

A Better Priest and a Better Covenant

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[0 : 00] So open your Bibles then please at chapter 7. The key word is better.

That's what we need to keep in mind.! Really we ought to do chapter 7 verse 1 right through to the end of chapter 10, or at least halfway through chapter 10, 10, 18, because it's really all one coherent and very carefully constructed argument.

And we recall that the writer is writing to those who knew the Mosaic law, and we're not in their position, but still, we may still have the same temptation to turn away to that which we can see and touch.

That's what we think of as real, isn't it? Things that we can get our hands on and see with our eyes. And yet, the writer wants us to persuade us that that is not what is truly real.

What is truly real is in heaven. And, of course, it was Moses who led the people out of captivity. And surely, perhaps, this new gospel of Jesus Christ that the apostles were preaching was just some newfangled religion, perhaps, riding on the coattails of Judaism.

[1 : 25] And if that's the case, why not be like the Athenians and always wait for the next new thing to come? We could, perhaps, have a go at Islam or perhaps enlightenment humanism, whatever it is that floats your boat, as they say.

But, no, the writer to Hebrews wants to persuade us and make it absolutely clear that the new covenant found in Jesus Christ is superior in every way to the old.

And he does so in at least these three ways or four ways, you might say. He wants to persuade us that we have a better priest.

A priest, of course, is someone who intercedes for us with God. It is a better covenant and represents a better temple. And then he's going to go on to persuade us that we have a better sacrifice than lots of dead sheep and cows.

That we have a much better sacrifice than that. But we're going to look at that next time, a better sacrifice. So, I want to look this evening in these two chapters about the better priest and the better covenant and temple.

[2 : 40] And the writer reminds us this is all founded on better promises. 7, chapter 6, 8, chapter 6. And just in case you're wondering, I'll just point out that here the writer doesn't actually use the term temple.

Instead, he talks of the tabernacle or the sanctuary. The tabernacle, I think, literally means a tent. But basically, it was the tent of meeting, a kind of portable temple that was set up at the time of Moses, before the people were firmly established in the promised land.

The fact that he doesn't actually mention Solomon's temple has suggested to some scholars that perhaps this was written, in fact, after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

But we can't be clear about that. But either way, he's talking about the temple, although he actually talks about the tabernacle here, that Moses portable temple, as one might put it.

But the writer has a problem here, because all these things are interrelated. You can't just pick one out and talk about that.

[3 : 50] Because as he points out himself in chapter 7, verse 12, a change in the priesthood requires a change in the law, necessarily. Because the priesthood was established by the law of Moses, and so if you change the priesthood, you have to change the law.

And they're all interrelated. And he presents his argument, therefore. There are really four lines of argument here. And he presents these four lines of arguments.

First of all, he wants to persuade us that, in fact, the new covenant is really more fundamental, in one sense even older, than the Mosaic covenant.

And he wants us to persuade us that the old covenant foreshadows the new. And he wants to persuade us that the old covenant predicts the new.

So it's not really some newfangled idea. It was built in to the old covenant, that it would be refurbished, as one might put it. And above all, he wants to persuade us that the new covenant overcomes the limitations of the old.

[5 : 09] But because all these particulars of the covenant are all interrelated, so the lines of argument are intertwined. And that's perhaps what makes the argument so dense. But I don't think we can avoid that.

We have to come to terms with that, because they are all interrelated. And as I say, we're going to look today at the end of chapter 6, just that last verse, through to 8.13.

And we'll look next week at the better sacrifice, from chapter 9, verse 14, through to chapter 10. So first of all, what I've done, as you'll see, I hope you can read that at the bottom.

It's a bit small. But I've put those four lines of argument down the bottom there, so you can refer to them, as we go through. And you can see, if you have those four things in your mind, you can see how the writer, sometimes he pulls on one thread, and sometimes he pulls on another.

But those are the four points that he wants to establish. And first of all, then, from 6, chapter 20, through to 8, verse 1, he wants to persuade us that we have a better priest.

[6 : 27] And he starts, therefore, by reminding us that there are problems with the Old Testament Levitical priesthood. So, well, sorry, he doesn't start with that, but he does that. In verse 23, chapter 7, he reminds us that they had an inconvenient habit of dying, so they couldn't carry on their work forever.

