

SESSION NINETEEN

**THE SON'S PRIESTLY MINISTRY
SUPERIOR TO THE LEVITICAL PRIESTHOOD**
Heb 7:11-28

I. ORIENTATION

In Heb 7:1-10, Melchizedek was introduced as a foundation for presenting the Melchizedekian priesthood to which our Lord Jesus belongs. In addition to the witness of Ps 110:4 that Christ belongs to the order of Melchizedek, a careful reflection upon the introduction of Melchizedek in Gen 14:18-20 shows that there are some rather striking parallels between Christ and Melchizedek that confirm the association.

The remainder of the chapter in 7:11-28 continues to highlight ways in which Christ's priestly ministry (of the order of Melchizedek) is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The structure of the remainder of the chapter is difficult to ascertain. Ellingworth suggests that 7:11-19 should be seen as a unit in light of what he regards as an inclusio:

Verse 11	τελείωσις	νενομοθέτηται
Verse 19	ἔτελείωσεν	νόμος

Hence, for Ellingworth the chapter falls into three sections: 1-10, 11-19, and 20-28. The problem with this proposal is that the break between verses 19 and 20 is not easy to justify on thematic grounds. Perhaps it would be better to address the smaller individual units and postpone judgment about the macrostructure of the chapter.

II. TEMPORARY CHARACTER OF THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD (7:11-14)

The Levitical priesthood was instituted at the time of the inauguration of the Old Covenant, i.e., in the time of Moses when the Hebrews came out of Egypt (ca. 1446 BC). Psalm 110, which announced that Messiah would be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, was written by David, and thus would be dated sometime around 1000 BC. For the author of Hebrews, this chronological factor has significant implications for the relationship between these distinct priesthoods. There would be no need for announcing a different priesthood unless the first *priestly system* was due to be replaced. Furthermore, if the order of Melchizedek is replacing the Levitical order, then the Melchizedekian priesthood must be superior to the Levitical priesthood (otherwise, why should the first be replaced at all?). Note that this is a similar argument to what the author had used in Hebrews 3-4 regarding the "rest" mentioned in Psalm 95. There must

have been a *greater rest* than that brought about by Joshua, because David (writing many years later) used the word "Today" and made mention of forfeiting "rest."

This announcement of a new priesthood in David's time also means that the Old Covenant itself is giving way to another arrangement. The Levitical priesthood is an inherent part of the Old Covenant (a package deal!). There can be no change in the priesthood, unless there is a major change in the covenant arrangement itself that legitimizes it. That this is so, is further demanded by the fact that one of the fundamental requirements for priesthood is being radically altered. Under the Old Covenant, the high priests had to be in the line of Aaron. Ps 110, on the other hand, is establishing a priest from the line of Judah (though not specifically mentioned, it is clear that this psalm has the Messiah in view, and it is clear from other passages that Messiah was from the line of Judah). Such a radical shift could not take place apart from a major change in the covenantal arrangement established by God.

The mere mention of a different priestly arrangement in David's time through Ps 110 signals that a new and different covenant must be *in the works*. Regardless of the time when the replacement covenant might be instituted (a factor which was not revealed), Ps 110:4 was a clear signal that God must have something better in mind. If through Ps 110, God was revealing that a new covenant was coming, then the Levitical priesthood and Old Covenant must be temporary. Yet a *temporary covenant* is inferior!

III. THE INDESTRUCTIBLE LIFE OF CHRIST AS A SUPERIOR PRIESTLY QUALIFICATION (7:15-17)

The previous section (7:11-14) was concerned with the *timing* of the announcement in Ps 110 in comparison with the Levitical priesthood. In this next section, the author of Hebrews will make a further argument for the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood.

Under the Old Covenant, the primary requirement for priests was to be born from the tribe of Levi, and for High Priests to specifically be in the line of Aaron. How long they lived or held their office was not an issue. In contrast, the priestly arrangement of the new order required someone who could be priest *forever*. One's descent was not the emphasis, but an *unending life* was! This is clear from Ps 110:4 which said, "Thou art a priest forever." That one word "forever" makes all the difference. Only a person with an indestructible life could fulfill that requirement, and obviously he would be superior to any high priest of the Levitical priesthood.

Hence, the Melchizedekian priesthood with a superior requirement must be a superior priesthood, and the covenant upon which it is based must be superior to the Old Covenant on which the Levitical priesthood was based.

