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A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

[Jesus] has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father.

Revelation 1:6, NLT

In this book I will be dealing with one of my favorite topics, the topic of *prayer*. For some people, I suppose, prayer seems like an irksome religious duty. For my part, I love to pray—and what is more, I get what I pray for. That is just what I am going to teach you—how to pray and get what you pray for.

As we come to God in prayer, we need to begin with the understanding that He wants us to do so. Most of us probably need to change our negative and unattractive images of God. I know I did. These pictures often stand between God and us and hinder our prayers.

I remember thinking as a boy growing up at school—and I spent many long and rather weary years in British boarding schools—that God was somewhat like a schoolmaster. I really was not too fond of schoolmasters, but that is how

I envisaged Him—sitting at His desk, in His study at the end of a long corridor. If you ever had to go and see this Schoolmaster, you would kind of tiptoe down the corridor. The floorboards would creak as you stepped on them, giving warning that you were on the way. Then as you knocked at the door, the rather grumpy voice would tell you to come in and probably begin by scolding you for something you had done or had not done.

In order for me to be able to pray effectively, that picture I had of God had to change. I have found that there is a similar picture of God in the minds of many—of somebody who is a rather long way off and does not want to be bothered and is probably going to scold us, and, well, the best thing we can do is stay away from Him if possible.

Now that is not at all the truth about God. When we come to Him, He does not scold us; He welcomes us. If anything He says, “Why have you waited so long?”

What a Welcome!

The Bible gives a beautiful picture of how God welcomes us when we come to Him. It is Jesus’ well-known story of the Prodigal Son who had strayed away from home, wasted all his living, gotten himself into real deep trouble and ended up absolutely down-and-out. When this young man came to the end of all his resources, his thought was, *I’d better go back home. Perhaps my father will receive me. I couldn’t ask him to take me back as a son, but I could ask him to take me as one of his hired hands.* Now I want you to notice how his father received him.

[The son] got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with

compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20, NIV

See what a welcome this young man got as soon as he was willing to turn around and go back home? He never had a chance to say “Make me as one of your hired servants,” because his father was kissing him and welcoming him back as a child.

That is a beautiful picture of how God receives us. He does not scold us; He does not blame us; He is not stern and distant. He is loving and warm and gracious. James 1:5 tells us that God “gives generously to all without finding fault” (NIV). Keep that in mind as you think about praying. God gives generously. He does not find fault. When we get that picture of God into our thinking, it altogether changes the way we pray.

Jesus came to represent the Father to humanity, and the teaching of Jesus on prayer was as totally positive as any area of His teaching. This is what He said in the Sermon on the Mount:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Matthew 7:7–8, NIV

Notice those three positive statements. Everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; to him who knocks the door will be opened. In Matthew 21:22, Jesus said: “All things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (NASB). Again in Mark 11:24, Jesus said: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (NIV).

What could be more all-embracing than those words?
Everything. Whatever.

In His closing discourse to His disciples in John's gospel, Jesus again assured us—three times—that God will answer our prayers. Listen to these words:

Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

John 14:13–14, NASB

If you ask anything I will do it. How comprehensive!

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

John 15:7, NASB

Ask whatever you wish. How could He say more than that?

Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.

John 16:24, NASB

Ask, and you will receive. There is a special kind of joy that comes from getting our prayers answered. Jesus wants us to have that joy, so He says, "Ask."

To know that Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, the Ruler of the whole universe has His ear open to our personal, individual prayer, that He will do what we ask Him to do, individually, is one of the most exciting experiences anybody can ever have.

That is what Jesus taught not only by word but also by example, and His example continues for us today. Let's see how we can follow Jesus into this realm of prayer.

Jesus' Ongoing Life of Prayer

Isaiah 53 gives that well-known and glorious description of Jesus' atoning work. The closing verse reads like this:

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53:12

You will notice that four acts of Jesus are recorded here.

He poured out His soul unto death. Leviticus 17:11 says that “the life [or soul] of the flesh is in the blood.” Jesus poured out His soul unto death when He poured out every drop of His blood.

He was numbered with the transgressors. He was crucified with two thieves.

He bore the sin of many. He became the sin offering for us all.

He made intercession for the transgressors. Jesus made the most extreme intercession possible from the cross. He said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). He was also saying, “The judgment that is due to them, let it come upon Me.” And it did.

But Jesus' life of prayer did not stop with His death and resurrection. In Hebrews we read:

He [Jesus Christ], because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood [one that never passes from Him to other people]. Therefore [in the light of this priesthood] He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God

through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 7:24–25

These verses offer a rather interesting perspective on the timeline of Jesus' life. He spent thirty years in obscurity in perfect family life. He spent three and a half years in dramatic powerful ministry. Now He has spent nearly two thousand years in intercession! The writer of Hebrews gives us further insight to this ongoing ministry of Jesus:

Behind the [second] veil, . . . the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, [was] priest of the Most High God.

Hebrews 6:19–7:1

When I read these verses I always think in terms of the Tabernacle of Moses, in which two large curtains or veils hung. Going beyond the first veil correlates to being united with Christ in His resurrection. It is here that we have the five body ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Going behind the second veil into the area known as “the Holy of Holies” means going beyond resurrection to ascension. It is here that believers are identified with Jesus in His ascension—seated with Him on His throne (see Ephesians 2:6). Behind the second veil we begin to discover the two great and final ministries.

When the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus entered in within the second veil as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, he was saying that the heavenly order is the king and the priest. On earth it is exciting to be an apostle if you happen to be one—or even a prophet. They are wonderful gifts. But Scripture holds the promise of a much more exciting level of

ministry. Behind the second veil Jesus is Priest and King. We have the opportunity to share in that ministry as well.

