as a thing. To correct that, we have got to seriously take our mentality in hand with a view to becoming perfectly clear and aware that, whatever may be literal in an objective sense at any time or eternity that we occupy a position literally which is called the position of priests unto our God, that we come to a place called the throne or a position which we might call reigning, sitting together with our Lord

in His throne, whatever that may mean in that literal and objective sense, that is quite a secondary matter and it will have a greater or lesser appeal to us. Perhaps it will have little appeal to some people and become something very optional. It might be that there are some natures who would find the thing making an appeal to them to be in such a position, such a place of advantage and power, but such a mentality and such an outlook is entirely secondary. A change of mind about these things is necessary and we have got to take ourselves in hand very deliberately over this matter of our mentality, which is necessary in this matter is to come to realize quite definitely and clearly that priesthood is a function long before it is an office, and the throne is an inward spiritual position long before it can ever be outward in any literal way.

More than that, you and I, if we have really come into the hand of God, into the grip of the Holy Spirit, are every day of our lives being made priests and kings. We are spiritually coming to the throne every day if we are in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and any reigning with Christ or sitting down with Him in His throne will but be the consummation of a spiritual process and not some sudden act by appointment. That which you and I are going through under the hand of God in these lives of ours on this earth is explained by these two words, priesthood and the throne.

We were seeing in a previous meditation that priesthood can be and should be interpreted as the ministration of life, which now, in view of the present conditions through the fall, through sin, means the overcoming of death, and that is a tremendous business. It is the business of a lifetime and that is doing business in deep waters, of meeting death in the mighty power of an overcoming life.

We up in the North come very closely into touch with the earthly counterpart of this. There all the ships are coming in and going out, the great ships and the little ships, and they have come in and they have gone out and they will never come in again. We can tick them off. We know ships and men have gone down in a few minutes, many of them to the eternal abyss. Two million tons of shipping in five months, and large percentages of their crew. We see these men come in and we see them go out and we say, 'Maybe they will never be back again!' You are going out to do business in great waters and meet death in all its terrible force as it is today, death which has been drawn out, extended, to its full effect in the natural realm of man.

I believe that the children of God who really do come into the testimony of Jesus are in something which is even more terrific than that. It is the encounter with the forces of spiritual death and the question is, is that going to be overcome? Why, the Battle of the Atlantic is child's play compared with this thing that has gone on from Adam's day till now. Is life going to quench that death once and for all to destroy it? Of course it is! We have the assurance, the guarantee of it in Him who ever lives, who said, 'I became dead and I am alive unto the ages of the ages!'

But the point is, the carrying on of that testimony is committed to believers, and the carrying out of that testimony is the work of priests or is priestliness, and the victory through the priest is the reigning in life, is the throne. This, in the first place, is essentially a spiritual matter, and it is essentially an inward matter. Do not let us get these objective ideas about priests and thrones. That is inside of you and me every day, this dual issue, the throne through priesthood.

You know how Satan has ever sought to defeat that divine end of the throne, the universal throne of His Son with the church in company with Him, by corrupting the church. That is the appeal here to Laodicea, corrupted, tainted, defiled, and "He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne". Corruption is the basis of death, and corruption is the thing with which the priest has to do always throughout the Word of God, because it is not corruption as something in itself, nor an end in itself, but as Satan's way of defeating God's end of a universal reign of a holy Lord with a holy church at His side, and that thing is going on inside us.

