

Hebrews 7:11-28

The Superiority of Christ's Priesthood

But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them – vv. 24,25

For all of Paul's writing in this epistle to the Hebrews about priests and orders of priests and comparisons between orders of priests one might be tempted to think or ask – *what does any of this have to do with me?* We don't live in a day of priests. We readily acknowledge that we don't live in the Old Testament era where you would find priests offering animal sacrifices. And we don't follow the church of Rome's order of priests and bishops and cardinals and popes. So unless you find some academic or historical interest in Paul's discussion of priests in this chapter you might wonder whether or not there's any real practical or spiritual value to it at all.

The truth of the matter is, however, that there's tremendous practical and spiritual value to the chapter when you recognize that you are, in fact, in dire need of a priest. You cannot be saved apart from a priest. You cannot draw near to God apart from a priest and the thing that this chapter brings out most forcefully is that not just any priest will do.

Notice what it says in v. 11 *If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?*

What further need? – the apostle asks. And the implication behind this verse is that there is need and there is need because perfection hasn't come through the Levitical priesthood and perfection is necessary for salvation. The term *perfection* in this verse conveys the idea of completion or accomplishment or fulfillment.

There must be a completion or an accomplishment to that which a priest performs. There must be a certain finality to what he does. And in the Old Testament economy there was no such completion. In 10:4 we're told *For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*. And if perfection is going to be accomplished in such a way that we can gain eternal life and gain a home in heaven then sins must be taken away. And so we find ourselves in need of a priestly ministry that can accomplish that feat.

Now look with me at 7:19 *For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God*. The law, in this verse, I believe refers to the Old Testament sacrificial law. That law could make nothing perfect and that law, therefore, could not enable us to draw near to God but the bringing in of a better hope does enable us to draw near to God.

And what is that better hope? It's the hope of Christ and in particular it's the hope of Christ's priestly ministry. Because of the functions of his priestly ministry we can draw near to God. Because of the functions of his priestly ministry we can not only know salvation but we can know salvation to the uttermost. Because of the accomplishment of

his priestly ministry every barrier that stands between us and God has been removed and a perfect sacrifice offered by a perfect priest paves the way for perfect righteousness to be our portion. A perfect sacrifice has gained for us the necessary qualifications for heaven. And what are the qualifications for heaven? Sins must be expiated or removed and righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees must be our portion. These are the things, then, that must be accomplished by our high priest.

I hope you begin to see, therefore, the tremendous benefit to Christ functioning as our High Priest, functioning from the vantage point of a superior priesthood to the priesthood of Aaron. And I hope you begin to appreciate your need for Christ as your priest. This morning around the Lord's table I would like for us to remember:

The Superiority of the Priesthood of Christ

Would you think with me first of all on:

I. The Superior Power of Christ's Priesthood

Look with me at v. 27 where referring to Christ it says: *Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.* Underscore the phrase *for this he did once*. This is going to be a point of emphasis in the ensuing chapters.

- Heb 9:12 *Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.*
- Heb 9:26 *For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*
- Heb 9:28 *So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many...*

These verses speak to us of the finality of Christ's offering of himself. It took one sacrifice. And if you want to add to this category of verses a verse that speaks of the finality of the benefit of what Christ accomplished you can add Heb 10:10 *By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* Just as there is a finality to the sacrifice so there is a finality to the blessing gained by the sacrifice. We are sanctified by virtue of that sacrifice once for all.

The fact that Christ could accomplish so much with one sacrifice of himself testifies to the power of that sacrifice. And the power of Christ's sacrifice stands in stark contrast to the weakness and what is termed the unprofitableness of the sacrifices of the Levitical priests. Look at verse 18 *For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.* The reference is to the weakness and unprofitableness of all those animal sacrifices that were in effect in Old Testament times under the Mosaic economy.

Think for a moment on those animal sacrifices. They are revealed to us in the book of Leviticus when they were established under the Mosaic economy. There were burnt offerings that were to be offered morning and evening – twice a day, every day. There were sin offerings and trespass offerings and peace offerings that could be offered whenever an Israelite felt the need. And there were special occasions in which offerings would be made – on the Day of Atonement and for the Passover and the feast of Unleavened bread. I dare say that the number of sacrifices that were made by the Levitical priests would defy calculation. Who could possibly count the number of all those animal sacrifices? The fire on the altar was never to be extinguished and for good reason – there would be such perpetual need for continual sacrifices under that economy.

