

XVII. A Priest Forever

May 15/16/17, 2018

Hebrews 7:20-28

Aim: To celebrate the superiority of Christ's priesthood, permanently and perfectly fitted for us, which is able to save us who draw near Him to the uttermost.

[DSB Note: The titles of this lesson and the last are appropriately sequenced, since I've put 'A Priest Forever' after 'The Order of Melchizedek'!]

Schreiner: The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood to the Levitical continues to be argued. First, the change of priesthood demonstrates that the Levitical priesthood is inferior (vv. 11-12). Second, the priesthood has truly changed since Jesus comes from the tribe of Judah instead of the tribe of Levi (vv. 13-14). Third, Jesus' priesthood is better because He possesses an indestructible life (vv. 15-17). Fourth, the Melchizedekian priesthood is better because it brings human beings into God's presence (vv. 18-19). In the rest of the chapter, three more arguments are made. Fifth, Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant because the covenant was accompanied by an oath (vv. 20-22). Sixth, Jesus' priesthood is living and hence accomplishes a complete and definitive salvation (vv. 23-25). And seventh, Jesus is a perfect and permanent high priest who has offered a once-for-all sacrifice (vv. 26-28).

Hughes: In this section the writer gives us three consecutive reasons for the superiority of Christ's priesthood: 1) God's divine *oath*; 2) the priesthood's *permanence*; and 3) the *person* of the priest. As before, the first two reasons are firmly rooted in the prophetic words of Psalm 110:4, from which the writer extracts the last drops of significance.

A. Christ Serves as a Promised Priest (Hebrews 7:20-22)

1. The Oath of God (7:20-21)

a) *Without an Oath (7:20)*

²⁰*And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath...*

Schreiner: Jesus' priesthood, His Melchizedekian priesthood, was distinctive, for his priesthood was based on an oath. The author previously explained the significance of God's taking an oath in 6:13-18. An oath isn't necessary for God's sake but for the sake of human beings, confirming and underscoring the unalterable character of God's purpose. God's oath demonstrates that the Melchizedekian priesthood is permanent. By way of contrast, no oath accompanied the Levitical priesthood, showing that the Levitical order was restricted to a certain period in salvation history. The author is not suggesting that the Levitical priesthood was contrary to God's will or intention; he is simply emphasizing that it had a built-in obsolescence.

Bruce: Our author continues to examine his text, so as to extract from it its last degree of significance for the character of the new priesthood. He now draws his readers' attention to the fact that the acclamation of Messiah as a perpetual priest was confirmed by a divine oath. What he has said about God's oath to Abraham in 6:13ff. is equally true about God's oath here. The inauguration of the Aaronic priesthood rested on a divine command (cp. Ex. 28:1). But there is not mention of a divine oath in the record of their appointment as there is in Ps. 110:4, where a

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new priest ‘after the order of Melchizedek’ is introduced. This suggests the superior dignity of the Melchizedek priesthood.

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews declares the total sufficiency of salvation in Christ by noting that the permanence of Jesus’ priestly ministry guarantees our relationship to God. The author gets at this by means of his continued exposition of Psalm 110:4, which is the basis of all his teaching in this chapter. He has already squeezed this verse hard enough to get almost all the juice out of it, and so far it has been very nourishing indeed. Our present passage goes on to elaborate another difference between the Old Testament priests and the priestly office of Jesus Christ. Here the difference deals with the nature of His ordination to ministry. In what manner does God’s oath make Jesus’ priesthood the guarantee of a better covenant? To answer, we should observe that this is not the first time we have heard the writer of Hebrews refer to an oath from God. In 6:13-14 he pointed out that Abraham’s promise of blessing was secured by a divine oath (cp. Gen. 22:16-17). God did not give the oath because *He* needed it, but in order to give *us* every surety that He will do what He has promised.

Hughes: To begin with, our attention is drawn to the fact that Jesus became our Melchizedekian priest through divine oath. In contrast, the Aaronic priests ascended to their position, not on the basis of divine oath, but rather because of divine instruction (cp. Ex. 28:1). This was followed by an extended ceremony, but there was no oath (cp. Ex. 28-29; Lev. 8-9). Certainly God did not swear to Aaron, or any other priest, that his priesthood would be forever.

MacArthur: God did not swear to Aaron that his priesthood would be forever. In fact, God never suggested, to Aaron, or to anyone else, that the priesthood would be anything but temporary. However, many Israelites no doubt thought that it would be permanent, but their belief had no basis in Scripture. Neither when the old priesthood was first established nor when any priest or group of priests were consecrated had God made an ‘oath’—or any sort of promise, conditional or unconditional—that His priesthood would be eternal.

b) *With an Oath (7:21)*

...²¹*but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’”*

Hughes: But God did swear to His Son that He would be ‘a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’ The only other place we know of God swearing an oath was in confirming His covenant to Abraham, as we saw in our study of 6:13-18 (cp. Gen. 22:16-18). The reason he did this was clearly stated by our writer in 6:17. An oath was not necessary, because God’s word is enough. But because humanity is a race of liars, God accommodated Himself within the sphere of human undependability. His oath is a double-assurance to fallen, duplicitous humanity of the eternality of Jesus’ Melchizedekian priesthood. Whatever God confirms by an oath becomes something so utterly unchangeable that it is woven into the very fiber of the universe and must remain forever.

