

Abiathar: The Priest



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 28:6, 39:2–7, 1 Sam. 21:1–9, 22:6–23, 2 Sam. 15:13–29.*

Memory Text: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (*1 Peter 2:9, NIV*).

Priests played a very important role in the life and history of Israel. And not just in Israel but in the surrounding nations, as well. In Mesopotamian culture the king was considered a priest; thus, he combined both political and religious power. Priestly guilds represented powerful interests at the court, and in many instances priests were king-makers. In the Old Testament especially, the role of the priesthood was central to the life of faith of Israel. Sacred history shows the influential roles of the priests in New Testament times, as well.

The priesthood of all believers (*1 Pet. 2:9*), an idea that came to prominence in the Protestant Reformation, is not entirely a New Testament concept (*see Exod. 19:6*). It seems always to have been God's ideal that believers would be holy and serve others by interceding for them and by communicating the plan of salvation.

This week we'll look at Abiathar's story, which gives us some important glimpses into the Old Testament priesthood and tells us that priesthood is not based just on pedigree or education but on personal commitment to the Lord. As in the case of Abiathar, wrong choices can disqualify a member of the priesthood.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 13.*

Lies and Tragedy

Read 1 Samuel 21:1–9 and 1 Samuel 22:6–23 and answer the following questions:

- What lie did David tell to Ahimelech about why he was there?

- What happened to Ahimelech as a result of his trust in David?

- How did Saul seek to turn his own men against David? What kind of argument did he use?

- How did Ahimelech respond to Saul regarding the character and faithfulness of David?

- What does this story tell us about just how fallen and degenerate and vengeful King Saul had become?

- Why do you think Doeg, a foreigner, would do what the servants of Saul refused to do?

- How did David respond to the news of the massacre? In what ways was his response correct?

- What promise did David make to the one son of Ahimelech who managed to escape the slaughter?

Look at the contrast in this story between honor and dishonor, faithfulness and faithlessness. Look at the havoc wreaked from dishonesty and sin. What kind of moral questions are you facing right now; what kind of moral choices must you make? Think through the consequences of your actions before you take them.

Abiathar, the Priest

We're not told how Abiathar escaped the slaughter of his family. We're told only that he escaped and made his way to David. However, before fleeing, Abiathar managed to save the ephod (*see 1 Sam. 23:6*), one of the most important objects of priesthood (a sacred vestment worn by the priests; *see Exod. 28:6, 39:2–7*), which was used to seek God's will when making decisions. On at least two occasions, the biblical author reports that David called for Abiathar and the ephod (*1 Sam. 23:9–12; 30:7, 8*).

In contrast to many of us today, the people in Abiathar's days had little access to God's Written Word. There were only a few handwritten copies of the Book of the Law (the Pentateuch), so most people had little opportunity to study the Word of God for themselves. Most of us are privileged to have access to the Bible for ourselves. God has promised to give us the Holy Spirit to explain the Word to us, personally and collectively (*John 14:26*). God also uses people to give us godly advice (*Prov. 20:18*) and works through circumstances too (*Rom. 8:28*).

What were some of the functions of Abiathar when he was priest?
1 Sam. 23:9–13, 2 Sam. 15:24, 17:15–22.

Besides functioning in these roles, Abiathar had experienced personal trauma and, like David, was a homeless refugee—which somehow prepared him even better to serve the future king of Israel, who also was constantly on the run. He could understand the frustrations, fears, and betrayals that David and his men must have often felt in the face of continued persecution.

This motif of personal identification with a person or a group of people is important in the New Testament's concept of priesthood. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus can be our High Priest because He fully can empathize with us (*Heb. 2:17*).

Read 1 Peter 2:9. The New Testament clearly teaches that all of us have the responsibilities of priests in our communities. Ours is no self-calling. Jesus said: “‘You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name’ ” (*John 15:16, NIV*). God's calling to us does not make us into Old Testament priests or New Testament apostles but challenges us to intercede for our families, communities, and all those around us. How can you better serve in the role of “priest”?

Absalom's Revolt

Second Samuel 15–18 tells the sad story of Absalom, David's son who revolted against his father's rule. At one point Absalom's army is on its way to Jerusalem. This must have been a nightmare for Abiathar. David has decided to flee rather than turn Jerusalem into a battlefield and cause a bloodbath. All of David's faithful followers prepare to flee with him. Abiathar must have remembered his flight after the massacre of his family and village under King Saul. He gets ready to leave with David.

Read 2 Samuel 15:13–29. What does this passage teach us about the character of David, even at this time of peril? What role does Abiathar play in this episode?

