

## Sermon 35, A Perfect Priesthood, Hebrews 7:11-12

**Proposition:** The Levitical priesthood could not bring perfection, and thus both it and the law of Moses are rendered obsolete by the coming of Jesus Christ, the perfect priest like Melchizedek who does bring perfection.

- I. Perfection Is the Fulfillment of all the Promises in Heaven, Heb. 11:39-40, 12:23
- II. Perfection Was Unattainable through the Levitical Priesthood, v. 11
  - A. The Levitical Priesthood Was at its Best in David's Time, 1 Chronicles 24-26
  - B. David Spoke of another Priest Outside the Levitical Order, Ps. 110
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the verses before us this morning testify powerfully to the greatness of our High Priest. About this, as the writer comments, he truly does have much to say, and hard to explain. Today's text in particular demands that you apply your mind and heart to understanding. The writer's whole point is built on two things that are not self-explanatory: perfection and the relationship between the Levitical priesthood and Mosaic law. In order to understand his point, which is that the Levitical priesthood could not grant perfection and therefore both it and the Mosaic law are now superseded, we must take some time to talk about perfection and then about how the Mosaic law existed in order to enable the service of the Levitical priests, and yet both that law and that priesthood have now been fulfilled and abolished in Christ. As we will see, the implication of this statement is that Christ's priesthood, and only Christ's priesthood, is the source of perfection.

Allow me to remind you that the harsh negative statements about the Mosaic Law and Aaronic priesthood in this section are not spoken absolutely, but only relatively. Relative to perfection, the Mosaic Law and Aaronic priesthood were imperfect. Relative to their own time

and the purpose for which God instituted them, they were glorious, useful to the people, and pleasing to God. Remember, the writer's overall purpose is not to exalt the priesthood of Christ by denigrating the priesthood of Aaron, but to show that as glorious as Aaron's priesthood was, the priesthood of Christ is far more glorious — so much more glorious as to swallow up and apparently cancel out the glory of the Aaronic order.

Thus, we will see that the Mosaic Law and Levitical-Aaronic priesthood could not bring perfection, and therefore, they had to go — but they went only when Jesus Christ came as the great and perfect High Priest in Melchizedek's order, the only priest who is able to create perfection. The imperfect has passed away, and the perfect has come. The partial has been done away.

We need to know all this stuff because it is two-thirds of our Bibles. What is all the material in Leviticus about? How can something inglorious, weak, and useless be worth learning about? The answer, of course, is that you cannot understand or even recognize the glory and perfection of Jesus Christ unless you know the glory of the Levitical system. Jesus may be a priest in Melchizedek's order, but you won't understand what that means unless you know something of Aaron's order. The era of the Spirit may be even more glorious than the era of David, Moses, and the Levitical worship in the temple — but you won't know how much more glorious, or even recognize the point of the Spirit's ministry in the New Covenant era unless you know what went on in the old covenant and what changed with the coming of perfection. So let's dive in and see how perfection came, not through Levi and Aaron, but through Jesus.

#### **I. Perfection Is the Fulfillment of all the Promises in Heaven, Heb. 11:39-40, 12:23**

The writer begins by announcing that perfection was unattainable through the Levitical priesthood. Fair enough, I suppose you could say — except that we are left wondering what exactly perfection is. We know that the writer said in ch. 5 that the perfect/mature man is the one who is able to exercise moral discernment and tell the right thing to do in any situation. But limiting the perfection spoken of here to moral maturity doesn't seem quite right. And, in fact, if you continue to look through Hebrews for the usage of the word/category "perfection," you will find that perfection is another way of referring to the fulfillment of all God's promises in Heaven.

Allow me to demonstrate this to you. Turn forward a couple of pages to Heb. 11.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40 ESV)

OK. So the writer clearly says that the heroes of faith from ch. 11 did not receive the sum total of all the promises. God kept His promises to them. That's not the issue. The issue is whether they were made perfect. Notice that this is the very thing that the Levitical priesthood is not able to do. It cannot make God's people perfect. The heroes of faith were not made perfect separately from Christians of the New Covenant era. The writer puts receiving what was promised in

parallel with being made perfect. The two phrases are synonymous. Those who are not yet perfect have also not yet received what was promised.