IV. CONCLUSION STATED: THE LEVITICAL ORDER IS INFERIOR IN COMPARISON WITH THE NEW PRIESTHOOD (7:18-19)

In these two verses, the author does not put forward a new argument for the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood, but rather highlights the conclusion that all this is coming to. The

Levitical priesthood is being replaced, and this must imply that a better priesthood is intended. But a better priesthood implies that people will have a better hope for "drawing near" (i.e., having an approach) to God. Furthermore, it must mean that the Old Covenant on which the Levitical priesthood was based had an inherent problem (weakness and uselessness).

V. THE "OATH" WHICH MAKES THE NEW PRIESTHOOD SUPERIOR (7:20-22)

In vs 7:20, the author puts forward a new argument for the superiority of the *coming priesthood*, namely, that the priestly promise in Ps 110:4 was announced with an oath:

"The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind,

"Thou art a priest forever."

Why is an oath needed from God in announcing this new priestly arrangement? Obviously, an oath is not needed. God's word is assurance enough, but the fact that God went an extra step by including an oath makes the matter all that more assured. This is a similar argument to what was used in Heb 6:13ff. in which God made the promises to Abraham all the more certain by virtue of an oath.

The Levitical priesthood was not established by oath. In contrast, the Melchizedekian priesthood of Messiah Jesus was. Hence, the latter is certain to supersede the former, and is thus all the more superior. In addition, if the New Covenant contains a superior priesthood in comparison to the Old Covenant, then the New Covenant is a "better covenant."

The author concludes by saying that "Jesus is the guarantee (ἔγγυος) of a better covenant. The word translated "guarantee" is the Greek word ἔγγυος, which only occurs here in the NT. However, it does occur 3x in the LXX (2 Macc 10:28; Sir 29:15,16). In those cases, the word is used of a pledge or surety given for something, i.e., something given as an *assurance* that a promise will be kept. Jesus is our *assurance* (the pledge money!) that the New Covenant is indeed a better covenant. We can confidently trust in this, and have no fear of putting our hope in the promises of the New Covenant. For the original audience, they need have no fear of abandoning the Old Covenant to embrace the New Covenant.

VI. THE IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS' UNENDING LIFE: HE CAN SAVE COMPLETELY (7:23-25)

In 7:15-17, the author had called attention to the word "forever" in the promise of Ps 110:4. In contrast to the Levitical priests who had short-lived ministries because of death, Jesus has an eternal ministry because He lives *forever*. This was an argument in itself for the superiority of the New Covenant. The first High Priest was Aaron, but he was replaced by his son Eleazar upon his death (Num 20:25-29). Eleazar in turn died and was replaced by his son Phinehas (Josh 24:33). According to Josephus (*Ant.* 20.227), eighty-three high priests officiated from Aaron to the fall of the 2nd temple in AD 70. The new priesthood, in contrast, does not have this problem, because Jesus will always be the High Priest.

In 7:25, the author points out a significant implication arising out of Jesus' unending priesthood:

"Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

ἴθην καὶ σώζειν εἰς τὸ παντελὲς δύναται τοὺς προσερχομένους δι' αὐτοῦ τῷ θεῷ, πάντοτε ζῶν εἰς τὸ ἐντυγχάνειν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν.

SALVATION FROM THE PENALTY OF SIN?

What exactly does the author mean that Jesus is able to "save forever"? Is he talking about Christ's saving work from judgment and death on the behalf of sinners? Does this mean that Christ is *keeping them saved* through His intercessory ministry? The answer to these questions must be an emphatic "no"! Rather, the author has something else in mind.

Notice that this is a "complex sentence" consisting of a main clause and a dependent clause:

Main clause - "He is able to save" (σώζειν . . . δύναται)

Dependent clause - "since He lives to make intercession" (ζῶν εἰς τὸ ἐντυγχάνειν)

The word "since" is not explicitly in the Greek text but is based on the syntax of the participle ζῶν. This is properly understood as a *circumstantial causal* participle (so most translations). The point is that the *saving* in view is based on the intercession of Christ. Theologically, however, our salvation from the penalty of sin is not based on Christ's intercession. Rather, it is based completely upon the atoning work of Jesus Christ upon the cross. If one were to interpret Heb 7:25 as meaning *personal salvation from sin*, then he would in effect be saying that salvation from sin is based on Christ's work on the cross plus Christ's ministry of intercession. Some have not considered this point carefully enough, and have mistakenly assumed that the verb "to save" means salvation from the penalty of sin (that a Christian receives at new birth). Philip E. Hughes, for instance, states:

Most important of all, the truth that he who is our Mediator and High Priest "continues for ever" carries with it the inescapable consequence (*consequently*) that *he is able for all time* and in all completeness to *save those who*, putting their whole trust in his priestly offering of himself on their behalf, *draw near to God through him* (cf. v. 19 above; 4:16; 10:22).¹

When Hughes includes the statement "putting their whole trust in his priestly offering of himself on their behalf," it is clear that he is thinking in terms of personal salvation from sin (i.e., conversion).