Schreiner: By way of contrast, Jesus became a priest with an oath. Once again the wording of Psalm 110 is consulted, where the author finds an oath (Ps. 110:4). We cannot help but notice how virtually every word in this verse is ransacked for its significance. The attention paid to the specific wording of the text is quite remarkable. The Lord does not only say, ‘You are a priest forever.’ He swore (*ᾧμοσεν, ὀμοσεν*) that Jesus was a priest forever. The emphatic nature of the utterance leaps out to the reader. Not only did God swear that the Melchizedekian priesthood would endure forever; the verse also stresses that God will not change His mind. God swears

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there is no going back on the Melchizedekian priesthood so He will never revoke what He has sworn.

Phillips: In chapter 7, Hebrews refers to another of God's oaths, an oath regarding the Messiah (cp. Ps. 110:4). Both of these oaths have reference to God's dealings with Abraham. In the one case God promised to bless Abraham, and in the other He promised the Messiah that He would be a priest in the order of the priest-king Melchizedek. It stands to reason that these two oaths, so closely related in terms of God's covenant to Abraham, serve similar functions—namely to give assurance to those who look to God with the faith of Abraham. These oaths serve as seals of God's promised salvation. The oath to Abraham sealed God's intention to bless him; God swore by Himself that He would do it. Similarly, the oath to the promised Messiah sealed the means by which God would accomplish that intention, the sending of a Savior to accomplish what God had promised.

2. A Better Covenant (7:22)

²²*This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.*

a) *Jesus*

Hughes: The result of God's self-imposed eternally binding oath is: 'This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.' We must understand, for two reasons, that the emphasis here is dramatically focused on *Jesus*. First, the writer places Jesus last in the Greek sentence structure, so that the full weight of verses 20-22 falls on Jesus as the guarantee. Secondly, the writer's choice of the name 'Jesus' is a conscious emphasis upon the humanity and work of Jesus who 'saves His people from their sins' (Mt. 1:21). This emphatic use of Jesus' name consciously recalls His *incarnation* here on earth—that He was really human—that His human instrument was just like ours. But there is more: His incarnation was terminated by His becoming the *propitiation* for our sins on the cross (2:17). Christ propitiated the Godhead's personal wrath against our sin, fully meeting it and putting it away. Finally, after his incarnation, propitiation, and ascension, our 'Jesus' is in Heaven making *intercession* for us (v. 25).

b) *Covenant*

Phillips: The point made in verse 22 is that it is by means of His priesthood that God's promises are accomplished. God's oath to Messiah, that is, to Jesus Christ, given through King David in Psalm 110 almost one thousand years before His coming, guarantees the covenant with Abraham, through which we are also saved. A covenant is a binding arrangement, with stipulated conditions and promised benefits upon their fulfillment. God's covenant with Abraham was His promise to bless him with salvation, along with all those who look to God in faith as Abraham did. The oath of Psalm 110 seals this covenant because it guarantees the One who would bring it to pass: the Savior who would bear Abraham's and our sins upon the cross, and who would then rise again, ascending to heaven to secure the blessings God had promised.

Schreiner: The author concludes the comparison begun in verse 20. If we put the two parts of the comparison together, the argument runs as follows: 'To the degree that this was not without an oath, to the same degree Jesus became the guarantor of a better covenant.' The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood and the new covenant is based on the oath which accompanied Jesus' priesthood. As noted previously, the word 'better' (*κρείττονος, kreittonos*) plays a major role in the author's argument, and the covenant established through Jesus is far better than the old covenant.

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MacArthur: Jesus' priesthood is based on an oath of God, and is therefore shown to be eternal, unchangeable. Because of that fact, Jesus is made a 'guarantee,' a surety, 'of a better covenant.' The covenant that God made through Jesus is better than the old one because the old one was temporary and the new one is eternal. A better priest guarantees a better covenant. It is important to recognize that the Old Covenant was not *bad*. God did not make the new because the old was bad, but because it was imperfect and temporary. The Mosaic covenant was a very good covenant, a God-given, God-ordained covenant that served its purpose for the time it was meant to be in effect. Until the coming of Jesus Christ, the Mosaic covenant was exactly the covenant that Israel was supposed to have. The New Covenant is simply better because the Old was incomplete. The Old was good; the New is 'better.'

Bruce: This is the first occurrence of the term 'covenant' in this epistle, but the term is about to play such a central part in the argument to follow that the whole epistle has been described as 'The Epistle of the *Diatheke*.' For the moment, however, the designation of Jesus as 'the guarantor of a better covenant' prepares the reader for what is to come: there are still two further tokens of the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood which must be mentioned.

c) Guarantor

Schreiner: Jesus is 'the guarantee' (ἔγγυος, *engyos*) of a better covenant inasmuch as it was established with an oath. The verb is used of those who guarantee the debts of another so they pay what is owed (Pr. 17:18; 22:26). The word 'guarantee' along with 'oath' drives home the certainty of what was promised. But in what sense does Jesus stand as a guarantee? The author doesn't say here that Jesus fulfills the debts human beings owe to God. Rather he emphasizes that Jesus guarantees God's fidelity and faithfulness, indicating that God will certainly fulfill His promise of forgiving the sins of His people.

Phillips: The Greek word for 'guarantor' or 'surety' appears in the New Testament only in Hebrews 7:22. The word is *engyos*, and it was used in ancient legal documents for 'one who stands security. The *engyos* offered his goods or even himself as security to ensure what was promised. This helps us grasp the writer's point, namely, that as long as Jesus lives, the covenant of or salvation is secured by Him. Therefore, because Jesus lives, we too will live.