Turn another page or two ahead.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. (Heb 12:22-23 ESV)

Now, did you catch that? We have the word “perfect” in parallel with another phrase here in Heb. 12. This time, “made perfect” is parallel with “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”

In other words, “heaven” is an equivalent term to “perfection.” The ones in heaven are the ones who have received the perfection that the Levitical system could not yield.

So based on these two texts of Hebrews, one of which puts perfection in parallel with receiving the promises, and the other of which puts perfection in parallel with going to heaven, we can say that perfection is best defined as the fulfillment of all God’s promises in Heaven. In that place, all the promises will be kept, at a scale beyond your imagination, for eternity and beyond.

This is what the Levitical priesthood could not yield. It could not get people to heaven; it was not sufficient to bring about the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

## **II. Perfection Was Unattainable through the Levitical Priesthood, v. 11**

That, of course, is the point that the writer makes in this verse. He doesn’t make it directly, but rather, in the form of a question. To paraphrase, he asks “If the Levitical priesthood had brought about perfection, why would David have announced an eternal new priest from a different order?” But we know that David announced an eternal new priest from a different order, because the writer has been quoting the phrase over and over: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

But let’s explore some additional background here. When you understand the situation of the Levitical system in the time of David, the writer’s argument becomes even more cogent.

### **A. The Levitical Priesthood Was at its Best in David’s Time, 1 Chronicles 24-26**

As we saw a few weeks ago in our evening service, the Levitical priesthood was at its best in David’s time. David gave a huge amount of attention to organizing the worship of God. Three chapters of 1 Chronicles speak of how he set up Levitical choirs to make music before the ark of God. Two other chapters speak of additional organizing that he did for the priests and Levites. The bottom line is that in David’s time, the Levitical priesthood was at its best. We’re not going to go read a bunch from Chronicles — as I said, I did that recently from this very pulpit — but you can and should take the time to read it. The message is profound: The Lord’s Anointed loves worship and lavishes his attention upon it. The king provides for worship. And when he did, he pulled out all the stops. Worship under David was glorious.

### **B. David Spoke of another Priest Outside the Levitical Order, Ps. 110**

But David recognized that Levitical worship was not enough. At least, he wrote a psalm in which Yahweh swears to the one David calls “my Lord.” The oath is this: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

David not only spoke of a non-Levitical priest; he also called this priest his Lord and indicated that His commission was straight from the Almighty.

### **C. Therefore, David Recognized that the Levitical Priesthood Was Not Sufficient**

In other words, at the high-water mark of the Levitical priesthood, right around the time when he was lavishing months of work on getting it set up to worship like never before, David says “A greater, non-Levitical priest is coming. He has already been appointed by Yahweh, and His priesthood will endure forever.”

The Hebrew writer does not appeal in these verses to the NT; he does not quote Jesus using priestly language and saying “for their sakes, I consecrate myself” to offer sacrifice; he looks directly to the very best period of the Levitical priesthood and says “Even then, this group was not able to bring perfection, and David called it. The king saw it. More importantly, God saw it and said ‘I will raise up a new priest, one after the order of Melchizedek instead of after the order of Aaron.’”

All right — clearly Psalm 110 says exactly what the Hebrew writer says it says. The Levitical priesthood is not enough; by even bringing up another priesthood David has sapped the foundations of the Levitical system and promised that someday, it will collapse and be replaced by a forever priest in Melchizedek’s order.

### **D. The OT Saints Do Receive all the Promises in Heaven, but not through the Levitical Priesthood**

But — but, you’re thinking, does this reading of Psalm 110 just consign all the OT saints to Hell? If the Levitical system could not bring perfection, which we defined a moment ago as Heaven, aren’t we saying that no one who lived under the Levitical system went to Heaven?

