

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 18

Hebrews 7:11-19

The Guarantor of a Better Covenant

January 7, 2018

The Change in the Priesthood & the Law

vv. 11-12

i. A Change in the Priesthood

These first two verses of our text begin the argument represented by vv. 11-19. The author is presenting the very important theological point that the old priesthood could not accomplish the salvation to which it pointed. It was – in a real sense – a shadow of what was to come. In fact, the very fact that God revealed a new priesthood is a testimony that the old order was not perfect, but transitory.

Paul, in Galatians 3:18-29, argues that (zeroing in on v. 24) “the law was our guardian [NKJV “schoolmaster”] until Christ came.” This argument at least, is an indication that Paul understood, as one closely associated (cf. Phil. 3:3-6) with the OT priesthood and the Law, that it was never meant to carry humanity all the way to the end of God’s redemptive plans. To be fair, Paul (as Saul) never understood that until after Acts chapter 9.

Hebrews 7:11-12 echo the logical underlying truth of Galatians 3, by exposing the imperfection of the OT priesthood. The word translated “perfection” here (i.e., “the bringing of a thing to the completeness designed for it” – cf. Ezek. 29:11-19 – cf v. 12), is used to refer to salvation. Perfection or completion being the condition by which people are made to be acceptable to God (cf. MT 5:20,48).

This argument assumes that the Levitical priesthood and the law were forged together inseparably. Ray Stedman comments – in Richard D. Phillips’ commentary; “The priesthood and the tabernacle with its sacrifices were the means God employed to render the sinful people acceptable to himself. They constituted the shadow of Jesus in the Old Testament. Then the law was given with its sharp demands to awaken the people to their true condition so that they might avail themselves of the sacrifices...The law was a teacher to lead to Christ (represented in Israel by the tabernacle and its priesthood).”¹

But what was it about the OT priesthood that was imperfect? It is clear that it was ultimately inadequate – it didn’t fully and truly forgive sins or give open access to God, as Christ’s High Priesthood does (Heb. 4:14-16). It doesn’t transform people so they become righteous and it doesn’t restore the dominion of humanity over creation which was lost by Adam.

¹ Ray Stedman, cited in Richard D. Phillips, Hebrews, Reformed Expository Commentary; P & R Publishing, 2015, P. 233

Tom Schreiner says, “instead, the Levitical priesthood had an interim character and nature, so that it adumbrated² and prepared the way for a better priesthood, a Melchizedekian one.”³

There appear to have been 3 main problems with the old order; NOTE: these 3 points are by Philip Hughes, but my wording.

1. All those who served as priests (including the Aaronic high priests) were sinners & law-breakers themselves. This made it impossible for any of them to ever offer an adequate (efficacious) and perfect sacrifice. In fact, by way of example, the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, had to first offer sacrifice for his own sins before offering sacrifice for anyone else – cf. Lev. 16:3-6.
2. No unwilling or uncomprehending animal innocent though they were, was competent to serve as a substitutionary atonement for a human sinner. The sacrificial animal, duly consecrated, provided only temporary forgiveness (IOW – a shadow of true eschatological forgiveness). This is the reason for the virtually constant system of sacrifices, which, when you consider it, was a built-in testimony of the system’s ineffectiveness and imperfection. Notice Heb. 7:26,28; 9:11-14; 10:1-4.
3. OT priests died of necessity, their service effectively ended with the end of their life (Heb. 7:23). They were then replaced by (usually) their son, who then takes up the role as a priest until he too dies. The 2ndary problem with this 3rd point is that the new, upcoming generation of priests, although qualified by their ancestry, may not love God and may not even be a real believer.⁴ You need only look at Christ’s treatment under the priesthood in the Gospels to observe that a once useful contrivance of God had gone to seed. In the OT, Malachi (and not him alone – note Ezekiel) complains of a priesthood going through the motions, and no longer caring about the spirit of the law, only the outward letter of the law. Christ’s John 10 discourse on the “Good Shepherd” echoes the charge of Ezekiel 34 as He chastises the poor quality of shepherding by the Levites and Pharisees.

Because of all this, a change in the priesthood was an absolute necessity in order to provide an effective principal of justification by faith – as Paul mentions in Galatians 3:24-29. And in Ps. 110, David, through the Holy Spirit, provides an advance warning of a coming new order of priesthood relegated to the future, and it was in the coming Messiah that this priesthood would come to fruition – cf. Ps. 110:1-4. The author of Hebrews will expand and develop this theme through chapters 7 to 10. Listen to what Richard Phillips says:

“The Messiah, represented prior to the law by the figure of Melchizedek and identified under the law by David in Psalm 110, would establish a new and eternal priesthood. His priesthood is an eternal one, not merely or even essentially in terms of its unlimited duration, but in the character of its life. This priesthood rests upon and advances not merely the power of the outward commandment and ritual, but the inward power of eternal life – unquenchable life from heaven that is of God himself and last forever.

