

M. Basilea Schlink

The Royal Priest- hood



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The Priestly Ministry of Blessing

A pastor once told me about a man who spent his childhood in the Bethel Institutions.* One day Father Bodelschwingh, as the director was affectionately called, meeting the boy on the street, laid his hands upon his head and said with godly love and authority, "God bless you, my child. The blessing of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit rest upon you." Father Bodelschwingh then went his way. But from that moment on something of the glory of God rested upon the boy. It was a demonstration of the reality of Numbers 6:27: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." Because the name of God had been pronounced upon the boy in blessing, something of the nature of God, something of His peace and divine love, flowed into his heart. From Leviticus 9:22,23 we know that blessing others was part of the ministry of the priests in the Old Testament.

* Charitable homes in Germany, founded by the Lutheran pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1831-1910).

In the New Testament we read that Jesus Christ "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6). We are called to the "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). What a wonderful calling! What a privilege to bless others and bring them joy and happiness! From the very nature of this calling we can see how wrong it is when people who have been dedicated to this priesthood by the blood of Jesus complain about others or criticize them instead of blessing them. Faultfinding is comparable to murder. This is why he who says to his brother, "You fool!" is, in a sense, killing him, according to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21,22. But to pronounce a blessing is a life-giving act bringing peace and happiness to others. And to this we are called. Just as our Lord and Saviour is the Bringer of joy, so should we, as members of His body, carry out this joy-bringing, beneficial ministry of blessing. How special is the task entrusted to us!

Some time ago a priestly-minded Christian woman wrote to me, saying that a spirit of unrest had entered her home through one of her new tenants. She hardly dared to step out of her door for fear of meeting the sullen, ill-tempered woman. This evil influence threatened to pervade the whole house, although the woman who owned the house did nothing to aggravate the situation. Then suddenly she was struck by the realization: Though it is important that I don't

complain about this woman or criticize her, what really counts is that I make use of our authority as priests of God to bless her!

In prayer she then proclaimed the name of Jesus the Redeemer over her house, asking Him to permeate it and rule it with His redemptive power, so that no other spirit could remain there. She also pronounced the Redeemer's name as a blessing upon this troubled woman, praying that the blood of Jesus might flow through her and free her from all the evil in her life.

Day after day she prayed in this manner. Not long afterwards, the oppressive spirit left the tenant; instead of her former restlessness there was a sense of divine peace about her. How relieved the tenant herself must have felt! What a difference it would make to families, homes, churches and the community at large if there were more people present who were able to bless!

It takes spiritual authority to bless others. Many Christians say, "God bless you," but one clearly senses that although the words express a kind wish, they lack real spiritual authority. That is, the person pronouncing the blessing does not have the power to move the arm of God through prayer to grant a blessing. His prayer does not reach God's throne, and so the redemptive power of Jesus cannot come upon the person being blessed, nor can the peace of God enter his heart.

Many people when faced with trials and temptations used to ask the godly Pastor Blumhardt* to pray for them, saying, "We know that your prayers have power and are heard." Holy Scripture confirms the deep spiritual truth behind these words. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 30:27 we read, "Then the priests and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven." In other words, their prayer of blessing was answered. This is emphasized because previously their priestly prayers of blessing had not been granted.

Scripture says, "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). From this we see that there are prayer hindrances. Unless these are removed, our prayers will not reach God, and our priestly ministry of blessing will lack power.

How was it that the priests in 2 Chronicles 30 had such spiritual authority? Earlier on in the same chapter we read, "The priests and the Levites were ashamed, and sanctified themselves"

* Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880) was a pastor in Möttlingen, Württemberg. This spiritual counsellor was mightily used by God in bringing about a revival movement and was well-known for his ministry of healing the sick and delivering the demon-possessed.

(v.15 RAV). Through repentance and cleansing, the prayer hindrance which for years had denied them spiritual authority was removed.

How far we have drifted from the biblical norm! I, too, must confess there was a time in my life when I thought that the main point was being faithful in my daily intercession and then my prayers for others would be heard. I knew that I had been saved by Jesus Christ and that, in Him, I had received the forgiveness of sins, once and for all. But I knew nothing of a daily cleansing. I thought there was nothing wrong with my life, and so I was confident that my prayers would be answered. However, in Revelation 1:5,6 we read that Jesus "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father". And, as the Old Testament illustrates, coming before God as a priest means having clean garments and clean hands each time one enters the sanctuary for prayer. Woe to the priest who appeared with unclean hands and garments before God to perform his ministry of prayer at the altar! This is why Scripture says, "Worship the Lord in holy array." Without cleansing, we cannot come before God's throne; without cleansing, we lack authority.

