

Sermon Transcript
12.14.2025
Hebrews 7:15-19

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- Good morning. Happy 103rd anniversary of Orville and Wilbur's first attempt to fly the Wright Flyer at Kitty Hawk.
- In honor of this special aviatric anniversary, I want to begin with an illustration involving an airplane. Some of you have heard it before, but bear with me.
- Many of you know that I did some mission work in South Sudan between 2009 and 2012, right in the sweet spot between civil wars. Given the nearly non-stop conflict for the past half century, most of the pastors had never received much formal education so my job was to do a few years of theological training with about 20 or so men.
- On the way there we would first fly to Uganda & then take a little short-haul flight to S. Sudan. Given that it was such a short flight & a really small prop plane, we'd be flying under 10K ft.
- Being so low, we could see quite a bit of the landscape: the turns of the Nile river, mountains and hills, safari preserves, and small villages. I remember staring out the window at awe that I was experiencing Africa in person. The plane was old and rickety so I thought about crashing and it occurred to me that even if we survived the crash, we were in trouble since most of the area was either inhabited by crocodiles, lions, leopards, and hippos, or it was also the general area of Joseph Kony, the notorious Ugandan warlord.
- But after about 45 minutes of anxiety, we would land at Yei Airport which was just a dirt strip and one little freestanding concrete block building and we'd be picked up by one of the pastors. Then we would drive about 30 minutes to the compound.
- We'd have to stay on the dirt road since many of the surrounding areas hadn't been cleared of mines. And again, as we drove, I would sit and stare out the window, transfixed on the images of villages composed of traditional huts called Tukul, women carrying yellow jerrycans of water on their heads, kids running up and down the road waving and staring at us strangers while kicking deflated soccer balls. And I remember thinking, now THIS is Africa.
- Then we would arrive & disembark at the compound & I'd spend the next week eating, drinking, talking, dancing & singing with Sudanese pastors and I'd think, now THIS is experiencing Africa.
- And to some degree, each of those were correct. There is a sense in which you can experience something by viewing from a plane, but there is a different experience by van, and then still another experience in-person.
- And I was thinking about that as we get further into the weeds of Hebrews. To a degree there's a sense in which Hebrews is intended to be read in one sitting. The author will later call this book a "brief word of exhortation." Like looking out a plane's window, reading the book in one sitting allows you to see the contours of the land, the twists and turns, the mountains and valleys.

- But at the same time, you miss some of the details. For that you need a lower and slower approach and that's what we're doing with this sermon series. We're breaking things down, but at the same time we need to keep the context in mind lest we miss the forest for the trees.
- The reality is that we need both approaches. We need the 10,000 foot and the boots on the ground views.
- If we go too fast & soar too high, we'll miss a lot of the breathtaking details of the book, but if we go too slow and get too much into the linguistic weeds, we'll miss the flow. So here is what I want to recommend.
- Especially while we're in chapters 7-10, the real heart of the book, I want to encourage you to set aside time to read the whole book in one or two sittings once a week or at least once a month. That will then supplement our much more intentional pace and more detailed approach as we work through the meat. With that in mind, let's turn to Hebrews 7. We'll be in vss. 15-19, but first let's pray.
- Self, others, me.
- As we began, we talked about not missing the forest for the trees so let's back up to remember the context. Hebrews 7-10 is the heart of the book, the meat so to speak.
- And the entire book is an apologetic, an argument for the supremacy, sufficiency and superiority of Jesus Christ.
- Christ is better is the overarching theme of the book & the author expresses that in various ways. Better than the angels in chapters 1 & 2, both by virtue of His deity & His humanity respectively. He is better than Moses in chapter 3. Better than Joshua and the sabbath rest in chapter 4.
- Remember the historical context. The Hebrews were facing persecution. As we'll see towards the end of the book, some have been beaten, some imprisoned, some had their possessions confiscated. As a result of their sufferings, they're being tempted to recant, to fall away, to apostatize, to leave the confines of the church for the seeming safety of the synagogue. To go back to the shadows of the OT law.
- So the author writes the book to show why doing that would be foolish and futile. To forsake what is superior for what is inferior is absurd.
- After a brief parenthesis about the danger of falling away in chapter 6, the author comes back to the theme of Christ's supremacy in chapter 7.
- He does so by drawing out the implications of Psalm 110. We saw it quoted in chapter 1 where the author noted that the fact that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father with His enemies under His feet is evidence of His superiority. But the author keeps reading and reads about the Lord's scepter and power, both pointing to His authority as the messianic king.
- But then He comes across verse 4 which says this:
 - *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."* (Psalm 110:4)
- So not only is this messianic figure king, but also priest.
- But the problem is that those offices are bifurcated in the OT law. Priests come from the tribe of Levi while kings come from Judah. In fact, there are a number of notorious examples of things going really bad when kings tried to do priestly stuff. Saul lost his kingdom for that reason, other kings were struck with leprosy.