² “adumbrated” – definition – ‘foreshadowed’

³ Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 216

⁴ For a great example, consider the account of Eli’s sons in I Samuel 2 & 3. (Hophni & Phinehas)

Andrew Murray writes; “When God speaks to his Son, ‘Thou art a priest forever,’ it not only means that the priesthood will never cease, but it points to what is the root and cause of this; it roots in the life and strength of God.”⁵

Matthew 27:51 is a symbolic indicator of what would take place to the old order some 40 years later, in 70 AD when the Temple and most of Jerusalem were leveled by the Romans under General Titus. From that point in history on, Israel has had no access to their temple or to their sacrificial system – of which the Temple in Jerusalem – was an absolute necessity. As a result of the rise of Islam from the 600’s AD to the present, and especially the Crusades of 900’s to 1100’s, access to the location for a Temple for Judaism has been blocked. Thus, no viable religious system for Judaism exists any longer. In fact, as a result of Temple records lost in 70 AD (including family ancestries), the Jews, who still await their ‘Messiah’ can no longer legitimately identify or certify anyone who claims to be that Messiah!

ii. A Change in the Law

v. 12

The “change in the law” mentioned in v. 12, tightly tied to the change in the priesthood here, is at the very heart of the Gospel. It is this change in the law – this ‘heretical’ [to the Jews] shift from law to faith that caused the violent reaction to Christ’s apostles and new Christian converts that - in the minds of the Jewish leaders – were against God and flaunting a heresy, making an idol of One who impossibly [to them] claimed to be God! They saw this as a slap in the face to their beloved law-giver, Moses. Jesus dealt with this thinking for 3 years – cf. John 5:44-47 – to show them they entirely missed the point of Moses, and thus, had missed the point of the OT law.

The Jews’ hatred flared up throughout the NT, and was especially vehement against one of their own who had defected – Saul of Tarsus – note Acts 23:12-15. Even some converted Jews also became the nemesis of virtually every church plant as they attempted to convince converts to Christ that they must also accept circumcision in order to be saved, and to follow Jewish customs.

However, it is not as if the essence of the law has been destroyed. Christ claimed in Matt. 5:17-20: ¹⁷ *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* The full force of the Law, the underlying motivation to be obedient to it is found in Christ’s words in Matt. 22:34-40: ³⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.*

⁵ Richard D. Phillips, p. 235-236

³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Philip Hughes comments here;

“In accordance with the promises of the New Covenant the law ceases for the Christian to be an external instrument of condemnation and becomes an internal principle of the will of God which, through the gracious enabling of the Holy Spirit, re-born humanity delights to perform. Thus the change in the priesthood involves both a change in the law, in the sense that all regulations governing the old order are now superseded and set aside forever, and also a change in the Decalogue, in that under the new covenant which comes into operation together with the new priesthood the law is now written in the heart, so that through divine grace man is able to joyfully glorify God by performing His will which previously he had opposed. (see Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:9; 2 Cor. 3:3ff). In the order of Melchizedek both law and priesthood are still intimately bound up with each other, but now in a relationship of perfection and fulfillment.”⁶ (emphasis is mine)

Messiah, Descendent of Judah, Priestly Credentials? vv. 13-14

In v. 13, the word, “For” once again connects us to what has gone before. In this case, it connects with the change in the priesthood and the Law to “*the One of whom these things are spoken...*”. So this change in these two extremely important biblical concepts is about a person...a “one”. And this one did not have His credentials in the established legal requirements associated with the OT priesthood. He was not a descendent of the tribe of Aaron/Levi, those alone who had, exclusively (by law), to that point, served at the altar in either the Tabernacle or Temple.

Verse 14 – Jesus traces His lineage back, not to Levi, but to Judah (cf. Matt. 1:2-3). Interestingly, Philip Hughes points out that the verb translated “descended” here actually has a contrary meaning – it actually means “has arisen”. So though Jesus is not from Levi, this verb in the Greek points to a fulfillment of or an echo of Messianic prophecy; per Balaam in Num. 24:17 & Mal. 4:2. Although a risen star is not mentioned in Genesis 49 with Jacob’s pronouncement about his sons’ futures, vv. 8-12 are clearly messianic of the descendants of Judah. The assertion that Christ has arisen from Judah therefore has a messianic connotation.⁷ (cf. Luke 1:78).