To draw the conclusion that Hughes does, however, is to rob the saving work of Christ of its glory. At the cross, Jesus Christ completely and absolutely did everything necessary to take care of my sin problem. Colossians 2:13-14 states,

"And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

When it comes to the matter of taking care of my sin problem before God and granting justification, nothing can be added to the saving work of Christ on the cross, not even His intercessory ministry. With this clarification, we are left with only one satisfactory conclusion:

¹Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 269.

the *saving* in view in Heb 7:25 must refer to something other than personal salvation from the penalty of sin.

SALVATION IN HEBREWS

In light of our studies in Hebrews thus far, it should not be too surprising that the word "save" (Gk σώζω) might mean something other than *save from the penalty of sin*. The verb itself only occurs one other time in Hebrews, namely 5:7, where it was used in the sense of "rescue" with Christ as the object in view: "He offered up both prayers and supplications . . . to the One able to save Him from death." Obviously, salvation from the penalty of sin was not the meaning there.

The noun occurs several times in the book (1:14; 2:3,10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28; and 11:7). It is doubtful if any of these instances is speaking of *salvation from the penalty of sin*. This is particularly true of Heb 1:14 and 9:28, where an eschatological salvation is in view . . . a future salvation connected with the Second Coming of Christ in which believers have the opportunity to share in the future dominion and rule of God's creation *jointly* with Jesus Christ.

SUPPORT OF A "SALVATION" THAT IS FUTURE ORIENTED

Thus far, I have suggested two reasons that should make us question the meaning of σώζω as referring to salvation from the penalty of sin: (1) the causal clause which follows and connects the *saving ministry* with Christ's intercession; and (2) the usage of the terms *save* and *salvation* in Hebrews. Now I would like to point out two other observations that shed light upon the intended meaning of σώζω.

First, the object of this *saving ministry* are "those who draw near to God through Him." The word used for "draw near" is προσερχομένουσ (from προσέρχομαι). This word is used 7x in Hebrews (4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 10:22; 11:6; 12:18,22). In Heb 4:16, for instance, the author had admonished his Christian audience, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." The *drawing near* was not for salvation, but as a resource of help in light of "our weaknesses" (4:15). We could call this a "post-conversion" activity. The word προσέρχομαι is used in a similar way in Heb 10:22 where the "brethren" (10:19) are urged "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (and in vs 23 they were to "hold fast the confession"). Consequently, the *saving ministry* of Christ is for those Christians who were taking advantage of Jesus' priestly role, and who wanted to "draw near" to God (i.e., receive his grace and mercy for their Christian pilgrimage). Those who desire to "draw near" must do so through faith, and the ones who do will be rewarded. This is precisely the meaning that προσέρχομαι has in Heb 11:6,

"And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God [lit. "draws near to God"] must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."

A second observation is to be made in regard to the word "forever" in the clause "He is able to save forever." The word "forever" is the translation given by the *NASB*, although the *NIV* has "completely" (the *NASB* puts "completely" as an alternative in the footnote). In the Greek text, this is a prepositional phrase εἰς τὸ παντελές, from the adjective παντελής meaning "complete, perfect, absolute." This only occurs one other time in the NT (Lk 13:11), although it occurs 6x in the LXX. Interestingly, the case in Lk 13:11 uses the same phrase εἰς τὸ παντελές. In the

Lukan passage, the phrase is used of a woman with an infirmity that prevented her from being able to straighten her back. The *NASB* translates, "she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all." The point is that she could not straighten up *completely*. In this case, we should observe that this phrase does not have a *temporal* force ("forever").

Of the six instances where παντελής is used in the LXX (2 Macc 3:12, 31; 7:40; 11:1; 14:46; 3 Macc 7:16), it never has a temporal nuance. It normally means "complete, whole." It may be worth mentioning that the word "salvation" is used in conjunction with παντελής in the case of 3 Macc 7:16. In that situation, the words were used in reference to a military confrontation where the welfare of a city was at stake. Someone who is said to "have enjoyed a full deliverance (παντελή σωτηρίας), departed from the city."

According to Liddell & Scott's classical Greek lexicon, the phrase εἰς τὸ παντελές is functionally equivalent to the adverb παντελῶς, meaning "completely." Ellingworth (391) also notes that the phrase is used as a synonym of παντελῶς by Philo, Josephus, and Aelian.

