

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 19 January 28, 2018

Hebrews 7:20-28

He Always Lives to Make Intercession for Us

Introduction

In our last lesson, we saw, secondarily, that as humans in a fallen world, we are all born with an active sin nature (Eph. 2:1-3; Ps. 51:1; Rom. 5:12...) and that we need a priest. From the viewpoint of our necessity for salvation, we have 2 main problems, (1) Sins we have committed in the past, and (2) the present and future – we are spiritually weak and laced with inward corruption. “This is not just the outward reality of sin but the inward problem, which is its source.”¹ We can make all sorts of outward changes – to our physical body, to our work experience and growth in knowledge, in our lifestyle, in our experiences in life in the realms of both joy and grief.”

But Richard Phillips rightly says we have an inability to change our own hearts;

“But when it comes to our hearts, to who we really are, to our attitudes and affections and character, we find that change is quite a bit harder. Indeed, it is beyond our grasp. We buy new outfits and advance to higher positions, we grow a bit older and learn a few life lessons, but from year to year we are basically the same person. When it comes to a real and substantial and lasting change of heart, within ourselves we simply lack the power and the resources.”²

This is the true picture of our lives before Christ saved us in grace, and in some ways, is a reminder that, should God release His hold on us, that’s where we’d be – back in a works based attempt at salvation. In a very meaningful song by Phil Hugh & David Hamilton (Were it Not for Grace), the lyrics say it all – especially the chorus;

“Were it not for grace,
I can tell you where I’d be,
Wandering down some pointless road to nowhere
With my salvation up to me.
I know how that would go – the battles I would face;
Forever running, but losing the race,
Were it not for grace.”

In this section of Hebrews, every verse of which is great, we find the remedy for our main problem in v. 25. Since Jesus’ High Priesthood is eternal / permanent, and because He lives, He constantly intercedes for His people and thus is able completely and perfectly save those who trust in Him.

¹ Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 246

² IBID, p. 244

God's Oath Makes the Difference

vv 20-22

In vv. 20-22, Psalm 110:4 again makes an appearance in the text (v. 21), as it plays a prominent role in this epistle, pointing to a messianic king who would save His people when He came. The oath that vv. 20-21 (ESV – “The Lord has sworn...”) mentions is from God. Psalm 110 was written by David, but is the message of the Holy Spirit. The fact that this passage in Psalm 110, written hundreds of years before Christ came, but referring to a relatively obscure passage in Genesis 14:17-24, hundreds of years before David was alive, contains an oath by God regarding His Son, Jesus the Christ and His everlasting priestly ministry, which did not begin until His death, resurrection and ascension, is an astonishing evidence of the cohesiveness and veracity of Scripture.

Back in Heb. 6:13-14, Hebrews points out another oath made by God – this one regarding the promise of blessing to Abraham. This was an oath not because God needed to make an oath in order to be believed, but in order to assure us (His people) that He will do as He has promised – note Heb. 6:19 which sums up the result of God's oath / promise.

Now, here in chapter 7, His oath regards His Messiah – v. 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,’”* citing, as already mentioned, Ps. 110:4. Consider the interesting point that both oaths (6:13-14 & 7:21) have to do with Abraham as well, relating to the priest-king who blessed him, and to the Messiah who would be the seed / the vehicle of that blessing!

Richard Phillips points out –

“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. This is precisely the point made in verse 22: “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.” It is by means of his priesthood that God's promises are kept.”³

It is not as if the author is making the suggestion that the Levitical priesthood was not God's will or design – it was, and it served its purpose for sure; but his emphasis is on its built-in obsolescence. It was designed to be superseded and left behind when God's timing was right – once it had served His purpose for it.

“The divine oath verifies the absolute reliability of the priesthood of Christ, upon which the hopes of the Christian community are anchored. The achievement of its purpose is assured.”⁴

³ R. Phillips, p. 247

⁴ William L. Lane, Hebrews 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 48A, Word, 1991, p. 187

In v. 21b, “[the Lord] will not change his mind.”...This Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ will endure forever. There is no going back on this priesthood, because it will never become obsolete and is not a shadow for something else coming along after it. So reverting back to the OT priesthood is neither helpful, prescribed or possible. In fact, soon after this epistle was written, the Romans in 70 AD permanently assured that it was no longer there to go back to. This oath of God will never be revoked.