- That's why the reference to Melchizedek is significant. The Christ, the messiah, the Lord wouldn't just be any priest, but a priest after the order of Melchizedek, the OG priest/king.
- What's that mean? That's what we've been unraveling over the past few weeks.
- As we've noted, chapters 7-10 are an apologetic for the better priesthood that Christ represents. His priesthood isn't simply new, but inherently better. Whereas the old was a shadow, the new is substance. Whereas the old was impotent, the new is effectual.
- So last time we considered the change in priesthood and change in law as we saw in vs. 12 which says:
 - *For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. (Hebrews 7:12)*
- Since the law mandated that only those descended from Levi could serve as priests, it was necessary that the law be changed if a non-Levite like Jesus were to be appointed as our high priest.
- And as we saw last time, the good news is that the law can be changed. Unlike the promises of God which are unchangeable, the law was always intended to be temporary. It was like a babysitter, like a parenthesis in God's eternal plan.
- We'll continue to explore the implications of that this morning so let's pick it up in vs. 15-16.

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. (Hebrews 7:15-16)

- Last week we saw in verse 14,
 - *For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (Hebrews 7:14)*
- Notice the word evident. This week we begin with this becomes even MORE evident.
- What becomes more evident?
 - The fact that there has been a transition in the priesthood and the law. The fact that with the advent of the new, the old has been rendered out of order. Or, as a former pastor of mine used to say, the altar is closed.
 - As a result, the audience isn't facing a confusing and vague situation where they're having to figure out what option is best among various potential alternatives.
 - For example, my family been doing that this past month with the elders as we have to wade through health insurance options given the escalating costs. And there are pros and cons to the various options.
 - But that isn't the case here in Hebrews. There is no question, no ambiguity in regards to what is better. The supremacy and superiority of Christ's priesthood & the obsolescence of the Levitical priesthood are obvious for God has made it obvious in the promise of a new priesthood after the order of Melchizedek and reality of the resurrection of Christ.

- Speaking of the resurrection, that could be implied in the word “arises.” Another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek. That word in Greek is often used of the resurrection.
- It also potentially alludes to 1 Samuel 2 which we talked about last time. If you recall, Eli’s priesthood was rejected by the LORD given the wickedness of his sons Hophni and Phinehas. In speaking of the rejection of Eli’s family, God says this in vs. 35
 - *And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.* (1 Samuel 2:35)
- In the LXX the word translated raise is the same as in Hebrew’s arises.
- Regardless of the possible echoes in the word arises, we see hints of the resurrection in the phrase “by the power of an indestructible life.” Some scholars think that is referring to the resurrection, others that it is referring to His deity, but I think its probably a mix of both given that His resurrection can’t be separated from His deity.
- And this qualifies Him as a priest. This is another theme we see in Hebrews. We talked about it before with the image of Christ’s sonship. There is a sense in which Christ is eternally son, but there is also a sense in which Christ became a son. If you remember the phrase “today, I have begotten you.”
- Christ was always the eternal son of God, the second person of the Trinity, but He had to accomplish sonship in the sense of being the messianic king of Israel. He “became” son in this sense at His resurrection or at His exaltation.
- And the same is true of His priesthood. In some sense, Christ was functioning as a priest when He offered Himself up on the cross, but in another sense, He became priest at His resurrection since He now perpetually lives to make intercession for the saints.
- So that’s what the author is referencing in saying that Christ has become a priest on the basis of the power of an indestructible life and not on the basis of biological descent.
- When it came to the Levitical priesthood, there was no moral requirement that someone had to meet to qualify for the priesthood. They could disqualify themselves, but they were presumed in, they were born into the position by virtue of their genealogy. All one needed was the right family tree. They didn’t earn it.
- But Christ has earned His priesthood. He has conquered death and lives perpetually as a sign of His victory.
- And this relates to Melchizedek since, as we’ve seen in previous weeks, Melchizedek had no recorded genealogy which the author interpreted typologically as without beginning or end of days in Hebrews 7:3.
- So this typology is being stretched and squeezed to get every last drop. We see that even in the word likeness. Like in vs. 3 where it says that Melchizedek “resembles” the Son of God, so here Christ arises in the likeness of Melchizedek.
- As we mentioned weeks back, this helps to clarify that the author isn’t saying that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate Christ. The author isn’t saying Melchizedek is Christ, but that He is a type, a pattern, a picture, of Christ.
- There is a resemblance or a likeness. Christ is not a priest because He is descended from Melchizedek, but because He shares a similar trait.

