

Sermon 21: Hebrews 7:20-28: Jesus the Superior High Priest

OUTLINE

Superior by oath
Superior by permanence
Superior by holiness

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the climactic point of the author's argument that Jesus is the Superior High Priest. The whole of chapter 7 has been rallying arguments to prove from every possible angle that the priesthood of Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood. All of this is in aid of the central point of this letter that we consider Christ and hold fast to Him. Think back to the argument of chapter 7, Jesus priesthood is greater because Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and by implication Levi, v1-10. Last week we looked at how the Levitical priesthood was weaker because it was always intended to be replaced by God; Christ's better priesthood was prophesied, and because the Levitical priesthood could not deliver from the sin it highlighted nor deliver the perfection it pointed to v11-19. We come now to the last part of this chapter and the closing points about why Jesus high priesthood is superior. He gives us three points where Jesus priesthood is superior. It is superior by oath v20-22, in other words how the office was appointed by God; it is superior by permanence v23-25, all other priests died but Jesus has an indestructible life; and Jesus holiness as priest is superior because He is holy in every way v26-28. Superior by oath, permanence and holiness.

Superior by oath

V20-22, ²⁰ 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.' Having highlighted the weakness of the Levitical priesthood, the author highlights another glaring difference, how Christ's priesthood was appointed in comparison to Aaron's. Based on Ps. 110:4 we are told that God swore and will not change His mind regarding Jesus being a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Being appointed by God Himself, and with an oath, and with an oath confirming an eternal priesthood, you cannot get any better credentials. Now we have already seen the importance of oaths when God swore by Himself to Abraham. The Jews would appreciate that this trumps everything else. The Levitical priesthood was authorized by God through the Mosaic Law, but we have already heard about how the law itself is inadequate and can make nothing perfect, v19. Aaron was anointed into the role of high priest by Moses performing the anointing; but God Himself spoke at Christ's baptism and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove rested on Christ when He was anointed for His priestly role. A. W. Pink lists 12 ways in which this chapter highlights Christ's superiority over Aaron, 'An analysis of our chapter reveals that Christ's superiority over Aaron appears in the following points. First, Aaron was but a man; Christ was "the Son of God".... Second, Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi; Christ, according to the flesh, sprang from the royal tribe (verse 14), and is the Priest-King. Third, Aaron was made "after the law of a carnal commandment"; Christ, "after the power of an endless life" (verse 16). Fourth, Aaron "made

nothing perfect"; Christ did (verse 19). Fifth, Aaron was unable to bring the sinner, "nigh unto God" (verse 19); Christ has (verse 25). Sixth, Aaron was not inducted into his priestly office by a Divine oath; Christ was (verse 21). Seventh, Aaron had many successors (verse 23); Christ had none. Eighth, Aaron died (verse 23); Christ "ever liveth" (verse 25). Ninth, Aaron was a sinner (verse 27); Christ was "separate from sinners" (verse 26). Tenth, Aaron was only the priestly head of an earthly people; Christ has been "made higher than the heavens" (verse 26). Eleventh, Aaron had to offer sacrifice "daily" (verse 27); Christ's sacrifice is "once for all". Twelfth, Aaron was filled with "infirmity" (verse 28); Christ is "perfected forevermore". Well may we praise God for "such a High Priest" (verse 26).¹

Now want to linger on the quote from Psalm 110:4 for a moment. Ps. 110 is quoted 10 times in Hebrews and is the most quoted psalm in the NT. It is not only important because it prophesies Jesus priesthood indicating a change from the OT to the NT. It is important for other reasons too. In v1 it is used to highlight the deity of Christ. But it is also important in the doctrine of the covenant of redemption. This is one of those wonderful texts where God pulls back the curtain and we see the intratrinitarian workings. We see the Father speaking to the Son, and there are other verses where we see the Son speaking to the Father. We cant do a full study on this here but we cant pass up the opportunity to show the rich foundation that our salvation rests upon. The doctrine teaches that in eternity past the Trinity and in particular the Father and Son made an agreement to save a people. The Bible because of our weakness presents this as a covenant, so that we see God swearing an oath in an unbreakable covenant; and we see Jesus accepting responsibility and offering Himself. What we are seeing in Ps. 110 is the Father making an oath with the Son; like with Abraham the presence of an oath indicates the presence of a covenant. We see other intratrinitarian conversation in places like Ps. 40:6-8 which will be quoted in Heb. 10:5-10 where Jesus indicates a pre-incarnate awareness of His role to do God's will in this regard. The question that arises is when did this covenant take place? With the mention of an eternal covenant in Heb. 13:20; Christ's awareness of this agreement before His birth Ps. 40:6-8; David granted prophetic view of this exchange showing that it predates David; tracing the promise all the way back through every promise of a Savior and every covenant of salvation before this; and add to this that all of God's actions are planned from eternity and our election in eternity past is 'in Christ.' We cant help but conclude that there is an eternal agreement to save a people. Reformed theologians have concluded that the Covenant of Grace is a temporal outworking of the Covenant of Redemption.²

