

Sermon 132: Romans 11:28-32: God's gifts: Part Two

OUTLINE

Christ and the priesthood

INTRODUCTION

We are talking about what many people think will happen to Israel in the future. There are many who think that there will be a literal temple with literal priests and literal sacrifices. We have begun to show that this is impossible. Using our key for interpretation that all the promises are yes in Christ, and a view of God's promises that sees the fulfilments as larger than anticipated we have shown that the church is the foretold temple of Ezekiel. Today we continue to address these matters and will be looking at the question of a revived priesthood.

Christ and the priesthood

Turn to Hebrews 4:14. We will take a walk through some chapters here to demonstrate that there is no possible way that the Levitical priesthood can be revived by God at any future time, for it would be a slight on the gospel. This letter we know is written to Jews who were feeling the pressure of persecution to return to Judaism. The letter is written to demonstrate the superiority of Christ, that He is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, that He is a greater Highpriest and offers a greater sacrifice. The superiority of Christ as priest is begun in 4:14-16, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 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. 16 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.'

We have a list here of the ways in which Christ surpasses the Levitical priesthood. He ministers in heaven not on earth; He is not merely a man but the Son of God; He is an empathetic High priest who not only has superior qualifications but is still able to know our need and represent us to the Father; He is perfectly sinless and has enabled us to draw near with confidence for mercy unlike the OT tabernacle; and His priesthood is effective and so secures mercy and grace when we need it.

5:1-2 tells us that ordinary priests are sinful and need sacrifices and can only serve by God's appointment, 'For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.' v5-10 then point out that Christ has been appointed to the priesthood of Melchizedek by God and was perfect throughout His life, note especially v5-6 proving God's appointment, 'So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."' And v8-9 prove His sinlessness, 'Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.'

At the mention of Melchizedek he realises that he has made a statement that needs explanation but is not sure that the Hebrews are mature enough to hear it, so in a pastoral way he rebukes them and urges them on to maturity. There are all sorts of questions about

falling away and other important matters that he raises that we will have to discuss another time but notice at the end of his exhortation and encouragement he returns to this matter in 6:19-20 with the mention of Christ as our Highpriest in the order of Melchizedek, 'We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'

Now he is ready to explain the superiority of Christ's priesthood. 7:1-2, 'For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace.' He begins by taking us back to the first mention of M in the bible, to Gen. 14 where Abraham had rescued Lot and M had met him on his triumphant return and has received tithes from Abraham. M was a Gentile priest king, uniting in one person two offices that could not be united by an Israelite. He was a worshipper of YHWH. His names are significant M means the king of righteousness, or literally 'my King is righteousness.' And Salem, is the place of Jerusalem before Israel inhabited the land, and it means peace.

The book of genealogies presents this person without one and no death day details is something the writer picks up on to highlight that this fits with Christ who is from heaven and is resurrected. 7:3, 'He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.'

Next the writer using an idea we are not familiar with proves the superiority of M over Aaron by showing that Levi tithed through his representative Abraham to M, v4-10. And then M blesses Abraham, the writer uses this detail to argue the superiority of M over Abraham, note especially 7:7, 'It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.' The matter of tithing is significant because the Levites as the priests received tithes from Israel, but in this instance the Levites are shown to be the ones submitting to another's priesthood and tithing.

Verses 11-15 give us reasons why a new priesthood must replace the Levitical priesthood. Firstly, perfection is not attainable through the Levitical priesthood and this is indicated by the revealing of a new and future Melchizedekian priesthood as prophesied in Ps. 110:4. 7:11, 'Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?' Secondly, a change in priesthood implies a change in law, v12, 'For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.' This cannot be overstressed. A change in law means that there is no longer any divine warrant for the former state of affairs. If God changes the law, then God's authority rests in the new order and no longer in the old. If God has changed the law and appointed Christ into a new order of priests can we think of the Levitical being revived and making the law of Christ's priesthood no longer true? Impossible! Christ is qualified to serve as priest forever by virtue of His indestructible life, but we are told in v18 that the Levitical priesthood was weak and to be superseded, 'For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.' Law changes indicate weakness and the need for improvement that is why Christ is a priest forever, there is no need to improve it and return to any other form of priesthood, the Levitical priesthood is forever replaced, and the Roman Catholic and other orders of priests destroyed.