Let us get very near to this matter. It explains everything in our experience. It is quite impossible for people who are livingly bound up with the testimony of Jesus to live a normal life. You may say goodbye to a normal life if you are going to be bound up with the testimony of Jesus, and oh, how we long for a normal life! If only we could have our home and our family and just sit down quietly and live a proper, normal, home family life in a very simple way, love the Lord, serve the Lord, and go on on an even keel, to change the metaphor. When will things become more straightened out and more normal? Since we came right into living line with the Lord and His full thought, everything has got out of the normal. We cannot live a normal family life. Do not misunderstand me. I am not talking about guarrels in family life, I am not talking about order. You cannot have just what you would have if you were a man in this world. Your family life is interrupted, very often broken up, scattered. Your home is assailed and your home life assailed by things which are not natural but spiritual, always causing things to be well, not just as you would like them to be. It cannot be accounted for by the ordinary things of man's life, the interruption of business, sicknesses, etc. More than that - extra factors breaking in. And in every other sphere of life. All the time we are thinking, if only we could get away from this present situation, somehow get away, and have a bungalow in the country, for example, and get settled down to a nice, even life, love the Lord, serve the Lord, be out for the Lord. But that is a part of the price. I want to be very practical; I know what I am talking about. I have had a good many years of this sort of thing. By far the greater percentage of it is not what you would have met in the ordinary way of life by one who was not the Lord's servant. Let us face it quite frankly.

I marvel at some of these seamen. Some of these men who give their lives to the sea, they amaze me and they shame me. They go home to their families. Of course, they feel it when they say goodbye and go away. They cannot stay at home; they have given themselves to that life and back they go. That is their realm. Now, any seaman who goes to sea and lives in mind and heart all the time back there with his family, is finished as a seaman; he will have to give it up. It is part of the business. You and I have got to face this quite definitely that when we come into the way of the testimony of Jesus, we have to bring our families, our homes, our normal lives here on earth, and just hand them over as it were, and if the Lord seems to disrupt, to scatter, make the thing something altogether unnatural in a sense and impossible of normal procedure, that has got to be accepted, recognized as a part of the business. Not until we have got through on that and settled over that, shall we come into any inward rest, and not until then will the Lord be able to do anything in those matters at all.

What are we committed to? What is our business? We are by calling priests and as such our business is in deep waters. It is with all the power of death, and the issue bound up with priesthood is the conquest of death in the power of a life which has already conquered death, and that conquest, that victory, is the throne, without ever having any chair to sit on. It is not something objective, external to ourselves. It is that in an inward way and that is what the Lord is doing with us every day. Now you and I may not think that we are doing very well in this overcoming business, in this life triumphant business. But let us comfort our hearts, not to take it easy, not to let ourselves off lightly, but let us remember that it is a matter of the direction of our hearts and the wholeness of our hearts as set upon God's end. That is all. The rest remains with the sovereignty of God. I am so glad of that.

Joseph as priest and king

Older people can always find plenty of faults with the seventeen-year-old Joseph, talking about dreams of exaltation over everybody else. That is all right, but there is something more than that about him. You have got to see that the Holy Spirit is not writing fiction. He is writing eternal truths and there is something more behind it and there is no doubt that Joseph had a heart towards the Lord. That comes out very clearly in the position into which he found himself thrown; different from his brethren whose disposition was altogether other than his, and the test as to whether the root of the matter is in a man is not when he is at home with the comforts of home and loved by those there. It is when he is far away from home in very adverse circumstances. You can think of alternatives to the course that Joseph took, such as in the house of Potiphar. Potiphar made him ruler over all his house and put everything he had in Joseph's hand. Here is a young man of seventeen years of age in that position, and then the temptation comes to resist which jeopardizes his whole position, his whole future. What course might he have taken? Well, if he had been disposed to, he could have said, 'Well, I have had a pretty hard time, I have lost everything, home, parents, sold as a slave, here I am in a foreign country, an exile! God has not cared for me very much in the past! Why should I jeopardize all my prospects?' He could have taken that line. But oh, what another line he took, a strong line for God, and his appeal was, Should I do this great sin in the sight of God? God governs in this man's heart.

