

Sermon 20: Out With the Old and in With the New

OUTLINE

Planned Obsolescence
Prophesied Credentials
Perfect Results

INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite verses in the book of Acts is 6:7, 'And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.' This is a verse with stories behind it. I can imagine that the priests who were eye witnesses to the curtain that had been torn had their world turned upside down by the death and resurrection of Christ. More than any other Israelite they would have appreciated the significance of the temple, and the sacrifices. For a large number of them to follow Jesus Christ, believing Him to be their High priest; their sacrifice, and having put an end to their whole identity and history would have been an emotional rollercoaster with great sadness as centuries long practices and institutions came to an end, and great joy as something greater than the temple and sacrifices has come. It seems that someone with this set of concerns has written the book of Hebrews. We don't know who the author is, but one of my favorite suggestions is that it was written by Barnabas. He was a Levite, Acts 5:6, and the author of Hebrews is deeply aware of Levitical concerns. The book of Hebrews is written to Jews who have converted to Christ, but are tempted to return to escape persecution. The author has been showing how Jesus is better than all the elements of their one-time religion, and how the OT anticipated the coming of Christ, and what has come is greater by far than the old. He is greater than the angels who gave the law; greater than Moses who gave the law; greater than Joshua who brought them into the land, and now he is demonstrating that Jesus is a better high priest with a better priesthood after the order of Melchizedek.

Try and feel for a moment how this would feel for the Jew. The priesthood was an institution along with the temple and sacrifices. The Jews identity was bound up with the temple and priesthood. Every year three times a year their men would have to go to Jerusalem to the place God has appointed, and the forgiveness of the sins of Israel would be obtained through the actions of the High priest. The author of Hebrews feels this difficulty and is going into deep biblical explanations to help them see that Christ has a priesthood that is given by God; revealed by God and is superior to the Levitical priesthood. We saw last time that the author sought to prove that Jesus priesthood was superior to Aaron's by showing that M. is superior to Abraham, from whom Levi and the Levitical priesthood comes. Today we continue looking at this train of thought. He has shown that Jesus has a superior priesthood to Levi; but now he really wants to highlight that the Levitical priesthood was inferior and always intended to be replaced. We will divide his arguments under three headings. In v11-12 he will show that the Levitical priesthood was a case of planned obsolescence. Secondly in 13-17, Jesus prophesied credentials imply the inferiority of Levi's priesthood. And thirdly, we will see that Jesus priesthood is able to obtain the perfect results Levi's could not.

Planned Obsolescence

V11-12, '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? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.' Planned obsolescence or built in obsolescence is something we are familiar with, when a provider makes something to break to force you to buy a replacement. The OT has a type of built in obsolescence, it was always intended to be temporary. It was never intended to be God's final solution to our sin problems. You will see the mention of the word 'perfect' here in v11, and again in v19, these provide book ends highlighting the central argument of this section, the Levitical priesthood could not make the worshippers of God perfect therefore it had to be replaced with something better, namely Christ's priesthood.

The Levitical priesthood could not make perfect, what does this mean? The word perfect has a broad spectrum of meaning, it can mean mature all the way to new creation glorified perfection. Here it is in reference to what the work of Christ accomplished that the priestly laws and sacrifices could not, things that pertain to our salvation and there are several. As it pertains to justification Christ's sacrifice fully pays for sin not merely covering it over as the OT sacrifices did. As it pertains to sanctification, Christ's Spirit writes the law upon our hearts and brings about a true cleanness in God's eyes not merely a ceremonial cleanness. As it relates to final perfection, Christ has fulfilled Adam's unfinished obedience and secured by His death and priesthood the new heavens and the new earth. But in the foreground of the author's concern is drawing near to God, v19.

Think about the limitations of the Levitical priesthood on this front. The OT priesthood underlined our distance from God didn't it. The Israelite could not just wander into God's presence and worship any way they wanted. God reminded us through the priests and sacrifices that we are sinners, that our sin hinders us from approaching God. The death of a sacrificial animal was a not a bribe to sate a bloodthirsty God but a reminder that the wages of sin is death and being able to come into the presence of God and not dying was only enabled by God appointing that another pay your sin debt and die in your place. This is why Jesus died upon the cross. A priest had to be appointed to do this on your behalf, but the problem is every priest was also a sinner and so they too had to be cleansed with water and blood, and be properly attired to do this for anyone else. But even all but one priest could not go into the Holy of Holies, the inner room which represented the direct presence of God, His throne room. And this on only one day of the year. No Jew could peer into the holy place to see the altar of incense and the showbread and the lampstand; and only one priest got to go into the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept. There were layers of distance between a holy God and the sinful worshipper, the killing of a substitute was a layer, the need for a pure priest to serve on your behalf was another, the curtain between the outer court of the tabernacle and the holy place, and then another curtain between the holy place and the inner room of the Holy of Holies. And this on top of the other cleanliness laws when you could not approach God for worship like when you had touched a dead body. We can see that the function of the law which is to increase the knowledge of our sinfulness and judgement worthiness is plain. And the purpose of the law pointing beyond itself to one who would finally pay for sin and put an end to these ceremonies is present too. The sacrifices had to be repeated over and

over and liters of blood spilled because sin had not been finally dealt with, perfection had not been reached.