In what sense then (v. 22) is Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant, and what exactly is a guarantor? “The Greek word translated “guarantor” here is the only time the word is used in the NT. The word is ‘*engyos*’, and it was used in ancient legal documents in the sense of “one who gives security”. The ‘*engyos*’ offered his goods or himself as security to ensure what was promised.”⁵ Therefore, as long as Jesus lives, the covenant of our salvation is secured by Him. Compare some points Jesus Himself made: JN 10:27-30; JN 6:37,40,44 & 8:24.

Noah was given a type of ‘*engyos*’ – God’s promise not to destroy the world ever again with a flood, sealed by the security (symbol, seal) of a rainbow (Gen. 9:13). In Jeremiah 31:35-36, God seals His promise to Israel this way.

In the case of this passage in Hebrews, a salient point is made by Richard Phillips again;

“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. This is precisely the point made in verse 22: “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.” It is by means of his priesthood that God’s promises are kept.”⁶

It is the power behind God’s oath and the power of Jesus’ indestructible life (v. 16) that gives credence to this contrast between the New Covenant in Christ and the Old Covenant in Moses. The oath certifies that the Melchizedekian priesthood will never come to an end. Jesus is the guarantor, the surety of this better covenant in which sins are truly and forever finally forgiven.

Our Permanent High Priest

vv. 23-24

There were, over the many generations of Israel, some good priests, for example, Zadok who ministered in David’s time, and there were also evil men who were priests, who used their office for personal gain, for greed and debauchery: eg., I Samuel 2:12-34; 3:12-4:11 –Hophni & Phinehas; Caiaphas and Annas – contemporaries of Jesus. There were others, unnamed in Scripture who led people to ‘worship’ without heart or love for God in Malachi’s time, Jeremiah’s time, Ezekiel’s time, etc. The enemy of every OT / NT priest was time. They all died within their own generation, and were

⁵ Phillips, p. 246

⁶ IBID, p. 247

not able to continue to hold office or influence people. Also, they were never really able to lead anyone to God by the Law. Scores and scores of priests came and went, dying in succession – none of them conquered death and that was not the design of the OT priesthood anyway. Note v. 23 – *“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office.”*

“But” (v. 24) – now the contrast, the solution comes. In the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, our reliance is on a priest who pleases God in all things and who also lives forever and thus CAN always guarantee our relationship with God through Him. There is no prescription for another priest to take His office because *“He always lives”*, and has the power of an indestructible life. He is both divine and human, a fact that can never be separated, and we have the record already in Hebrews (2:10,17-18; 4:13-16; 5:8-10; 6:19-20) that He is perfectly qualified to serve in this capacity. What did Jesus tell His disciples in the upper room on the night He was betrayed? Note John 14:19 – *“Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.”*

Saved To the Uttermost

v. 25

“Consequently” – IOW – based on all the author has been saying about Jesus as guarantor of the New Covenant, about God’s oath and promise of Jesus in Ps. 110:4, and Jesus as a permanent High Priest – for all these reasons and more, *“...He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*

It is an interesting connection that this verse says that those He saves (*“them”*) are those who *“draw near to God through him.”*, while John 6:44 says – *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”* This appears to be a reversal of order, but as has been pointed out before, Christ’s intention is to bring us to God the Father – cf. I Pet. 1:21; 4:11 & 3:18. The elect are drawn to Christ, are saved (*“He who comes to me I will in no wise cast out”*, Jesus said), kept, sanctified by the Spirit, and through Christ, are brought to God. There is a fantastic unity within the Trinity, and the interaction between the Father & Christ and the Holy Spirit is considered by Thomas Goodwin;

“Let us consider both the person interceding, namely, Christ; and the person with whom Christ intercedes for this favour, which is God; the one the Son, the other the Father; and so the greatness of Christ with God, and the graciousness of God to Christ, together with the oneness of wills and unity of affections in them both: so that Christ will be sure to ask nothing which his Father will deny, and his Father will not deny anything which he shall ask.”⁷

Can there be anyone who cannot see the love, grace and mercy being displayed in this verse? The office of High Priest, which Jesus holds forever is a position of grace, whereas His office of King is one of power, dominion and authority, and His office of

⁷ Thomas Goodwin, cited in Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ, Banner of Truth*, 2016, p. 177

Prophet is one of knowledge and wisdom. Note Heb. 4:14-16, and the expansive description of grace unmeasured!