Taking the ark of God, Abiathar and the priests prepare to leave the city, but David orders that the ark stay. David has learned that carrying the symbol of God's presence does not necessarily mean that God is with you. Wearing a cross, displaying a religious slogan, or keeping a set of rules does not guarantee God's presence or compliance. God cannot be manipulated. The ark was to stay where it belonged. Leaving the ark there was also an act of faith on David's part. He trusted that God would save him and bring him back to Jerusalem once again.

The ark of God is set down, and Abiathar offers sacrifices (*2 Sam. 15:24*) until all the people have finished leaving the city. In this particular moment the priests, Abiathar and Zadok, become intercessors for David and his people.

The story of David's intelligence network makes for exciting reading (*2 Sam. 17:15–29*). Abiathar and Zadok become David's eyes and ears in the city. Abiathar's and Zadok's sons wait for word outside Jerusalem. People are not what they seem to be. An unsuspecting female servant brings the message out to the young men. A young lad innocently standing around proves bright enough to figure out what is going on and tells Absalom. The priests' sons are chased by Absalom's men and find a sympathizer and climb into a well. A woman makes things appear what they are not by throwing a cloth over the well and sprinkling grain over the top, reminiscent of Rahab's method of hiding the two spies under flax stalks (*Josh. 2:6*).

In our own context, things are often not what they seem either. Many an aching heart is hidden by a smile. As Christ's followers, we are called to be His representatives. We become God's hands to reach out to those around us. We must be open and sensitive in order to look beyond appearances and see people and situations for what they really are, and we must be willing to sacrifice of ourselves to help.

Abiathar's Choice

We have no record of Abiathar's personal opinions, politics, or religious views. Everything that he says is recorded as God's Word to David. But his actions speak louder than words. Even though he is not recorded as saying anything, just being there makes a powerful statement.

In the time of David, the firstborn son was traditionally considered his father's main heir. For a king, that would mean that the firstborn son would inherit the throne. God is, however, never bound by tradition. As a matter of fact, during the history of Israel He often overlooked firstborns to call others, sometimes by divine decrees and sometimes by the circumstances and choices of the firstborn themselves (*see Gen. 4:1–5, 21:8–12, 25:21–36, 48:8–19, 1 Sam. 16:6–12*).

Read 1 Kings 1:1–8. What could have caused Abiathar, who had been so loyal to David, to do what he did here?

Solomon was not the oldest son and so by custom would not normally have succeeded his father as king. The oldest son, Amnon, had been killed by his brother Absalom. Absalom, in turn, had been killed during his unsuccessful coup attempt. And now the fourth-oldest son, Adonijah, felt that the throne was rightfully his. Adonijah conferred with Joab and Abiathar, and they gave him their support (*1 Kings 1:7*).

Solomon was younger than Adonijah and had a shameful family background. His mother was none other than Bathsheba, the former wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was murdered in order to cover David's affair with Bathsheba. But in spite of his shameful background, Solomon was loved by God (*2 Sam. 12:24*), and it was clear that God had chosen him to be David's successor (*1 Chron. 22:9, 10*). In the face of this uncomfortable choice, it may be that Abiathar could not reconcile himself with the public scandal that the choice would cause, and so he resorted to tradition as opposed to God's revealed will.

Tradition can be very comfortable, as it saves us from taking responsibility to think things through in the light of God's revealed will. It is much easier and "safer" just to say, "We've always done it like this."

How often do we let tradition get in the way of God's leading? At the same time, why must we be careful not to judge things automatically as mere "tradition" and then brush them off?

Abiathar's Fate

After the death of David and the ascension of Solomon to the throne, certain issues needed to be resolved. After Adonijah was put to death (*1 Kings 2:13–25*), there was still the issue of Abiathar the priest, who had so faithfully served Solomon's father. What was to be done with him for his part in the insurrection against Solomon?

Read *1 Kings 2:26, 27*. How does Solomon deal with Abiathar, and what reasons does he give?

A superficial reading of the verse may give the impression that Abiathar is dismissed because of a prophecy made to Eli more than a hundred years before (*1 Sam. 2:30–36*). But really what we have here is a demonstration of the way God knows our future free choices. God knows what free choices we and our descendants will make, and so He is able to prophesy the future. God knew that just as Eli's sons disqualified themselves from the priestly office by their behavior, their descendant, Abiathar, also would disqualify himself from the priestly office by being unwilling to accept God's choices.

Read *Matthew 26:14–16, 20–25*. Explain this prediction in the light of Abiathar's demotion from the priesthood. What similar principle is operating in both cases?