Bruce: The author introduces a further aspect of the priesthood of Jesus which will be developed in the following chapters—Jesus' role as guarantor and mediator of a covenant which is as much superior to the covenant of the *ancient régime* as His priesthood is superior to that of Aaron. This is the only occurrence of 'guarantor' (ἔγγυος, *engyos*) in the New Testament. In common Greek it is found frequently in legal and other documents in the sense of a surety or guarantor. He is answerable for the fulfillment of the obligation which he guarantees. The old covenant had a mediator (cp. Gal. 3:19) but no surety; there was no one to guarantee the fulfillment of the people's undertaking: 'All that Yahweh hath spoken we will do, and be obedient' (Ex. 24:7). But Jesus guarantees the perpetual fulfillment of the covenant which He mediates, on the manward side as well as on the Godward side. As the Son of God, He confirms God's eternal covenant with His people; as His people's representative, He satisfies its terms with perfect acceptance in God's sight.

Hughes: The author's point here in this letter is that in Heaven 'Jesus,' who did all this for us, now acts as the 'guarantor' for those of us who are still on earth awaiting the full outworking of the 'better covenant.' For our heart's health and steadfastness, we must understand that Jesus,

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our superior high priest, will do anything and everything consonant with His nature to meet our needs.

MacArthur: Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant, and in this has provided us with eternal life. But He does more than mediate the covenant; He also guarantees it. He has become surety for it. All of God's promises in the New Covenant are guaranteed to us by Jesus Himself. He guarantees to pay all the debts that our sins have incurred, or ever will incur, against us.

B. Christ Serves as a Permanent Priest (Hebrews 7:23-25)

Schreiner: The main point in verses 23-25 is that Jesus is able to save completely those who come into God's presence through Him. Levitical priests can't match this, for they all die. Dead priests can't accomplish salvation! Jesus' priesthood, on the other hand, never ends, and thus the saving efficacy of His priesthood is perpetual.

1. Permanence (7:23-24)

a) Prevented by Death (7:23)

²³*The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office...*

Hughes: The Father's oath confirming the eternality of Jesus' priesthood anticipates the next reason for its superiority, which is its permanence. A glance at the old Aaronic priesthood demonstrates its *impermanence*. Aaron—Eleazar—Phinehas—the priestly succession continued on. The concluding comment for every priest was inevitably, 'and he died.' Josephus reckoned that some eighty-three priests served from Aaron until the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD (*Antiquities*, 20.227). But the Talmud lists even more—eighteen during the first temple and over three hundred for the second (*Yoma* 9a).

Bruce: The Aaronic priests were indeed appointed on the hereditary principle (not, of course, on the basis of Ps. 110:4); but none of them could enjoy the priestly dignity in perpetuity. In generation after generation the high priest died and his office passed to another, until in all (so Josephus reckons, *Ant.* 20.227) eighty-three high priests officiated from Aaron to the fall of the Second Temple in 70 AD.

Schreiner: The inferiority of the Levitical priesthood is evident because death was the master of every Levitical priest. There were scores of priests, priest after priest, through the roll call of history. But each and every one died. No Levitical priest lasted more than a generation, and each one in succession died. The 'many' (*πλείονές*, *pleiones*) are contrasted with the one. What is needed is one effective priest, one priest that conquers death, but such a priest did not hail from the tribe of Levi.

MacArthur: The Levitical priests had what might be called the ultimate disqualification for permanent ministry: 'death.' None of them could serve indefinitely. Each died and had to be succeeded in order for the priesthood to continue. Once again, the Jewish readers are reminded of the limitations of the Old Covenant.

Phillips: The strength of God's oath explains how it is that we have 'a better covenant' (v. 22). The contrast is between the new covenant in Christ and the old covenant in Moses. In the old era, priests did not live forever. They were mere men, and their ministry did not have a divine

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oath that guaranteed permanency. This is why there was a procedure for passing on the office by blood descent.

b) Continues Forever (7:24)

...²⁴*but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.*

Schreiner: In marked contrast to Levitical priests, Jesus' priesthood continues forever. The word 'permanently' (*ἀπαράβατον, aparabaton*) means His priesthood never ends. Remaining forever refers implicitly to the resurrection. His priesthood endures because He conquered death, and as the one who triumphed over death, His priesthood persists. It may also have reference to the eternal character of the Son's person affirmed in the opening chapter of Hebrews. On this reading, the author doesn't focus on Jesus' triumph over death but His inherent superiority as a divine being. Still, it seems more likely that the author thinks of Jesus' humanity as a priest, and hence the focus is on His humanity instead of His inherent divine properties. Certainly Jesus as high priest is both divine and human, and the two ultimately can't be separated from one another. Nevertheless, it seems that the author here focuses on Jesus' humanity, and hence His permanence is most likely ascribed to His resurrection.

MacArthur: 'Permanently' (*aparabatos*) means more than incident permanence, or something that simply will not be changed. It means unchangeable, unalterable, inviolable—something that *cannot* be changed. Jesus' priesthood does not just happen to be permanent. It cannot possibly be anything but permanent. It is not capable of anything but permanence. By its very divine nature it can never conclude or weaken or become ineffective. Jesus Christ has a priesthood that is absolutely incapable of ever being altered in any way! He is the last high priest. No other will ever be needed.