According to divine law, only the priest who had washed at the bronze basin was permitted to enter into the sanctuary and stand before the holy God. Similarly, we can only carry out our

priestly ministry with power and authority if we cleanse ourselves daily before interceding for others. We need to confess our sins — if necessary, also before others — and come to Jesus in repentance to be cleansed by His atoning blood.

Only to the extent that we overcome the prayer hindrances in our lives and undergo daily cleansing, do we have the power to bless others. The world, our homes, our churches, our towns and cities are waiting for our ministry of blessing. How different the world would look, how different the state of our nation would be, if there were more sanctified priestly souls! These are souls who have the power to bless, for they intercede with sanctified hearts. They never begin their daily time of intercessory prayer without having first brought to the cross all that is unholy in their lives, so that their old self can be crucified there with Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb.

Various passages in Holy Scripture indicate the obstacles that need to be removed daily if we are to pray with authority and bless others: for instance, unwillingness to forgive (Mark 11:25); anger and quarrelling (1 Timothy 2:8); materialism, immorality and lack of self-control (1 Peter 4:2-7); reluctance to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). He who has removed these obstacles has God's promise of authority for his prayers. In 1 John 3:22 it says, "We receive from

him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." James 5:16 states, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects," and in Psalm 34:15 we read that "The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry." This is why the only entirely righteous One who lived on this earth could say, "I know that you always hear me" (John 11:42 RAV).

Where are those dedicated priestly souls who day by day take care to come with cleansed hearts before God so that their prayers are unhindered and effectual? Where are the priestly people with spiritual authority to claim the redemptive power of Jesus in times of distress so that judgment can be turned into grace and blessing, and the forces of destruction held back? Where are the priestly-minded people who, like the priests in 2 Chronicles 30, publicly express their shame, are cleansed in deep repentance, and change their ways? Where are those who then with power and authority are able to call down God's blessing upon their nations, the refugees, the prisoners in labour camps, the starving and the disaster victims throughout the world? Where are the prayer fellowships in which cleansing and repentance prevail and effective prayer is made, deferring the impending judgments and calling down God's blessing?

Regarding times of judgment, God says to us in His Word: "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none" (Ezekiel 22:30); "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene" (Isaiah 59:16).

How complacent we have become! Just as the lukewarm priests in the Old Testament had the attitude: "This is the temple of God; here are the offerings; our relationship with God is intact!" so we today put our confidence in this: "We are members of this church or that fellowship; we stand on the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus; we live by grace." But God's reply is, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord . . . ' Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place" (Jeremiah 7:4,3).

Even though the priests in those days served in the temple and were sustained by the offerings, in the eyes of God they were worse than the heathen. The same goes for us as New Testament believers if we accept the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice and yet show little repentance in response to God's voice of judgment. Such an attitude makes our priestly ministry ineffective.

I once read in a biography about the outbreak of a severe plague in seventeenth-century France. The reaction of the believers there moved me greatly. In deep repentance they humbled

themselves under this scourge of God. A general fast was declared, and everyone examined his life, asking himself, "In what way have I aroused God's wrath with my conduct and attitudes, causing such a terrible judgment to come upon us?" The people confessed their sins, put things right in their lives and turned from their old sinful ways. And the plague ceased.

In Nineveh, at the mere threat of judgment, the king "arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation . . . 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands'" (Jonah 3:6-8).

A heathen king and a heathen people responded with fasting, repentance, and earnest prayer to Jonah's warning of divine judgment. And we Christians, who are called to the holy priesthood and thus to a life of daily repentance and cleansing, how do we respond to God's judgments? Are we aware that the words of Scripture apply to us: "And yet his wrath is not abated, his arm is stretched out still" (Isaiah 9:12 MOFFATT)?

The heathen city of Nineveh repented. But do we? Our lack of repentance shows that we, the

Christian community, are just as much at fault as anyone else when God is forced to send judgment. During World War II, did not we Christians in Germany provoke God with our attitude? Although the voice of God spoke clearly to us through the destruction of our cities in the last years of the war, how many of us ignored His hand of judgment and continued to live in self-complacency, preoccupied with worldly things? Today, faced with the prospect of a nuclear war, are we not arousing the wrath of God all the more with our ever-increasing pursuit of pleasure and conformity with a world that rejects God's commandments?

If the Christian community is so materialistic, worldly-minded and self-seeking in the face of divine judgment, it is obvious that, in contrast to pagan Nineveh, few will be roused to "cry mightily to God". A sign that we have really taken God's wrath to heart is that we underline our prayers with some kind of fasting, a giving up of worldly enjoyments. Only then do we grieve in genuine, priestly love with all the suffering, the imprisoned, the starving, and the refugees, and for our nation during times of divine chastening.

