

JESUS: PERFECT HIGH PRIEST FOREVER

Hebrews 7:1-28

Key Verse: 7:25

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

To this point, the author has introduced Jesus as a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17), our apostle and high priest (3:1), and our great high priest who can empathize with our weaknesses (4:14-15). He especially mentioned that Jesus is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (5:6), and he had much to say about this in particular. But he realized that Hebrew believers no longer tried to understand this. They remained as spiritual infants. They only wanted to suck on milk bottles and avoided solid food. So the author strongly warned them and greatly encouraged them in order to help them understand Jesus' high priesthood more deeply. In chapter 7, the author emphasizes that Jesus is high priest forever and that he is also a perfect high priest. In order to explain this, he quoted Psalm 110 once again to show that Jesus became a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron (1-19). He also explained that Jesus' high priesthood was permanently established by an oath from God and on the basis that he lives forever (20-25). Finally, he tells that Jesus is a perfect high priest based on his character and position, and the perfect sacrifice (26-28).

Why is it so important to realize that Jesus is perfect high priest forever? It is because we need such a high priest. Since Adam's fall, there has been a huge gap between the holy God and sinful mankind. Mankind was cut off from the source of life and wandered restlessly on the earth, suffering from guilt and shame, fear and anxiety. The root of people's unhappiness is not lack of money, but lack of God's life in their souls. Coming to God is the only solution. So people have tried to come to God in many ways, but end up worshipping idols and never reach the presence of God. In his great mercy, God provided a way through the sacrificial system in the Law of Moses. At the heart of this system was the high priest, who was the only mediator between God and people. But this high priest was imperfect and temporary. He was just a shadow of the one to come; Jesus is the reality. Now we can draw near to God and have fellowship with him through Jesus. That is why we need Jesus. Let's learn how Jesus became our perfect high priest forever.

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First, Jesus is high priest forever like Melchizedek (1-19). In order to explain the significance of Jesus becoming high priest “in the order of Melchizedek,” the author taught who Melchizedek was. The character Melchizedek is not familiar to us like Abraham, Moses and David. His name appears only in Genesis 14, Psalm 110, and here in Hebrews. Genesis 14 is historical (1-10), while Psalm 110 applies the spiritual meaning to Christ’s priesthood (11-19). On the basis of these two references to Melchizedek, the author developed the theme of the superiority of Jesus’ high priesthood.

Verses 1-3 explain the person of this mysterious man Melchizedek. He held two offices: king of Salem and priest of God Most High (1). He was a priest-king, and so is Christ. When Abraham returned from the defeat of the kings in order to rescue Lot, all of a sudden, Melchizedek appeared and blessed him by God Most High who had given him victory (Gen 14:19-20). Then Abraham gave him a tenth of everything, recognizing that Melchizedek was priest of God Most High and that his victory had come from God. Many people wonder who Melchizedek was and various explanations have been given, including that he was a Canaanite king who genuinely feared God, an angelic being, or even a *Christophany* (pre-incarnate Christ in human form). But the words “resembling the Son of God” indicate that he was not the Son of God, but like the Son of God. In what ways was he like the Son of God? First of all, he shares some attributes of the Son of God. His name means “king of righteousness,” and “King of Salem” means “king of peace.” Righteousness and peace are attributes of the Son of God. Isaiah 9:6-7 describe the characteristics of Christ’s kingdom as justice, righteousness and peace, which always go together. If there is justice and righteousness, there is peace (Isa 32:17a). When we are ruled by Christ’s righteousness, there is true peace. Secondly, he remains a priest forever. The words “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life,” do not mean that he is divine. Rather, they mean that as far as Scripture is concerned, we cannot trace his human origin. This was intentional to present him as a type of Christ. For Aaronic priests, genealogy was vitally important in order to establish the legitimacy of their priesthood. So they carefully recorded their genealogy in great detail, as we find in Chronicles. In contrast, Melchizedek has no genealogical record, and is not confined to the Levitical priesthood, but remains a priest forever (3).

