

Baptist DNA: Priesthood of the Believer (Matthew 27:45-54)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/baptist-dna-priesthood-of-the-believer/

Today's topic in our Baptist DNA series is "Priesthood of the Believer." I admit that this is not an incredibly exciting topic, and I can see some of you starting to nod off in anticipation. I'm curious, though, of how many of you feel that you have at least a general understanding of what this means? Please go ahead and raise your hand if you know what Priesthood of the Believer means?

For us to really understand it – like everything else in this Baptist DNA series – we have to understand the historical backstory. So today we'll begin by looking at the role that priests played in the Old Testament scriptures. But if you're like me, this might be what you think of when you hear the word "priest" ...



But that's not who we're talking about today.

In the Old Testament, priests served as the go-betweens or the middlemen between God and God's people. The people were down here on earth; God was almost always separated from them; and the Priest's job was to connect the people to God. They did that by leading and orchestrating the religious rituals that God had instructed them to follow, most notably the offering of sacrifices. There were different types of offerings for different purposes...

- Burnt offerings that involved different types of animal sacrifices;
- Grain offerings;
- Peace offerings;
- Sin or Purification offerings; and
- Trespass or Guilt/Reparation offerings which were for unintentional sins.

There is also a very specific logistical aspect of all of this that is important for us to understand. When God's people had a temple at which they worshipped God – first in a tabernacle that was built in the wilderness, then in the permanent, stone temple built in Jerusalem. Part of the Temple included a secluded, special room called the "Holy of Holies." It was a room that God's presence resided in, which is quite different from how we look at God today. Today we talk about how God is everywhere – omnipresent. But back then, God was almost always at a distance and separate.

So, once again, we have this separation between God and God's people. God was confined to the Holy of Holies room, and God's people were never to enter that room and into God's direct presence. Well, everyone except for one person. Every year, on the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur (Hebrews 9:7), the High Priest would enter and would offer a sacrifice to God on behalf of himself and all the people. This annual Day of Atonement was and continues to be the most important and holiest day of the Jewish year.

Even though those photos I showed you earlier were fake, my research did turn up some surprises for me this week that relates to this mysterious Holy of Holies area in the temple...

- It's apparently a myth that the High Priest tied a rope around his ankle when he entered this sacred once per year. The idea and the legend was that if the Priest was found to be unclean/unacceptable in God's presence in that secluded room, then he would drop dead and would need to be pulled out by the rope. However, nothing in the Bible and other reliable sources from those times indicate that this practice really took place.
- Second, there was a curtain – called the veil - at the entrance to this room that was much more than a curtain that you and I might picture in our minds. Instead of being one layer of heavy fabric, the curtain in the temple was multiple layer thick and in total may have taken up to 3-feet of space. The priest entered by moving back and forth between the layers until he finally reached the other side.
- Finally, God's people sometimes got caught in the trap of "going through the motions" with these sacrificial rituals, just like we can "go through the motions" in our worship today. There are several occasions when God spoke up and reminded the people that the point was that they showed their love to God and to each other through these rituals, not the ritualistic acts themselves...
 - *Hosea 6:6 - For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*
 - *1 Samuel 15:22 - But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

Before we jump to our scripture passage in Matthew 27, let's recap...

- People could only connect to God through the work of a Priest. The Priest was the middleman and essential for the people to worship and connect with God.
- The veil or curtain in the temple kept God and God's presence secluded and separate from the people.

But those two things changed as Jesus gave his life for us on the cross, and led to our strongly held Baptist view of Priesthood of the Believer...

Matthew 27:45-54

(As Jesus hung on the cross...)

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints

who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

This moment, the moment when Jesus breathed his last breath and died, is obviously monumental:

- The earth shook;
- Rocks were split;
- Dead saints walked again;
- And the typically unreligious soldiers who were there suddenly turned into Jesus's most compelling witnesses when they proclaimed, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

But what we're going to focus on is what happened in verse 51: that the curtain/veil that had separated God's presence from the people for centuries was suddenly torn in two. Completely ripped apart and separated from top to bottom.

This is so significant for us today, because this means that never again do we have to rely on a Priest or a middleman to connect us with God. It also means that God's presence is no longer confined to a small room that only one person could enter only once per year. Each and every one of us – you and me – have direct access to God because of what Jesus did for us on the cross... when he gave his life in place of ours.

This may not be the most exciting part of our identity as Baptists, but it's extremely important. Some other denominations continue to practice their version of Christianity by continuing to place priests front and center in their church structure. Baptists don't do that. Again, our core concept here is that – because Jesus served as the ultimate and final High Priest – he has permanently provided us with direct access to God.

But let me quickly say, ministers in the Baptist church continue to be very important. Similar to how the Old Testament priests knew everything there was to know about conducting the various rituals of their day – they were the experts in that area, our seminary trained and church ordained ministers of today know more than we do... about the Bible, about religious history, about theology, about conducting the Baptist rituals we adhere to – Believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper – and many other details that you and me just aren't qualified to tackle well. They're the experts and we need them to help us in our faith journey. So please don't hear me saying that when you have a question or are working through a matter of faith, that you shouldn't reach out to Melissa or another minister that you know and respect. They are there to guide and assist and we all seek to follow Jesus together.

Let me tell you how this important principle of Priesthood of the Believer has played out in my own life:

- When I was 14 years old, and laying in bed in the middle of the night, my spirit was troubled. I really didn't understand what was happening, but God was convicting me. It was as if God was saying to me in some mysterious kind of way that only God can, "Todd, your relationship with me isn't what it should be." In that moment, when it was just me and God, I realized that I had never truly given my life to Jesus... asking Jesus to save me, forgive me, and lead me. So that's what I did. I didn't have to call up a priest or anyone else to make that decision or to begin a truly personal relationship with God. I was able to connect with God directly, and God was able to connect with me directly.

So please hear the Good News in all of this: Because of what Jesus has done for you, you have direct access to God. You can speak directly to God, and God can speak directly to you.