Hughes: In marked contrast to this, the author asserts that Jesus 'holds His high priesthood permanently, because He continues forever.' The Greek word for 'permanently' can have the sense of *unchangeable* or *permanent* as our translation has it, or it can mean that the priesthood is *non-transferrable*. The word may, indeed, have both senses. But whether it is one or the other or both, the benefit of Jesus' ongoing priesthood is easily apparent. There is no unevenness in the quality of His priesthood, as there would be in a human succession of priests. But the boon of Jesus' intercession is that He never changes. Think of it—you and I will never have another high priest. No young, inexperienced priest just out of seminary will succeed Him! Think of all the prayers He has heard from us. And He remembers them all! He has answered every single one. Think how He knows us! Jesus is superior by virtue of His permanence.

Phillips: All of this changed in the new covenant in Jesus Christ, which relies upon a priest who not only pleases God in all things, but also lives forever and will always guarantee our relationship with God. This is the assurance of our salvation in Him. There is no stipulation for passing on His priesthood, because there is no need. This means that if you have come to Jesus Christ for salvation, then you have come to a living priest who offered His blood for your sins and now reigns in heaven to secure your future. This is your assurance of eternal salvation. God established Him as the guarantee of the covenant, of His promise of eternal life, and He lives forever. As Jesus said to His disciples, 'Because I live, you also will live' (Jn. 14:19).

2. Performance (7:25)

a) Able to Save (7:25a)

²⁵*Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him...*

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Hughes: The high point for the benefits of His permanence is given in verse 25, which dramatically states His super-sufficiency for salvation. Our text argues emphatically that Jesus ‘is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him.’ The term translated ‘uttermost’ is unusual, being used elsewhere only in Luke 13:11, and combines the idea of *completeness* with the idea of *eternality*—‘for all time’ (RSV). It means complete, absolute, total, eternal salvation. Moreover, the words here allow for no possibility of our supplement our salvation by doing good (cp. Eph. 2:8-9). Salvation is all Christ’s work, from beginning to end.

Schreiner: Since Jesus has a permanent priesthood, it follows that He is able to save ‘for all time’ those who come to God through Him. Alternatively, the sense is that He is able to save ‘completely’ (*παντελής, panteles*) those approaching God through Him (cp. Lk. 13:11). Probably both ideas are intended here, for they are not mutually exclusive, and both fit the context. Christians are saved forever and fully through the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

MacArthur: Jesus’ priesthood is not only eternal and unalterable, but it is also unlimited in its scope. He saves ‘forever’ (*panteles*). Although the meaning in the context of 7:25 can be that of eternal, the basic idea of the word is that of completeness or perfection. The King James translation (‘to the uttermost’) is therefore accurate and significant. Jesus’ priesthood is no halfway measure, as were the old sacrifices that only symbolized removal of sin. The symbol was important for that covenant. It was God-given and God-required, but still was only a symbol. But Jesus Christ is able to save both eternally and completely.

Schreiner: The phrase ‘able to save’ (*σῶζειν...δύναται, sōzein...dynatai*) does not simply convey the idea of potentiality, as if He is able to save but He might not do so. On the contrary the efficacy of Jesus’ saving work is featured here. Those who draw near to God through Jesus are assured that they will be saved. The word ‘approach’ (*προσερχομένου, proserchomenous*) is often used in the letter for drawing near to God (4:16; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). One of the central issues in Hebrews is fellowship with God. The author reminds them that true fellowship with God, genuine access to God, is only possible through Jesus Christ.

MacArthur: The power of salvation is Christ’s ability—‘He is able.’ Other priests were never able to save, not even partially or temporarily. The old sacrifices partially and temporarily covered sin, but they did not even partially or temporarily *remove* sin. They did not to any degree or for any length of time bring deliverance from sin. But Jesus Christ is able, perfectly able. The nature of salvation is bringing men ‘near to God.’ By delivering from sin, it qualifies believers to come to God. Deliverance from sin has all three of the major tenses—past, present, and future. In the past tense, we *have been* freed from sin’s guilt. In the present tense, we *are* freed from sin’s power. In the future tense, we *shall be* freed from sin’s presence. The objects of Christ’s eternal salvation, of course, are those who come to Him to be saved, ‘those who draw near to God through Him.’ There are no restrictions but this, no other qualification but faith in God’s Son. There is no other way but Jesus, but this way is open to every person who puts His trust in Him. The other side of this truth is that Jesus can save *only* those who come to Him in faith. He is able to save all, but not all will be saved, because not all will believe.

Hughes: One other observation about Christ’s being ‘able to save to the uttermost’—the words are actually in the present tense. The reference is not just to the great initial experience of being saved. It refers to the perpetual experience of being saved (cp. 1 Cor. 1:18). He saves us, not only in the moment of initial commitment, but day by day and moment by moment—through all

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time! His perpetual saving work brings about our growing sanctification as we are made ever more like Him.

Bruce: Those who have Christ as their high priest and mediator with God have in Him a Savior whose saving power is available without end, not liable to the mischances of mortal life. He lives eternally, eternally engaged to bless and protect those who have committed themselves to Him. The way of approach to God through Him is a way which is always open, because in the presence of God He represents His people as ‘a priest forever.’

b) Always Lives to Intercede (7:25b)

...since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Phillips: The oath given to Jesus Christ through King David utterly and completely seals and guarantees the salvation that is in Him. But how does His priestly ministry actually save us? The word ‘consequently’ at the beginning of verse 25 links together the permanent priesthood of Christ and the intercession of Christ. We have made much of Jesus’ permanent presence in heaven as our surety, but He is not just sitting there. He is active in His intercession for us. To intercede is to approach on behalf of others, and this is what Jesus does for us at the throne of the heavenly Father. He represents us and pleads our cause. Indeed, in verse 25, ‘to save’ is linked with ‘to intercede.’ Intercession is the means by which Jesus so thoroughly saves us, gaining us complete divine favor and every resource we need for our salvation.