God longs for us to be priests who will step into the breach, repenting first for themselves (judgment always begins with the household of God — see 1 Peter 4:17) and then for others. But

often our ears are deaf, because our hearts, in love with this world, have grown hard and insensitive to God's judgments. How can a nation be roused from its apathy if the priests of God, the Christians, don't wake up first?

Haven't we learnt from the past? Haven't the judgments we've experienced shown us the extent of God's wrath? Don't the events in today's world constantly remind us that our sin must have exceeded all bounds when the Lord God, who loves us so much that He gave His only begotten Son for us, is forced to resort to such severe measures? This is the same God who looked with compassion upon a city and said, "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11).

How we must have aroused the wrath of God, how great our sin must be, if this God of love sent and must still send such severe punishments! How it must have grieved God every time He saw one of the cities in our country reduced to ruins! In every judgment that God is forced to send upon us, do we not feel convicted by the words of Ezekiel 22:30 — "I sought for a man . . . who should . . . stand in the breach before me for the land"? But, in our love of this world and of self, we go on living as if nothing has happened and so neglect our responsibility.

Don't we often hear Christians saying, "How can God be love if He allows destruction, misery and wars, which leave so many homeless, starving or dead?" Are we so blind that we are less able to recognize the truth than heathens? The people in pagan Nineveh blamed themselves, knowing that God sends judgment only when sin has taken on such proportions that man refuses to be guided by His love and rebuked by His wrath. Then God has no other choice but to "punish the world for its evil" (Isaiah 13:11). As Scripture says, the earth's "transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again" (Isaiah 24:20) and therefore "a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt" (Isaiah 24:6). For this reason "death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces" (Jeremiah 9:21).

Our sins are to blame — our lukewarmness, worldliness, pride, self-will and lack of love. Instead of interceding for one another in our families and fellowships as priests with hearts filled with priestly love, we complained about others and criticized them. When we should have helped others and blessed them, bringing joy, we spoke ill of them. In doing so, we encouraged evil. And so we are also to blame for the calamity that then struck us. How great our guilt must be, how deeply we must have grieved God, if He has to resort to such drastic measures to bring us back onto the right path!

The love of God is indisputable. His love has proven itself as eternally valid in the sacrifice of His Son for us. When we come to see God's actions and judgments in the light of truth, our accusations against Him will be silenced and we will discover, like Job, that we cannot "answer him once in a thousand times" (Job 9:3). The Lord will say to us, as He did to Job, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" And we will have to reply like Job, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further . . . I have uttered what I did not understand . . . I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 40:2,4,5; 42:3-6).

No doubt, we will feel the same way in eternity when we come to know God fully in His love and in His everlasting purposes, which are meant to lead us to glory. But then it will be too late to repent, too late to enter our priestly calling. As it says in the Word of God, "Today, when you hear His voice . . ." Today, when He speaks to us through judgment, He is challenging us to confess our sins, to separate ourselves from the world and to purify ourselves, so that we might live in the sanctuary as priests and fulfil our ministry of blessing. Then as priests we can, with authority, place the saving name

of Jesus ever anew on all the suffering people in our own land and throughout the world. Judgment will be transformed into blessing as many who don't know the Lord or who even hate Him come to a saving faith in the Redeemer. The forces of destruction will be held back. Amid all the hardships an eternal weight of glory will be prepared for those who love the Lord, a glory incomparably greater than the sufferings of this present age.

My Father,

I thank You for redeeming me, through Your Son's atoning death, from hatred, quarrelling, and fault-finding and for calling me to bless instead. I thank You that I may place the saving name of Jesus upon others and so help to stop the advance of sin and distress and to counteract their effects. Help me to keep my calling holy by ever anew turning away from my sins. Cleanse me by the blood of the Lamb, so that You can grant me authority to bless. Wherever I go, may I bring blessing, peace and joy to others.

Amen.

The Priestly Ministry of Sacrificial Love

The day of the Lord is near, and it will be preceded by waves of divine judgment, says Holy Scripture.

The preliminary judgments we are currently experiencing and the prospect of a nuclear war may well evoke in us feelings described in the Word of God: "Men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world" (Luke 21:26); "Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in travail" (Isaiah 13:8).

We know that terrible judgments lie ahead. We know that misery, hunger and death increase with every war and that the day is coming when no place on earth can offer peace and security. Yet all these are still preliminary judgments: the possibility of deliverance exists. It is a fearful thing, however, to fall into the hands of the living God: "Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come"

(Isaiah 13:6). Then people will hide "in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?'" (Revelation 6:15-17).

