

A New Order of Priesthood

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[0 : 00] This morning we're looking at Hebrews chapter 7 verses 20 through 28. If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, that is page 1004. We are over halfway through February.

That means that spring is only one month and four days away. Even though that may seem hard to believe, it will come. Some of faith is believing what we don't currently see, but what we have reliable reasons to know will occur in the future.

Hebrews 7, starting at verse 20. And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath.

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. This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number.

[1 : 16] Because they were prevented by death from continuing in office. But he holds his priesthood permanently. Because he continues forever.

Consequently, 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.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest. Holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily. First for his own sins, and then for those of the people. Since he did this once for all, when he offered himself.

For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests. But the word of the oath, which came later than the law, Appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever.

[2 : 24] I've never particularly enjoyed going to the doctor. But there have been a couple of times in my life when I am very thankful that I did. One of those times was just about a year ago, last February.

I'd been in bed for two and a half days with a fever and stomach pain. It felt sort of like the flu, but I wasn't throwing up. And it just felt different. I felt like it wasn't something I had had quite ever the same before.

So I called the doctor's office on a Thursday morning. Got the last appointment on a Thursday afternoon. Long story short, I was diagnosed with possible appendicitis. I was sent to the hospital that night.

A CAT scan revealed my appendix had actually ruptured. And if your appendix ruptures and you don't get any medical treatment, you could possibly die. So it's quite serious.

The next day, Friday and Saturday, February 8 and 9, I think, of last year, was Blizzard Nemo. Which, if you were in New Haven last year, you certainly remember that.

[3 : 23] New Haven received three feet of snow in 24 hours, and the city was basically shut down for five days. So I watched the snow come down from my hospital bed on the fifth floor of St. Raphael's Hospital.

While my wife, Jane, and our two young children, Nathan and Grace, were confined in our house for three days because our street wasn't plowed. And there was no way to get out. Now, looking back, I'm thankful for a lot of things.

Throughout the whole process, I was well taken care of by the doctors and hospital staff and nurses of various kinds. But I'm also thankful that I made it. And that I made it to the doctors that Thursday afternoon, because if I didn't go then, then I might not have made it before the blizzard began.

And then who knows what I would have done with a ruptured appendix for three days in a blizzard. Once I left, thankfully, most of the bill was covered by our health insurance.

Without that, we would still be in debt. Now, when you face real problems that you can't fix yourself, it makes a big difference whether or not you are covered, as we say.

[4 : 28] If you have distressing physical symptoms and you don't know what's causing them, or you do know what's causing them and you know it's pretty serious, in our society, it makes a big difference if you're covered by health insurance.

If you're covered by a good insurance policy, you feel the freedom to go see a doctor, pursue a diagnosis, and if necessary, get the treatment you need. If you're not, it's possible that you might be tempted to deny the problem or delay getting treatment, until, at least in my case, it might have been too late.

But the same is true, not only when we face problems that are bigger than ourselves, but also when we face a mission that is bigger than ourselves. For example, if you want to start a medical practice to help all the rest of us when we get sick.

Or the same example could apply if you're wanting to open a restaurant, or revitalize a troubled neighborhood, or rebuild a troubled marriage, or train for the Olympics.

Any mission that is bigger than you can sustain by yourself, you need to have resources outside yourself. You need to have someone who's going to stand behind you and cover you, as you go forward in your mission.

[5 : 44] Somebody who's maybe going to loan you some money, so you can rent a building, and buy equipment, and hire staff, and advertise in the community, and defend yourself against malpractice suits, and all the other things that doctors have to consider.

If you're covered with the resources and the support that you need, on an ongoing basis, not only financially, but also personally, it makes all the difference.

If you aren't covered, if you don't have what you need, you'll tend to be either crippled by anxious pessimism, or blinded by naive optimism. Nothing's going to go wrong.

Ever. But if you are covered, if you know that someone is standing behind you, going before you, protecting you from the dangers that you see, as well as the dangers that you can't see, you can go forward with freedom and confidence in your mission.

Now, what this morning's passage is telling us, is that in our most difficult problems, and in our most important missions, there is one person who can cover us, like no one else.

[6 : 49] At the heart of this passage is verse 25, which says, consequently, he, Jesus, is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, because he always lives to make intercession for them.

In other words, if you approach God through Jesus, you are covered, completely and forever, to the uttermost, without qualifications or limitations or exclusions.

Now, as we look into this verse, and this passage as a whole, we'll see three things. First, why do we need to be covered? Second, why Jesus is able to cover us, and third, how he covers us continually.