God's people are quite ready to say that "Christ died for me". Some also recognise that His life of obedience, sinlessness and righteousness was lived so it could be imputed to us once He saves us. How many are also aware that He also lives in heaven now for us? He continually lives to make intercession for us – for His church. As He intercedes for us there, bringing our name and situation before the Father, he also sends His Holy Spirit to us to keep us. No doubt, His angels are also sent on missions to help us.

Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843), a Scottish pastor famously said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference; He is praying for me."⁸

Mark Jones also writes about Christ's permanent intercession on our behalf;

"Since Christ always lives, he always intercedes. There is no Christian alive who has not had Christ mention his or her name to the Father. Indeed, if you are a Christian, it is precisely because the Son presented your name to his, and now your, Father. He could perhaps have sacrificed millions of worlds of innocent men and angels, but even these sacrifices would pale in comparison with the worth of Christ's bloody sacrifice. Christians must know that all Christ had to do was raise his hands before the Father and their name appeared, which was enough to bring them into possession of eternal life. Charitie Bancroft expressed this idea well in the hymn, 'Before the Throne of God Above';

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high Priest whose Name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in Heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart."⁹

The phrase, "He is able..." in the first part of v. 25 is not intended to say "He is able, but may not necessarily do it". No, instead, the message is; "Since Christ lives forever he is able to do this, and since He is our perfect High priest, he does indeed do it."¹⁰

But what is meant by intercession? It means to plead for someone – i.e., the work of a priest. Anthony Hoekema points out;

"This pleading is an aspect of Christ's work as priest. Having brought his perfect sacrifice on the cross while he was on earth, and having ascended to heaven, Christ now continually makes intercession for his people on the basis of that sacrifice (see also Rom. 8:34). What

⁸ Cited in Mark Jones, p. 183

⁹ Mark Jones, p. 179

¹⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 243

is included in Christ's intercession? Christ pleads with the Father that the sins of his people may be forgiven (1 JN 2:1). He also prays that his people may be progressively sanctified (JN 17:17), that the work they do for God may be accepted by the Father (1 Pet. 2:5), and that they may all at last be with him eternally so that they will be able to see his glory (John 17:24).

Surely Jesus' prayers for his people will be heard. Did he not once say, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me" (JN 11:41-42)? Is it now possible that those for whom our faithful high priest continually intercedes, on the basis of his all-sufficient sacrifice, will yet fail to attain to heavenly glory? The answer must be a resounding No!"¹¹

Further to that, Joel. R. Beeke talks about the fact that Jesus did not just purchase salvation;

"Christ did not merely purchase salvation and then leave the application of that salvation to man's free will, for then He might have suffered and died for nothing, which was unthinkable to [Anthony] Burgess, in light of the dishonor it would cast upon God. Christ intercedes for everyone for whom He died. Believers will certainly receive the blessings for which He paid so dearly (Rom. 8:32)."¹²

More Than That?

Rom. 5:9-11; 8:34

Although this ministry of Christ is really only described in detail in Hebrews, there are very brief glimpses of it elsewhere in the NT. Where it is mentioned, especially in Romans by Paul, it is accompanied by descriptive language which magnifies its importance to our salvation.

Notice together Romans 5:9-11. Three times in these verses, the phrase "*much more*" or "*more than that*" is found in the text. In v. 9, it is used to enhance the fact that we were saved as sinners, and being justified by his blood, "*much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God*". Therefore our salvation has more value to us than it might at first appear, and this magnifies what we are saved from.

Then, in v. 10, the verse I want to focus on specifically, because this "much more" appears to be saying that we were reconciled to God while we were His enemies – so the sinning now takes on more sinister colours, especially when we are reminded that He saved us by the death of His Son. So, the verse says, "If while we were enemies..." He saved us at that cost, then that's incredible on its own, but look at the last part of this verse, "much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."! What?!

This is not referring to His incarnate life while He was on earth, as valuable that sinless, righteous, obedient life is on our behalf over the course of 33 years. No. This is [recall the word "now" in v. 10) His life at God's right hand, in heaven, as our Great

¹¹ Hoekema, p. 243

¹² Joel R. Beeke & Brian G. Najapfour (eds), *taking Hold of God*, Reformation Heritage, 2011, p. 89

High Priest! This ministry He now attends is ongoing, forever, indestructible, and it is the key to much more than our justification, as valuable as that is. Why? Because it's ongoing, and it's forever – it is the key to our sanctification and our perseverance. This is why Hebrews 7:25 says *“He saves to the uttermost.”* Can you imagine that a true believer could ever “fall away” or be lost when our lifelong care is in the hands of a God who gave up His Son for us, and that same Son now intercedes for us in heaven? No way!