This day is drawing closer, for the Word of God is always true. Prophecies concerning the events leading up to it are beginning to be fulfilled: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world...and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). The Bible is being translated into more and more languages. In accordance with the prophecies for the end times, God's covenant people Israel is returning to the land of her fathers from every corner of the earth. Similarly, Jesus' prophecy about the increase of wickedness (Matthew 24:12) is becoming more of a reality with each new day. The world is ripe for judgment, and according to experts a nuclear war would unleash a large-scale devastation of the earth. Signs like these indicate that our world is approaching ruin. The time of grace is drawing to a close.

Figuratively speaking, the world is a house on fire. Who will help to rescue souls before it is too late? Who will help to save them before the wrath of God is poured out on a world that bears antichristian characteristics? Who will intercede

for souls who will otherwise be cast into the fire of judgment, into eternal darkness, where they will suffer the torments of hell? Who grieves over a world that has already begun to reel under the judgments of the Almighty, a world headed for destruction? Who is zealous to save souls from the grip of evil forces before the great and terrible day of the Lord when the earth will go up in flames? Yet this fire will be only a pale shadow of the everlasting fire in the kingdom of hell: "His angels... will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matthew 13:41,42); "... where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

Saving souls is a priestly ministry. It can be performed only by those who no longer live for themselves but for Christ, who now lives in them — Christ who sacrificed Himself. And so they no longer hold their own lives dear, but lay them down so that others can be saved. We do not rescue people out of a burning house by merely calling to them: we need to risk our lives.

Our world today is this burning house. Calling people to God through evangelizations and other forms of proclamation is no longer enough on its own. At this late hour the world needs priestly people who will step into the breach, people who are ready to lay down their lives and

so form a bridge over which others can pass from the burning house to safety.

In the days of the prophet Ezekiel, God said in view of the judgments then, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; their way have I requited upon their heads" (Ezekiel 22:30,31).

Today when God has stretched out His hand to judge and purge the earth, and the time of grace is drawing to a close, will He not once again be looking for priestly souls? These are people who are willing to brave the scorching heat of judgment themselves, in order that others might be rescued, made glorious and presented to the Father as His children.

Priests of God, according to Scripture, are chosen ones, set apart from others. No longer living for themselves, they offer themselves up for their fellow-believers (Philippians 2:17; 2 Corinthians 12:15). Priests of God are people who suffer vicariously for others and who are ready to endure everything if only others might obtain salvation (2 Timothy 2:10). Priests are people who, kindled with an ardent love for others, are willing to be "accursed and cut off from Christ" (Romans 9:3), to do without that which is good,

desirable and satisfying if only others might be rescued from the fire. The apostle Paul was such a priest of God. He was prepared to forfeit for time and eternity the joy and fulfilment of his life, namely, the presence of Jesus, if only his fellow-countrymen might be saved.

Priestly souls are inwardly driven to make sacrifices, to renounce prestige, to forgo the understanding, love and respect of others, to do without sleep and food, comfort and ease, their homes and leisure. Paul once confessed, "I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men... To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless... We have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:9-13).

Priestly souls willingly enter inner night, so that others can experience the blessing of light. They share the distress of those trapped in the burning house, even going in to them, so as to save at least one soul from destruction and to lead him to salvation and glory. By their willingness to take divine judgment upon themselves, they are like a wall shielding others and offering them shelter and peace. They do not let the Lord lament in vain that there was no one to intervene (see Isaiah 59:16). No, priestly souls have

dedicated their lives to being buffers for others. When insulted, persecuted and slandered, they radiate love and compassion, thus bringing release and blessing to others. "We bless... we endure... we try to conciliate" (1 Corinthians 4:12,13).

Who willingly submits to God's judgments, which are meant to bring us to repentance over our old sinful nature? Who willingly bears them in a spirit of true contrition and shares Jesus' grief over a world lost in sin? Did not Jesus wrestle in Gethsemane for this lost world of ours when He asked His disciples, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). And although we are sinful, whereas our great High Priest is holy and blameless, is He not making the same request to us today and calling us to follow in His footsteps?

Priestly souls suffer vicariously, submitting to judgment and humbling themselves for the sins of others (Daniel 9:1-20). Have we ever offered ourselves for others in this way? In everyday life were we ready to bear unjust accusations, insults and slander with humility? Were we willing to be blamed by the very ones who were at fault and who wronged us? Were we willing to be wounded by them? Have we used these opportunities to suffer vicariously and to step into the breach, so that others might be saved?

