

ONLY JESUS SAVES

Hebrews 7:23-28

With the conclusion of the third warning about getting sidetracked and missing out on the very purpose for being saved and the admonishment to grow into spiritual maturity, the writer of this letter to the Hebrew Christians continued to develop the overall theme of the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old Covenant in the early verses of Chapter 7.

The ministry and work of Jesus put an end to the sacrificial system and essentially eliminated the need for the Levitical priesthood. However, the need for a priest preceded the giving of the Law and the establishment of Aaron and his clan (the Levites) as the priestly tribe. Jesus was compared to Melchizedek who was a priest of God Most High prior to the giving of the Law and prior to the birth of Levi. We see also the practice of tithing as preceding the Law of Moses. Both the work of a priest and tithing stand apart from the law and do not depend upon it for their validity.

The Levitical priesthood was temporary but the priesthood of Jesus is eternal. It is pictured in Melchizedek in that he is shown to have neither a beginning nor an ending.

The superiority of the eternal priesthood over that of the Levitical priesthood is seen in that Levi (through Abraham) paid a tithe to Melchizedek.

The old order (the Levitical priesthood and the law of Moses) was a physical foreshadowing of the new order which is the spiritual reality. The old was incomplete and brought temporary atonement. The new was totally complete and provided for eternal atonement.

God is sovereign in that He chooses and intervenes in the natural course of things. Natural progression would have the eternal priest coming from the Levites. However, God selected the tribe of Judah and a descendant of David to be the Forever Priest. This choice further highlighted the fact that this was a new thing separate from the law.

An applicable conclusion from this is that our salvation is not a result of heredity or national origin but is a result of the new life that comes to us through the new birth. It is this new life that is eternal and gives us immortality.

The former priestly system with its ceremonial laws all pointed to the new revelation of God in Jesus. The sacrificial system was not able to provide an exchanged life that was freed from slavery to sin but it made us aware of our sinfulness. The work of Jesus provides us with new life and power over sin by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit by which we are free. We are assured of the validity that this is what God is doing since He swore with an oath regarding the change which is found in Psalms 104.

The Permanent Priest – 7:23-24

²³ The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴ but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Hebrews 7:23–24 (NASB95)

The Law given through Moses established an order of priests. Prior to the giving of the law there were various people who were referred to as priests. The first time the word “priest” is seen in the Biblical record is in reference to Melchizedek in Genesis 14. Other uses of the term are found in regard to a priest in Egypt whose daughter became the wife of Joseph. Moses’ father-in-law was called the priest of Midian.

What did priests do and why were they needed? Prior to “the fall” Adam had access to God in his state of innocence, but after sinning that free access was not admitted. Sin created an

estrangement from God since there was a realization that God was holy and that which was impure was not compatible with holiness. As a result, man's approach to God was accompanied by sacrificial offerings as we see in the account of Cain and Abel. How this idea of offering a gift to God developed is not addressed in the Scriptures. It was stated (Heb 11:4) that "by faith" Abel offered a better sacrifice. If faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God, then some communication of expectations of the proper way to approach God must have been made. Apparently, each person presented his own offering to God and thus served in the role of being a priest or a presenter of sacrifices.

By implication of the accounts in the Bible, the idea of having one person carry out this function of presenting sacrifices to God for a group of people developed as we see from the cases of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Job. In each of these cases, these men were heads of their families and served as an intermediary or representative in matters pertaining to God.

The sense of one's own personal inadequateness caused people to desire the intervention of some one of whom they thought was likely to be more acceptable than themselves. This person (a priest) would offer up their prayers, thanksgivings, sacrifices. We still see this idea being practiced in the Roman Catholic traditions.

With the giving of the Law to the newly formed nation of Israel, a new approach to this important role of a person who would represent the people before God was defined and assigned to Aaron who was of the tribe of Levi. The Levitical order for priests was followed under the Old Covenant from the time of the formation of the nation of Israel until it was replaced by a New Covenant when Christ Jesus put an end to sacrifices and offerings by His perfect sacrifice of Himself on the Cross.

The Levitical system was not adequate to provide what people needed and those who served as priests in that system were limited in their qualifications and their vulnerability. The vulnerability was related to the fact that they were subject to death and to various imperfections that might limit their availability for service. Not only were the priests temporary and imperfect, the sacrifices they offered provided for temporary atonement and had to be repeated with yearly, seasonal and even daily sacrifices.

The new order of the priesthood was complete and provided for eternal atonement since the High Priest of the new order has overcome death which had resulted from He Himself being used as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

Able to Save – 7:25

²⁵ Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25 (NASB95)

The system under the Old Testament law was not able to "save" in that no one is "justified" by the keeping of the law. The law could only point out the need for restoration and atonement and pointed to the New Covenant which was initiated by Jesus. The entire system of Old Testament Law has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and has been taken out of the way. The believer has been set free from the Law and is dead to the Law.