And then in the dungeon prison afterwards, it is God in all his thoughts, and the Psalmist tells us about that long time in prison, "The word of the Lord tried him" (Psa. 105:19). We know perhaps just a little of that. I can only understand that to mean that these dreams that Joseph had had were to him the word of the Lord. To him it was the Lord saying, I am going to bring you to a place of power, a place of usefulness; I have a great destiny for you! And a man who had had dreams like that, a man who had suffered the loss of everything because of his dreams, which had become to him the very voice of God, the very purpose of God, here he is for a second time. He has lost everything. First his dreams and now he is in a dungeon, experiencing long-drawn-out adversity, waiting. A king, one destined for the throne?! Might not Joseph have said, I was a fool; they were only dreams after all! Look where the dreams have landed me! I have been all wrong! No, it says that through that time the word of the Lord tried him. That simply means this that God had spoken and everything went in the opposite direction, and faith decided to live on in adversity and deep trial over something that had come to him as God's will.

But I am quite sure there was a thrill in your soul when you

read those passages. When I first went from passage to passage like that, I felt something inside me just thrilled. "Shall we indeed come to bow down ourselves to the earth to thee?" And then again and again, "and they bowed down their faces to the earth and they made obeisance" — again and again and again; they said to him, My Lord! — "thy servants". Here they are abjectly bowing down before him and that is the sovereignty of God, and that sovereignty relates to one who in himself may have had many faults and weaknesses, but whose heart was right towards God, that is all. He believed God in adversity. The sovereignty of God did the rest.

The fellowship of His sufferings

You notice that Joseph went by the priestly course, the priestly course of the Lord Jesus, to the throne. First of all, the priest has to stand against iniquity. "Separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26) is the word concerning the Lord Jesus, and Joseph fled from the sin in Potiphar's house. He stood and maintained his position as one wholly under the Lord; separated unto God, sanctified.

But then a priest has to suffer over sin and not his own sin. There is another factor in priestly ministry. You suffer because of sin, not necessarily because of your own sin. You are the sufferer because there is sin about, and you come into a living fellowship with your Lord in this matter. "That I may know him and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). This is not in the same sense the vicarious sufferings of the Lord, the atoning sufferings of the Lord, but it is the fellowship of His sufferings. Joseph knew something of that. The sufferings of Joseph were not, at least in the first place, because there was sin and an enemy about, and he was standing for God and for right. He went through that way as in fellowship with his divine Master, even through death, in death and in resurrection.

The principle of the throne

What I want to point out is the nature of the throne. What was the principle, the essence, of that throne life of his? Was it simply that he was raised to high office, appointed to be a great personage? Not at all. The very nature of that high position was because he was a minister of life, because he had come into the place where he had the secret of life, could deal in the matter of life at a time when death was threatening all around. You see, life was the law of his reigning, life was the strength of his throne. He said to his brethren, God sent me before you to preserve life, to preserve you alive! And when those brethren came and bowed down and made obeisance to him, in principle their position and his position were brought about because he had come into the place where he was able to minister life to them. Here are those who needed something; they needed life above all things, the sustenance of life, and God who is sovereign in the long run makes those who need that life to come to the place where that life is found, unwontedly to acknowledge that life is there for them. And God has a surprise in store for them.

However, you see the point is that his position as in the throne had its strength in the fact that he was in the way of life for others. That is priesthood leading to the throne. That can be immediate in measure, that can be now in measure in the case of every one of us. Have you got the secret of divine life? Have you got that measure of divine life, the life of the Lord, that can meet the need of another? Are you really a minister of life to another? Then you are a priest and a king right away. In the measure in which that is true, you are a priest and a king now. We look on to the day when that will come into realization in its fulness, but it is only that same thing developed, and we were saying that the Levite is one who has had a history of suffering. It is that that makes us Levites and priests and brings us into the way of testimony. And again, the testimony is not some truth or system of truth, some interpretation of Scripture, some teaching. The testimony of Jesus is that He lives, and all that that means. All that that means to hell, to men, to heaven. Jesus lives! That is the testimony, the one thing that Satan has ever sought to nullify.