A wonderful radiance surrounds truly priestly people: the radiance of the great High Priest, the Lamb of God, who gave His life as a ransom for many. The radiance of heaven, the glow of compassion and of love rests upon these priestly people, who out of love for Jesus, their great High Priest and the Bridegroom of their souls, no longer seek their own interests. They live only to die to self, so that while there is still time others will be snatched from the clutches of death. Wherever they go, wherever they set foot — be it in a new land, in a new home, among new acquaintances — they are a life-giving fragrance. By dying to self, they bring others life, which is peace and happiness.

In a world marked by death, only priestly souls can help others to cross over from death to life. Sustained by the spirit, the life and the blood of their great High Priest, they follow His example as members of His Body. "United with him in a death like his" (Romans 6:5), they have the noble privilege of bringing life to others.

Darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. Disaster threatens. Yet a light shines, dispelling the darkness. It is the light of priestly, saving love, which comes from the heart of Jesus. This priestly love is filled with divine ardour and willing to die so that others may live. How tremendous is this heavenly, eternal calling to the royal priesthood with its commission to

love and save! Above this love shines the glorious crown of Jesus, for it is the love of the Lamb, who bled to death so that souls condemned to destruction would experience salvation and glory instead.

There is no limit to this priestly love of the Lamb, which is alive in His followers. This is a love which willingly enters night and suffers the fury of destructive forces, so that others may experience light and the blessing of salvation and be freed from Satan's power and the dominion of darkness and be changed from glory to glory.

In our times hell is opening its jaws wider and wider, seeking whom it can devour. Satan is striving for control over mankind, so as to drag it down into his kingdom of hell. The present manifestations of evil give an inkling of the true nature of this kingdom under his absolute rule. During times of distress and divine judgment Satan is especially active in order to draw humanity into his clutches. Who will defy him? Who will enter the battle and help rescue his victims before it is too late and the gates of hell are locked behind them? Today the world needs priests of the living God. Filled with the priestly spirit of the Lamb, they can proclaim the name of Jesus with authority, thus commanding Satan's respect (see Acts 19:13-16).

"Whom shall I send?" This is the question asked by our great High Priest as the time of

grace runs out. Love Eternal, interceding at the throne of the divine Majesty for a lost world headed for disaster, is sending out messengers of love even at this advanced hour. His challenge continues to sound forth: "Who will be My messenger?"

My Father,

I thank You for granting me such a high calling: to love and suffer with my Lord Jesus in a priestly way. Thank You that with Him I may become a bridge across which others can return home to You, my Father. Kindle in me a fervent love that seeks to save others from the coming judgments of wrath, a love that does not hold its own life dear but lays it down for others for the sake of Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for us sinners.

Amen.

The Priestly Call to Live in Holy Separation

A world headed for divine judgments is waiting for messengers of God, those who belong to the royal priesthood, to save souls from the impending destruction before the time of grace has run out. What type of soil is necessary to nurture and prepare the hearts of those messengers of God, those priestly people, for their holy ministry? The Lord says, "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation [consecrated, set apart to the worship of God]" (Exodus 19:6 AB). Only in a state of holy separation with their lives hid with Christ Jesus, only in an attitude of quietness and adoration before the triune God, can royal priests be prepared for their holy ministry. Just as the holy angels are sent from the throne of God to serve, so only those people who live in God's presence can serve others in a priestly manner.

Filled with reverence for the holiness of God as true worshippers, the angels, the "ministering

spirits" (Hebrews 1:14), go forth reflecting His holiness and with the glory of His presence resting upon them. Their worship and adoration alone empower them to minister effectively to mankind. Because they first stand in adoration before the holy presence of God, totally immersing themselves in His nature and radiant glory, they can reflect something of this divine splendour.

How can priests of God and messengers of His love carry out their ministry and pronounce a blessing or place the name of God upon a person with authority if they do not come from the presence of the living God with the imprint of His divine seal? How can the living God be served if His messengers do not abide in the dwelling place of the Most High, where His holy presence pervades everything? Before the holy God the cherubim bow in worship and the seraphim sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And His servants, the priests, join in this angelic adoration and pay homage, humbly acknowledging the privilege of serving the King of kings, though they are but dust and ashes.

Only as God's priests abide in the stillness of His sanctuary, hidden in His holy presence with the light of His countenance shining upon them, can they be equipped to carry His light into our dark world. In the sanctuary they are prepared

and transformed for their holy service. Here their faces begin to reflect the glory, joy and power of the holy God. Here they receive their instructions from the King of kings.