Allow me to explain that this objection is not founded on an accurate interpretation of what the Hebrew writer is saying here. Yes, he is saying that the Levitical system was not capable of getting anyone to heaven. But he is emphatically *not* saying that no one living under the Levitical system went to heaven. He is affirming that all OT saints went to heaven, but by another path. Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon and the rest were indeed saved and are in heaven right now. But they are not there through the efficacious ministry of the Levitical priesthood. They are there through the efficacious ministry of Jesus’ Melchizedekian priesthood.

Does that make sense? As the writer is going to go on and explain, a ticket to heaven costs more than the blood of a bull and a goat. It costs more than the blood of umpteen bulls and goats. The sum total of all sacrifices offered under the Levitical system from the day Aaron was ordained until the day Herod’s temple was destroyed did not pay for the lightest sin of the most godly saint.

The reason David, Solomon, and the rest will be in Heaven is that Jesus paid it all. His priestly ministry is sufficient not only for those living after Him, but also for those living before His time on earth. The writer, then, is not denying that OT saints are in heaven. He is denying that they got there through the Levitical ministry.

Now, not to get too deep into the weeds, but it is important to remember that anyone who rejected the Levitical ministry during the period in which it was ordained by God also rejected salvation through Christ. God ordained that His Son's salvation would be dispensed through the Levitical system, not because that system saved but because that system was the way the Savior ordained to train His people and to show them His salvation. At the same time, we can see that the system was not equipped to deal with the really serious stuff. David says in Psalm 51 that God does not desire sacrifice. He is not saying "I figured out that this whole Levitical system is a crock." He is saying "There is literally no possible sacrifice for an adulterer and murderer to present." That's why he didn't give sacrifice.

Open your hymnals to page 852. I don't normally do this in sermons, but the Westminster Confession explains this so perfectly that I want to read its explanation to you.

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament. (WCF 7:5)

Notice how precisely that explains the implications of Psalm 110 and the argument here in Hebrews 7. The OT saints had "full remission of sins, and eternal salvation" — that is, the "perfection" spoken of in our text. But they did not have this perfection "through" the Levitical priesthood — nor did they have it apart from the faith in the Messiah that the Levitical system taught and signified to the people of God.

Well, brothers and sisters, that is the first point our text makes.

### **III. The Levitical Priesthood and the Law of Moses Are Inextricably Linked, vv. 11-12**

The second is like unto it: the Levitical priesthood is inextricably linked with the law of Moses, such that to change one requires changing the other. Just as we can posit that to change the frequency at which electricity is transmitted through the power grid would require a corresponding change in the devices which run on that electricity, so can posit that to change the Levitical priesthood into a Melchizedekian priesthood will require a corresponding change in God's religious requirements. If it was a sin for an Israelite to reject animal sacrifices and claim to be a vegan whose religion did not use animals, it is now a sin for a Christian to offer a sheep and claim that by eating roast lamb he is performing a religious rite.

Change the priesthood, change the law.

### **A. The Levitical Priesthood Is Not Historically Prior to the Mosaic Law**

Now, I want to address for a moment the Hebrew writer's statement that under the Levitical priesthood the people received the Mosaic law. The obvious meaning of that statement seems to be that the Levitical priesthood is historically prior to the Mosaic law. But actually, Exodus tells us that Israel camped at Mt. Sinai three months after departing from Egypt, but did not erect the tabernacle until one year after departing from Egypt. Thus, it appears that historically speaking, the Mosaic law predated the Levitical priesthood's ordination by some nine months at least.

### **B. The Levitical Priesthood Is Logically Prior to the Mosaic Law**

So when the writer says that under the Levitical priesthood the people of Israel received the law, he means that the priesthood is logically prior to the law. The law presupposes a functioning Levitical, sacrificial system. It is designed for a people who are receiving priestly help to repair and maintain their relationship with God.

#### **1. The Law Is for a People in Covenant with God**

Put simply, the law is for a people in covenant with God. That is of course what we see in Exodus. God brings Israel out, delivers the book of the covenant, and has the people verbally agree to keep the covenant. Then He begins to give them instructions for the tabernacle and the Levitical system of sacrifices to be offered within it. The law is a covenant law, and it is given to a people in covenant.

#### **2. The Covenant People Are Created and Maintained through Priestly Work**

But the covenant people do not and cannot exist without priestly work.