I want you to take this word and see in the unnormal life (I am not going to say the abnormal life) the cost to your family life, to your home life, to your life here on earth, in all that God is working — priesthood through suffering, through travail, through trial, and it is true. It has almost become commonplace. It is a thing we do not like to accept, but it is true that they who have suffered most have most to give. They who have the most terrible conflicts with death and come to know the power of His life in such conflicts, are those through whom He can minister most livingly to others. That is priesthood in the making. Priesthood leads to the throne.

The church is a priestly people, it is a priestly city. The last picture of the church in the Bible is of a metropolis in the capacity of a priest. There is a city; out from that city issues a river, and from the life in that river all the nations derive their life. It is a ministration of life out to the bounds of God's universe from that city, that church, Christ the life at its centre. Again let us adjust our mentality and see after all whatever the figures of the Bible are, the spiritual truths remain the same, and God's end is Christ with the church His body at the centre of His universe fulfilling the full meaning of His priestly ministry, sending out life now, blessed be God, at that time not to conquer death, for death is conquered, vanquished and vanished, but the life goes on. It is deathless life in the fulness of His victory. That city has gates of pearl, and pearl is made through suffering.

Well now, you see the spiritual truths. Forget the figures, do not let them turn you aside from the great realities. See what God is doing. He is constituting us priests unto Himself, and priesthood in this sense leads to the throne, and that is something for everyday life. The sufferings of everyday are intended to lead to life being made possible for others, and that is the throne.

THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Reading: Lev. 13:45-46; Isa. 53:1-12; 2 Cor. 5:21; Matt. 27:46.

In the Scriptures which we have just read we have brought before us what I believe to be the very deepest meaning of the cross. It was not a wrong relating of Scriptures, as we shall see, in bringing that part of the book of Leviticus over and connecting it with Isaiah 53 and bringing back the two New Testament passages to the same point. It may seem a very terrible thing to bring the leper and his awful loathsome, fearsome leprosy into touch with that divine Son of God. Perhaps there might be an inward shrinking from reading the two passages together. Isaiah has become so solemnly sacred to us all, so holy, that to touch it with the leper would seem to desecrate and yet we have to accept not the theory or any suggestion of man, but the fact that the two are one, and the oneness is found in the very language that is used in both which is identical language.

In Leviticus 13 and 14 the whole case of the leper and his leprosy is dealt with under the Mosaic economy from the moment when the first signs of leprosy appeared right through the awful prescribing for dealing with the leper till his ultimate cleansing and restoration. In those two chapters one word occurs fifty times. That is a large number of times for one word to occur in so short a portion of Scripture. It recurs with terrible monotony. It is as though the Spirit of God was deliberately making that the note to be struck all the time. It sounds like an awful death knell right through the two chapters. Fifty terrible times that word is heard — plague, plague, plague. The leprosy is the plague. We turn to Isa. 53:4 and we have this -

"Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted"

and that Hebrew word there translated 'stricken' is exactly the same Hebrew word used fifty times in those terrible chapters — plagued. "We did esteem him plagued of God." Is it too terrible to say, 'made a leper'? Not too terrible in the light of 2 Cor. 5:21 — He who knew no sin, Him He made to be sin. Ah, there is something more than — He made Him to be the *Bearer* of our sins. He made Him to be *sin*. He was plagued of God!

What did leprosy do? How did it work? Well, if you look again, you will see certain marks of leprosy. First it disfigured and blotted out the very likeness of a man. It made him appear something other than God meant him to be. We turn again to Isaiah in chapter 52:14 -

"His visage was so marred more than any man."

Jeremiah uses that word in connection with the potter's vessel. "The vessel was marred in the hand of the potter" (Jer. 18:4), and have you seen the potter's vessel marred as the clay spins upon the wheel and suddenly the thumb comes upon some foreign hard substance with its pressure, and the whole vessel becomes unshaped, deformed — marred.

"His visage was so marred more than any man ... more than the sons of men ... and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised, and rejected of men."