But the oath, being important is secondary to what it accomplishes through Jesus better priesthood, v22, 'This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.' This idea of Jesus as a guarantor or our surety is one of the greatest aspects of His work in saving us. What does it mean that Jesus is our guarantor/surety? This is the only time this word appears in the NT, but it has an easy meaning to apprehend. Not to long ago my son approached Lynn and I to sign to guarantee a rental lease that he was entering into with three other flat mates. This is called being a guarantor, 'A guarantor is a third party (often a parent or guardian) who signs the tenancy agreement and legally agrees to take financial responsibility—

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pink/An%20Exposition%20of%20Hebrews%20-%20A.%20W.%20Pink.pdf> accessed 17/4/2025

² See Robert Cara's notes in his Hebrews commentary for this info.

including unpaid rent and property damage—if the tenant fails to meet their obligations.’ Now you can imagine how nervous we as parents would feel to make ourselves legally liable not only for a son who may or may not be very reliable but for others as well. What if he lost his job? What if he seriously damaged the place? What if he fell three months behind in rent? Any number of things could go wrong and the owners of the property could legally come looking for us to settle his debts. We signed but not without serious consideration. We were guarantors for our son, Jesus was a guarantor for us.

Consider what it means to be a guarantor. The Son in becoming our surety agreed to fulfill our obligations and pay for any debts that we incurred. We get a profound grasp of this if we consider the covenant that God made with Abraham in Gen. 15. Remember that Abraham was seeking reassurances that an heir from his own body would be given to him to fulfil God’s promises to Him. God decided to prove His truthfulness by cutting a covenant with Abraham. Gen. 15:9-10, ‘He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.’ So imagine it, a bunch of cut up animals a corridor to walk between the parts. Abraham knew what was expected when God appeared in some sort of physical manifestation, the two parties making a covenant would walk between the pieces. Both parties are saying that if they break their word may what has happened to these animals happen to them. But things did not go as Abraham expected. He fell asleep, God reaffirmed the promise to him, even revealing the future that his offspring would spend time in bondage until the time for judging the Amorites the present inhabitants of the land had arrived, and then they would inherit the land, v12-16. And then God went through the pieces without Abraham, v17-18, ‘When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.’ God was offering Himself as surety. Two parties went between the pieces, the Father and the Son, the smoking pot and the flaming torch. God makes a promise and walks between the pieces accepting the penalty of death if Abraham or his descendants prove unfaithful. We get all the reward; He takes all the punishment, this one sided gracious covenant is possible not because God disregards our sins but because He pays for them Himself. Our debts are real, sin must be punished, God cannot deny Himself and not demand payment; because of His love He pays Himself. Jesus is our guarantor.

And we see He is the guarantor of a new and better covenant, not the old one where sin is merely covered, which has types that points to permanent forgiveness. He brings in the fullness of a better covenant where every covenant member is renewed, filled with the Spirit; obedient; and fully forgiven. This is the 1st of 25 times the word covenant is mentioned or alluded and we will develop it in the next chapter.

Superior by permanence

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 author draws to an explicit point what he has

mentioned several times. In 7:3 Melchizedek resembles Christ because he has no end of life mentioned; in 7:8 it says 'He lives'; 7:16 talks about His indestructible life. Drawing again on the reference to 'forever' in Ps. 110:4 just quoted Jesus has a priesthood untouched by death. Some sources say there have been over 300 high priests before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. The high priesthood had to be passed on from one generation to the next because death defeated those priests removing them from service. But Ps. 110 says that Jesus is a priest forever, this is an allusion to death not bringing His priesthood to an end. The priesthood of Aaron was not permanent and was transferable because of death. Jesus has a non-transferable priesthood that is not disrupted by death. Jesus died as a priest but not from being a priest because He overcame death by His resurrection. 'holds ... permanently'; 'continues'; 'forever' are words used that all underline this marvelous truth. This is why Paul insists that there is only one mediator between God and man the man Christ Jesus, 1 Tim. 2:5. Any Orthodox or Catholic notions that insist we continue to need a priesthood to mediate grace place in men in the place of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who unites us to Christ and takes what is His and makes it ours. We do not need priests to stand between us and God; we have access to the Holy of Holies without the need of mediating priests. When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well and she was debating about the right building to worship in, Jesus spoke of true worship being in Spirit and in truth.