This was an important point at the time of the Reformation. If we apply the rule of Sola Scriptura, we see that the NT only teaches that elders and deacons are given to the church to be its leaders. The Roman Catholic Church recognises that the NT does not support the office of NT priests. Listen to Raymond Brown a Roman Catholic Commentator who makes this point: "When we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament, it is striking that while there are pagan priests and Jewish priests on the scene, no individual Christian is ever specifically identified as a priest. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the high priesthood of Jesus by comparing his death and entry into heaven with the actions of the Jewish high priest who went into the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle once a year with a blood offering for himself and for the sins of his people. But it is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews does not associate the priesthood of Jesus with the Eucharist or the Last Supper; neither does he suggest that other Christians are priests in the likeness of Jesus. In fact, the once-for-all atmosphere that surrounds the priesthood of Jesus in Hebrews 10:12-14, has been offered as an explanation of why there are no Christian priests in the New Testament period."¹ Why then did the RCC end up having priests? The office of priest is based not on scripture but on early church practices which are given authority through the Catholic view on tradition.

The reasons are stacked further in 7:20-22, we are told that where the old order of priests were not sworn in by oath, Christ's priesthood is sworn in by God under oath, making the priesthood permanent, 'And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, 21 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.'

Can you see how this issue is directly relevant to the question of can there be a future Levitical priesthood? These first century Jews thought they could return to a Levitical priesthood, but these arguments prove that it is impossible. God's oath seals Christ's priesthood as the last one as it accomplishes the purposes of the priesthood and stands forever. There can be no other priesthood coming in after it.

In v23-25 he points out that the Levitical priests kept dying but Christ is able to save us to the uttermost by virtue of His never dying life. That by this never dying life He 'always lives to make intercession' for us. V23-25, 'The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 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.'

The idea that Jesus is now presently interceding for us is one of great comfort but one that has also brought some misunderstanding. For example, because Jesus is called an advocate in 1 John 2:1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." On account of this we think of Jesus as a type of defence lawyer and the devil as a type of prosecutor. We have heard many sermons where the courtroom scene is laid out and the devil raises an accusation and it is Christ who answers by dying in our place. This scene is imaginary and helpful to illustrate various truths. However, we must not think that right now in heaven every sin of every Christian is being brought in accusation before God's throne and every sin of every Christian being answered by Christ's defence. We have already shown that the devil has been cast out of heaven, out of the courtroom as it were because Christ has made His offering for sin, perfecting forever those who are being sanctified,

1 <http://www.bereanbeacon.org/new-blog/2015/11/16/the-priesthood-by-a-converted-priest>

having silenced the devil's accusations in one blow by one offering forever. As we ponder Christ's present intercession we can think of Him as representing and praying for us. Firstly, we should think of Christ's bodily presence in heaven at the right hand of the Father as interceding for us by representing us before the Father. The role of high priest as a representative is a well known one to anyone who is familiar with the OT. In the OT you had the high priest, an individual, representing the whole nation. On his shoulders he would have 2 onyx stones known as the stones of remembrance, from these a chest piece was hung with 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. The high priest acted on Israel's behalf as their representative. Likewise Christ represents His church before the Father. God could be with the people, in their midst because of the ministry of the high priest. However, the argument of Hebrews is that Christ is a better high priest in every way. Aaron had to offer sacrifices for his own sins, Christ did not. Aaron could only offer the blood of animals which cannot remove sin, Christ offered a perfect human life. Aaron died and had to be replaced, Christ lives forever. Aaron's sacrifices needed to be repeated year after year, Christ was offered once for all time. Aaron was an imperfect human being who could only ever represent us imperfectly, but not Christ. Aaron represented Israel symbolically in stones and dress. Christ identified Himself with us by becoming flesh, and by uniting us to Himself in salvation by His Spirit. So His representation of us before the Father in heaven is perfect. This is the way that Phillip Hughes puts it, regarding what the believer needs to stand before a holy God he says, "He needs a holiness not his own, made available to him by the Lamb of God who has made atonement for his sins and who interposes Himself as his representative in the heavenly sanctuary. And this is the representation which Christ fulfils as He appears in the presence of God for us." In other words, Christ as He is right now, as our representative, He is your holiness. Whenever God wants to look upon your holiness, He does not look upon the incomplete, unfinished work of our sanctification. He looks at His perfect Son who is seated at His right hand as our representative.