- In particular, the likeness referred to here is eternity. Again, the author isn't saying that Melchizedek was actually literally eternal, but literarily so. And this isn't only something implied from Genesis 14, but from Psalm 110:4 as the next verse shows.
- We'll get there in a second, but first, notice the phrase legal requirement of bodily descent.
- If you've been following along with Hebrews, you'll note that this is a phrase that is pregnant with the connotation of weakness.
- First, we have mention of the law. As we've seen and as we'll continue to see, the law represents futility and weakness in the book. In fact, in verse 19, we'll see that the law makes nothing perfect. The law stands in some contrast with promise throughout Hebrews. The law is weak, the promise is powerful, the law demands, the promise delivers, the law prescribes, the promise provides. So by referencing the law here, the author is implying that the Levitical priesthood was weaker because it was based on a weaker foundation of law rather than promise.
- Second, we have the adjective bodily which also often signifies weakness. We see that for instance in chapter 2 where Christ's taking on a body implies His ability to sympathize with our weaknesses. And in chapter 4 it says this
 - *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* (Hebrews 4:15)
- Yes, Christ is human, but not merely human whereas the Levitical priests were merely men.
- So the author has already been setting the stage to contrast the law with promise and the fallen body with the resurrected body to show all of the myriad ways that Christ is superior to the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood.
- As Paul writes in Romans 8:3
 - *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...* (Romans 8:3)
- The law is all command and no provision, all demand and no power. That's why the law brings condemnation. As you've heard before,
 - Run, John, run, the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands.
Far better news the gospel brings, it bids me fly and gives me wings.
- So the Levitical priesthood is based on law and therefore based on what is insufficient and ineffectual, but Christ's priesthood is efficacious and sufficient because it is based in power. The power of an indestructible life made abundantly manifest in the resurrection.
- As Acts 2 says:
 - *God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.* (Acts 2:24)
- What was impossible under the old is possible under the new because it was impossible for death to defeat the author of life. That's why Christ had to lay down His life. No one took it from Him, no one could take it from Him. He had to humble Himself in order to experience death:

- *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7–8)*
- As we talked about in Phil, that's the beauty of incarnation & the meaning of Christmas. The sovereign, omnipotent God of the universe became man, became weak, condescended to the lowest lows of humanity, to a manger, a cross & a tomb that His mission might be accomplished.
- Let's keep going. Vs. 17.

For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." (Hebrews 7:17)

- If you want a defense of the method of slow and methodical expository preaching, it can be found here. Notice that everything the author is saying is simply unraveling the word "forever."
- Remember where this quote is coming from. Psalm 110:4 which says:
 - *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." (Psalm 110:4)*
- What does that mean? The author of Hebrews takes like 4 chapters to expound upon it.
- IOW, he hasn't merely read it & moved on. He has decided to stop & camp out for a bit, take the word "forever" & ponder all of the implications of that one word. He's mining Psalm 110 for gold.
- He literally fleshes this one word out over the span of multiple chapters to get every last ounce of treasure out of it.
- He is saying, here is what that word means. That means that Christ's priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood because it is permanent, perpetual, eternal.
- As Melchizedek has no literary beginning or end in Gen, so Christ has no literal beginning or end.
- That's what it means to be a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.
- And again, this isn't just a fact that the author tells us so we can impress our friends in Bible trivia. The point is pastoral. This is why you must hold fast to your confession. Because you belong to a priest who has conquered death. What is the point in founding your hope for eternal life on priests who die?
- This reminds me of going to the gym and seeing trainers who seem terribly out of shape and thinking, why would I trust you to help me get healthy?
- Or when prosperity preachers claim that God wants you to be healthy if you just have enough faith, but then they get cancer.
- Physician heal thyself.
- The fact that Christ has been raised, the fact that Christ is eternal, means everything for where we attach our hope and whether or not our hope dies. Our hope is alive because the object of that hope lives.
- The fact that Christ is a perpetual priest, means that we have a perpetual hope, rather than the transient, temporary, wishful thinking offered under the former administration.
- Let's keep going.

- Vss. 18-19.