A few verses down, in Heb. 7:17, the author connects back to Ps. 110:4 again (& also in v. 21, and back to 5:6). As previously mentioned, Ps. 110 has royal messianic overtones, showing that this new priesthood is also of royal nobility – Christ is both priest and king – a unity never seen legally accomplished in the OT. Jesus had not

⁶ Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 258

⁷ Ibid – Hughes, p. 259

come to reset the Levitical system but to supersede it with a 'better' priesthood, that of Melchizedek.

Also of great significance, stressed even more in the NT is the fact that Jesus descended from David. He is sometimes referred to as the "Son of David" (MT. 15:22; 21:19; MK 10:47f; JN 12:42); designated by Paul (Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8), and Jesus Himself argues over His ancestry to David with the Pharisees in MT. 22:41-46; not to mention numerous prophecies referring to this relationship, especially as it relates to Jesus' Millennial throne (II Sam. 7:8-16; LK 1:32-33).

The Authority of an Indestructible Life

vv. 15-17

The points made in the dialogue regarding the last 2 verses are further strengthened when we consider the reality that, in fact, another priest has arisen in "the likeness of Melchizedek". The nature of this "likeness" has already been pointed out in vv. 1-3, especially v. 3, where we are told of Melchizedek that *"he resembles the Son of God"*, and *"continues as a priest forever"*.

There'd be no point in saying this if the system still in operation when this epistle was written was effective and irreplaceable. In Christ, what was promised and foreshadowed (in type – Melchizedek) has come to fulfillment. In fact, this would be made even more clear about 5 or so years after this letter was written, when the Roman army would obliterate the Levitical priesthood along with the Temple in AD 70! A better order of priest was now here and thus, the old order was redundant. In Hebrews 8, the author will go on to include the supersession of the old covenant along with the old priesthood.

Notice in v. 16 that the basis of this new priest in the order of Melchizedek is, *"not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent"* – IOW – not because He descends from the right tribe (according to OT law) to be a priest, but because the scope and duration of Jesus' priesthood is determined by *"the power of an indestructible life"*. This is an inherent qualification according to Ps. 110:4, *"You are a priest forever"*, and is based on *"the Lord has sworn [an oath]"* – cf. Heb. 6:17-20.

Philip Hughes is again right on the mark when he writes:

"There is, however, no more than a likeness between Christ and Melchizedek, a likeness which is suggested by the mysterious silence of the Genesis narrative concerning the birth and death and the posterity of Melchizedek. Within this setting, the figure of Melchizedek is a semblance or a shadow, a signpost pointing to someone greater than himself. He is like a primeval John the Baptist who testifies in effect: "After me comes one who ranks before me" (JN 1:30). The reality foreshadowed by Melchizedek is Christ, the One who is forever, first, because he is the eternal Son, and second, because by his incarnation and sacrifice of himself he has become mankind's high priest, who by the power of his resurrection from the dead and the glory of his exaltation to the right hand of the majesty on high has redeemed and raised up with himself our fallen nature. He who died once for us now lives,

never again to die (Rom. 1:4; 6:9; I Cor. 15:20). The crown has followed the cross, and it is the power of an indestructible life which guarantees that he is indeed our priest forever.”⁸ Death cannot conquer Him – He has instead conquered it by rising from the dead to live forever. This quality distinguishes Jesus from every Levitical priest who ever lived. The citation here from Ps. 110:4 hones in on the phrase, “*a priest forever*”.

A Better Hope

vv. 18-19

These two verses cast a negative comment regarding the OT administration / regulations for the priesthood, and thus, the Law. It is said that it was “weak” and “useless” (relatively speaking of course), and so it has now been set aside.

Richard Phillips says:

“Our present passage advances the argument a step further, as the writer of Hebrews continues to explain the difference between the two administrations: “On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God” (Heb. 7:18-19). These verses say something negative about the old administration and something positive about the new one. This is not to say that the old covenant was wrong. In the flow of God’s redemptive history, it was necessary and good. The negative point that the writer of Hebrews makes is simply that as an administration of salvation, the law could not bring about what it sought. The goal of every priesthood is to draw people to God, but the old covenant could not do this. This was its weakness, and why it demanded another covenant to come.”⁹ (emphasis mine)

Let’s not set aside the main theme of Hebrews here. The author saw people in his ‘congregation’ who were on the verge of renouncing Christ, and wanting to go back their familiar, comfortable lives as Jews, because they expected the persecution they now experienced as Christians, would vanish or lessen for them. The author has opened up a lot of venues of illustration to demonstrate clearly Jesus’ superiority to angels, people, OT priests, Moses, etc. This now – this argument about a superior priesthood and royal High Priest, is his main argument, making up the heart of the book of Hebrews.