That is what the potter did to the vessel marred, rejected, but the poor leper, marred, disfigured, rejected, repulsive. You and I perhaps never caught that view of the Lord Jesus, but God has. Leviticus 13 and 14 are God's answer to that awful cry on Calvary — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). He made Him to be sin in our place, plagued of God, so that God turned His face from Him. Isaiah says that the people did that —

"As one from whom men hide their face he was despised."

I think there are many in the world today who take that attitude, who see nothing in the Lord Jesus that they should desire Him but rather despise and reject Him. This is not a word only for such. This is a word to fill our hearts with new worship. I trust that is where we shall be before we are through as we see the deepest meaning of Calvary, disfigured like the leper.

Leprosy disintegrated the whole body, so that joints fell apart, limbs fell off, the whole body fell to pieces in the course of time. Do you remember the prophetic cry, as in the mouth of the Lord Jesus on the cross? It was sounded through the Psalmist so many years before Calvary.

"All my bones are out of joint" (Psa. 22:14).

What could that mean in the case of the Lord Jesus but awful anguish to a soul like His of being made sin? It was as though He were being disrupted, torn asunder — the effect of sin upon a sinless One. You and I do not know anything about that. We may have sometimes felt some horror at man's sin, wickedness, cruelty; we may have recoiled when we have read or heard of abominations to which men can hand themselves over, but we have never suffered the suffering of a sinless spirit being brought into actual touch with iniquity, so that that iniquity touches us ourselves with its awful hand of evil. I do not know whether you have ever felt the presence of evil in such a way as to become almost petrified, paralyzed, by the sense of naked evil drawing nearer. Such an experience is possible even to us. The Lord Jesus, the sinless One, being made sin suffered so intensely, that it was the disintegration of His very being, the tearing apart of His bones. It was as though He were on the rack; His very limbs were torn out. "All my bones are out of joint." The leper!

And this leprosy is the steady terrible process of death creeping on, the working of death in all its terrible meaning. We said in the previous chapter there is no poetical sentiment associated with real, unmitigated, unrelieved death, which is not only working in the body but in the soul. Death is a horrible thing. Have you seen someone die without hope, without a glimmer of light, and yet in the grip of an awful soul anguish? Ah, that is only a faint reflection of what He endured.

And then we find here that leprosy resulted in the separation of the leper from all holy fellowship and relationships. The leper had to go outside the camp, be refused the very habitation of men, be a stranger and a wanderer, apart from all held dear, whose company was coveted. That is exactly what happened to the Lord Jesus on the cross. His cry there was the cry of an exile, the cry of one who for uncleanness had been put outside; 'cut off' is the word here. That is Isaiah 53 - "cut off out of the land of the living". Yes, the Lord Jesus, spiritually and morally in a representative way, but in such a real way to Himself, took the place of the leper and on the cross before God He was as a universal leper. That is, He gathered all men unto Himself and became one all-embracing, all-comprehensive leper, and suffered what the leper had to suffer, in a spiritual way, even to having the face, the company, the fellowship of God, withdrawn from Him. We shall never know what that means. Here is this word. "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that (it is the other side now to the story) that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Oh, that we might have a deeper and more acute sense of the awfulness of sin in the sight of God, the loathsomeness of sin in the nostrils of God, and the costliness of sin to the Son of God.

Look at chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus again:

"And when the flesh hath in the skin thereof a boil, and it is healed ..." (Lev. 13:18).

"But if in his eyes the scall be at a stay, and black hair be grown up therein; the scall is healed, he is clean" (Lev. 13:37).

"And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look; and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper ..." (Lev. 14:3).

"And if the priest shall come in, and look, and, behold, the plague hath not spread in the house, after the house was plastered; then the priest shall pronounce the house clean, because the plague is healed" (Lev. 14:48).