For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 7:18–19)

- Last week we saw the symbiotic relationship between the law and the Levitical priesthood. As we saw then, the priesthood was unable to provide perfection and thus a change was necessary. But if you're going to change the priesthood you have to change the law since the law mandated the provision of the priesthood.
- Vss. 18-19 continue this same train of thought by showing the inability of the law to provide perfection. As we see here, the law made nothing perfect.
- And by perfect remember how we defined that last week. Perfection relates to achieving the desired outcome. That outcome is bridging the separation between God & man. That was what the Levitical priesthood and the law could not do for various reasons that the author will expound in the next few chapters.
- As we talked about last time, the garden was a type of the temple. It was where God & man dwelt together, but with sin, man is exiled from the garden & forbidden to re-enter, separated from his Creator. The temple offered a sliver of light, whereby 1 man could enter, but only occasionally & after dramatic & elaborate ritual. By & large, rather than representing man's communion with God, the temple was a vivid reminder of the distance, the transcendence of the divine.
- Remember the historic context here. To draw near to the most holy place was to invite certain death. Only the high priest could enter, and only once a year, and only by means of sacrifice, and only after an elaborate preparatory process.
- In fact, everything in the temple was ordered to keep the people away. Think about it like concentric circles. In the center was the holy of holies that was accessible only to the high priest and only once a year, then there was the holy place which was also only accessible to priests, and then you had the court of men, accessible for Jewish men, then the court of women, accessible to Jewish women, then the court of Gentiles.
- Each of those courts separated the people not only from each other, but from God.
- The entire temple edifice, the entire sacrificial system represented the fundamental distance between God and man.
- So the law couldn't afford access, it couldn't offer perfection which is what perfection entails. Perfection means to bring to completion the intended end. If the end or telos or goal of the law and sacrifices was to bridge the divide between God and man, it could never do that.
- But we see that goal here in this passage. Notice the contrast. The law made nothing perfect, but the better hope in the gospel allows us the privilege of drawing near.
- In other words, in Christ, all can draw near. That is because Christ's sacrifice has accomplished what the priests could not. That is what perfection entails. It is finished. Atonement has been accomplished. Perfection has been achieved. Access is granted.
- And because the previous covenant and previous priesthood were imperfect, they have been set aside, rendered invalid, abolished.

- So, it isn't like there are now two potential ways to access God. You can go through the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant. No, God has rendered the old void. It has been set aside, declared obsolete.
- And again, this is because the old was impotent. Notice how the author describes it, as weak and useless and imperfect.
- Now, by saying its useless, that doesn't mean the law is good for nothing. Just that it wasn't good for the purpose of achieving perfection. Going back to the image of an airplane, think about trying to take a plane to the moon. Its useless for that particular purpose, though its great for getting around down here. Likewise, Paul will say that the law is useful & good for achieving certain ends such as showing God's commands, showing our inability to live up to God's standards, etc. The law is good for some purposes, but useless in providing perfection.
- Why was it weak and useless? Well, for at least two reasons:
 - First, because we are weak. That's part of the author's argument. The priests themselves were imperfect so that rendered the system imperfect.
 - Imagine that I break into your house and you have a gun to defend yourself. If you're at all competent with a firearm, you can fend me off. But now take that same weapon and put it in the hands of a toddler and this perfectly sufficient weapon is rendered useless.
 - That's the first part of the insufficiency of the law. Its rendered useless by the fact that the priests themselves were corrupted by sin. They couldn't offer sufficient sacrifices for the people for they first had to atone for their own sin. It was a never-ending cycle.
 - But there is another level to the insufficiency of the law. And that is the fact that the law itself was actually not designed to provide perfection. It was designed as a sign, a shadow, as we saw last week, a guardian.
 - So let's go back to the previous example. I break into your house and you have a really cool non-firing replica model of a gun. That changes things. Maybe you can throw that fake gun at me, but that's about it. A fake gun isn't a very promising means of protection and likewise the sacrifices of the Levitical system aren't an effective means of perfection.
 - The author will talk about that later when he'll mention the fact that the blood of bulls and goats could never actually atone. So, even if those priests would have been perfect, the Levitical priesthood would not have been able to provide perfection because a goat couldn't atone for humanity.
 - We'll see that in chapters 9-10. For instance,
 - *he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:12)*
 - *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)*
- So the Levitical law and the Levitical priesthood were always designed to be deficient because they were always designed to point forward to something else. They were always designed as a type, a picture. God didn't plan Jesus as a backup. He didn't plan for

Jesus once the Mosaic covenant failed. Rather, He planned the Mosaic covenant's insufficiency in order to prepare the way for Christ.