The extent of the salvation that we find in Christ is literally to "all ends." This is translated as "uttermost" in some versions and "forever" in others. The use of the word "ends" in the Greek could apply to circumstances or events as well as to time. The idea is that this salvation is effective in all situations and never stops being available.

However, there is a limit to this salvation. How can that be possible? The limitation is that it is for those "who draw near to God through Christ." The "salvation" is available only for Christians and since they are "Christians" we are not referring to the "justification" element of

our salvation since we already possess that by virtue of being “in Christ.” The “saving” would then be related to the idea of preserving, maintaining, restoring, strengthening, enabling, healing, overcoming, etc. as we go about fulfilling the purposes for which we have been saved.

There may be another implied limitation in the requirement that goes beyond being “in Christ.” That requirement would be that we must draw near to God. The failure to draw near might be connected to the “falling away” or getting sidetracked that was mentioned in the early verses of Chapter 6. This could be reinforced by the word picture we see in Psalm 91:1 which says “He who dwells in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” In other words, if we wander away from the shade (protection) that God provides then we will be exposed to the harsh burning desert sun.

Warren Wiersbe points out that

The basis for this completed salvation is the heavenly intercession of the Savior. The word translated “make intercession” simply means “to meet, to approach, to appeal, to make petition.” We must not imagine that God the Father is angry with us so that God the Son must constantly appeal to Him not to judge us! The Father and the Son are in total agreement in the plan of salvation. Neither should we imagine our Lord Jesus uttering prayers on our behalf in heaven, or repeatedly “offering His blood” as a sacrifice. That work was completed on the cross once and for all. (Bible Exposition Commentary)

Because of His Character – 7:26-28

²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸ For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever. Hebrews 7:26–28 (NASB95)

Not only is our High Priest able to save completely, to serve without interruption, and represent us before God in the heavenly realm, He is also fully equipped by reason of His personal attributes (character) to fulfill that role. He is exactly what we need!

The characteristics are listed in this letter and reinforce the argument that the readers of this letter should not be enticed to return to Judaism since what they have in Christ is the only means of salvation (it is necessary) and the Mediator of this New Covenant is totally sufficient for every need we might ever have.

The first attribute is that He is holy. This is a different word than is typically translated holy in the New Testament. The typical use of the word “holy” is associated with being “set apart” for special use. Most people associate “holy” with the idea of being “free from wickedness” and being “pious.” That is exactly what the word means in this verse.

The second attribute, innocent or harmless, is related to what we might associate with children, especially a baby. A baby may hit you in the face as you are holding the child, but there was no intent to harm you. We might even extend this idea to include the condition of Adam before the fall. It is somewhat related to being without hidden agendas and being trustful of others.

“Undefiled” implies purity and being unimpaired by defects. During His earthly ministry Jesus associated with publicans and sinners but He was not contaminated by that contact. He did not participate in whatever was impairing them or causing them to be less than pure.

The description that He is “separated from sinners” does not mean that He was or is isolated from them. It is somewhat like being **in** the world but not being **of** the world. Today, the separation is seen in that He is separated because of His position of being higher than the heavens, but He is accessible to all who come to His throne of grace.

Jesus could meet these qualifications whereas the Levitical priest could not because of

their weakness. They held their position not because of the perfection of their character (in that they were weak in their Adamic humanity) but by virtue of their heritage and appointment under the Law.

After the Law was in effect, God swore an oath to initiate a new priesthood. The Law of Moses made no provision for a priesthood from the tribe of Judah. Since our High Priest is from the tribe of Judah, according to His human ancestry, then there must have been a change in Moses' Law. 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 that we are free to do the will of God. We obey, not because of outward compulsion (commandments), but because of inward constraint of the love of God that is in our hearts. The indwelling Holy Spirit enables us to fulfill the "righteousness of the Law" as we yield to Him.

Since the message of this letter was to convince the Hebrew Christians to not even consider going back to Judaism, what is the application for us today in the Church? There is little (no) temptation to reinstate the old sacrificial system along with the rites and rituals that the Israelite had practiced. The temptation for us comes in the form of thinking that the rites and rituals associated with our Christian faith are replacements for the reality of what these activities actually represent. We also are vulnerable to the kind of thinking that says we should do particular activities that are in agreement with the will of God because we are "commanded" to do so. Such thinking is Judaistic (if I may coin a new word) in that we are no longer operating under "grace" but under the "Law." Our motivation must be "the freedom we have in Christ" that results in doing God's will and walking in His way which leads to life. Operating from the standpoint of "obeying commands" leads to condemnation. We see the alternative available to us summed up in the first four verses of Romans chapter 8.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit [that is the freedom that we have in Christ]. (Brackets [] added.)