Schreiner: In the last phrase of the verse, the readers receive further assurance. Their salvation is complete and final because Jesus ‘always lives to intercede for them.’ The contrast with the Levitical priests continues, for their ministry on behalf of the readers can’t continue after they die. The benefits of Jesus’ priestly work endure, for He intercedes as the ever-living one, as the one who has triumphed over death forever, as the risen one. It is probable that Jesus’ intercession is based on His sacrifice, for Jesus’ priestly ministry is the theme here, and the subsequent verses (vv. 26-28) focus on His offering as a priest. His intercession, then, is linked with and based on what He accomplished in His death. Indeed, the drawing near to God (cp. 10:22) is only made possible through Jesus’ blood and sacrifice.

Hughes: And how does He do this? It is through His substitutionary atonement and propitiation for our sins. But our text adds a vital and dynamic dimension: ‘since He always lives to make intercession for them.’ Jesus’ contact with the Father is unbroken. His intercession is never-ending. Day by day, hour by hour, year by year, millennium by millennium, Christ prays for us. How does He intercede for us? He, along with the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27) takes our feeble prayers, cleans them up, ennobles them, and presents them to the Father. There is a beautiful aroma from Jesus’ perfect prayers, offered confidently as He sits at the right hand of God. Every prayer hits the mark and graces our lives. The reason He can save us completely is that truly ‘He always lives to make intercession’ for us.

MacArthur: He ‘always lives to make intercession’ for us. The security of our salvation is Jesus’ perpetual intercession for us. We can no more keep ourselves saved than we can save ourselves in the first place. But just as Jesus has the power to save us, He has the power to keep us. Constantly, eternally, perpetually Jesus Christ intercedes for us before His Father.

Bruce: What is our Lord’s special function as His people’s high priest with God, apart from ensuring their never-failing acceptance before God? In 2:17ff. we have been told that He became a high priest to make atonement for His people’s sins and strengthen them in temptation;

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in 4:15ff. we have been told that He sympathizes with their weakness and supplies the mercy and grace to help them in time of need. Here His high-priestly function is summed up in terms of intercession: ‘He lives continuously to intercede for them.’ The intercessory work of Christ at the right hand of God is not a doctrine peculiar to our author (cp. Rom. 8:33ff.). We may also trace the echo of the fourth Servant Song, where the Servant of the LORD, once humbled and put to shame but now high exalted, is said to have made, or to be making ‘intercession for the transgressors’ (Is. 53:12). This is one of the statements about the Servant which indicates that His ministry is priestly, as well as prophetic and royal.

Phillips: There are two great errors we must avoid. The first and greater error is to think that Jesus is an insufficient intercessor, that He is somehow disinterested or incompetent. This is the grave error of those who would turn to others (such as deceased relatives, or saints, or the virgin Mary) for their intercession. Jesus is ‘able to save to the uttermost’ through His intercession; to turn to any other is to deny this and impugn God’s Word. Another error is to infer from Jesus’ intercession that the Father sits in hostility toward us, and is only begrudgingly placated by the labors of His Son. It is true that we are worthy of God’s complete disdain. But never let us forget that Jesus here fulfills the office to which the Father appointed Him. We are saved because the Son does the will of His Father for us, opening the way for our full reconciliation as God’s children.

Bruce: If it be asked what form His heavenly intercession takes, what better answer can be given than that He still does for His people at the right hand of God what He did for Peter (cp. Lk. 22:32) on earth? And the prayer recorded in John 17, also belong to the same night in which He was betrayed, is well called His high-priestly prayer, and a careful study of John 17 will help us considerably to understand what is intended here when our Lord is described as making intercession for those who come to God through Him. It is important to emphasize this, for the character of our Lord’s intercession has at times been grotesquely misrepresented in popular Christian thought. He is not to be thought of as an orante, *standing* ever before the Father with outstretched arms, and with strong crying and tears pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God; but as a *throned* Priest-King, asking what He will from a Father who always hears and grants His request. Our Lord’s life in heaven is His prayer. The appearance in God’s presence of the Crucified One constitutes His perpetual and prevalent intercession. His once-completed self-offering is utterly acceptable and efficacious; His contact with the Father is immediate and unbroken; His priestly ministry on His people’s behalf is never ending, and therefore the salvation which He secures to them is absolute.

C. Christ Serves as a Perfect Priest (Romans 7:26-28)

Phillips: In this seventh chapter of Hebrews, the writer has been building his argument up to the point of summation and integration that we find in the last three verses.

Hughes: So far we have seen that Christ is a superior priest because of God’s sworn oath and because of the permanence of Christ’s priesthood. Now we see His superiority due to His person. Teodorico, the ancient Italian commentator, first identified verses 26-28 as a hymn, calling it ‘a hymn to the High Priest,’ and certainly it seems that the author stands back in awe as he celebrates the superior character of Christ the high priest.

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1. Fitting in His Person (7:26)

a) *Fitting (7:26a)*

²⁶*For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest...*

Phillips: Drawing together all that has been said about the person and work of Jesus Christ as our heavenly high priest, the writer of Hebrews concludes, ‘It was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest.’ That is the point, isn’t it? Not just that He is admirable, not merely that He is worthy in an abstract sort of way, but as the NIV renders this verse, ‘Such a high priest meets our need.’ He is perfectly fitting for us, in terms of both His person and His work, perfectly suited for our predicament, and perfectly able to save us to the uttermost. A better translation would be, ‘Such a high priest was fitted to us.’ The point is that Jesus as high priest is perfectly fitted for the predicament in which we find ourselves; He is appropriate in every way to be the Savior of sinful humankind.