It was this very thought that John Bunyan marks as what his faith clung to when he was converted. Writing about his conversion he says, "One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God." (Piper). So you are always represented before the Father, but not in yourself, but in Christ. And in Christ you are represented to God not in your sins, nor in your imperfect sanctification but represented by the person of Christ who has died to pay your sin debt, but brings to the table more than a mere perfect human death. He also lived a perfect life of obedience, and is perfectly righteous. This is the significance of Christ's ongoing presence in heaven. No one can kill Him, no one can pull Him down, no one can change His righteousness. And we are hidden in Him.

There is no new suffering that Christ does in heaven. There is no more blood that He offers. Every time we sin He does not squeeze another drop of blood onto an altar in heaven to pay for it. The payment for our sins is complete, no more suffering or payment needs to be made. His physical presence before the Father as our representative puts His perfection forward perpetually in our place instead of our sins. Hebrews 10:11-14 makes very clear that the work of Christ in paying for sin is finished, and is indicated in Christ being seated at

the Father's right hand, 'And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.'

This is a most important point to make for Roman Catholics believe in ongoing sacrifices in the mass, and Dispensationalists look for more sacrifices in a future literal temple, this cannot be. Christ has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. The Catholics teach, 'This divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner.'

Secondly, we need to realise that Jesus is praying for us. Paul's use of the word intercession in Romans 8 has the primary meaning of prayer, regarding the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us, Paul uses the word 'intercede', and 'prayer', interchangeably. Romans 8:26-27 (ESV) "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. [27] And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." The wrong picture to have in your mind is the Son begging an unwilling Father. No the Father has appointed the priesthood of Christ, He has ordered that all things should be done in response to His perfect asking, and that based on His perfection any answer should be given. The prayers of Christ are not new offerings, but rather requests based on His cross work. God has appointed it that not only should Christ secure the Church's blessing by His priestly work of dying, but that the application of the benefits of that work should be given in response to Christ's asking. It is accomplished through the priestly dying of Christ, and applied by the priestly asking of Christ. Picturing how the mechanics of this all works out is very difficult. But here is a picture. Please do not take this picture literally it is simply an attempt to illustrate a possible construction. The Father is seated on His throne, and the Son beside Him. Both are at rest, there is no frantic anxiety of a military consultation room with surprised and worried faces, pondering what possible response they could make to the devil's latest trick. Picture the events leading up to Pentecost. Both are seated, they turn to look at each other, both are in perfect harmony with each other, the Son stands and asks for the promised Holy Spirit to be sent to the Church, and the Father gladly gives. This was something Christ's death already secured, not some new aspect of His work that He has to work for. An out working of the already accomplished redemption, not a new work. But Christ is still a priest, and continues to function in that capacity even now as the mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). He prays for us as He prayed for Peter when Satan asked to sift him as wheat, Luke 22:31-32, '

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." We see Christ praying for our unity, the ingathering of the elect, our holiness and preservation in His high priestly prayer, 'Holy Father, keep them in your name,' 17:11; 'Holy Father, keep them in your name,' 17:17; "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.' 17:20; 'that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' 17:21. We also see Christ interceding for Stephen when he is dying, Jesus reveals Himself to the martyr and he sees Jesus standing not sitting at the right hand of the Father, He is praying for the Stephen and the church which is just about to experience persecution.

Chapter 7 then ends with a sevenfold description of His perfection and sufficiency as our Highpriest. 'Holy, innocent, unstained' that is pure in His relationship before God, with

mankind and within Himself. 'separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens,' He is one of us but pure and His exaltation marks His entrance into the direct presence of God and to His throne for perfect ministry on our behalf. He has offered up Himself, being both the offering and the offerer, once for all. Here we see that the Roman Catholic practice of repeating mass is a denial of Christ. And finally we do not have a servant but the Son Himself, the Second person of the Trinity, God Himself as our priest. In this our salvation is secure from sin, the devil and all the things the world can throw at us. We need no other saviour, no other priest, no other temple, no other offering. He is enough for both Jews and Gentiles, and it is our zeal for the glory of this Saviour that we protest to any revival of shadows and imperfect types.