

Hebrews 7:11-19 "Our Priest Jesus" \*\*

Main Idea: In order to help us appreciate the greatness of our priest Jesus, the writer of Hebrews presents a vivid contrast between human priests and Jesus in Hebrews 7:11-19.

- I. Think about the deficiency of human priests (11-17).
  - A. The priests of Levi cannot offer perfection (11a).
    1. A human priest can show us God's standard.
    2. A human priest cannot help us attain God's standard.
  - B. The priests of Levi were a means to an end (11b-17).
    1. God is now working through a different line (11b).
    2. God is now working through a different tribe (12-14).
    3. God is now working through a priest like Melchizedek (15-17).
- II. Think about the sufficiency of priest Jesus (18-19).
  - A. He offers us perfection.
    1. The law makes no one perfect.
    2. By His sacrifice Jesus makes sinners perfect (Heb. 10:14).
  - B. He has introduced a better hope.
    1. This indicates we're not to live for what we can see.
    2. We need to fix our attention on what is yet to come.
  - C. He enables us to draw near to God.
    1. Christ didn't come merely to rescue us from hell.
    2. Christ came so we could be close to God.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself the following questions...

1. Who is your priest?
2. Are you cooperating with the intent of priest Jesus?
3. Are you sharing the good news about your priest with others?

*If you're perfect, you don't need a priest.* It's as simple as that. A priest, by definition, is a go-between, a bridge-builder, a person (as Webster puts it) who serves as a "mediatory agent between

humans and God." So if you're perfect, you don't need a priest, and therefore, you don't need this message.

The reason we need a priest, of course, is because we are not perfect. No one is. Since Adam sinned, all human beings enter this world with a nature that is bent on going its own way rather than God's way, and that's what we do from birth, go our *own* way on a road that leads to destruction.

It's like the raccoon I tried to turn into a pet when I was in high school. I found a baby coon in a friend's haymow one summer day, took it home, and tried to domesticate it. I reached out to that masked creature, fed it, tried to show it affection and earn its trust. Day after day, I tried, but to know avail. In the end it so resisted my efforts that it jumped to a rafter in the barn, slipped, fell headfirst into the concrete floor, and killed itself.

That's the way sin works. God created us to live in a relationship of trust with Him and obedience to Him, but ever since Adam's fateful choice, we don't want what God wants. We want Him to leave us alone so we can go our own way. And that course always ends in destruction, often in this life and surely when we leave this life and stand before Him to whom we must give account.

But can a person who's been going his own way in life, can a *sinner* return to God? The answer is *yes*, by God's grace he can, but he can't do it by himself. God says that sinner needs a *priest*.

In a sense, the story of the Bible is the story of what God has done to provide sinners with a priest. Since God is holy, He cannot allow any sin in His presence, which is why He cast sinful Adam and Eve out of the garden and out of His presence. Yet because God is merciful, He chose to make a way for sinners to be reconciled to Him. For Adam and Eve, He killed an animal so as to clothe the first sinners and remove the shame of their nakedness. In so doing He also gave the world a picture of the plan by which He intended to reconcile undeserving sinners to Himself, through the death of a substitute offered by a priest.

In Genesis 4, Abel offered a firstborn animal to the Lord, and God was pleased with his sacrifice, commending him as a righteous man (Heb. 11:4). In Genesis 8, Noah sacrificed burnt offerings, and the Lord was pleased (Gen. 8:21). Then in Genesis 12, God chose the man through whom He would bring salvation to the world, and we see that man Abram, likewise, building an altar and calling on the Lord (Gen. 12:8). God blessed that man Abraham with a son of promise, Isaac, and blessed that son with twin boys, Jacob and Esau, and blessed Jacob with twelve sons, and in time turned those twelve sons into the chosen nation of Israel.

And what did the Lord give to Israel? If you thinking, "He gave them the Promised Land," that's right, but that gift didn't come until the book of Joshua. What did God give Israel *before* the promised land? Read Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and you see the detailed record (and I mean *detailed*) of a system He gave them, a system designed to take care of their sin problem, a system that included a tabernacle, an altar, and a *priesthood*.