MacArthur: It was ‘fitting,’ necessary, that He be such a person. Otherwise He, too, would have had to offer sacrifices for Himself first, and He, too, would have had to repeat the sacrifices over and over and over. He could only be the eternal and perfect High priest if He were completely righteous and sinless. And He is.

b) *Holy, Harmless, and undefiled (7:26b)*

...holy, innocent, unstained...

Phillips: Hebrews 7:26 sets Jesus forth as a high priest who is fitted to our need in that He offers Himself. There are five things said about Jesus in this verse, beginning with a triplet of adjectives: holy, innocent, and unstained. These are related concepts, all of which point to the perfection of Christ’s person. The first pertains to God (holy); the second pertains to other people (blameless); and the third pertains to Himself (pure). Another viewpoint is to see them as pertaining first to the religious qualification of a priest—the word ‘holy’ might be rendered as ‘devout.’ This deals not with how Jesus appeared before men, but how He appears before God. Next comes the moral qualification of a priest: he is blameless, never having done wrong to his fellow men, sinless both in action and in motivation. Finally comes the cultic, we might say professional, qualification of a priest: he is pure, and thus undefiled for priestly service. Jesus our high priest is not merely pure in an external way, the way the Pharisees thought of purity by merely washing the outside, but He was pure throughout, outwardly and inwardly. Holy, blameless, pure—this is how Jesus qualifies in His person.

MacArthur: As believers, we are all holy in the sense that we are set apart in Christ for righteousness. We are counted righteous in Him. But Christ’s righteousness is in Himself. He was ‘holy’ from the very beginning, eternally holy. He was born into this world holy. He was not capable of sin. Jesus is also ‘innocent,’ or harmless. Holiness points toward God, harmlessness toward men. Jesus injured no man. He lived for others. He went about always doing good to others, including those who had done, or who He knew would do, Him harm. He healed but never harmed. Jesus was ‘undefiled,’ free from any moral or spiritual blemish. For thirty-three years Jesus Christ was in the world, mingling continually with sinners and being tempted continually by Satan. Yet He never contracted the least taint of sin, or defilement. Jesus lived His life in the sinful, defiled world without losing the least of His beauty and purity. He moved through the world and remained untouched by any of its blemishes.

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Schreiner: The superiority of Jesus' priesthood is evident from His qualifications. He is a 'fitting' high priest, one that matches what humans 'need' since He is a sinless high priest. The author uses a number of terms to describe Jesus' virtues. He is 'holy' (ὅσιος, *osios*), always living righteously in a way that pleases God. He is 'innocent' (ἄκακος, *akakos*) and devoted to what is good. The word 'undefiled' (ἀμίαντος, *amiantos*) means He is unstained by sin. The same word is used for the sexual purity demanded in marriage (13:4).

Bruce: But whatever other reasons may be adduced to demonstrate the superiority of the new priesthood, there is one final argument. The new priesthood is better because the new priest is Jesus. 'Such a high priest does indeed fit our condition' (NEB). He has the unique qualification of having experienced the full force of temptation without once yielding to it. There is no question of His fitness to appear in the presence of God; He is the Holy One of God, free from all guile and defilement.

Hughes: His character is unflawed. He is 'holy.' He is uniquely God's Holy One. He is set apart to God. He stands accepted before God. He is 'innocent'—literally 'without evil.' Whereas we are intrinsically evil in our motives and deeds, there is nothing but good in Him. He is 'unstained.' The Old Testament priests had to be externally without imperfection. But Christ is unstained within. Jesus walked through the muck and mire of this world for thirty-three years but was never stained by sin. His character rendered Him immune.

c) Separated and Exalted (7:26c)

...separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

Phillips: The verse goes on to provide two participial phrases as a couplet: 'separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.' In what sense was Jesus set apart from sinners? He was not set apart from them in His nature, for God sent His own Son 'in the likeness of sinful men' (Rom. 8:3). He was not set apart from men during His ministry on earth. Being set apart from sinners declares what Christ is, His state and condition. He is holy and undefiled. He was separate from sinning in its nature, causes, and effects. Jesus underwent all manner of temptation, but He is separate from sin. He is in a different category from sinful man, because He overcame temptation and emerged sinless. You see the importance of this for us. If we need Jesus to represent us because we are sinners, then it is vital that He be without sin, 'separated from sinners.'

MacArthur: Jesus was 'separated from sinners.' He was of an utterly different class. Obviously, He was not separated from sinners in the sense of never coming in contact with them or mingling with them. His parents, His brothers and sisters, His friends, His disciples—all the people He encountered—were sinful. Yet He ate with them, traveled with them, worked with them, worshiped with them. But His nature was totally separate, totally different, from theirs—and from ours.

Phillips: Lastly, we read that Jesus was 'exalted above the heavens.' The point is not that Jesus has been elevated to some place higher than heaven, but rather that He is now higher than every other heavenly being, seated at the right hand of God with authority and power forever. Having seen His religious, moral, and ceremonial perfection, we now are reminded that His person is in heaven, where He is needed on our behalf.

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MacArthur: Finally, He is ‘exalted above the heavens.’ He is exalted because of all the other things just mentioned. Because He is holy, innocent, undefiled, and separated from sinners, He is therefore exalted.