The author is saying that if the Levitical priesthood had been the one to perfect the people of God, if what they had was the goal and there was no room for improvement, then why did God introduce and prophesy another priesthood. You will remember that the biblical introduction of M. as a type in Gen. 14 pointing to Christ, and the prophecy in Ps. 110 by David have been presented as the biblical grounding of Jesus's Melchizedekian priesthood. This is an important argument to see. The Jews obeyed the law around the priesthood because it was revealed from God, they would need a biblical basis to now disregard the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices.

We see in v12 that the change of priesthood is part of a tapestry of things that need to change. The priesthood and the law are linked and you can't change one without the other, and on top of that the law and the covenant are linked and chapter 8 will show this reality. These Jews who had defined their lives by the law because it was God's word needed good arguments to help them see that they could leave these things behind and cling to Christ. Now in saying the law has changed we do have to be careful. Because the law represents God's moral character, and is written on every human heart in creation, we must distinguish the moral law of God captured in places like the 10 commandments from the ceremonial law of God that falls away with the coming of Christ. You are not under law in the sense that you are not under a covenant of works; or that you are not an Israelite under the Mosaic Covenant; or that you are no longer under the condemnation of the law, but we are still under law in the sense that we are obligated to obey God's moral law. Those laws that pointed to Christ are fulfilled and obsolete, but those laws that Christ commands of us are the obligation of every believer. Law still plays a large part in our lives in that we because we are saved gladly embrace God's will, live out His love and seek to glorify Him by obeying Him. Lawlessness is a definition of sin not a description of the Christian life.

Revealed Credentials

The necessity of Christ's credentials being different to the requirements for the Levitical priesthood are laid out next. V13-14, 'For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.' Here the author addresses the fact that Jesus is a priest who comes from the tribe of Judah. Now at first you might think that this disqualifies Jesus to be the high priest. Remember Uzziah, in 2 Chronicles 26:16-20 we see the pride of Uzziah as he as a descendant of Judah and now a king decides that he will offer incense in the temple like the priests. Azariah and 80 other priests stood against him. When he grew angry for being denied the right to offer incense reserved only for priests he grew angry, and it was then that the Lord struck him with leprosy. So technically, being from Judah, even being a king did not qualify you to be a Levitical priest and entitle you to serve in a Levitical way. But this is the strength of Jesus' descent from Judah, He has not come to be a priest like Aaron, but to improve and replace the Levitical priesthood. His being from Judah is in fact a supporting argument for the change from the Levitical priesthood. Now we know that the OT prophesies that the Messiah, the king will be from Judah. Gen. 49:10 in Jacob's prophecy to Judah reveals this, even speaking of his eschatological and

international reign, 'The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.' 2 Sam. 7:12-13 anticipates a Son of David who will sit on the throne forever, 'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.' He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, Rev. 5:5. It should not surprise us that one who is to be a Second Adam should be both king and priest as Adam was in the garden. But it is Ps. 110 that brings the truths of a king who will also be a priest in the order of Melchizedek together to describe the coming Messiah.

V15-17, 'This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." Another weakness of the Aaronic priesthood is that it legally required that a priest be of the right bodily descent, in other words have the right bloodline. Here we have underlined the superficial nature of the Levitical priesthood. A priest did not need to be born again to serve as a priest, even the high priest. What mattered was your external qualifications. To be the High Priest you needed to be Jewish; male; circumcised; a descendant of Aaron and of age to serve. He had to be married to a virgin not a widow, divorcee, gentile or former prostitute. He could not have a disability or deformity. In order to serve he had to be properly cleansed, free of wine, uncontaminated from dead bodies, dressed in the right clothes and properly ordained to the office. But none of these requirements spoke to moral character or spiritual state. Eli and his sons are examples of those who fulfilled the merely external requirements. More was needed, and in Christ we have one who is the perfect priest in heart, mind, body and spirit. Who is sinless, love filled, ardent in His worship of God and dedicated to fulfilling His priestly service on behalf of needy sinners perfectly. But more than that the author points to Christ's indestructible life. Being a royal priesthood in Him, we seek to imitate His holiness, His love for God and neighbor and His dedicated service. May we be preserved from the corrupt and indulgent priesthoods of Annas and Caiaphas, and Eli, and the compromise of Aaron and Jonathan Judges 18:30.