The sanctuary of God — what a wonderful and impressive description the Old Testament gives of this holy place of priestly service! The details shown to Moses on Mount Sinai as an everlasting truth reveal a place filled with eternal beauty, silence and God's presence. Here the priests were privileged to tarry and listen to the voice of God. How noisy, in comparison, was the court outside, filled with bustling crowds under the open sky and with the clamour of the voices of the world!

How privileged the priests were! They were called to enter the sanctuary of God. And this same privilege has become ours ever since we were given direct access to the presence of God when the curtain was torn in two at the death of Jesus (Mark 15:38; Hebrews 10:19,20).

After the priests had removed their stained everyday clothes, put on the priestly robes, and washed themselves at the bronze basin, they were allowed to pass through the curtain and enter the sanctuary. Here the priest was truly set apart from the world and completely surrounded by the presence of God. The symbolism of this holy place pointed to Him and so foreshadowed Jesus Himself. For example, the

colours of the curtains covering the ceiling and the walls spoke of His spotless purity and heavenly beauty, His splendour and kingly dignity. The table with the bread of the Presence prefigured Jesus' desire to give Himself to His servants as the real, eternal food. The lampstand was symbolic of Him as the Light of the world, the absolute perfection and splendour of truth. The incense altar spoke of His eternal love, which moves Him to intercede continually for us as our great High Priest. Everything we read in the Old Testament about the sanctuary points to Jesus, just as all the scriptures bear witness to Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:27).

Yes, it was good to be in the sanctuary. "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!" the priests would sing (Psalm 84:1). Stepping into the sanctuary, they were greeted by the sweet aroma of incense and of the bread of the Presence. Exquisitely beautiful artistic creations such as the seven-branched golden lampstand delighted their eyes, for in the court they were accustomed to seeing merely the altar of burnt offering and the basin for washing, both of which were made of less refined material. In this holy silence everything spoke of God. Here was the peace that the human heart longs for amid the commotion and restlessness of life. And here worship was offered at the altar, coming from a heart that overflowed with joy and thanksgiving

for the love of God. In this holy atmosphere the priests of God were prepared and equipped for their service.

And for us as New Testament believers, could there be a more noble and wonderful calling than to belong to the royal priesthood? Could there be a greater privilege than to live in the sanctuary spiritually, ministering to the King of kings — both now and in eternity! One would assume that everyone hearing this call of Jesus would gladly forsake the outer court and all it has to offer in order to enter the peace and tranquility of God's glorious presence, which fills the heart with joy. Living and serving there as a priest, one would be equipped to impart this joy to others.

No doubt, there are many who feel attracted by this calling and reach out for its privileges but for wrong motives. A comparison can be drawn to Korah and his followers (Numbers 16).

Many desire the glory of the priesthood. Yet they do not want to know about the requirements: sanctification and separation from the world. Despite the words of the apostle Peter, "You are . . . a royal priesthood . . . that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9 RAV), we so often fail to wear the holy, priestly robes in our conduct and lifestyle.

In the parable of the wedding guests, the king coming in to meet his guests noticed one without

a wedding garment and said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here?" Since the man could make no reply, the king ordered his attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matthew 22:13).

Self-styled priests who disregard the holy laws governing the priesthood, imagining they can serve Jesus in unpriestly attire, will fare similarly when the end-time judgments of God descend.

Priests of God were chosen and set apart from other people. They were to be different. They were completely separated from the world. Consecrated wholly to God, they were not allowed, for instance, to give way to soulish grief or excitement. To them the words of Jesus can be applied: "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60), and "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

Today, as in Old Testament times, whoever enters the sanctuary is consecrated to God. His one and only love is Jesus. The words "Holy to the Lord" shone magnificently on the holy golden crown, the headplate attached to the front of the high priest's mitre. So, too, the priestly people of the New Testament are set apart for the Lord and King of kings in order to share the pathway of the Lamb, the pathway of poverty,

lowliness, silent endurance and sacrificial love for others.

A priestly person has only one love and that is God. In the sanctuary of old every colour and vessel reflected His glory and prefigured Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Light of the world, the Bread of life, the great High Priest. How, then, can a person dwelling in the sanctuary desire the worthless glamour of the world? How can he think back with longing to the time when he was emotionally bound to others? Did he not sever these ties when he left the outer court? Far more precious and wonderful things await him in the sanctuary: the love of Jesus — this pure, tender, divine and ardent love with which He has always loved us and which moved Him to call us into loving communion with Him.