Schreiner: Jesus was also ‘separated (*κεχωρισμένος, kechōrismenos*) from sinners.’ Probably the author has in mind here Jesus’ separation in that He was exalted by God as priest-king. The last line (‘exalted above the heavens’) is similar. The first clause describes the exaltation as Christ’s final triumph over sin. The second underscores the dazzling heights He has attained. What does Jesus’ purity of life have to do with His exaltation? The most likely answer is that His exaltation was the fitting reward for His righteousness. Jesus’ exaltation picks up what we find in Psalm 110:1: Jesus’ reigning at God’s right hand. As the sinless one, He is now the triumphant and reigning one.

Bruce: Although He came to earth ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom. 8:3), lived among sinners, received sinners, ate with sinners, was known as the friend of sinners, yet He was set apart from sinful men; and is now exalted above all the heavens to share the throne of God,

Hughes: Because Christ was ‘holy, innocent, unstained,’ He is ‘separated from sinners.’ He is part of humanity because He took it for our sake, but He is separate in His character from sinful human nature. Further, He imparts His righteousness to us. And finally, He is ‘exalted above the heavens.’—an allusion to the triumph of His resurrection, ascension, and glorification at the right hand of God (1:3). In contrast to my flawed intercession due to human weakness and sin, Christ in His transcendent glory is not just a figure of the past, but also of the present and the future. His intercession is just as powerful for us today as it was in the first century. Christ is our contemporary and ever-present Lord and intercessor.

2. Fitting in His Work (7:27)

²⁷*He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.*

Phillips: Hebrews 7:27-28 deals with Jesus’ work as the priest who offers the sacrifice to God. In His priestly work, He alone meets our need. Verse 27 contrasts Jesus’ priestly work with that of the Old Testament priests of Israel. The Old Testament high priests were really not able to meet our need. They were like someone who is hired for a job, who is given the right tools, and who works hard but simply lacks the ability or skill. Sculptors need artistic ability; scientists need mathematical prowess; athletes need speed and strength and grace. Priests need holiness. The reason is the nature of their work, namely to bring pure offerings before a holy God. The Old Testament priests showed their inability here, both in that they had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, and also in that their work was never finished. The insufficiency of any one sacrifice was illustrated by the need for more sacrifices later. In the greatest possible contrast, Hebrews 7:27 speaks of Jesus’ fully sufficient sacrifice. Whereas the Old Testament priests were sinners, He is holy; while their sacrifices were insufficient, His is sufficient; while the old priests were not able to meet the need of sinners, He is able once for all to reconcile us to God. Just as Jesus was perfectly fitting in His person, so is He also in His work. He fully meets our need, having been fitted by His perfection to our weakness and sin.

Schreiner: Because Jesus was without sin, He had no need to offer a sacrifice first for His own sin and then for the sins of the people. Jesus atoned for sin once for all by the sacrifice of Himself. Jesus’ sinlessness (v. 26) stands in sharp contrast to all other human beings. Their sin

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requires sacrifices ‘every day.’ We have an implicit recognition here that the sacrifices offered do not truly atone for sin (cp. 10:1-4). Indeed, the fallibility of the high priests is also evident. The author has already emphasized their impermanence: they all die (v. 23). But here he reminds us of their sins. Despite the reputation and holiness of high priests, they were required to offer sacrifices for their own sins (cp. Lev. 9:7; 16:6).

Bruce: Aaron and his successors, before they presented a sin offering on behalf of the people, had to present one for themselves. This was preeminently true on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:6). The occasional sin offering (cp. Lev. 4:3) may have been in our author’s mind when he used the expression ‘daily’ in this connection. There is indeed no explicit command for a daily sin offering to be presented by the high priest on his own account; but inadvertent sinning, of the kind provided for in Lev. 4:1ff., could well have been a daily hazard. And the high priest occupied special position; an inadvertent sin on his part brought guilt on the people. It was wise therefore to take precautions against the very possibility of his having committed an inadvertent sin.

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews mentions that the high priest made sacrifice for his own sin every day, and then made sacrifices for others. It seems that the author is including here the practice contemporary to his own time, when the high priests offered daily sacrifices simply because of their important position and out of anxiety for their sin and failure. Obviously these were not priests who could really bring the people near to God.

MacArthur: And because of all five of these things in verse 26, He does not need to offer sacrifices for Himself, ‘like those high priests.’ Sinlessness needs no sacrifice. Jesus offered only one sacrifice, and that one not for Himself but for others. He did it once. A perfect sacrifice by a perfect Priest and it was done—for all time.

Schreiner: Jesus as a high priest is different, showing that He belongs to a different category. As the sinless one, He didn’t need to offer a sacrifice for His own sins. Furthermore, a new sacrifice was required every day. Instead, forecasting one of the major themes of chapters 9-10, Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice ‘one for all’ (ἐφ’ ἅπασι, *epharax*). His one sacrifice definitively and finally dealt with sin, and thus no further sacrifices were needed, showing that sin had been truly cleansed through the sacrifice of Christ. Forgiveness was obtained not through the offering of animals but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The priests did not offer themselves but animals. Jesus secured forgiveness by offering Himself, and so unlike the priests He was both the priest and the victim offered in sacrifice.

Bruce: But Jesus has no need to present a daily sacrifice—or, for that matter, a yearly sacrifice—for His people’s sins. He presented a permanently valid sin offering on their behalf when He offered up His own life—an offering so perfect and efficacious that it needs no repetition. For all the completeness of His identification with His people and His sympathetic entering into their trials and sufferings, He is personally free from the guilt and tyranny of sin, and for that very reason is the more able to be their effective high priest. We have already been told that He ‘made purification for sins’ (1:3), that He was appointed ‘to make atonement for the people’s sins’ (2:17), since it is the function of every high priest to ‘offer gifts and sacrifices for sins’ (5:1). But now we are told expressly the nature of the sacrifice which our Lord offered: ‘He offered up Himself.’