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

The tremendously impressive fact is that the word used in Isaiah 53:5, the word 'healed' only occurs in this precise form elsewhere in the whole Bible in the passages we have just read from Leviticus. You will come upon 'healed' in many parts of the Bible in other connections, but the precise form of the Hebrew word used in Isaiah 53:5 only occurs elsewhere in the whole Bible in those chapters dealing with the leper healed. "With his stripes we are healed." It is the healing of the leper, not another healing. By His cross, the leper is healed. Oh, it is marvellous that we who are sinners are in the sight of God naturally what Christ was when He was made sin hanging upon the cross and what the leper represented when he was expelled from the camp, we, by His cross, are healed! The priest, the expert in these matters, the one whose eye is trained to search out and detect any trace of a blemish, the one who before God and man is held responsible for the question of life and death as to where corruption may be, that priest can find no trace of the plague and pronounces it healed.

The Lord Jesus is not only the healed leper in representation, but He is also the High Priest. Has there ever been a priest with a more acute sense and discernment of sin? Do you think that He has gone through all that without that sense of sin becoming if possible ten thousand times more acute and sensitive? Yes, He knows and He is able to look upon a believer, one who has come to the cross, one who has accepted all His redemptive, atoning, substitutionary and representative work, and simply pass the word, 'Healed!' and for such a One to say, 'Healed!' means indeed there is no trace of the sin. He has blotted out our transgressions. He has cast them into the depths of the sea. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). Do you see from what depths to what heights the Lord Jesus has brought the believer, the trusting child of God, by His cross; into what depths he has gone and into what glorious heights he has risen. "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us" (Psa. 103:12). Well might we sing, "Redemption — oh, wonderful story!" "By his stripes we are healed." I am sure you are going to invest that little clause with a new meaning whenever you read it in the future, and we are going to see that poor, abandoned, outcast leper healed and brought back, the restoration of all that was lost through his leprosy.

One more word.

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand" (Isa. 53:10).

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin ...". Do you see the margin? "Thou shalt make his soul a trespass-offering." If you go back to Leviticus 14, verses 12 and 21, you will see the offering prescribed for the leper, and then you will see that it is exactly the same offering as is here mentioned in Isaiah 53:10. "Thou shalt make his soul a trespass-offering for sin." That is precisely the offering that had to be provided for the leper. I think this is all tremendously impressive. "Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin" — the leper's offering, the offering for the cleansing of the leper, and when that is done, the rest is illuminating.

See the leper. Oh yes, he is excommunicated, he is shut out. No family life for the leper, his days seem to be counted, numbered. For him there is no prospect, no future, nothing of home, nothing of family, nothing to look forward to in his own day or in succeeding generations for him. But heal the leper, and "he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." This glorious work of the cross brings a new prospect into view — a new hope, a new assurance, a new blessing. "The pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand."

I do not think I need add much more to this. It all speaks so strongly, so deeply, so wonderfully. It tells us of how great, how deep, how terrible, and yet how marvellous and glorious Calvary was and is. In reading that account of the leper, we read the clause - "the priest shall go forth out of the camp", and in reading that another similar clause at once leaps to our minds from Hebrews 13 - "Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." But these are not the same thing. In the case of the leper and the case of the Lord Jesus, that place outside the camp was execution from the presence of the Lord. In Hebrews 13 the place outside the camp is execution in fellowship with the Lord. We may have to know something of being outside the camp, but we need never know being executed from the presence of the Lord. He knew that for us. It was because He took the place of the leper outside the camp and lost for that eternal moment the face and the fellowship of God His Father that we, though suffering with Him here below, may enjoy, even in our suffering, the abiding fellowship of the Father. His exclusion has bought our inclusion; His lost fellowship has secured our eternal fellowship, that is if we believe and, in our believing, accept by faith that Jesus died, being made sin on our behalf that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

May we glory in the cross more than ever, appreciate what that cross meant to Him and therefore appreciate Him more than ever we have done as we see the awful terrible depths to which sin led Him, the awful leprosy — plagued of God.

The purpose of this publication is to encourage God's people to lay hold on eternal life, the hope set before them, knowing that Jesus Christ, their Saviour, will soon return to establish His eternal Kingdom, "so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:12).

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