God gave Himself completely to the priests, as we read in the Old Testament. They were wholly consecrated to Him and enjoyed a close relationship with Him. God Himself was their inheritance. Just as it was natural for the people of God in the outer court still to be concerned about material possessions, so it was a sign of a priest's calling that he did not seek earthly goods and possessions. He was solely and completely dependent upon God, who in His Word says to the priests, "You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and

your inheritance among the people of Israel" (Numbers 18:20).

So we see that a priest of God is ruled by completely different laws from those governing the people of God in the outer court or from those governing a Christian who has not taken up his priestly calling. A priest has forsaken all in order to consecrate himself entirely to God, and now in the sanctuary he receives grace upon grace from the hand of his Lord. From this hand also flow material blessings, for, as with the manna in the wilderness, provision is made for his needs. (The priests received portions of the offerings.) And taking his place in the sanctuary, near the lampstand, the table with the sacred bread and the incense altar, he is filled with joyful adoration, for there he is granted a glimpse into the very heart of God and allowed to partake of His grace and blessings.

The guiding principle of a priestly life is to lose and forsake all. A priest lets go of emotional ties, the joys and pleasures of this world, and the security of a normal life. Yet nowhere are the words of Jesus "he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39) so clearly demonstrated as in the priest's life. Whoever dares to turn his back completely on the world will gain everything in Him, the Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer of the whole world and the perfect summation of all its glory and beauty. Whoever

dares to remove his stained clothes, as the priests did, that is, whoever dares to admit his weaknesses and to confess his guilt, also before others, gains everything. Though by humbling himself before others, he seems to lose their respect and to discredit himself, he is honoured by the Lord of lords. He is privileged to serve Him as His priest and to act as His messenger among men. He is given both the power to bless and the grace to offer himself up so that bonds may be loosed, and souls saved before destruction descends.

Those whom Jesus has called into His priestly service, He makes beautiful and glorious after they have removed their ordinary clothes like the priests of the Old Covenant (Exodus 28). Doubtless, the splendour of the high priest's attire was a foreshadowing of the splendour that Jesus offers. The high priest first put on white linen breeches and a coat of white linen, the garment of righteousness, which covered the body completely and became the underlying garment for the rest of the clothing. Next to this undergarment came a robe all of blue, symbolic of his heavenly-mindedness. His inheritance was and is the Lord, and his home is in heaven. Accordingly, he does not seek earthly possessions. With every fibre of his being he is orientated towards heaven and the throne of God. Instead of conferring with flesh and blood, instead of rushing to this person and that or making use of personal

connections, he turns to God alone. In the sanctuary he speaks about his needs and concerns to his Lord, as a friend to a friend.

The most distinctive part of the high priest's garment was the ephod, a short, sleeveless tunic. It was woven of gold thread and blue, purple, scarlet, and fine linen yarn. Of the same colours, material and manufacture as the sanctuary curtains, the ephod was indicative of his royal dignity and authority — "You are a royal priesthood." What royal authority was placed into his hands! This was also demonstrated by the breastplate, a square piece of doubled cloth carried on the ephod and set with twelve precious stones. Mounted in four rows, these gems were engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of God's people.

Human souls are like jewels. Cherished and precious in God's sight, they are to be carried prayerfully by the priest into the sanctuary, into the presence of God. There, in the light of God, they begin to shine, just as a jewel sparkles when placed in the light.

It was upon the shoulder that the badge of office was worn (Isaiah 22:22). And so on his shoulders the high priest wore — again as a token of his royal authority over souls — two precious stones, each engraved with the names of six tribes.

Authority in intercessory prayer to bind and to loose, royal authority over human souls, an

authority recognized by heaven — all this is part of the wonderful calling of a priest.

What a tremendous commission for us today! With priestly authority we are to release people for all eternity from the bonds of darkness, from the misery, distress and affliction that sin has brought upon them and their families. We are called to lead them into the wonderful light of Jesus' kingdom, so that their lives can begin to radiate and God can achieve His glorious purposes for them for time and eternity.

With such a high calling, one can understand why a whole chapter of Scripture is devoted to the holiness of the priests (Leviticus 21). Yes, one can also understand why the words "Holy to the Lord" were engraved on the headplate, which was made entirely of gold (symbolic of the divine nature). All eyes were drawn to this holy golden crown gleaming on the forehead of the high priest and testifying to the holiness of the priesthood.

The higher the calling, the more earnest the warning to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). Holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. Being holy, He does not tolerate in His presence or service anyone with an unclean heart or unclean lips. As the Bible says, "Purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord" (Isaiah 52:11). Woe to him who failed to do so! The priests were to wash

themselves at the bronze basin before entering the sanctuary, lest they die (Exodus 30:18-21).