It ought not surprise us that the enemy of God, Satan, would seek to undermine God's plan by manufacturing imitation priests, men of the cloth who claim unwarranted authority to take human beings to God, but would do so to their own peril and the peril of those who trust them. And that, of course, is what we find when we read Joshua, Judges, and the rest of the Old Testament. We read about the priests of Baal and Molech and Dagon and a host of other false gods represented by their man-crafted idols. The Assyrians had their priests, as did the Babylonians, the Greeks, and later, as we find in the New Testament, the Romans. And even to this day the religions of the world have their priests.

Satan's aim is to confuse. On the one hand he feeds the proud with the notion, "You're a good person. You don't need a priest." And on the other hand he fills the world with a sea of false priests who offer a false hope to their blinded victims.

Nonetheless, the fact remains. Sinners need a priest, and what sinners desperately need God in His grace has provided.

We find the first appearance of the word "priest" in the Bible in Genesis 14:18: "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine [to Abram]. He was priest of God Most High." So Abraham benefited from a priest, one that pre-dated the Levitical priesthood by six hundred years. And it's this king-priest named Melchizedek that Psalm 110:4 says is an Old Testament shadow cast by the light of the ultimate king-priest, the Messiah Himself, "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."

When we come to the book of Hebrews we discover that the word "priest" appears twenty-eight times. That's significant. One of the criticisms that first century Jews leveled at Christians is, "You don't have a priest like we do, so you can't be right with God!" But Hebrews says, "Yes, we do have a priest, the One God says is the only legitimate priest, and His name is Jesus!" To help us appreciate the superiority of priest Jesus, in Hebrews 7:11-19 the writer presents a vivid contrast between human priests and Jesus.

### I. Think about the deficiency of human priests (11-17).

The writer presents this deficiency in two ways. First he shows us what the priests of Levi *cannot* do, and second he shows us what they were *intended to do*.

**A. The priests of Levi cannot offer perfection (11a).** "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?"

Notice those first words, "If perfection could have been attained." Most of us don't think much about perfection. Attain perfection? "Just do your best," we tend to think. That's what Sherry and I tell our daughters all the time, whether it's schoolwork or athletics or whatever. "It doesn't matter whether you get a 100 on the test. Just make sure you do your best."

Parents, perfectionism is a dangerous thing, the idea that I have to be perfect, and it's rooted in performance-based pride. But while perfectionism is dangerous, don't miss the necessity of perfection.

The Bible has a lot to say about perfection. Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48)." "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it," says James 2:10. "Be holy because I am holy (1 Pet. 1:16; a quotation of Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7). The prophet said this to God in Habakkuk 1:13, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."

God's standard for us is not, "Do the best you can do." God's standard is God Himself. Be holy. Be *perfect*.

To enter the presence of a holy God, perfection is required. Thankfully, what God requires, He Himself has provided. He provided first a temporary solution, and then fourteen centuries later a permanent solution. The temporary solution? The Levitical priesthood which covered sins but could not remove them nor make the sinner perfect (see 10:1).

The permanent solution? The final priest, God's own Son. "For the wages of sin is death [there's the standard, perfection; the wage for sin is death, separation from God], but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Through Jesus Christ God gives imperfect sinners what they lack and desperately need. More about that in a moment.

What's true of human priests, specifically the Levitical priests? Two things...

1. *A human priest can show us God's standard.* However...

2. *A human priest cannot help us attain God's standard.* For centuries the priests of Israel taught the people God's law. God says, "Do this and you will live!" And God says, "Don't do this or you will die!" The priests made the standard clear, but they couldn't help the people reach it.<sup>[2]</sup>

"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood." But it couldn't. The priests of Levi cannot offer perfection. Yet that's not why God gave Israel the priesthood in the first place, as Hebrews points out next...

**B. The priests of Levi were a means to an end (11b-17).** Notice the question in verse 11 again, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood..., why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?"