So first, why we need to be covered by Jesus. Now, the assumption of this passage is that we need to be covered. That every one of us is facing great spiritual dangers that we cannot defend ourselves against.

Problems that we cannot fix on our own. Verse 25 says, Jesus is able to save us. And it presents that as good news, but that only makes sense if there's actually something that we need to be saved from.

[8 : 06] You know, if you told me today that I need to spend the next month of my life in the hospital, being treated by doctors, my immediate reaction would be annoyance. I don't want to spend the next month of my life in the hospital.

I want to be home with my family, and here at the church, and out in the community, and free to do what I want to do. But if you told me, and you really knew, that I needed surgery tomorrow to save my life, and the doctors could do it tomorrow, but I'd have to stay in the hospital recovering for a month, then I would gladly do it.

I'd embrace every single day that I was in the hospital as a precious gift, and I would live the rest of my life knowing that I had been rescued.

You see, it's basically the same way with the Christian faith. If you believe that you're basically okay, and you don't need any outside help, Christianity will feel like an annoying imposition.

Right? Like the new healthcare reform law feels to a person if you don't have any interest in buying health insurance. You feel like, I'm perfectly fine without it. I don't need it.

[9 : 16] Well, why is there this law? Right? It feels constricting and has all these rules with penalties attached that infringe upon your freedom. And Christianity will feel the same way.

Or at best, Christianity will be an interesting enrichment activity, a hobby to fill your time until you find something better to do on Sunday mornings. But you know, according to the Bible, every one of us is desperately in need of spiritual help.

even if we don't realize it. The prophet Jeremiah said, the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. In other words, we're infected with a deadly virus.

But one of the effects of this virus is to make us numb so that we don't recognize its symptoms. And so especially when our circumstances are going well, we may feel very self-sufficient.

We might not feel a great need for God. But our present feelings and our self-assessments are not always a reliable indicator of our spiritual condition.

[10 : 26] You know, when I was single, I thought that I was generally a selfless and servant-hearted person. And then I got married. And now there's at least one person in the world who knows otherwise.

The experience of marriage has shown me my self-centeredness and my self-defensiveness in ways that I wasn't previously aware of. It's not that marriage made me a different person.

It just showed me aspects of who I was that I hadn't seen before. Sometimes when life, or sometimes another thing that can do that is when life doesn't go the way that we hope.

we become more aware of our fallen and needy human condition more clearly than before. You know, think about the things that make your life work on a day-to-day basis, that hold your life together, that give you stability.

Physical health, mental capabilities, social connections, a job, a place to live, a relationship, your good reputation. And then imagine if over the next year, just two or three of those things were removed or seriously damaged.

[11 : 44] On most Wednesdays, I spend time talking with people at the Columbus House homeless shelter. And sometimes, I'll ask people, what brought you here? Now, that's never the first question I ask.

But as I get to know people better and they open up, sometimes I will. If it seems like they're willing to share about things. And many people have said to me, I never expected to be here.

I grew up in the suburbs, a nice suburb. My wife and I had two cars. I was going to college. I was a mother of three.

I had a thriving business and I was earning good money. And then somehow, over time, my life fell apart and here I am.

Now, if you've been through a traumatic event or a major loss, you know deep inside how vulnerable we are at any time to changing circumstances, some of which are totally beyond our control and some of which we provoke through our own foolish tendencies.

[12 : 53] But you know, this isn't only the experience of someone who's become homeless or experienced a major loss. A few months ago, I received an email from a guy who I had known when he was in college.

And he gave me permission to share this. He graduated from a top-tier college. He moved to New York, found a high-paying job. He's been very successful in his field. But he wrote this. This email came to me completely out of the blue.

He hadn't been in touch for a couple years. He said, I really enjoy my current job. I love the people I work with. Unlike my last job, I also have time.

I have time to spend with family and friends and to pursue other things I enjoy. But I feel very strongly that something is missing. I was raised Catholic. The way I was taught growing up, you are what you do.

You will ultimately be judged by the sum of your actions, good and bad. And that became the source of my self-worth. Until approximately junior year in college, my sense of self-worth was tied to a few specific things.

[13 : 55] Athletic performance, academic performance, and my relationship with the girl I had been seeing for some time. One by one, all of those things went downhill. Some of it was my fault, but not all of it.

My life had essentially been one big victory lap up until that point. I had always tried to do right by others, and I thought that good things happened to me because of that. And now I did not understand and couldn't accept what was now happening.