In James 4:8 it says, "Draw near to God... Cleanse your hands...purify your hearts..." Thus the hallmark of a priestly person in the service of God is that he confesses even the smallest sins and avails himself daily of the cleansing power of the blood of the Lamb. Otherwise his service for God is futile. He even comes under judgment.

Living in the presence of God, where no evil is tolerated, is a holy and serious matter. So is being involved in priestly service. In this calling God empowers sinners, who nonetheless are called to be saints, to bless others, pray for their release, and save them from the burning house of the world.

Do we realize what it means to fail in our priestly responsibility — to approach others without being able to help them, since we lack the power to bring release and to bless? How will we be able to stand before the living God one day when He requires our brother's blood from us and holds us responsible for him, because we failed to live in God's sanctuary and forgot that we have been cleansed from our former sins (2 Peter 1:9)?

Like the apostle Paul, priestly people can speak of a "formerly" and a "but now". Formerly, though aware of their salvation, they wanted

to be their own masters, because they enjoyed making their own decisions and dominating others, rather than submitting to them. Formerly, they did not want to let go of bitterness and resentments, because they simply did not want to be reconciled with this or that person. Formerly, they did not want to give up their sensual pleasures, because they still derived great satisfaction from them.

Because of their bondage to sin, to the world and to people they despaired in times of distress. They were incapable of living in harmony with difficult people and of bearing them in humble love, let alone of ministering to them in a priestly way. They could not endure hardship and suffered greatly if, for instance, they could not gratify their craving for food and drink or if they were not loved and respected. In spite of knowing that Jesus was their Saviour, they failed to enter their priestly calling, and so remained in bondage to sin and to this world, dependent upon circumstances, relationships and their own human nature. While they themselves were in such bondage, how could they minister to others and help them to experience release? How could they speak of redemption if they themselves were under Satan's yoke, even wilfully holding on to it?

But now they have been drawn by Jesus into a new life. As those "in Christ Jesus", they have

left the past behind, taking up His challenge and completely dedicating themselves to Him.

This is why royal priests can be royally independent of people, circumstances and the material things of this world. Jesus has become everything to them. He has become their inheritance. Now they can also go through times of peril and judgment in royal independence. "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12,13 RAV). Truly, this is a royal priesthood: to be personally free and independent of the things of this world, yet always ready to identify in a priestly way with the sins and needs of others, interceding compassionately for them and loosing their bonds in prayer with royal authority.

In the shattering events of the end times the full glory of this priestly ministry will become evident. Amid the darkness of the world around him, amid privation, hardships and misery, the priestly person rests in the peace of the sanctuary. Jesus is all-sufficient for him. Self-denial and suffering, always an integral part of his priestly life of commitment and sacrifice, only serve to unite him more deeply with his Lord and make the nature of Jesus more visible in him.

In a wonderful way, he can convey the radiance of Jesus' name to a dark world, so that light penetrates the darkness. He is privileged to help turn sorrow into joy, to bring release to those in bondage, and to bless and encourage those who are in despair and without hope.

The King of kings has opened wide the gates of His sanctuary. And Scripture bids us, "Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19,22). Now, at the dawn of the end times, the King of kings wants to appoint ambassadors of His love. Today, in a perishing world crying out for help, messengers are needed who come from the presence of the living God — messengers who have been empowered by Him, reflect the glory of His countenance and truly are "royal priests". Who will take up his calling and confirm his election to the royal priesthood?

The glories of this unique and wonderful calling reach beyond this life into eternity, for the priest-kings will share in the first resurrection and reign with Jesus a thousand years (Revelation 20:6), sitting with Him on His throne as overcomers (Revelation 3:21). Yes, the Lord is calling, "Whom shall I send? Who will be My messenger? Who will serve Me as a royal priest and minister to a world headed for disaster?" May our response be, "Here I am, Lord, send me!"

My Father,

I thank You for calling me to the life of a priestly person, who is privileged to dwell in the sanctuary. I thank You that although I still live here on earth and in the world, You have prepared a place for me in Your presence. There, in the quiet of prayer, removed from the hustle and bustle of the world and from people, I may live solely for You and, like the holy angels, always stand before You, beholding You in adoration.

I thank You that when my soul abides in Your sanctuary and speaks with You alone, You impart power and divine radiance to my life, enabling me to fulfil my holy priestly ministry in the world. Grant that I may constantly abide in Your dwelling place — hidden with You. Grant me the grace to live in Your holy presence so that even when I am at work and with others I may continue to minister to You and to them through this holy priestly service, to which I have been called and for which I have been redeemed.

Amen.

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