V25 highlights the application the author wants us to draw, '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.' This is one of the greatest verses in the Bible, it is so full of good news. Because Jesus is alive and not dead, 'consequently', He is able to save. The OT priesthood and sacrifices could not finally save, it is only because of the death of Christ that salvation is possible. Secondly, have you ever felt absolute despair at the possibility of your sins being forgiven? Knowing how terrible your sins are, how hard heartedly you run into them; without any care of God or man you took hold of your sins with both hands and gorged on them and boasted about it, have you ever doubted the possibility of your ability to be saved. Good news, He is able to save. He is God, He is sinless man, He is the conqueror of satan, sin and death. He died to save His enemies, salvation is possible, He is able to save!

Thirdly, He is able to save to the uttermost. He does not only get forgiveness for your past sins, but for your present and future sins. He does not just get you out of hell, but He secures a place for you in His inheritance won by His obedience in the new creation. He does not just get you a ticket into heaven but a welcome as adopted children. You do not only get to be saved from sin but saved into a life of holiness and fulfilling service. You are not saved to then slave and struggle but He yokes Himself to you; puts His Spirit within you; unites you to a spiritual family to serve and be served, and promises His presence until the end. He does not merely save from the guilt of sin; but the power of sin and one day the presence of sin. He does not just rescue you from satan, sin and death, but He overcomes them, and they are not merely made powerless but will be removed altogether. He saved you not so that your salvation is now possible there is nothing that can separate you from His love, you will be saved.

Fourthly, any or all those who come through Him are able to draw near to God. Here we have implied the fact that all can come to God in Christ; that drawing near is through faith in His work not trying to buy our way in through our own; and that we can gain access not to a million bucks, not to paradise, but to God Himself, the highest good.

Fifthly, this is all made possible not only by His incarnation; nor even just by His death and resurrection, but by the continuing priestly intercession that He is continually waging on our behalf.

This unique aspect of Jesus priesthood foreshadowed in Aaron going into the Holy of Holies is source of great comfort in this letter. The intercession of Christ is a doctrine of great comfort for the believer. To know that He is in the presence of the Father as our priest is comfort beyond compare. 1 John 2:1 reveals that He is now our advocate with the Father for our ongoing sins as Christians, so that we can gain an application of forgiveness for our failings, '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.' We pray for the forgiveness of our trespasses every day knowing that we will find it because He is our heavenly high priest. Paul says as much in Rom. 8:33-34, 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.' His heavenly intercession does not consist in continuing to be a sacrifice for sin, no that is finished and complete, now he is given authority to bestow the benefits of the salvation He has won. We must not imagine a merciful Son pleading with an unwilling Father as if the will of the Trinity is not one. No, the Father and Son love us. The Son is not twisting the Father's arm but positioned to now pour out the reward of our salvation He has obtained. The Spirit given on Pentecost is one of many things that are ours because He is our heavenly High priest, John 15:26, "'But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.' The great benefit put forward in Hebrews is of course the great boon of prayer as we now have access to the very throne of God through Him. We have His name so that our prayers do not come to God apart from the sweetness of His own righteousness, and are heard with all the favor that He has with the Father. And the reason He is able to save to the uttermost ensuring our sanctification, and our good deeds and our perseverance and preserving us from the evil one is because He continues to oversee all from his ruling priestly position. His ongoing intercession means ongoing representation for forgiveness and heard prayer; and ongoing blessing and oversight as He applies the benefits of the salvation He has secured for us. No other priest can do what He has done or be in the position that He is in, or have the power that He wields, or have the love with which He loves us; nor ask from the Father with perfection of love and agreement securing what He asks. To have Him as our heavenly high priest is to have all.

Superior by holiness

V26-28, 'For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.' The last qualification listed after wrapping up this list of obvious overqualification beyond Aaron is Christ's superior holiness. We heard earlier from Exodus 29 how Aaron and his sons needed to confess their sins and be cleansed and robed before they could serve. The beauty and holiness of the OT priest's robes were always pointing to the greater holiness and

glory and beauty of Christ spoken of in this verse. We have 5 ways in which He is holy. The word holy means morally pure, but also separate and consecrated to the Lord. He is described as holy, and He was holy before God; blameless and He was blameless before men; pure, He was pure in Himself; separated from sinners, not separate in that He was not incarnate or present for ministry, but not a sinner like the rest of mankind, this secured by His virgin conception; and exalted above the heavens, this refers to His glorified state of holiness but more how He is high and lifted up in the place of God, holy as He is holy. Every possible qualification of holiness is present, both as man and God. God requires that we be holy as He is holy and we can be because Jesus is our high priest. No other man can claim this title, this qualification.

The last qualification mentioned is in that one word 'Son'. That word which is so rich and full of layers of meaning in Hebrews. He is the divine Son who is the radiance of His glory; the Son of Man as the second Adam; the Son born of the woman; the Son of Abraham and the Son of David; the representative Son like Israel who is finally obedient. To say He is the Son is to say that He is more qualified than can be described. It is not fair to compare Christ's priesthood with Aaron's but this is the point. He is sufficient, He is enough, He is the way and the truth and the life and no man can come to the Father but through His high priesthood.