Even the Old Testament predicted another priest was coming, one who would replace the priests of Levi. I should point out that there's evidence that the first century Dead Sea community was actually looking for, not one, but *two* messiahs. One would be priestly, "the messiah of Aaron," and the other kingly, "the messiah of Israel." It's quite possible that the recipients of Hebrews had been exposed to this belief, and so the writer of Hebrews carefully addresses the concerns raised. He does so by showing that these two messianic expectations were indeed fulfilled in the one person of Jesus Christ, who is both priest and king.<sup>[3]</sup>

Notice the word "change" in verse 12. It appears twice. The writer announces that some changes have occurred, and here's the first...

1. *God is now working through a different line (11b).* Verse 11 says there was "need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron." The word "another" (*heteron*) means "one of a different kind." For centuries God worked through the order of Aaron. Now it's through one who is in the line of Melchizedek.

With that statement the writer is again alluding to David's messianic announcement in Psalm 110:4. In David's day the Lord predicted the coming of a priest "in the order of Melchizedek." That prediction was made in approximately 1000 BC when the Levitical priesthood was in full swing, as it had been since Moses instituted it four hundred years earlier. However, David's prophecy made it clear the Levitical priesthood was missing the mark, and that the day was coming when the Lord would replace it with a priest from another line, *in the order of Melchizedek*. Here's a second change...

2. *God is now working through a different tribe (12-14).* "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.<sup>[4]</sup> For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests."

Jesus wasn't a Levite. He was the virgin born son of Mary and the adopted son of Joseph, both from the tribe of Judah. How then could He, a non-Levite, be a priest, since the Mosaic law stipulated the priesthood belonged to the tribe of Levi? Verse 12 gives the simple answer, "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law."

Suppose our president decided he wanted to proclaim himself to be the King of the United States, and not just president. He couldn't do that, of course, because U.S. law makes no such provision for a king. In order for our president to become our king, the law would have to be changed first.<sup>[5]</sup>

Likewise, in order for a non-Levite to become a priest, there had to be a change in the law. And there has been. As Warren Wiersbe explains, "The entire system of Old Testament Law has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and has been taken out of the way (Col. 2:13-14). The believer has been set free from the Law (Gal. 5:1-6) and is dead to the Law (Rom. 7:1-4)."<sup>[6]</sup>

Does God's law ever change? Be careful how you answer that question. It depends what you mean by "law" and "change" right? Some today justify homosexuality, saying, "Things have changed. We're not under the law anymore." But when verse 12 talks about "a change of the law," is that what the writer has in mind? Is he saying that God's moral standard has changed? No, he's talking about what Bible scholars often refer to as "the ceremonial law." In verse 18 he states that "the former regulation is set aside," referring not to God's moral law, but to the ceremonial law. That's what we don't go to Jerusalem to offer animal sacrifices any more, for as we'll see in the rest of Hebrews, in Christ there's a new altar (13:10), a

new tabernacle (8:2, 5), a new priesthood (7:24), and yes, a new covenant (7:22).

So God didn't merely abandon His Law. Rather, in the person and work of Christ, He fulfilled it. That's why He is now working through a different line and a different tribe. What's more...

3. *God is now working through a priest like Melchizedek (15-17).* Verse 15—"And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears." Notice we have *another* priest. It's not Melchizedek, but one "like" Melchizedek (KJV says "after the similitude of Melchisedec").

What makes this priest unique? Verse 16 tells us, "One who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life." Right there is what sets Jesus apart from all other priests—His *indestructible life*. He didn't get His priestly position by pedigree, but by an unmatched demonstration of power.

He could not be destroyed. Oh, His enemies tried. They schemed and plotted to eliminate Him, but they couldn't touch Him until He permitted it. He allowed them to arrest Him in the garden (remember how the soldiers fell to the ground when they first tried to accost Him?). He allowed them to nail Him to the tree. They didn't take His life, but He *gave* it. And then three days later, He walked out of that tomb as a testimony to the power of an indestructible life.

Do you want a weak, dying priest, or an indestructible, living one? Those are the options. Christ alone is the latter, as verse 17 verifies with yet another quotation from Psalm 110:4, "For it is declared: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'"

That brings us to our second point. First, Hebrews urged us to think about the deficiency of human priests. Beginning in verse 18, the writer wants us to...