The Ministry of a Priest

Most people understand the function of a king: It is to rule. Our participation in the role of priest is not so well understood.

Let's start with the one word that describes the unique ministry of a priest: *sacrifice*. In the book of Hebrews we find many places where this relationship is mentioned. Hebrews 5:1, for instance, says, "Every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins." Hebrews 8:3 says, "Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices." Priests offer sacrifices. We can also turn that around and say that the only people in the Bible whom God authorized to offer sacrifices to Him were priests. (Two kings, Saul and Uzziah, offered sacrifices, and both of them were judged severely by the Lord because they were not priests.)

We understand from these New Testament Scriptures, then, that no person can approach God with a sacrifice or an offering unless that person is a priest. People in general are not entitled to walk up to God and give a gift, even if that gift is a tithe. They must go through a priest.

On that basis, certain words written by Peter might seem to be a contradiction. He told the early Christians that they were supposed to approach God with sacrificial offerings: "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to *offer* up spiritual *sacrifices* acceptable to God" (1 Peter 2:5, emphasis added). The verb clearly is *offer*; the noun clearly is *sacrifice*—two words connected inseparably with being a priest. Most of

those early Christians were not priests; neither are most of us—and certainly not Levitical priests. What does this Scripture mean?

The answer is again found in the example set forth by Jesus.

A Higher Priesthood

During His days on earth, Jesus was not a Levitical priest. The writer of Hebrews states this quite clearly: “If He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law” (Hebrews 8:4). Jesus did not come from the tribe of Levi. He had, therefore, no right to offer the sacrifices of the Levitical priest.

Jesus had a different kind of priesthood, and that priesthood is described in Hebrews 6–7. Look again at the verses from Hebrews that I quoted a moment ago: “Behind the [second] veil, . . . the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, [was] priest of the Most High God” (Hebrews 6:19–7:1).

We need not look any further. The name *Melchizedek* in Hebrew means “king of righteousness.” His name revealed him as a king, and his position was priest of Salem, meaning *peace*. His is the first priesthood mentioned in the Bible (see Genesis 14:18).

The Levitical priesthood under the Law of Moses was a secondary, inferior priesthood. The permanent, eternal priesthood was that of Melchizedek, which is the order of the priesthood of Jesus.

It is interesting to note that Abraham offered his tithes to Melchizedek. In return, Melchizedek gave Abraham two things: bread and wine. At the Last Supper, when Jesus took

the bread and wine and gave them to His disciples, He was saying, in effect, “In these elements you see the priesthood of Melchizedek reinstated in Me.” These two practices in the Church—tithing and Communion—are the most ancient ordinances in the priestly service of the Lord.

Since Jesus was a priest, though not a Levitical priest, He offered sacrifices even while He was on earth. When we again turn to Hebrews, we find the sacrifice He offered and how this applies to us. Here the writer quotes Psalm 110: “As He also says in another place: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’; who, in the days of His flesh . . . offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:6–7).

Those words *You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek* were applied to Jesus. We have, then, the three successive sacrifices of Jesus in His priestly role: First, on earth, He offered prayers and supplications—crying out to God; second, on the cross, He offered Himself; and, third, in heaven, He offers the continuing priestly ministry of intercession.

Following Jesus’ Example

This example set by Jesus shows what God wants us to become. These words are found in the book of Revelation: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 1:5–6, NIV).

Through the forgiveness of our sins and the cleansing blood of Jesus, we have become a kingdom and priests. Other translations say “kings and priests” or a “kingdom of priests.” However it is worded, we can embrace two of the highest

functions ever made available to man. God's destiny and purpose for His people is to be a kingdom of priests.

What does it mean for us experientially to be kings and priests? As kings we are meant to rule in His Kingdom; as priests we are meant to offer sacrifices. But notice the specific connection: a kingdom *and* priests or a kingdom *of* priests. God's people are not one or the other. As people of a kingdom it is our responsibility to rule the world for God. Only when we learn to minister as priests can we do this.

What kind of spiritual sacrifices does God expect us to offer? Just as Jesus offered up prayers and petitions during His life on earth, so should we. When we learn to pray, then we are qualified to rule.

Is God Calling You?

Some years ago I became an American citizen. I became one by choice. Believe me, I weighed that decision very carefully. And even though I could see the tremendous possibility of divine judgment falling on America, I decided that I wanted to identify myself with this nation for better or for worse.

Choosing to understand the power of prayer and take your place as a person of prayer in God's Kingdom is no less momentous. Think about it. Are you willing to say this: "God, if You can make me into a priest for Your Kingdom, I'm willing to pay the price"?

Let me tell you there is no higher calling. When you pray, you have reached the throne. Others may not see you because you will be out of sight beyond the second veil, but your life will count for God for time and eternity.

You may not consider yourself to be a strong person of prayer now, but if you offer yourself, God will fashion you. It probably means some changes in the way you have done things, but

the difference will be answered prayer. It is not hard; it is very practical. We will learn in this book how to approach God, complying with the basic conditions for answered prayer.

We will learn about many kinds of prayer, such as petition and command. We will understand the place of spiritual warfare. We will learn how to know God's will and pray it back to Him. It is possible to pray with confidence. Remember, *God wants us to pray and get what we pray for.*

My prayer for you is that God will bless you in this calling, that He will keep His hand upon you and that He will lead you in paths of discipline and instruction. May He make you what you have offered to be.

Ready? Let's go.