Priests died and their ability to serve came to an end; but Christ serves with the power of an indestructible life. There is a question the commentaries discuss here: is Christ's indestructible life as God or man in view? Is this speaking of Christ as the Alpha and Omega; or as the resurrected One? And the answer must be yes. As God in Him was life, John 1:4 who gives light to men; as man He is the resurrected one to whose human life we are united to by the Spirit and have life. You should think of the sledge hammer of Christ's divine and human life in the hypostatic union, distinct yet united crashing down on the tiny tack of our need for life and Jesus being so overqualified it is ridiculous. His life is indestructible on all counts, as God He cannot die; as the resurrected one He has conquered death and is invulnerable to all the effects of death, ageing, decay, etc. not only can He not die like a Levitical priest He is the overflowing stream of eternal life. Ps. 110:4 with the mention of forever is the biblical proof offered by the author.

Perfect Results

V18-19, '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.' The author is arguing why the Levitical law is inferior and must pass away. The first argument was that the Levitical law could not deliver what it pointed to, perfection; or deliver from what it highlighted, sin. The second argument was the superior and different qualifications of Jesus priesthood, a priest-king from Judah who has a never dying life. In this third and last argument we are considering the author shows that Jesus delivers what the law could not, a better hope by which we can now draw near to God. Both the idea of a better hope and drawing near have to do with the curtain in the temple. We see this combination of hope and the curtain in 6:19-20, '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.'

I want you to think of the tearing of the curtain in two parts, the first tearing of the curtain was the tearing of the literal curtain in the temple when Jesus died, and by this we now have access in prayer as forgiven sinners, being able to approach God's throne as children. Let me underline it this way, our access to God in prayer, bought and paid for by the finished work of Christ is a privilege greater than we can realize. Remember the psalmist and His desire to gaze upon God in the temple, Ps. 27:4, 'One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.' David sought it, we have been handed it in Christ. The most important application we can make from this is the ardent praise and worship that we will one day enjoy in heaven is ours now. To know God and be known by Him, all of the incumbrances of sin removed, and a free access to God to love and praise Him. It is priceless, any believer who knows the value of this resonates with the psalmist in 63:1-4, 'O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.' I felt very rebuked this week because I am ashamed at my lack of longing when the way is so open to the presence of God. Let me illustrate this with a famous story told by Donald Barnhouse about the wonderful access we now have in prayer: 'During his student days in France, Donald Grey Barnhouse was pastor of a little Evangelical Reformed Church in the French Alps. Once a week he went to a neighboring village for an instruction class. Each time he made the trip he passed the local priest, going on a similar errand in the opposite direction. They became good friends and often chatted together for ten minutes or so before they went their separate ways.

On one occasion the priest asked him why we Protestants do not pray to the saints. "Why should we?" Barnhouse asked. The priest launched an illustration of the way one might get an interview with the president of the French Republic. One could go the Ministry of Agriculture or to the Department of the Interior, etc.; any one of the cabinet members might succeed in opening the door of the president's office so that Barnhouse might see him. The priest's triumphant smile implied that the simplicity and clarity of the argument were such as to preclude any reply.

At that time Raymond Poincare was president of the Republic; he lived in the Palace of the Elysee in Paris—the equivalent of the White House. Barnhouse said

to his friend, "But, Monsieur le Cure, suppose that I were the son of Monsieur Poincare? I am living in the Elysee with him. I get up from the breakfast table and kiss him good-bye as he goes off to his office. Then I go down to the Ministry of the Interior and ask the fourth secretary of the second assistant if it is possible for me to see the Minister of the Interior. If I succeed in reaching his office, my request is for an interview with my papa."

The absurdity of a son's having to go through a father's assistants to reach him was at once apparent. The priest was thunderstruck as Barnhouse added that he was a child of God, an heir of God and joint-heir with Christ, and that he had been saved through the death of the Savior and thus had become a son with immediate access to the Father.¹

But there is another curtain I want you to see torn, that relates to our future and better hope. The temple is a picture of the universe. The outer courts represent this world, the holy place with the 7 lampstands representing the 7 then known planets, and the incense symbolising our prayers rising up to heaven, the holy place representing the second heaven. But the holy of holies represents the third heaven, God's throneroom. One day, when the trumpet sounds and Jesus returns, the curtain between this present evil age and the age to come will be torn. The sky will roll back like a scroll and the very presence of God from which we are separated right now will be removed. In Rev. 21 when you see the New Jerusalem descending to earth you are seeing heaven and earth now two divided places becoming one united place. Where once we were separated from the presence of God we will be with Him. He will wipe our tears. Rev 21:3-4, ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." The Levitical priests could never pay the sacrifice or serve perfectly to secure such a payment of sin that God could let us into His very presence, but Jesus has. The law and the Levitical priesthood could not make its worshippers perfect but Christ has and we can draw near to God now in prayer as welcome children, and one day we will be in His direct presence. Why go back to Judaism when it could not deliver cling to Christ who has won all of this for us.

1 R. Kent Hughes, [*Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*](#), vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 199-200.