There were some special occasions, such as when the temple was built and dedicated in the days of Solomon, when, as we read in 2Chron. 7:4,5 *Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the LORD. And king Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep.* A couple of verses later it says 2Ch 7:7 *Moreover Solomon hallowed the middle of the court that was before the house of the LORD: for there he offered burnt offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings, because the brasen altar which Solomon had made was not able to receive the burnt offerings, and the meat offerings, and the fat.*

In a single day the number of sacrifices could hardly be calculated. Add to that day the number of sacrifices that had taken place in the generations before Solomon as well as the number of sacrifices from the generations that followed Solomon and I think you'll conclude that there were a large number of animal sacrifices made during the history of Israel.

And when you strive to get a handle on a number that defies calculation and then read again our text in v. 27 referring to Christ *for this he did once, when he offered up himself*, then you begin, I hope, to see the tremendous contrast between those animal sacrifices and Christ's once for all sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice, then, was superior in power. Christ's sacrifice could accomplish what all those animal sacrifices could not.

Those animal sacrifices could only point to the remission of sins – Christ's sacrifice could accomplish the remission of sins. Those animal sacrifice could symbolize the obtaining of redemption. Christ's sacrifice could accomplish the obtaining of redemption. The animal sacrifice could convey an impressive picture of the removal of God's wrath, Christ's sacrifice could, in fact, actually appease that wrath.

This is why we're called upon to remember the broken body and shed blood of Christ – that we may glory in the power of his atoning death and that we may appropriate anew and afresh the benefits of his atoning death. And when you know and appreciate the greatness of Christ's accomplishment then you'll also understand why the Protestant Reformers were so utterly repulsed by a doctrine coming out of Rome that would reduce the greatness of that accomplishment by suggesting that Christ's sacrifice needs to be offered again and again just like those Old Testament animal sacrifices and that the time around the Lord's

table represents the re-offering of that sacrifice. You talk about taking the superiority of Christ's priesthood being reduced to the inferior and ineffective order of the Levitical priests and that's what the church of Rome does, in effect.

It's for good reason that we read in our Confession of Faith in chp. 29, the chapter on the Lord's Supper in section 2 that *In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to His Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of Himself, by Himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same: so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass is most abominably injurious to Christ's one and only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of His elect.*

So we find in Christ's atonement a powerful offering – one that could appease the wrath of God against us – one that could prevail with God for us – one that could purchase us to God by virtue of the value of that one sacrifice. And I should note here that Christ's sacrifice is superior in power because it's superior in virtue. How is it, we may well ask, that one sacrifice could do what all those animal sacrifices could not do?

Notice what we read in v. 26 *For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.* Such a statement could only be made of Christ alone. He alone is holy, harmless, and undefiled and separate from sinners. This could not be said of the Levitical priests. They had to offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for the people.

And because the life of the flesh is in the blood, when Christ shed his blood he poured out his life in all its virtue as a sacrifice that was capable of obtaining redemption. You see how the value of his life relates to the value of his death? By his life he fulfilled all righteousness for us. And this not only supplied the righteousness that we lack in our lives but it also qualified him to be that one offering that could prevail with God for our salvation.

So we remember around the Lord's table the superior power and virtue of Christ's priestly ministry. Thank God that as our priest he offered himself once for our sins. But would you think with me next on:

II. The Durability of Christ's Priesthood

I've referred in previous studies to the bomb that Paul drops on the Hebrews in this chapter. That bomb is the notion that the Levitical priesthood had served its purpose and was now being rendered obsolete. Verse 12 *For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.* This is what the Hebrew Christians were having such a tough time grasping. *How can you say, Paul, they would have reasoned, that this religious ordinance that has been in force for so many centuries is now expired?*

And as we've noted in previous studies, this is why the unbelieving Jews hated Paul. It wasn't simply because he preached Christ to them but it was because he preached and taught that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament types which made those types no longer

necessary. The sacrifices, the temple, the Levitical priests – basically Paul was saying that their entire order of worship was all null and void on account of Christ. For that reason they wanted to kill Paul and would conspire against Paul.