Writing in the ruins of ancient Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-32) wrote of the promise of a new covenant. How will the new covenant be superior to the old (Mosaic) one? The difference is not to be found in God’s grace, because the old covenant was established by God’s grace in the context of Exodus deliverance. The difference is found in the fact that the old covenant worked on the heart externally, by the Law. It never came with the power to enable the people to uphold their end of the covenant, by changing their hearts. This is obvious by the state of Israel’s priesthood (corrupt, legalistic, greedy, self-serving, etc. by the time Christ arrived. cf. LK 20:41-21:4).

⁸ Ibid, Hughes, p. 264

⁹ Ibid, Richard Phillips, p. 237

But with the new covenant comes regeneration – new hearts of flesh – Jer. 31:33-34 & cf. Ezek. 36:25-32. This idea was never put forth in the old covenant, and therefore it is described as weak and useless. It could never do what the new covenant does – it could only operate on the basis of warnings and threats. Paul, in II Cor. 3:1-18, picks up on this difference. Paul describes this as ‘*freedom*’ while the author of Hebrews calls it “*drawing near to God*.” Richard Phillips comments,

“This is our freedom as Christians – not to presume upon God’s grace through loose living or by flirting with sin, but the freedom to draw near to God by his Spirit. It is the freedom to fellowship with God himself, which was always the goal of the priesthood, but is accomplished only by the heavenly ministry of our great high priest, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. This is a much better way, a much better hope, than any Old Testament saint ever knew.”¹⁰

V. 19 – “*but on the other hand...*”. Because the book of Hebrews is not often taught in churches, since most concentrate on the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, there seems to be a real under-appreciation for the High Priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, since only Hebrews gives consideration to this important role of the Messiah. There are clues here and there in other NT books – such as John 17, and Rom. 5:9-10 (“*much more*”), but only here in Hebrews do we have an intensive study on this topic, showing us an all but overlooked aspect of our salvation. This ministry of Christ is ongoing, forever, not a past event like the Cross or the Resurrection, and is a key to our sanctification.

Many people think of Jesus as High Priest in the sense that He has merely fulfilled the ‘shadow’ of Aaron and the Levites. But “Christ is now a living high priest, offering us life and the power we need to receive salvation, and then helping us to press on in the faith. He sends the very life of God to renew us inwardly, so Paul could say, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (II Cor. 4:16). As we trust in Christ, the Spirit of God works to change our affections from the things of the world to those of heaven, from unforgiveness to the righteousness that pleases God.”¹¹

Where the Law made nothing perfect, through His life, Jesus gives us a better hope, giving us access to God Himself. Christ’s goal and desire – the end of His work is not only to justify us and forgive our sins, but to actually bring us to God (cf. I Pet. 3:18) through His Holy Spirit, who empowers us to stop sinning and instead to love God heart, soul, mind and strength. In a real sense, Christ the High Priest responds to our prayers with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Let’s wrap this lesson up with 2 excellent quotes. The first is from Tom Schreiner;

“Given its liabilities, the Levitical priesthood was annulled and a better and new hope has been introduced. The word, “better” captures the author’s intention: Jesus is “better” than angels (1:4); the readers have experienced “better things” (6:9); Melchizedek is “better” than Abraham (7:7); Jesus guarantees a “better covenant” (7:22; 8:26), which has

¹⁰ IBID, Richard Phillips, p. 239

¹¹ IBID, p. 24

“better promises” (8:6); he offered “better sacrifices” (9:23); the readers have a “better possession” (10:34); a “Better country” (11:16); await a “better resurrection” (11:35); OT saints will experience what is “better” and “perfect” only in fellowship with NT saints (11:40); Jesus’ blood speaks “better” than Abel’s (12:24). It is inconceivable, according to the author, that the readers would forsake what is better and cling to the law and the Levitical priesthood.”¹²

Finally, Hughes comments,

“By comparison...the hope of the old is far inferior to that of the new. The contrast is between the promise and the fulfillment, the shadow and the substance, the weak and the powerful, the transient and the permanent, the imperfect and the perfect. As chapter 11 will show, the saints of the OT were men and women of hope as well, indeed, because they were, men and women of faith, for by definition, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (11:1). But their hope concentrated itself on the expectation of the coming of him who, as the mediator of the new covenant and their “priest forever”, would at last take away the sin of the world; whereas we are privileged actually to live in the new age in which he who is our Melchizedek has superseded Levi and his order. Like them, we too are pilgrims, and in company with them we shall participate in the glorious and eternal consummation of Christ’s kingdom; but through him who has now come we enjoy that access into the presence of God himself which was not open to them when they were pilgrims on this earth. “The person who still holds to or wishes to restore the shadows of the law,” says Calvin, “not only obscures the glory of Christ but also deprives us of a tremendous blessing, in that he puts a distance between us and God, to approach whom freedom has been granted us by the Gospel.”¹³

¹² OP Cit, Schreiner, p. 226-227

¹³ OP Cit, Hughes, p. 266