- Like some tech companies design products with planned obsolescence, God designed the law to fail so that the promise of Christ would succeed. As we saw last time if perfection would have been attainable under the previous covenant, we wouldn't have needed a new one.
- But what the law and Levitical priesthood were unable to do, God has done in Christ.
- He has provided perfection, which means access to God.
- Notice how this stands out in stark contrast to the old system. Look at Exodus 19:22:
 - *Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them. (Exodus 19:22)*
- Only the priests could come near and only after consecration.
- In Exodus 24:2 we read:
 - *Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. (Exodus 24:2)*
- Not only did the Mosaic covenant and the Levitical law and the priesthood and the temple sacrifices not provide perfection, but they provided a nearly constant reminder of imperfection. The daily smell of blood and burnt flesh, the daily sound of bleating sacrificial offerings, the daily sight of the temple were all regular reminders of the transcendence of God and just how distant we are from Him. They were powerful and pungent testimonies to the fact that sin was never truly atoned for fully and finally.
- The entire OT is full of accounts of God choosing various persons to come near because the people as a whole were forbidden. But in Christ, the walls separating the courts have been abolished and the curtain separating God from the people has been torn down.
 - "God admits us into a familiar approach to himself, which the fathers were not permitted to have. Then he who still holds to the shadows of the Law, or seeks to restore them, not only obscures the glory of Christ, but also deprives us of an immense benefit; for he puts God at a great distance from us, to approach whom there is a liberty granted to us by the Gospel." (John Calvin)
- So one of the ways then that we apply this text is by experiencing the awe of this privilege. We have a tendency to assume and to presume upon God's grace. Of course, we can draw near. We've been disciplined by our egalitarian therapeutic age to presume upon God's kindness. We need to be reminded of the stories of Uzzah reaching out to touch the ark and being struck dead, and the stories of the elaborate rituals involved in entering the temple. We need those stories to remind us that we don't come on the basis of our own merits or rights. We come on the basis of grace.
- So one way we misapply this text is to come presumptuous. To try to draw near by works rather than by grace. That is akin to offering a sacrifice to atone for sins.
- To attempt to earn your way into heaven is to put yourself back under the law. A law which God Himself has said is impotent. So that's one way to misapply this.
- But another way we misapply is by shrinking back in fear.
- As Hebrews 10:39
 - *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Hebrews 10:39)*

- So we don't come in pride and presumption, upon the basis of our own assumed merits, but we do come.
- As the book holds out, there is no neutrality. We are either drifting away or drawing near. So may we apply the words we read back in chapter 4:
 - *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Hebrews 4:16)
- As we talked about then, its an incredible thing that the throne is described as a throne of grace and not judgment. And that we can not only draw near, but that we don't do so with knock on wood, wishful thinking, but in confidence. Or as chapter 7 says, we have a "better hope." As we've said before hope in Scripture is more than wishful thinking.
- We come with confidence because our hope is anchored to Christ Himself and He has made purification for our sin and is seated at the right hand of God.
- So especially at Christmas, this is a time to think about the immanence of God. Yes, God is transcendent. Yes He is the sovereign Creator of the heavens and the earth.
- But in Christ, God has come near. Immanuel, God with us. The word has become flesh and dwelt among us.
- And He has beckoned us to draw near in hope. To believe that it is finished. That the altar is closed, but the throne room is empty.
- We respond to this invitation as we pray, and as we partake of communion, a reminder of Christ's presence among His people, and as we sing.
- Let's begin with prayer.

Communion

- Fence table
- As we often talk about, communion is a multi-faceted meal.
- We look backward to Christ's death and forward to His return.
- We look inward at our imperfection and outward at His perfection.
- And there is both a vertical and horizontal element. Communion represents not only the fact that we can draw near to God, but to each other. As we feast from one loaf or drink from one cup, metaphorically at least, so we recognize that this meal represents our communion with God and each other.
- So, I want to ask you to take a second and consider the body, the church.
- 1 Corinthians 11:29 says:
 - *For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.* (1 Corinthians 11:29)
- In context there this has to do with the church being divided in the process of communion. A sacrament intended to unify the church was actually dividing it.
- So I want you to consider the body this morning. Spend a second and look around. Introverts this might make you uncomfortable, but it's a medicinal discomfort.
- Think about anyone you might have conflict with and resolve to seek resolution. Think about people you don't know and resolve to get to know them. Think about people who are suffering and resolve to pray for them.
- Let's take a second and ask the Lord to use this meal to unify and strengthen not just our individual lives, but this corporate expression of His body and bride.
- On the night...