But notice now, if you would, that in contrast to this old order which according to 8:13 was old and ready to vanish we now have the descriptions of Christ's priesthood given to us in this chapter as well as others. And the thing that the apostle refers to again and again in this section of Hebrews is that Christ is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Here is a new and superior order of priestly ministry that will never expire. Indeed this order of priestly ministry will outlive the very world in which we live. Recall that verse back in chp 1 which speaks of Christ as the Creator. The same statement in v. 11 that is applied to Christ's life could also be applied to his priestly ministry. Listen to what it says beginning in v. 10:

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.

And it is no stretch to apply this statement to Christ's priestly ministry by saying the old order of priests shall be changed but Christ is the same. They shall perish but Christ's ministry will remain. This point is emphasized in this 7th chapter:

Notice the words of verse 16 *Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life.* And in v. 25 the purpose of this endless life is stated for us – *Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

Here is a ministry, then, that unlike the old order of priests will never be interrupted by death and will never be rendered obsolete. The Levitical priests could only serve temporarily. In fact, if I recall it right they had to retire by the time they were 50 years old. The baton had to be handed to the next generation of priests and in due time they would have to pass the baton to those who followed them.

In contrast to this kind of ministry which must be handed down from generation to generation there stands out Christ's priestly ministry which is conducted in the power of an endless life and who ever lives to make intercession for his people. This certainly magnifies before us the superiority of Christ's priesthood doesn't it? Here is a priest who not only can prevail with God in his intercession but here is a priest whose plea will prevail throughout the ages.

It is because of this durable and all prevailing plea that the apostle can write in v. 25 that salvation will not only be applied to the people for whom this plea is made but salvation to the uttermost will be applied to them. I like the words of one commentator who notes: *He does not abandon the work midway; he does not begin a work which he is unable to finish. He can aid us as long as we need anything done for our salvation; he can save all who will entrust their salvation to his hands.*

Why do you suppose that Paul could write with confidence to the Philippians that he was *confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform [it] until the day of Jesus Christ*? It was because Paul knew that Christ ever lived to make intercession for them.

And why could Paul write to the Romans that *all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*? Paul knew this because he knew the power and durability of Christ's priestly work. Salvation would be their portion to the uttermost which means that salvation in its fullness and salvation in every detail would be the portion of those for whom Christ makes intercession.

And would you note with me from v. 24 that the durability of this ministry also carries with it the immutability of his ministry. *But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood*. You see how the two aspects of Christ's priestly ministry come together in this verse? His ministry endures forever and because it endures forever it will never change.

You need never fear, therefore, that God will change his mind toward you. You need never wonder whether or not the love of Christ will ever slacken. Fallible men can and do often change their minds and in this sin cursed world our affections may vary – but in the case of Christ we most gladly affirm that *this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood*.

And so you can fully expect that salvation in all its fullness and in all its soul transforming power will be applied to you. You will never be lacking in terms of cleansing or forgiveness. You will never be lacking in your spiritual progress. Your advances in sanctification may seem painstakingly slow and you may and indeed will know the grief of setbacks – but in the end you will advance, you must advance – for you to fail to advance would, in effect, amount to a denial of Christ's intercession for you.

Most gladly, then, do we remember that our high priest is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. We glory in a superior priesthood around the Lord's table today. We thank God for a priestly ministry that is governed by the power of an endless life. Most gladly do we call to mind what the bread brings to our remembrance – that Christ became a man in order that he might be our high priest.

And most gratefully do we call to mind what the cup bring to our remembrance – that our high priest has an all prevailing plea because his plea is grounded in the merits of his own shed blood. Most reverently and affectionately do we call to mind the power and the virtue of that once for all sacrifice that secured for us all that we need to bring us to heaven's shores.

And so let us affirm this morning and make it our prayer what the hymn writer has written: *Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood shall never lose its power, till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more*.