There is very little warrant for taking εἰς τὸ παντελές in a temporal sense "forever" in Heb 7:25, although this is supported by the Vulgate, Syriac, Coptic versions, Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin and some translations (e.g., *NASB*, *NRSV*, *TEV*). Lane takes something of a mediating position. He translates as "he is able to save absolutely" (1:174), but later comments, "The choice of the term 'absolutely' (so *NEB*) is meant to imply that both ideas are contained and expressed by the same phrase" (1:176). Those who prefer the translation "forever" are usually influenced by the context, namely Heb 7:24 which states that Christ holds His priesthood "forever" (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). Ellingworth, for example, opts to take εἰς τὸ παντελές in a temporal way rather than "qualitative." He states (391, brackets mine):

The derivation of the word, and its use in unmarked contexts such as 3 Macc. 7:16, suggests (1) [the qualitative sense], but the strong temporal element in the Hebrews context (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα *passim* . . . more strongly suggests (2) [the temporal sense]. Just as Christ's priesthood is permanent, so is the salvation which he makes possible.

Hence, for Ellingworth, the salvation is in regard to the penalty for sin. Ellingworth seems rather inconsistent, however, for he turns right around and says of προσέρχομαι that "it is used in Hebrews of the approach to God in worship; 4:16, τῷ θρόνῳ τῆς χάριτος " (391-92).

I would disagree with Ellingworth that the word "forever" in 7:24 ought to influence our understanding of εἰς τὸ παντελές as a temporal nuance in 7:25. If "save" means something in regard to our future eschatological salvation at Christ's return, and προσέρχομαι is a drawing near by Christians through faith for needed grace and mercy in their Christian pilgrimage, then Hodges is probably correct when he concludes that the sentence means that Christ is "able to carry us completely through to salvation." Lane (1:189) has come to the very same conclusion:

In Hebrews 'salvation' is presented as a future eschatological inheritance (1:4; 5:9; 9:28). There is, nevertheless, a definite sense in which the community has already begun to participate in salvation as a result of the obedience and sacrificial death of Christ and his subsequent exaltation (cf. 2:3-4; 6:4-5,9). The present tense of σώζειν reflects the current experience of the community and suggests that Jesus' support is available at each critical moment. He has a sustained interest in the welfare of his people.

Lane goes on to say after discussing the connection with intercession:

The direct result of his intercessory activity is the sustaining of the people and the securing of all that is necessary to the eschatological salvation mentioned in the previous clause" (1:190).

Hence, Christ's priestly ministry has two primary roles:

- (1) He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins to pay the penalty for us (Hebrews 9–10), and
- (2) He presently intercedes for the New Covenant believers, and is able to bring us safely and victoriously on to the future salvation if we draw near to God through Him.

The latter element is the one that Heb 7:25 has in view. MacLeod, in his excellent article on the present work of Christ, concurs. He states,

In Hebrews the noun "salvation" (σωτηρία, 1:14) and the verb "save" (σώζω, 7:25) do not mean the initial cleansing that occurs at conversion. They mean something eschatological, something yet to be inherited (1:14). This final deliverance into the promised blessings of the kingdom will occur at Christ's second advent (9:28). Because Christ always lives to make intercession, He is able to bring His people "through all hindrances to that honor and glory designed for them (2:7, 10)."²

VII. CHRIST IS A SUPERIOR PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS SUPERIOR CHARACTER (7:26-28)

The final argument for the superiority of the new priesthood with Christ as High Priest is that this priest is perfectly holy and righteous. The Levitical priests, in contrast, obviously were not, for they had to offer up sacrifices for their own sins before they could offer up sacrifices for others. Furthermore, the Levitical priests had to offer up sacrifices daily, in contrast to Christ who did it once for all.

Verse 28 forms a fitting conclusion to the preceding verses of chapter 7. Lane observes three crucial antitheses in this verse:

- (1) the basis of the Levitical institution was ὁ νόμος, "the law," but that of the new priesthood was ὁ λόγος τῆς ὀρκωμοσίας, "the word of the sworn oath," which was promulgated subsequent to the law; (2) the old priesthood consisted of ἄνθρωποι, "men," but the new priest is υἱός, "the Son"; (3) the old priests are characterized as ἔχοντες ἀσθένειαν, "affected by weakness," but the new priest as τετελειωμένον, "has been made perfect."

The words "made perfect" (τετελειωμένον) in vs 28 remind us of all that was entailed in preparing Jesus to be a high priest of His people. This would include both His lifetime of sufferings (note 2:10; 5:9) as well as His final act of suffering upon the cross. The former prepares Him to help His brethren who struggle in their sufferings, while the latter enables Him to present His blood on their behalf to provide forgiveness of sins.

² David J. MacLeod, "The Present Work of Christ in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:590 (Apr-Jun 1991): 195-96.