## II. Think about the sufficiency of priest Jesus (18-19).

Verses 18-19 "The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God."

Notice that significant verb in verse 18, "set aside" (*athetesis*, KJV 'disannulling'). It means to abolish or render inoperative. In 9:26 it is used to say that Christ "did away with sin."<sup>[7]</sup> That's what has happened to the former regulation.

Why? Two reasons are mentioned here. One, it was "weak" (*ashthenes*), indicating it lacks the power necessary to get rid of man's sin. And two, it was "useless" (*anopheles*, KJV 'unprofitableness') because it can't produce the effects sinners desperately need, such as to remove their sin and change their corrupt hearts.

Again, the law is like the speed limit sign. It can tell you what you ought to do (drive 65 mph) but it can't give you the heart and ability to do what you ought to do. And it certainly can't make you perfect, for the *law made nothing perfect*.

That doesn't mean the law was bad, for the law did exactly what God intended it to do, to reveal His standard and man's innate sinfulness, to produce guilt that would cause us to look to Him for forgiveness, in short, to prepare us for Christ.

That was a hard pill for some to swallow. Change often is. Indeed, these changes were at the core of first century Judaism's resistance to Christianity. It's the reason a religious crowd killed Stephen, as Acts 6:14 records, "For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." And, of course, it's why Saul of Tarsus led an all out assault to eliminate the young church. Traditions can be powerful.

But I love the balance I see in Hebrews. The writer makes it clear that Christianity isn't anti-law, nor

anti-Jewish tradition. Indeed, both served a valid purpose, and that's the point. The law has served its purpose and been fulfilled by Christ, who Himself said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Wiersbe offers this helpful distinction, "This new arrangement does not suggest that a Christian has the right to be lawless. 'Free from the Law' does not mean 'free to sin.' Rather it means we are free to do the will of God. We obey, not because of outward compulsion, but because of inward constraint."<sup>[8]</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah actually predicted this change was coming. We read in Jeremiah 31:31-33, "'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 broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"

What did Jeremiah predict would happen to God's law? God would put it in the minds and on the hearts of His people. Philip Hughes explains, "Though the regulations concerning the levitical priesthood have passed with the passing of that priesthood, yet the essence of the law, which is love and obedience, not only continues in force but is made possible of fulfillment by the gospel."<sup>[9]</sup>

John Calvin offers this helpful explanation, "The Law contains both the rule for good living and the free covenant of life, and there run through it many outstanding passages which instruct us in the faith and in the fear of God. None of this has been abolished in Christ, but only that part which was involved in the older priesthood."<sup>[10]</sup>

What makes Jesus such a sufficient, even a *superior* priest? The writer mentions three reasons.

**A. He offers us perfection.** What does verse 19 say? It's black and white...

1. *The law makes no one perfect.* That's because, as Romans 8:3 explains, "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature..." The problem isn't the law. The problem is *us*, our sinful nature. We can't keep the law! Yet here's the good news, yes, the best of news!

2. *By His sacrifice Jesus makes sinners perfect (Heb. 10:14).*

If we had time we'd take a close look at the word "perfect" in Hebrews. It's all over the place because, as we mentioned earlier, since God is holy, perfection is a big deal. I urge you to check out on your own these statements about Christ's perfection and what He has done to make sinners perfect (Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 7:28; 9:11; 11:40; 12:2; 12:23). But there's one verse I want to show you. It sums it up...

Hebrews 10:14 "Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." The verse says that a sinner can be made perfect. How? Jesus did it. And how did He do it? The verse states that by the one sacrifice that Jesus made, Jesus has given His perfection to a people. It's past tense. There are people in this world who are, in the sight of God, already perfect, and they are perfect forever.

How can that be? The Bible explains that when Christ died on the cross, He made them perfect forever. He took their sins and gave them the merit of His perfect life (2 Cor. 5:21). Paul put it this way in Acts 13:39, "Through him everyone who believes is justified [i.e. 'declared righteous or perfect'] from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." The law couldn't produce perfection. It could only illumine the lack of it. But Christ can! As Galatians 3:24 explains, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."