Nothing was going my way. I felt lied to. I was angry and turned away from the Catholic Church and religion in general. Embraced the philosophy of Ayn Rand.

But I felt so strangely unfulfilled ever since. Prestigious job, lots of money, expensive clothes, nice apartment. None of it means very much to me. And none of it has substituted for whatever it was I was missing.

You see, whether your life has totally fallen apart and you're forced to depend on others for your basic needs, or whether you achieve everything that you hoped and realize that that still isn't enough, sometimes God uses the circumstances of our lives to awaken us to our spiritual need that we cannot fix on our own.

[15 : 14] our need for something outside ourselves. And as we get older, the signs alerting us to our own dependence only increase in frequency because the older we get, the closer we come to the one reality that is 100% sure for every one of us, which is death.

When every one of the things that hold our life together and that we hold dear will finally be taken out of our hands and everything that held us together will fall apart.

Every one of us will face death alone. We can take nothing and no one with us. And Hebrews 9 says it is appointed for human beings to die once and after that comes judgment when each one of us will give an account of our lives to a holy and pure God whose presence is like a consuming fire.

And on that day there will be nowhere to hide. All our illusions about ourselves and our own self-sufficiency will disappear in the blazing light of God's all-knowing, all-searching, all-revealing gaze.

And when we come into the holy presence of God, we will recognize ourselves to be sinners. Maybe for the first time we will recognize that we rightly deserve to be forever excluded from His presence.

[16 : 37] And on that day there will be only one person who can help us in any way at all. Now the good news of this passage and the point of this passage is that unlike anyone else, Jesus Christ is able to cover us.

He's able to save us to the uttermost. That means completely and forever in this life and in the life to come. for all who draw near to God through Him.

And you know, when it says Jesus is able to save us completely, it's not merely presenting a hypothetical possibility. It's not saying Jesus might possibly save you if you come to Him.

It's saying He is powerful to save completely those who come to God through Him. The same phrase is used three other times in Hebrews to describe the work of Jesus or God.

In chapter 2, verse 18, it says Jesus is able to help those who are being tempted and He does. 4.15 says Jesus is able to sympathize with us in our weakness.

[17 : 50] Chapter 5, verse 7 says God was able to save Jesus from death and He did in the resurrection. And the point is Jesus is powerfully able to save us and He has proved His willingness to do so for everyone who draws near to God through Him.

Unlike anyone else, He is qualified to cover us completely and forever. Now you might ask what makes Jesus able to do this? How can I know that He will?

How can I have confidence to trust that this isn't just an empty promise like all the other empty promises out there in the world? Well, this passage gives three reasons why Jesus is able to save us.

Verse 20-22, it says that God Himself is guaranteed that Jesus is able to save us. In last week's passage we saw how the ceremonial law of the Old Testament was set aside.

Verse 18-19 says because it was weak and useless. And in the person of Jesus, God had introduced a better hope. But you know, the people who first read this letter were most likely Jewish Christians who had lived most of their lives under the Old Testament law.

[19 : 12] And for them, this would have felt tremendously destabilizing. Right? God Himself had given Moses the law at Mount Sinai and instructed him to build the tabernacle and establish the priesthood in the line of Aaron.

And now, they might wonder, wait a minute, God is doing away with what He Himself established? If that is so, how can we really trust that anything God says is His final word?

Maybe Jesus is just a precursor to another prophet to come. Maybe we should keep our eyes out for something else that God might send to us. Maybe it's like an operating system upgrade and Jesus is just one of many forthcoming upgrades to your Mac OS or your Windows operating system.

But the author of Hebrews is saying no. He says, when you read the Old Testament carefully, it points forward to something greater than itself. And it's an unfinished story crying out for a lasting resolution and Jesus is that lasting, eternal resolution.

And He will not be replaced. God commanded Aaron and his sons to be priests in the temple but there was never any oath involved. In other words, there was never a sign that it was absolutely unchangeable and would never point forward to anything else.

[20 : 32] God never swore an oath to them. By contrast, in this verse that He quotes from Psalm 110 which talks about a different kind of priest, not in the order of Aaron but in the order of Melchizedek, God did swear an oath.

So the point is, Jesus is this priest whom God has guaranteed will be there forever. So God has guaranteed that Jesus is able to save us.

That's the first reason. The second reason is because Jesus lives forever. This is verse 23 and 24. The second contrast, the former priests were many and they were many because they all died.