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In verses 4-10, the author explains that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, and by extension, greater than Levi, a descendant of Abraham. To the Hebrew people, it was shocking that anyone would be considered greater than Abraham. Abraham was the father of the nation Israel, the most honored man in their history. Spiritually speaking, he became the father of many nations. It was not easy to accept that someone was greater than Abraham. So the author supports his claim with facts. The first fact is that Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of his plunder, honoring him as the priest of God Most High (4). The author took an illustration from the Law regarding tithes (5). The Hebrews knew that the one receiving the tithe was honored by the one giving the tithe. Melchizedek, who was not in the Levitical line of priests, collected a tenth from Abraham (6a). When Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek, figuratively speaking, Levi also gave a tenth to Melchizedek (9-10). The second fact is that Melchizedek blessed Abraham. Verse 7 says, **“...without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.”** A third fact is that the Levites died, but Melchizedek is declared to be living (8). Based on the facts, Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, and by extension, greater than Levi. The point is that Jesus’ priesthood is superior to Levi’s because it was in the line of Melchizedek.

In verses 11-19, the author explained that Jesus’ priesthood is based on God’s appointment through his word in Psalm 110:4 and develops the implications of this appointment. In verse 11 the author points out that the Levitical priesthood, even though it was established by God’s Law, was imperfect. So, another priesthood was needed. As the priesthood changed, the law also changed (12). The law here is not the Ten Commandments, but the sacrificial system. The law required that a priest be from the tribe of Levi. The Christ had to come from the tribe of Judah. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, not of Levi. There was nothing in the law that allowed a priest from the tribe of Judah (13-14). On what basis, then, was Jesus appointed as high priest? It was on the basis of the power of an indestructible life, like Melchizedek (15-16). What is it that destroys life? It is the power of death. No matter how strong and healthy someone is, he can die at any moment, and will surely die someday. No one could defeat the power of death. But Jesus did. Acts 2:24 says, **“But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”** Jesus has the power of an indestructible life and can give life to those who trust in him. On this basis Jesus became our high priest.

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Moreover, Jesus' appointment came from God directly. Verse 17 says, **“For it is declared: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”** This declaration announced the abrogation of the Levitical law and its replacement with a better priesthood. As God established the law, so God can change the law according to his will and purpose. If God changes the law, who can raise an objection? When God declared the Christ as high priest forever, he brought an end to the old system and opened a new way for people to come to God. The former regulation was set aside because it was weak and useless. Generally, the law made nothing perfect (19a). The law helps us to recognize sin as sin, but it has no power to save us from sin, or from death. The function of the law is to make us realize that we are sinners who desperately need help to draw near to God. The law leads us to Christ who can truly save us from sin and give us new life. Jesus is the **“better hope”** by which we draw near to God (19b). The Greek word translated **“better”** appears twelve times in this letter. It means superior to another in excellence or quality. Jesus has a better name than angels. In Christ we have a better hope and a better covenant with better promises. Christ is a better sacrifice. So a **“better hope”** indicates that our sin problem is really solved and we can draw near to God freely at any time and in any place.

It was time for the Hebrew believers to let go of the old system and hold on to Christ alone. They did not need to go to the Jerusalem temple and offer animal sacrifices. They did not need an earthly high priest to mediate for them. They only needed Jesus to draw near to God. Only Jesus? To the Hebrew believers this was like a revolution. For about 1,500 years they had been observing the Levitical law and had offered millions of sacrifices. It had become part of their identity. When they heard, “the former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless,” they were shocked and said, “Are you crazy? It is unthinkable. You are blaspheming!” Though they believed in Jesus, they lacked confidence that Jesus was the only way to God. So they habitually wanted to depend on the old system. They thought that Jesus was good, but Judaism was also necessary. What is more, they would not be persecuted if they followed Jewish customs. We can understand them. Even though we believe in Jesus, it is hard to let go of old habits, customs and life patterns that are deeply ingrained. So we depend on Jesus plus something else. When difficulty comes, we can easily shrink back and drift away from Jesus. The main reason is a lack of confidence that Jesus is the only way to

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God who fully satisfies our souls. We know this conceptually. But practically, when a problem arises, we may depend on something else, not Jesus fully. So instead of coming to God, we may follow our old religious habits or fall into emotional dependency on others, or indulge in entertainment and games, ungodly music, alcohol, drugs, pornography or shopping. However, when we come to God through Jesus, God surely meets our need and satisfies our souls. Let's come to God through Jesus in our time of need.