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3. Fitting in His Perfection (7:28)

²⁸*For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*

Schreiner: The final verse in the chapter and in the argument that commenced in 7:11 rounds out the discussion. We see here again that the law and the priesthood are intertwined, for the law, as was noted previously, appointed men to serve as high priests (cp. Ex. 28-29). What is noteworthy is that the men who served as priests were characterized by ‘weakness’ (*ἀσθένειαν, astheneian*). Their weakness, as is apparent from the preceding verses, includes their sinfulness (v. 27) and their being subject to death (v. 23). The word ‘weakness’ picks up a thread in the previous discussion. The previous regulation regarding the priesthood is annulled because of its ‘weakness’ (*ἀσθενέζ, asthenes*). A new order has arrived which does not suffer from the liabilities inherent in the old order.

Phillips: Hebrews contrasts the old priesthood of the law with that of Jesus Christ. The law appointed men who were weak. The oath, which came later than the law and therefore indicated the former priesthood’s temporary status, appointed God’s Son, who is perfect as a high priest forever.

MacArthur: All the priests of the Old Covenant, even the most dedicated and spiritual of them, were ‘weak.’ But God established Jesus’ priesthood as eternally strong—just as it is eternally holy and eternally effective.

Schreiner: The superiority of the new order is also evident, for the author characterizes what has come in Jesus Christ as ‘the promise of the oath.’ The word ‘oath’ echoes the previous argument, where the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood is confirmed by its being accompanied by an oath (7:20-22), a feature that was lacking relative to the Levitical priesthood. The oath was subsequent to the law, and yet the newness of the oath does not suggest inferiority but superiority. That the oath came after the law was instituted (Ps. 110:4) reveals that the law is temporary in contrast to the priesthood affirmed with an oath.

Bruce: The divine acclamation, given under oath, of a new and perpetual priesthood after Melchizedek’s order, was designed to supersede the earlier priesthood established by the law. This supersession came into effect when the Messiah appeared and vindicated His high-priestly title on the basis of a perfect sacrifice. Fully equipped to discharge an intercessory ministry at the right hand of God, this is no high priest subject to all the conditions of earthly frailty; this is the one whom God addresses as Son, whose high priesthood is absolutely efficacious and eternally suited to meet His people’s need.

Schreiner: The oath is directed to the Son. We might expect him to say a priest or a king, for He is also, as Psalm 110 itself affirms, a king and a priest; but here he picks up the term *Son*, which is so important from the outset of the book, for the Son is greater than the angels. The oath was not spoken merely to a priest or to a king but to God’s unique Son. The Son ‘has been perfected forever’ (*εἰς τόν αἰῶνα τετελειωμένον, eis ton aiōna teteleiōmenon*). Earlier the author taught that Jesus ‘was perfected’ (*τελεωθείς, teleōtheis*) through His obedient sufferings (5:8-9). Obviously, this does not mean Jesus was sinful before He was perfected, for the author just affirmed His sinlessness (v. 27; cp. 4:15). The perfection here is eschatological and experiential. Jesus, in the anvil and agony of human experience, trusted and obeyed His Father. He demonstrated that He was qualified to be the perfect sacrifice for sins. The word ‘perfected’ also resonates with the themes of 7:11-28. The Levitical priesthood could not bring ‘perfection’

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(7:11, *τελείωσις, teleiōsis*), and ‘the law perfected (*ἔτελείωσεν, eteleiōsen*) nothing.’ Believers in Jesus Christ, however, have a perfect priest who ushers them into the presence of God. The perfecting of Jesus refers to the whole process by which Jesus was personally prepared and vocationally qualified for His continuing ministry in the presence of God. His once-for-all sacrifice testifies that the old order has been terminated and a new day has begun.

4. Fitting to Worship

Phillips: Jesus is perfectly fitted to deliver us from our predicament in sin and weakness. He is fitting in His person and fitting in His work. But Jesus Christ is also fit for our worship. The things we are taught in this passage are also the things essential to true worship. Where does true worship begin? It begins with an awareness of our need. This passage says that Jesus meets our need and we must admit that need—the need for forgiveness, the need for reconciliation with God, the need for eternal life. Without confessing that need you may come to church but you will never really worship God.

Phillips: The other thing we need for true worship is the awareness that in Jesus Christ God has met our need. Our word ‘worship’ comes from the older word ‘worth-ship.’ To worship someone or something is to acclaim its worth. And when you realize that Jesus Christ is not just some fine moral teacher, not some guru among a crowd of religious figures, but the very Savior you need, the only solution to your predicament, the only lamb able to bear your sin before God, and the only priest able to offer that sacrifice to God—when you realize that, then you will truly worship Him. If you do not worship Jesus Christ, then you are not saved, because He alone meets our need, is fitted to our predicament, as sinners confronted by a holy God. That is what the redeemed do in heaven: they worship the true Lamb, the Lamb who was slain.

Phillips: No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, the High Priest and Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, is perfectly fitting to you need. If you will admit that need—not just for a little help, but for an atoning sacrifice to take away your sin—and if you will bring that need to Him, then He will take away your sin and open for you the door to heaven. And you will serve with Him, in the beauty of holiness, both now and forevermore.

For next time: Read Hebrews 8:1-13.