If you have put your faith in Christ, God has imputed the perfection of His perfect Son's life to your account. You are perfect forever.

"Why then do I still struggle with sin?" you ask. Good question, and notice the answer at the end of

10:14. Those whom God has declared to be perfect forever in Christ (that's their position) "are being made holy." Holiness is both a position and a process. If you're in Christ, you're both perfect and being made holy.

But there's more! Not only does priest Jesus offer us perfection...

**B. He has introduced a better hope.** That's what verse 19 says. Since the former regulation is set aside, "a better hope is introduced."

1. *This indicates we're not to live for what we can see.* Rather...

2. *We need to fix our attention on what is yet to come.* That's when we get in trouble, isn't it? When we get preoccupied with what's happening around us and take our eyes off of what's coming. In Christ, we have a better hope. As the song rightly says, it will be worth it all when we see Jesus!

**C. He enables us to draw near to God.** "By which we draw near to God," our text concludes. Under the old covenant stipulations, that's exactly what you could *not* do. You could *not* draw near to God. When you went to the tabernacle, and later the temple, you could *not* enter the holy of holies. You had to stand off in the courtyard, and only the priests could enter the sanctuary, and only the high priest could enter the most holy place in the sanctuary. To approach God in freedom was only a longing, for sin separates.

If you stick to the law, if you put your confidence in your ability to live a good enough life to merit the privilege to enter God's presence, you will perish in your pursuit. But in the person of Jesus Christ, God has opened the way for us to come face to face, to *draw near* to God Himself.

Let the reality of this sink in, and ponder two implications...

1. *Christ didn't come merely to rescue us from hell.* That's not the goal of your salvation, a ticket out of hell. A wonderful by-product, yes, yes! But there's so much more to it!

2. *Christ came so we could be close to God.* Close, personal, in the family, near to God. Think of it! That's His offer to us. That's what His Son accomplished for us.

I have a routine I go through each morning which includes heading to the basement for a personal time with God, and then taking a jog. Every time I head down those steps, a friend accompanies me, our dog Maddie. When I go to my study, she follows me. When I'm reading, she's laying right beside me, looking up at me. When I head back upstairs, she's on my heel. When I open the door to go outside, she's locked to my side. She wants to be *near me*.

I've thought many times that God gave us dogs to illustrate, at least in part, how it's supposed to be between us and Him. What's wrong with this picture? "Do I have to read my Bible every day?" "Do I have to go to church when I'm on vacation?" "Do I have to go to prayer meeting?" Beloved, why would we *not* want to take advantage of every opportunity we can find to be *near God*? It's the very reason that God sent priest Jesus to the world in the first place.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself the following questions...

1. *Who is your priest?* Some people today think they need a human priest. But there's only one who offers perfection, who's introduced a better hope, and who enables us to draw near to God. Is Jesus Christ your priest? Have you put your faith in Him?

2. *Are you cooperating with the intent of priest Jesus?* His aim is to take you near to God. If He is your Savior, you'll experience that nearness perfectly in heaven some day, but He offers a foretaste of it now. He's given us His Word. He's given us His Spirit. He's given us His church, so that we might enjoy the presence of God. Are you taking advantage of these gifts? Are you cooperating with the intent of your

priest?

3. *Are you sharing the good news about your priest with others?* All around us are people who don't know the truth about our priest. Let's not keep it a secret. Let's look for ways to tell them this week about priest Jesus!

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**\*\*Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Priest: "one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God" <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/priest>

[2] The law can't remove our sin, but only expose it. Nor can it grant us righteousness, but only reveal our need for it.

[3] Philip Hughes, pp. 255-6.

[4] Notice there's been a change of altar, too, as the writer later elaborates in Hebrews 13:10, "We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat."

[5] I appreciate Warren Wiersbe's helpful insight on this point; p. 301.

[6] W. Wiersbe, p. 301.

[7] See R. Gromacki's helpful word study on p. 128-9.

[8] W. Wiersbe, p. 301.

[9] Philip Hughes, pp. 257-8.

[10] John Calvin, *Hebrews*, p. 96.