In the interest of time, we will only read v. 11, to see that it completes the praise for God, because of what He has done on our behalf. Then, note one more passage in Romans 8:32-34. Do you see the *“more than that”* here? Again, making the same exact point that Romans 5:10 does that the *“more”* is directly related to His intercession for His people. Then, in that context, read vv. 35-39. Nothing can overtake us that has not first passed through the hands of our Great High Priest! Praise God for that.

Once For All

vv. 26-28

The author of Hebrews has been building this case throughout chapter 7, and now we arrive at his summary of what he has been revealing in these last 3 verses.

Verse 26: *“For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.”* The NIV translates part of this as, *“Such a high priest meets our need.”* What the author is saying is that His person and His work is perfectly suited to deal with our predicaments and thus, is able to save us to the uttermost – hence the word “For”. He is the perfect Saviour.

Richard Phillips again comments, citing John Owen,

“Unholy sinners stand in need of a holy priest and a holy sacrifice. What we do not have in ourselves we must have in him, or we will not be accepted by the holy God, who has such pure eyes that he cannot look on sin. Such a high priest is the Lord Christ.”¹³

Revel in the 5 things said about our Jesus in v. 26:

He is – holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. The superiority of Christ's priesthood is evident from His qualifications.

Philip Hughes organizes the first 3 of these this way;

- i) Holy – pertaining to God
- ii) Innocent (blameless) – pertaining to other people
- iii) Unstained (pure) – pertaining to Himself¹⁴

In what sense is Jesus separated from sinners? He underwent and overcame every sort of temptation while on earth as a human – resisting even direct attempts by

¹³ Phillips, p. 255

¹⁴ Philip Hughes, Hebrews, p. 278

Satan himself to trip Him up. He emerged at the end perfectly sinless. The importance of this cannot be overstressed, because this is vital for us. We need a sinless substitute to stand in our place at God's judgment bar, and that is who we have.

John Owen again comments (cited by Richard Phillips);

“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. He did not live apart from everyone in a desert. He spoke with tax collectors and prostitutes, and the hypocritical Pharisees rebuked him for this. Being set apart from sinners declares what Christ is, his state and condition. He is holy and undefiled...He was separate from sin in its nature, causes, and effects. He had to be like this for our benefit. He became the middle person between God and sinners and had to be separate from those sinners in the thing he stood in their place for.”¹⁵

In v. 27 – we see that because Jesus is without sin of any kind, His priesthood does not have to rely on daily sacrifices, first for Himself, and then for His people, as those within the Levitical priesthood had to do. Instead, this verse declares that “*He did this once for all when he offered up himself.*”

There is an implication here (perhaps an indictment?) that the OT sacrifices offered up never really atoned for sins. This is bolstered later on in Heb. 9:12 & 10:4. But probably, even the shortcomings of the human priests is in sight here. The writer has already pointed out their mortality (7:23) but now he points to the fact that they were sinners as well. They were required by Mosaic law to offer sacrifices for their own sins – cf. Lev. 9:7 & 16:6.

In Jesus' case, since He is perfectly sinless, he could offer Himself (as our substitutionary sacrifice) “*once for all*” – a sacrifice that definitively and completely dealt with sin so that no further sacrifice was needed – hence, “*It is finished!*” Unlike other priests, He did not sacrifice an animal, and also, unlike them, he was both priest and victim offered in sacrifice. (cf. JN 10:15-18; 12:27)

Whereas the Mosaic law appointed men (v. 28) “*in their weakness*” (which has already been adequately explained), now God's oath (Ps. 110:4), coming well after the law, appoints – notice – not a priest, or king, or High Priest, but “a Son”, a Son who has been “made perfect”.

The term or title “Son” has been a critical element from the start of this book, because of His superiority over angels, Moses, and so on, so this oath “*You are a priest forever...*” was only given to One unique Person – Jesus Christ. He was “*made perfect*”, which reminds us of previously examined passages like Heb. 5:7-9; 2:10,17. His incarnate life demonstrated that He was 100% obedient to His Father, 100% sinless, and “*made like his brothers*”, and so He is eminently qualified to be our perfect effectual sacrifice, and High Priest.

¹⁵ Phillips, citing John Owen, p. 256

Tom Schreiner gets the last word:

“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.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 240