

Hebrews 7-9

Chapter 7: *A priest of the order of Melchizedek*

1. This is the flow of Hebrew up to this point:

- Chapters 1-2: Jesus, the Messiah, is God's one and only son and is far superior to the angels [using coronation Psalm 2 and a cohort of other short OT references]
- Chapter 2: Jesus is a truly human being who has attained sovereignty over creation [Psalm 8]
- Chapters 3-4: There is still a Sabbath rest for God's people [Psalm 95]
- Chapters 4-7: Jesus is the new high priest, of the order of Melchizedek [Psalm 110]
- Chapter 6: Interlude: Act like adults!

In chapter 7, the author finished what he started in chapter 4, leveraging the Messiah's priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, based on Psalm 110, to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus' priesthood.

(Remember, the author assumes Jesus is the Messiah.)

- a. What are some of the ways Hebrews says that Jesus' priesthood is superior to that of Levi?
- b. *A priest* was someone who stood between humans and God to intercede and offer sacrifices (Heb 5:1. But we know that Christians have direct "access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:18), that if we "draw near to God He will draw near to" us (James 4:8), and we are free to "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Heb 4:16). Given that we no longer need an intermediary, why is Hebrews talking about Jesus as our high priest?
- c. How does the author show that the "law" of the new covenant is superior to that of the old? (Cf. 7:11-12.)

Chapter 8: *The New Covenant*

2. The author later, in verse 7:19, describes the Mosaic law as "weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect),"¹ The old covenant is faulty (8:7), "obsolete" and "will soon disappear" (8:13). Yet Jesus says, "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt 5:18), and Paul says, "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Rom 7:12). In fact, for a faulty covenant it held a very lofty position in David's eyes: "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold

¹ This verse uses "perfect" not in the sense of moral perfection, but in the same sense we've seen earlier in Hebrews as complete or according to the intended purpose.

and silver pieces” (Ps 119:72). How do you reconcile the view of the Old Covenant in Hebrews with the views of Jesus and David?

3. Hebrews characterizes the Old Covenant by its “rites” (9:23; see also 8:3-4). About this, DeLashmutt writes,

Now that the real High Priest has entered the real Tabernacle to offer the real sacrifice, there are to be no more priests, no more holy buildings, and no more ritual sacrifices or services. Christianity is about a personal love relationship with God, not about ritualistic worship!

You can’t miss this shift if you read and compare the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God prescribes hundreds of rituals, and he gives detailed instructions on how to observe these rituals... But when you go past Jesus’ death, this changes dramatically. Now instead of hundreds of prescribed rituals, there are only two—and one of them is only done once! The heart of Hebrews’ message is that through Jesus God has provided a new and better way to relate to him that was possible during the Old Testament period...

The author is concerned that his Jewish readers are missing this point and still relating to God in the Old Covenant way. This is horrible, not only because they are missing out on a better way to relate to God, but also because they are misrepresenting Christianity to people who need Jesus! And this is still happening! For the past 2000 years, most forms of Christianity have been stuck in this same mistake! I call this the “Old Covenant captivity of the church”—and it continues to be the number one problem in Christianity.²

- a. Do sacramental traditions, such as the Lutheran, Catholic and Episcopal churches, with their altars and priests and (for the Catholics) penance fall prey to “Old Covenant captivity”?
- b. We may not have priests and penance, but we do have a sanctuary, and a liturgical worship service. Reformed theology makes it abundantly clear that these play no atoning role. Still, not all visitors to RCRC are familiar with our theology. How might these be a stumbling block for refugees from Catholicism who visit to RCRC?

Chapter 9: *Earthly and Heavenly Sanctuaries*

4. Hebrews refers to the Tabernacle as a “sketch and shadow,” “a mere copy of the true one” (8:2, 5; 9:24; Ex 25:40). The Tabernacle was all about access to God, which in the Old Covenant was restricted to the high priest, and him only at the right time and in just the right way. The New

² <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/?teaching=1118>; <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/?teaching=1123>, downloaded 2014 03 13.

Covenant offers us unrestricted access to God (Heb 4:16; 10:19). The author is drawing parallels between the “unreal” copy and the real Tabernacle, law, high priest, etc. As Barclay puts it,

The earthly priesthood is unreal and cannot lead men into reality; but Jesus *can*. We can say that Jesus leads us into reality; it means the same thing... Jesus is our perfect [mediator]; he stands between us and God. He opens the way to reconciliation between man and God, between the real and the unreal. In other words, Jesus is the only person who can bring us real life. (88-89)

If we think of the Mosaic law as “unreal,” the “real” New Covenant counterpart is the indwelling of the Spirit: “I put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts” (Heb 8:10). God offers by his Spirit an internal knowledge of right and wrong (cf. Heb 5:14) and an understanding of the very nature of God, since the law reveals God’s nature (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). These in turn provide us with a vision of the *reality* of which this fallen world is a broken copy. As C. S. Lewis put it in *The Great Divorce*,

Hell is a state of mind - ye never said a truer word. And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind - is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly. For all that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakeable remains.

How does it affect our mission as a Church to be able to look around at the unreal, fallen world and see, with the aid of the indwelling Spirit, the *reality* which God’s kingdom is transforming it into? Where are you most struck by the disparity between the unreal around you and the heavenly reality which is to come?

5. When Melanie’s mind is centered on the New Covenant, she experiences God’s grace in the knowledge that God has chosen to forget her sins (8:10), which are covered by Jesus’ one-time sacrifice (9:14). Still, despite her growth as a Christian, she struggles with the same old sins, and, aware that “God will not be mocked” (Gal 6:7) her grasp of God’s forgiveness for these sins is sometimes weak.

Convicted, she tries to be more serious about prayer and Bible study. Sincerely not wanting to manipulate or take advantage of God’s grace she focuses her attention on living like Christ and showing forth the fruit of the Spirit. Melanie is conscious of not just “trying harder,” but rather aligning her priorities with the kingdom.

For a time, she feels closer to God. She is in the Word! She is praying regularly again! But the stresses of work and family close in and her emotional resources are stretched thin and before long she feels like she’s back where she started.

Is Melanie experiencing just a typical cycle of spiritual growth, or is she, without realizing it, trying to accomplish *what Christ has already done* in setting her right with God? How can she experience the promised Sabbath rest of the New Covenant and be refreshed?

6. The holy of holies in the Tabernacle contained the ark of the covenant, which held the manna, Aaron's rod, and the "tablets of the covenant." Each of these three represented a time of bitter failure for the Israelites: The manna, when Israel rejected God's provision in the desert; Aaron's rod, when Israel rejected God's leadership; and the tablets, when Israel disobeyed God's law and worshipped the golden fertility symbol while Moses was on the mountain.

These symbols sat in the place where only the high priest could go, behind the veil separating God's presence from his people. Being purified on the Day of Atonement, Jews were enabled to enter the outer court, but never the holy of holies.

With the new covenant the veil is removed and we not only have access to God, Christ's sacrifice can "**purify our conscience** from dead works to worship the living God" (9:14). This allows us to "approach the throne of grace **with boldness**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16).

We enjoy unparalleled access to the creator of the universe, our God and Father. Yet often our greatest concern is not that we do not make full use of this astounding gift, but that we take it for granted. What do we risk when we do that? How can we appreciate the immense value of our intimacy with God without falling into the fear of God's holiness which characterized the Old Covenant?

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Fun quote: "...the Israelites believed that the Temple in Jerusalem was the place above all where heaven and earth met, quite literally. When you want into the Temple, especially when you went into the holy of holies in the middle of it, you were actually going into heaven itself." (Wright, 82)