Second, Jesus' perfect and superior priesthood (20-28). In order to help us come to him through Jesus with confidence, God established Jesus' priesthood with an oath. No such oath was associated with the Levitical priesthood (20). When God established Jesus as a high priest, he said to him: **"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind; 'You are a priest forever'"** (21). The author again quotes Psalm 110:4. In verse 17, he expounded on the word "forever." Here, he expounds on the word "sworn" which refers to God's oath. God's oath is rooted in his supreme authority, almighty power and utterly reliable integrity. Isaiah 14:24 says, **"The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.'"** Usually people swear an oath by something greater than themselves—such as God or heaven. But when God swears an oath, he has no one greater to swear by. So he swears by himself. In the Old Testament the word for "swear" appears 185 times. A majority of the time it refers to people swearing an oath. But there are some significant events in which God swore by himself. The first event was in Genesis 22:16 when God confirmed his promise to bless Abraham and his descendants forever, in response to Abraham's obedience. A second event was when God swore that the exodus generation would never enter the Promised Land, in response to their disobedience (Nu 14:20-23; 32:10-11). The author of Hebrews mentions both of these oaths in this letter. He contrasts them in such a way to show that God gives assurance through his oath to those who trust and obey him, but has no obligation to those who are unbelieving and disobedient. Now in verse 21, the author quotes another of God's oaths given to plant assurance in his people. God established our high priest Jesus with an oath to give us confidence. Verse 22 says, **"Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant."** A guarantor is a person of sufficient means who offers his belongings, freedom, or often his life as an assurance that another person will pay their debt. It is similar to a parent co-signing on a student loan. A covenant is an agreement between two parties.

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But this covenant is not an agreement between equals; it is God's one-sided promise of salvation. Because it is supported by God's oath, it cannot be changed. Those who come to God can be certain of their salvation. Our salvation is not guaranteed by our works, but by God's oath with Jesus as the guarantor.

Though Jesus is such a wonderful guarantor, if he only helped us temporarily like the Aaronic priests, we would still have a problem. The Aaronic priests were all limited by the power of death (23). None of them could enjoy the priestly dignity perpetually. Aaron served his people as high priest throughout the wilderness wanderings. But on the day of his death his son Eliezer took his place. When Eliezer died, his son Phinehas took his place. In this way, according to Josephus, from Aaron to the fall of the temple in A.D. 70, 83 high priests officiated.¹ Some were better than others, but they were all limited because of death. But Jesus defeated the power of death and lives forever, so he has a permanent priesthood (24). What can he do for us? Let's read verse 25. **“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”** The words **“he is able to save”** indicate that he has the power to save us from our sins, death and the devil. The salvation he gives is not just a temporary deliverance, but a complete, ongoing salvation. The word “completely” means fully in extent and forever in time. So Jesus is able to save his people fully and completely. After finishing his salvation work on earth completely, he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God and continues to intercede for us. Apostle Paul described his ministry of intercession in Romans 8:33-34, saying, **“Who shall bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”** Whenever we fail or make a mistake or commit sin, the devil uses this to accuse us before God night and day (Rev 12:10), saying: “You're no good. How can you be a child of God? Are you a shepherd or missionary?” When we hear these accusations, we lose spirit and fall into self-condemnation. We are helpless. But Jesus understands and bears all our weaknesses and defends us before the throne of God. He earnestly intercedes for us and our Father listens to him, not the devil. Because Jesus is mighty to defend us, all of the

¹ Bruce, F.F., (1990). *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., p 172.

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devil's accusations fall to the ground; they are completely nullified. God accepts us as his children just as we are and comforts us and strengthens us through Jesus' intercession.

Such a high priest truly meets our needs in three ways: he is sinless, exalted above the heavens, and a perfect sacrifice. When he came into the world and took on human flesh, he was without sin. He lived among sinners, welcomed sinners, ate with sinners, and became known as the friend of sinners; yet he is set apart from sinners in his purity and holiness (26). Now he is exalted above the heavens and sits at the right hand of the Majesty. Unlike other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for our sins once for all when he offered himself (27). The essential difference between Jesus and other high priests is that they are all men, who are weak, while he is the Son of God, who has been made perfect forever (28). Other high priests were appointed by the law, but Jesus by God's oath.

As beings made in the image of God, our souls long for what is perfect and eternal. This is why we never feel fully satisfied with the perishing and imperfect things of this world. God sent Jesus into this world to be our perfect high priest forever. Now we can come to God who is perfect and eternal. When we come to God through Jesus, we are fully satisfied. We enjoy heaven while living in this world. We need only Jesus; not Jesus plus something or someone else. Let's come to Jesus, our perfect high priest forever, who can truly meet our need.