In verse 27, he reminds us that they were sinners themselves, which obviously was a handicap. And in verse 28, he says that they were weak.

They were weak like us. They were men like us. And because of that, and worst of all, verses 18 and 19, really, they couldn't bring us near to God.

But still, this was the priesthood that was set up by Moses, that God had commanded. So maybe that's as good as it gets. After all, anyone can bitch about the clergy, can't they?

And maybe these priests were appointed by God, so perhaps we just have to get over it and let them do the best they can. But no, the writer wants to tell us that, actually, we can do better than that, and that God has done better than that.

[7 : 46] And he reminds us that even in the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament, a better priest is promised. And he's quoting there, actually, from Psalm 110, verse 4, quoting in verse 17 of Hebrews 7, you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

Notice the forever there. There's a solution to that nasty problem of the priest dying off and not being able to continue in the role.

But how does this work? And who on earth is this Melchizedek character anyway? Well, we actually meet Melchizedek in Genesis 14, and only there, but I wouldn't bother to look it up because Hebrews 7, 1 to 4, tells us pretty much everything we know about him anyway.

We're told that he was a priest of God Most High, that his name means King of Righteousness. He was King of Jerusalem, Salem, the city of peace, but also, of course, the city of David.

And he blessed Abraham after a military victory. And that's pretty much all we know about him. We don't know anything about his ancestry.

[9 : 09] We've got no life story. We don't know anything about his death or his descendants. And yet Abraham considered him worthy of great honor. And as the writer points out in verses 4 to 9, in a sense, even the Levites honored Melchizedek through their ancestor Abraham.

So what do we make of this parable, if you like, this type, as we might say, of Jesus Christ, Melchizedek? Now, I don't think the writer's literally telling us that he had no parents or no end of life, because if he meant that, he would still be around today.

And anyway, he's only pointing us to the Lord Jesus. He's not the Lord Jesus himself. But the point is, I think, that his priesthood didn't depend on any of these things.

To be a Levitical priest, you had to have the right ancestors. You had to be descended from Aaron. But Melchizedek was not. He just sort of pops up in history, almost like a perfectly formed jewel.

There's no indication who cut and polished it. And as that, he foreshadows the priesthood of Christ. So we're told that the promised priest is in the order of Melchizedek.

[10:23] He's the king of righteousness. He's the king of Jerusalem. So in a sense, in the line of Judah and David, rather than Aaron and Levi, as he points out in verse 14, although, of course, he wasn't literally a descendant of David, but he was king of Jerusalem, the city of David.

And Jesus, as the writer points out in verse 14, is descended from Judah and from David. And in fact, if you look at Psalm 110 that the writer is quoting for, this is a psalm for the king.

A psalm addressed to the king that says you're a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. In the Old Testament, of course, there was a separation between the kings and the priests.

The priests were descendants of Aaron and Levi, but the kings were descendants of Judah and David.

But Melchizedek is both king and priest, and so there has to be a change in the law, as the writer reminds us. The Levitical priests inherited the role.

[11:33] They had to as their parents died. But in the lack of a successor to Melchizedek, prefigures the resurrection of Jesus. And the psalm reminds us that this priest comes with a promise from God reinforced by an oath.

The writer says there wasn't actually an oath where the Levitical priesthood was established. But the psalmist says, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you're a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

So who is this true priest forever? Well, not actually Melchizedek, of course, but Jesus. So the priesthood of Jesus gets over all the limitations of the Levitical priests.

Let's just read Hebrews 7, 23 to 28 again. Now there have been many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office.

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them.

[12:55] Such a high priest meets our need. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day by day. First for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak. But the oath which came after the law appointed the Son who has been made perfect forever.

So the priesthood of Jesus overcomes all those limitations of the Levitical priests. He doesn't die off. He's a priest forever. And he's not weak and sinful himself.

But he is pure and blameless and holy and exalted above the heavens. And yet also he intercedes for us because he has been on earth and understands us as it were.

[14:01] So where does this priest serve? Shouldn't he therefore be in Jerusalem at the temple then? But this priest cannot serve in the earthly temple even if it were still standing.

And I say it's possible by then it had been destroyed anyway. But even if the temple were still standing, this priest could not serve there because he's passed into the heavens.

So this new covenant also requires a new temple. And the old one, only the high priest could meet directly with the Lord.