##### **a) Moses' Priestly Mediation Gave the Law**

As we saw in our recent three-year series in Exodus, Moses' priestly mediation gave the law. By standing between God and the people, and communicating Yahweh's will to Israel, Moses did the work of a priest. He is not called a priest like his brother Aaron, but clearly, in terms of repairing and maintaining Israel's relationship with God, Moses was a priest. It was as priest that he received the law and as prophet that he declared it to Israel.

##### **b) Moses' Priestly Mediation Established the Levitical Priesthood**

And, of course, if you read the account in Leviticus, you will see that Moses is the one who ordained Aaron and his sons. Moses' mediation established the Levitical priesthood.

### **C. When the Levitical Priesthood Ends, So Does the Law of Moses**

The writer is telling us that Moses' work is all of a piece. The Levitical priesthood that he set up is not to be dissociated from the law he declared. Indeed, the Levitical priesthood is part of the law — the ceremonial part of the law. To announce a priest after Melchizedek's order, then, is to signal the end of both the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic law which created it and which was created for it.

By the way, does this mean that the moral part of the Mosaic law is gone? Of course not. The moral law is unchangeable. But the ceremonial and civil parts of the Mosaic law are gone. They do not oblige us any more than the laws of the ancient Romans oblige us. We can read them, and when we do, we learn more about the character of the God who gave them. But they

are for a people and polity that no longer exists in that form. The priesthood and law have changed, and the people of God have a new name — Church, or “Lord’s” (*Kyriakos* is a Greek adjective meaning “belonging to the Lord” and is the etymological source of the English word “church”). The Levitical priesthood is over, for it could not bring perfection. The Mosaic law is over, for it existed to serve a priesthood that was imperfect in absolute terms.

#### **IV. Christ’s Priesthood Is the Only Source of Perfection**

But that leaves us with the writer’s positive point: Christ’s priesthood is the only source of perfection. You want perfection? Look no further. Don’t look back and join the Hebrew roots people. Don’t look forward and join the full preterists, who believe that all God’s promises have been fulfilled and we are basically in Heaven right now. Look no further than Jesus Christ, the one in whom all God’s promises are yes and amen.

##### **A. It Fulfills all the Promises**

His priesthood fulfills all God’s promises — including the seven in Genesis 12. In fact, let’s close out this sermon by briefly reviewing those, because they are great sample of the content of God’s promises.

1. I will make of you a great nation, and
2. I will bless you and
3. make your name great, so that
4. you will be a blessing.
5. I will bless those who bless you, and
6. him who dishonors you I will curse, and
7. in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:2-3 ESV)

These seven promises are fulfilled in and to Jesus Christ. God has made of Him a great nation. There are more people who call themselves “Christian” than there are any other kind of people.

God has blessed Him; look at Psalm 1, for instance, and Psalm 45. Christ is the blessed man who is anointed with the oil of joy beyond His companions.

His name is great. Jesus Christ has a greater name than Abraham, than Caesar, than any other famous historical figure.

Jesus is a blessing. He has blessed the whole world with His teaching, with His followers, with His love.

God blesses those who take refuge in Christ.

God curses those dishonor and reject Christ.

And, of course, in Jesus all the families of the earth have been blessed with salvation.

In this man, this Anointed Savior of the world, the whole world has been blessed. All this comes about through His priestly ministry and especially His death, by which all the promises of God have been fulfilled.

##### **B. It Brings Us to Heaven**

We are still waiting to see their perfect fulfillment — but we will, in Heaven. How will we get there? Through the death of Jesus Christ, which paid for our sins, and through His resurrection, by which we enjoy an indestructible life.

We have a perfect priesthood filled by a perfect priest. The Levitical priesthood did not actually atone for sins, much less perfect the moral judgments of the worshipers. But the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus the Messiah paid the full price for every sin of every chosen one, and it perfects both your conscience and your moral judgment. Someday soon, we will all be in heaven, enjoying the perfect fulfillment of God's most glorious and shining promises. Believe it. The once-for-all sacrifice of the Melchizedekian priest guarantees it. Amen.