

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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 2:9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify how the choices of Abiathar the priest affected his qualifications for priesthood in what he did both for, and against, David.

Feel: Value the importance of loyalty to God's purposes as a critical qualification for service in God's work.

Do: Stand on God's side as members of a people chosen to serve as a royal priesthood, praising God and serving in the priestly role of inter-mediation.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: On the Run

A Abiathar (the sole survivor of Saul's massacre of the priesthood) and David found common cause in escaping Saul's tyranny. Abiathar served David many years, but what act of disloyalty to God's anointed eventually disqualified Abiathar as a priest?

II. Feel: Friend and Betrayer

A Abiathar was loyal to David during both Saul's persecution and Absalom's rebellion. Near the end of David's life, however, Abiathar abandoned David for another royal son who wanted David's throne. What might have caused this betrayal? How can one act undo a life of service?

III. Do: Royal Priests

A We, too, are chosen as priests, to serve God in prayer, praise, and inter-mediation in good times and bad. How may we disqualify ourselves as Abiathar did?

B Is there something we must do to qualify ourselves for service in God's royal priesthood? Why, or why not?

► **Summary:** After a long life of service as a priest, Abiathar disqualified himself for ministry by betraying his king and supporting a usurper to the throne.

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”?**

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christians are called to be a nation of priests and priestesses, distinguished by their sacred calling, royal lineage, and holy conduct.

Just for Teachers: Using 1 Peter 2:9, lead your class in a discussion of the following question: Who is part of the chosen generation, royal priesthood, and holy nation, referred to by Peter?

Peter’s special designation for members of the then fledgling Christian church, and those who would accept Jesus as Savior in succeeding centuries, harkens back to Exodus 19:6, when God gave Moses the following message to give to the Israelites: “ ‘ “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” ’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (*Exod. 19:6, NKJV*). It was always God’s vision that a special, called-out group of human beings would participate with Him in the task of spreading the gospel to the world.

Consider This: Why did God choose to use fallen human beings to help Him reach other fallen human beings? What does this tell us about God?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: As you examine the priestly calling that rests upon followers of Jesus Christ, make the point that the called owe God much in return for saving them and giving them a privileged work. Therefore, we must participate with God in the work of reaching lost men and women. It is the least that we can do to show our gratitude to God for His grace.

I. Chosen Above All Others (*Read 1 Samuel 22:20–23 and Zechariah 3:2 with your class.*)

The murder of the Lord’s priests and their families at the command of Saul is a powerful testament to the unspiritual depths to which he had

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

sunk. Miraculously, providentially, Abiathar escaped the slaughter and made his way to David's side. It is a truth that all who have been saved from certain peril owe something to the one who saved them. For every Christian, certain peril has a name—Satan. The Bible makes clear in 1 Peter 5:8 that our “adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (*NKJV*).

When God saves us, He literally takes us from the jaws of a powerful adversary bent on our destruction. This was the case with Abiathar. Like Abiathar, Israel had been saved from Egyptian bondage and captivity through the miraculous intervention of God (*Exodus 7–14*). The apostle Paul honed in on this penchant of God's for rescuing fallen humanity when he wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (*Eph. 2:8, 9, NKJV*). We are the products of God's amazing grace, and as such we owe God an affirmative answer to His call to service.


Consider This: What does it mean to be called out? What special characteristics bind the called-out ones to Jesus Christ and to one another? (*Gal. 3:26–28*).

II. A Royal Priesthood (*Read 1 Peter 2:9 with your class.*)

The idea that God is willing to share royalty with those who are His subjects should fill us with wonder. Incidentally, royalty is one of the unique gifts Christians share with their God. While the gods of other faiths reserve royalty for themselves, God offered it to ancient Israel and likewise now to all, Jew and Gentile, who believe in Jesus (*1 Peter 2*). This gift comes, however, with several high expectations. Perhaps we can understand what God expects from us by seeing what He required of ancient Israel.

“According to the divine plan and purpose the Israelites were to be both a royal and a priestly race. In an evil world they were to be kings, moral and spiritual, in that they were to prevail over the realm of sin (Rev. 20:6). As priests, they were to draw near to the Lord in prayer, in praise, and in sacrifice. As intermediaries between God and the heathen, they were to serve as instructors, preachers, and prophets, and were to be examples of holy living—Heaven's exponents of true religion.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 595.

Consider This: Many Christians today want what they perceive to be the accolades and blessings that come from being God's royal representatives on earth. In many Christian quarters, there is a distinct emphasis on mate-

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

rial blessings as evidence of one’s connection with the Divine. How are we to counteract this false idea of what it means to be a member of God’s royal priesthood?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: As you discuss the thought and application questions below with your class, focus on developing practical answers to the questions. For instance, part of the answer to the first thought question should include hands-on things members can do as God’s ambassadors on earth to cultivate a culture of care for all people. Focus on finding concrete ways to apply the answers to life.

Thought Questions:

1 Israel’s high priest wore the sacred ephod with a breastplate, holding 12 precious stones, each representing one of Israel’s 12 tribes. The tribes were always to be near the priest’s heart. Of course, we lack the visual aid of the ephod and breastplate to remind us of the close tie to exist between priest and people today. So, then, how do we, ourselves “priests,” carry God’s people—all people—near our hearts?

2 Followers of Christ are chosen and royal, but they also are called to be holy (*Matt. 5:48, 1 Pet. 1:16*). What does it mean to be holy? What role does Christ play in our ability to live a holy life? What role does the Holy Spirit play in making us holy?

Application Questions:

1 Wednesday’s study makes the point that Abiathar’s decision to support Adonijah may have been the result of following what he believed to be the succession tradition in ancient Israel. From your perspective, what are some of the traditions in the church that may be hindering our understanding of God’s will?

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 As one of God’s priests or priestesses, what can you do to remain faithful to God until the end of your life, or until He comes?

Witnessing: Think of three people who don’t seem to be in a saving relationship with Jesus, yet whom you would love to see in heaven. Write their names in a place where you can be reminded of them each day. During the next week, ask God to show you one thing that you can do for each of these people that would help lead them to Christ. If the opportunity arises, share the testimony of the difference that God has made in your life. Don’t worry about being rejected as you share. Instead, tell God that you want to fulfill your role as His special emissary to these special people.

► **STEP 4**—Create

If we ever are perplexed about how to fulfill God’s holy calling for us, we need look no further than the life of Jesus. Jesus lived a life of daily devotion to the will and dictates of His Father. He exemplified the life of service and sacrifice with which members of the ancient priesthood were familiar.

As a class, peruse several local newspapers to get a sense of the issues challenging the community that surrounds your church. Then make a list of specific ways in which your class might help the community meet these challenges. Choose one idea from the list and implement it during the coming month. Set aside a short period of time for reports on how the project is progressing.

Consider This: Hebrews 7:25 states, “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them” (*NKJV*). Jesus intercedes for us, but do we intercede for others? Sure, we pray for people, but is this all there is to intercession? To intercede is to plead or make a request on behalf of another. Do children caught in the juvenile justice system need our prayers alone, or do they also need our advocacy on their behalf? Similarly, is prayer enough for the single parent struggling to make ends meet, or are we also called to reach out and help provide for him or her? In light of these rhetorical questions, discuss why there’s much more to intercession than prayer, as Jesus showed us.

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.