But Jesus is the one who lives forever. And God has guaranteed that Jesus is able to save us and He has demonstrated that by raising Jesus from the dead. You know, if you are not sure, if you doubt that Jesus is powerful and able to save, consider the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

If you doubt that it really happened, look into the historical evidence. It's quite strong. There's a booklet on the back table. If you want to read something short or if you want to read something long, you can read N.T. Wright's 800-page book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which is a powerful case by a leading scholar for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

[21 : 47] You know, one of the most remarkable aspects of the gospel accounts about the empty tomb is that the first witnesses were women. Now, at that time, women were not allowed to be legal witnesses in either Jewish courts or Roman courts.

They were seen as, there was one writer who said, women are inferior to men in every way. And that was just a common statement. Nobody really challenged him on that. So if you were going to make up a story back then that somebody had been raised from the dead and you wanted people to believe it, you wouldn't make up this detail that women were the first witnesses as all the gospels do unless it really happened that way.

You see, you would never make that up back then in that context unless that's how it really happened. And they really went to the tomb and it was really empty and Jesus had really risen.

You see, the early Christians were confident in the resurrection of Jesus because they were convinced by reliable witnesses, by women and men who testified that it really happened.

Even the early opponents of Christianity admitted that the tomb was empty. Nobody claimed that Jesus' body was still there. That would have been the easiest way to disprove it.

[23 : 08] You could go on and on. But the more you look into it, the historical evidence is strong, pointing to the reality of Jesus' resurrection. And because Jesus lives forever, we can be confident that he is able to save us forever, unlike anyone else.

So God has guaranteed it. Jesus lives forever. And third, the third reason that we see that Jesus is able to save is that he is our exalted brother.

This is verse 26 through 28. Jesus wasn't only raised from the dead to live on earth, he was exalted to the right hand of God in heaven, the position of ultimate authority over everything in the universe.

Verse 26 and 28 describes Jesus as fully identified with God in his moral perfection, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, the son who has been made perfect forever.

And yet, verse 27 says he is fully identified with us as our brother, that he offered himself up as a sacrifice on behalf of sinful people once for all.

[24 : 21] You see, Jesus is perfectly qualified to stand before a holy God because he is morally pure and without blemish, unlike anyone else.

And he is perfectly qualified, unlike the angels or other heavenly beings, he is perfectly qualified to represent us because he took on our human nature.

And on the cross, he paid the price to cover us completely and forever, to pay the debt that we owed for our sin. And when Jesus ascended back into heaven, you know, he didn't just leave his human nature behind on earth.

He carried it with him into the very presence of God. And so Jesus stands today in the very presence of God, not only as the eternal Son of God, but also as our brother, our fellow human being.

And him standing in God's presence is a sign that he is perfectly and powerfully able to save us with whom he identified and bring us with him into God's presence forever.

[25 : 32] Jesus is able to save us completely and forever. Well, finally, this passage describes how Jesus continually carries out his work of covering us, of saving us.

Verse 25 says, he always lives to make intercession for us. Now, to intercede for someone means to approach an authority figure with an appeal or a request on behalf of someone else.

So what this verse is saying is that Jesus, our exalted brother, our ever-living Savior and Lord, is continually approaching God the Father with requests and appeals on our behalf.

Now, you might wonder, what does that look like? Well, you know, we can actually get a clue of what that looks like, even though we can't look into heaven directly and hear what Jesus is saying to God the Father.

But when you read in the Gospels, there's some records of the prayers of Jesus that he prayed for his disciples. So Luke 22, 31 and 32, Jesus says to Peter, he says, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you.

[26 : 46] Satan was out to get you. He wanted to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. Jesus prays for us that our faith in him might not fail.

because it's not something that we can sustain on our own. He prays to God the Father that our faith would not fail. And when we do stumble and fall as Peter did when he denied Jesus that very night, Jesus continues to intercede for us that we might not only turn back to him, but then strengthen our brothers and sisters.

John 17, 15, Jesus prayed for his disciples. He said, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. Jesus does not promise to shield us from the harsh realities of life in this world.

[27 : 58] Jesus does not pray that nothing bad would ever happen to us. But he does pray that in all the things that happen to us that we would be kept from the evil one.

That even through our greatest trials and our hardest temptations that we would be set apart for holy service to God. That's what sanctify means.

To be set apart for a holy purpose by the truth of his word. Perhaps the most famous prayer of Jesus is what we now call the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11.

And actually, the context of that is Jesus was praying. And back then, most people prayed out loud a little more than we do today. If you think if you find somebody praying, you might expect that they're praying quietly.