The fact that Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray Him did not cause Jesus to push Judas away. Judas was included in the inner circle of the Twelve. He experienced the power of God firsthand. But Judas, like Abiathar, was not prepared to accept God's will. It seems that he also shared with Abiathar some ideas about kingship and how issues of power and control should be handled. Judas wanted to see Jesus crowned king of an earthly kingdom. Frustrated, he turned to the traditional leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, and betrayed his true King.

Divine foreknowledge does not automatically translate into divine predestination. People have choices, as did Judas and Abiathar. God's foreknowledge of these choices doesn't limit our freedom in making them.

Free choice is one of the most sacred gifts God has given us. It came with a great cost, too: the death of Jesus on the cross. (Had we not been given free choice, we could not have chosen to sin, and Jesus would not have died for us.) How carefully do you think through and pray through the decisions you make?

Further Study: “God has chosen you for a great and solemn work. He has been seeking to discipline, to test, to prove you, to refine and ennoble you, that this sacred work may be done with a single eye to His glory which belongs wholly to God. What a thought that God chooses a man and brings him into close connection with Himself, and gives him a mission to undertake, a work to do, for Him. A weak man is made strong, a timid man is made brave, the irresolute becomes a man of firm and quick decision. What! is it possible that man is of so much consequence as to receive a commission from the King of kings! Shall worldly ambition allure from the sacred trust, the holy commission?”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 167.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Drawing from other parts of the Bible, dwell on the life of Saul and the question of how someone who had been given so much could have squandered it all. What lessons can we take from his story for ourselves? What mistakes did he make that started him down a path that led him to the kind of actions we saw this week?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of how Jesus in His humanity is able to sympathize with us in our struggles. Why is the humanity of Christ so important to us?
- 3 Drawing on the experience of someone in your class who has faced bereavement, what are ways that you as a class can help? That is, what can you do beyond just speaking consoling words? Are there cases in which nothing else can be done other than “just” speaking consoling words?
- 4 One of the great questions that has challenged Christian thinkers over the centuries is the idea of God’s foreknowledge and our free will. If God knows our choices beforehand, are we really free in making them? If not, then where is personal freedom, and if we don’t have freedom, how can we justly be judged or punished for our actions? Some, to get around this conundrum, argue that certain of our actions have to be unknown to God, or else those actions couldn’t be free. Others see no problem: God’s knowing what a person will do doesn’t in any way affect that person’s freedom to make the choices. In class discuss these questions, realizing that you might not readily solve the issues. What’s important to know is that we are free beings, and yet, even while respecting our free choices, God is in control.

Escape From Evil

Hilario slipped out of the house and walked down the dusty road in southern Angola. He never turned back.

Hilario lived with his grandmother after his parents were killed when he was a baby. She taught him to pray and took him to church on Sundays. He wanted to become a priest, but the civil war forced him to flee to southern Angola, where he lived with an uncle.

One of his cousins died, and another became seriously ill. Hilario's uncle took the family to a traditional healer who told the family they must take special baths to rid themselves of the curse on them. Something about the woman troubled Hilario, and he didn't want to take her treatments. But his uncle insisted.

Hilario began having symptoms of spirit possession. Often he felt as though someone was trying to suffocate him. The healer invited him to live with her and learn how to use his new "gift." When he refused, she told him, "If you don't stay with me, you will die."

Hilario's uncle told him he must go, so he obeyed. Hilario realized that this woman's powers were from the devil. He begged God to help him escape. Several times Hilario tried to flee the house, but a force stronger than himself held him, and he couldn't move. The woman reproached him for trying to leave and reminded him that he would die if he left.

Hilario prayed for deliverance, and God answered. One morning he set out on an errand and never turned back.

He fled to the city where his grandmother lived. There he met a girl and took her for his common-law wife. One day he found a Bible and began reading it, searching for truth about God. When he found a verse that spoke of the Sabbath, Hilario stopped. It was so clear. Why had he never understood this before? He remembered an uncle who was a Seventh-day Adventist. He visited him and asked about the Sabbath.

His uncle took him to church. During the worship service Hilario realized that the spirits that had troubled him were gone. He asked Christ into his life. But when he asked to be baptized, his wife left him.

Hilario prayed for her as he prepared for baptism, and several months later she returned. She attended church with him and in time asked to be married and baptized. "We are living in God's freedom now," Hilario says. "We are new and transformed. We thank God for delivering us and saving us."

Millions still live in spiritual darkness. Your mission offerings help bring light and hope and healing where it's needed the most.

HILARIO and his wife share their faith in Luanda, Angola.