And so he might be saying to his Jewish readers, don't worry if the temple is destroyed because that was only a copy anyway. It wasn't the original. And the writer reminds us that Moses, and later picked up by Solomon, were given very precise instructions as to how the temple was to be constructed and what its dimensions were.

Now why was this? I mean if you were going to build a church, you would, church building or a temple, surely the best thing is to look around and hire the best architects you can and get the best design building that you can get.

[15:23] This would be the sensible thing to do. But that's not the way it was. Now why is that? It's because we are reminded that in fact Moses' tabernacle or Solomon's temple was not the true thing at all.

In fact it's just a model, a copy of the true temple. It had to represent on earth something that actually existed in heaven.

And we'll look at more of this next week. But I mean if you're making a model railway, you don't make it up as you go along. It has to look like the real thing. And this is the point that the writer is making here.

He's saying that the temple on earth, the tabernacle, was in fact a model of the temple in heaven. Now one might wonder a little about what that means.

Does the temple in heaven have exact dimensions? We can't perhaps, might be putting things a bit far, but it was certainly supposed to tell us something. And of course the holy of holies was a perfect cube.

[16:28] And as we've been reminded, the city of God in Revelation is described as a perfect cube. So somehow these dimensions of the temple on earth point us to the true throne of grace in heaven.

So as we could put it that way, this high priest, he doesn't work in the earthly branch office. He's at corporate HQ.

He walks the very corridors of power. He sits down with the CEO himself at the very right hand of God. I'm reminded that a new priest, a new requires a change in the law because the Mosaic law established the Levitical priesthood and the temple.

So if we have a new priest and a different temple and a different location, we have to have a change in the law. But this was to be expected. Just as the Old Testament predicted a new priesthood, so it also predicted a new covenant, a new agreement between God and his people. And so the writer quotes this famous prophecy of Jeremiah just before the Jews were taken into exile. I think I will read it.

[17:56] I've got time to do so. I'll read the Hebrews one. Don't bother to look back to Jeremiah, but I will read it again as it's quoted in Hebrews.

Hebrews. But this was a prophecy of Jeremiah and he prophesied that just before the Jews were going to go off into exile.

And his prophecy basically, he says, well you will come back from exile, but one has to say that the old covenant really has failed because it's been broken. And so he, and the writer of Hebrews then quotes from Jeremiah 31 to 34 and it's almost the exact quote here.

It's quoting actually from the septuagint, the Greek translation, but it's, this is the direct quote from Jeremiah 31. So Hebrews 8 verse 8.

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they did not remain faithful to my covenant and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.

[19:11] This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother saying know the Lord because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more.

We were thinking this morning, I don't think that means we don't have teachers in the new covenant, but I think what it means is that the law is not something external anymore. It's something that's written not on tablets of stone as of course the Ten Commandments were written, but instead on the hearts of God's people and in the minds of God's people.

It's based not on external regulations and teaching in that sense, but rather on a direct heart knowledge of God illuminated by the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit opens the word to us. priest. So, we've seen how the writer presents to us the new priest, but really the old priest, the priest after the order of Melchizedek, the true priest, the true high priest, and the one who overcomes all the limitations of the Old Testament priests.

[20:47] And he's a priest of a new covenant, a relationship with God not written on tablets of stone, but written instead in men's hearts and minds.

And he serves, as I say, not at the earthly branch office a long way from headquarters, but rather he serves at corporate HQ itself at the very throne of grace in heaven.

So, a simple question, complicated argument, but it leaves us with a simple question. Do we stick with the gospel of Jesus Christ, or look for some alternative way to get access to God?

Well, says the writer, there is no plan B. This is God's final offer, based on his own promise, and it's guaranteed, not by some email that, you know, might have been intercepted or faked, but it's guaranteed by the testimony of the Son himself, the Lord Jesus Christ testified on earth and now

testifies in heaven and stands before the throne of grace.

So, there is no better way to God, not the old Jewish covenant, not any new fangled scheme that we might come out with. The way to God is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 17] So, let's sing hymn number 503, which reminds us again, Charity Bancroft's great hymn, Victorian hymn, very Victorian in style, but one of great, I think, great importance and it really points us to the throne of God above and the one, the Lord Jesus Christ, who stands there.

So, let's sing number 503. 503.