But it's probably Jesus was praying out loud. His disciples heard him and they said to him, Lord, teach us to pray. And then he taught them based on what he was praying. And then the second half of the Lord's Prayer, he makes three requests on our behalf.

[29 : 09] He says, give us each day our daily bread. He's praying for what that we would be provided with what we need on a day-to-day basis. Second, he says, forgive us our sins.

Now clearly, Jesus isn't praying for himself there. Right? But even when he's on earth, Jesus is already praying to God the Father that our sins would be forgiven.

And third, lead us not into temptation. Even while Jesus was on earth, he was already praying for his disciples before the Father. And how much more since he is in heaven, since he has completed the work of the cross, which paid the price for our forgiveness and for everything else that we need.

So in summary, what does Jesus pray for? Well, Peter O'Brien, a commentator on Hebrews, summarizes it this way. He says, Jesus prays for anything and everything that might prevent us from receiving the final salvation that he has won for us at the cross.

In other words, through Jesus dying on the cross once for all, he has accomplished our redemption. And through his continual intercession on our behalf, he applies to us all the benefits that he has won and paid for in his death and resurrection.

[30 : 29] You see, Jesus has not only saved us by dying on the cross in the past, he continues to save us by interceding for us in the present. And one day, Hebrews 9, 28, says he will appear a second time to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

In other words, he has saved us by his death on the cross in the past, he continues to save us in the present and he will one day bring us to glory and complete that. That's what the Romans 8 passage that Kyle read earlier this morning is all about.

Called, justified, sanctified, glorified. He doesn't miss anything. He carries us all the way through. So if you approach God through Jesus, Jesus says, I've got you covered completely and forever.

I've forgiven you of your past. I'm upholding you in the present and I hold your future in my hands. That's what it means that he makes intercession for us.

Finally, if you know that you're covered by Jesus, let me end with three brief applications. Number one, if you know that you're covered by Jesus, we can honestly deal with and face our spiritual sicknesses, our besetting sins.

[31 : 50] We don't need to live in denial or fear that our problems will be too great to handle or too much for us to pay for. We can examine our own hearts. We can even receive critical feedback from others without becoming angry and defensive because we have a remedy that is available to us.

We have free access to our great physician who is already seen into the depth of our sin-sick heart and paid the price to bring us the healing and forgiveness that we need so we can face our spiritual sicknesses, our sin.

Second, we can go forth confidently into the mission to which God has called us. When Jesus prayed for all who had come to believe in him, you know, surprisingly, perhaps, he didn't only pray about our problems.

Sometimes our problems themselves can seem totally overwhelming and especially when we see them in the light of God's presence but Jesus not only prayed about our problems, he prayed about our mission. He prayed for his disciples that we might be one, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

So for those of you who are involved in, for one example, for those of you who are involved in the church plan in New London, Jesus is interceding for you that you may be united with one another, that you may enjoy rich fellowship with Jesus and the Father and that you may declare the unsearchable riches of Jesus to New London and that people in that part of the world would come to believe and love Jesus as a result.

[33 : 34] And you know what? That's already happening because Jesus has already been interceding on your behalf. And so go forward and continue in your mission prayerfully and humbly but also boldly.

For those of us who are here in New Haven and if you're not planning to move to New London, the same thing applies to the mission that God has given us here in New Haven. He has brought us together as one body in Christ and Jesus is constantly interceding for us that we might be united to declare to the world how awesome He is and that others might come to believe in Him.

So go forward in the mission that God has given you with confidence. Third, finally, in all the trials and temptations that we face, be encouraged. because even if you don't know what to pray or how to pray or if you feel like your prayer life is weak, you have someone who is praying for you.

You have Jesus who is praying for you. Louis Burkhoff wrote this. He said, that it is a comforting thought that Christ is praying for us, that He is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds, which we often neglect to include in our prayers, and that He prays for our protection against the dangers of which we are not even conscious and against the enemies which threaten us though we do not notice it.

He is praying that our faith may not fail and that we may come out victoriously in the end. So be encouraged. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank You this morning that You are able to save us.

[35 : 35] And we thank You that You are continually carrying out that work by interceding for us at the right hand of God the Father. That we may know that You may apply to us all of the benefits that You purchased for us in Your death on the cross.

Lord, this morning we join together in the prayer that You taught us to pray that reminds us of how You are praying for us. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Amen. As the music team comes forward, we're going to join together in one last song that speaks of Christ as interceding for us before the throne of God above.