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A BETTER HOPE:
DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

Hebrews 7:11-19

By

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Hebrews Lesson 21

A Better Hope: Drawing Near to God Hebrews 7:11-19

In 1903, someone noticed a Russian sentry standing guard at a post with no apparent reason for his being there. When asked why he was standing guard there, he answered, "I'm just following orders." The question was asked of the captain of the guard, but he didn't know why that sentry was posted there. The inquiry eventually went up the chain of command to the czar, but he didn't know either! He asked that someone track down the answer. Finally, it was discovered that in 1776, Catherine the Great had planted a rose bush there, and posted a sentry to guard it. The bush had been dead for over 80 years, but the sentry was still standing guard! Traditions are hard to change!

Religious traditions are especially hard to change, because people insist that God ordained them. The Jews rightly believed that God had ordained the traditions and practices of the Mosaic Law almost 15 centuries before the time of Christ. The Law was the very center of the Jewish culture. They ordered their lives around the Sabbath worship and the yearly feasts. The priests and Levites oversaw and regulated the worship at the temple. The sacrifices and rules for ceremonial cleansing were all spelled out in the Law. These laws and traditions were deeply entrenched!

To challenge the validity of these practices was to risk your life! The opponents of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, charged, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:13-14). Paul's opponents shouted, "This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place" (Acts 21:28). Even many Jews who had professed faith in Christ were still "zealous for the Law" (Acts 21:20).

So the author of Hebrews had a formidable task in trying to convince his Jewish Christian readers that the Law and the Levitical priesthood that was inextricably linked to the Law were now obsolete and set aside because of the far better New Covenant and

priesthood of Jesus. He makes some radical statements about the Law: it was weak and useless; it made nothing perfect (7:18, 19). Because of these problems, it has been changed and set aside (7:12, 18). He is drawing a distinct dividing line between Judaism and Christianity. You cannot blend the two into a homogenous hybrid. He doesn't want his readers to go back to the old Jewish way, as if it were good enough. Even if they suffer persecution for their faith, they must persevere, because Jesus has provided "a better hope, through which we draw near to God" (7:19).

That statement was radical, too. As I said last week, every Jew knew that you couldn't just stroll into the Holy of Holies to have a little chat with God! The Levitical system was designed to keep the worshipers at a distance from God, lest He destroy them. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. So for the author to emphasize that we are to draw near to God through Jesus (4:14-16; 6:19-20; 7:19; 10:19-22) was a staggering concept for those from a Jewish background. In our text he is arguing that...

The New Covenant and priesthood of Jesus are superior to the Law and Levitical priesthood because they provide the way for us to draw near to God.

Since the author presents a tight argument here, we will follow the text closely. It falls into two sections: in 7:11-14, he argues for the inferiority of the Law and Levitical priesthood, which could not make anyone perfect. In 7:15-19, he argues for the superiority of the New Covenant and the priesthood of Jesus according to the order of Melchizedek, which enable us to draw near to God.

1. The Law and the Levitical priesthood were inferior because they could not make anyone perfect (7:11-14).

The author emphasizes throughout Hebrews the concept of *perfection* or being made perfect. It does not mean being without any flaw or defect, but rather it refers to "the condition in which men are acceptable to God" (Leon Morris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:66). It means "to put someone in the position in which he can come, or stand, before God" (Gerhard Delling, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey Bromiley [Eerd-

mans], 8:82). The author repeatedly states that the Law was unable to accomplish this (7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:1). But what the Law could not do, Christ did: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (10:14). His argument about the inferiority of the Law and the Levitical priesthood has three points:

- A. If the Levitical priesthood had been perfect, God would not have predicted a new order of priesthood according to Melchizedek (7:11).

Keep in mind that the Jews regarded the Law of Moses and the system of sacrifices that it prescribed as sacred and virtually untouchable. The priesthood was the basis of the Law, in that the sacrificial system, which was the heart of the Law, could not function apart from the priests. A critic could have said to our author, "The Law of Moses and the Levitical priesthood came 500 years *after* Melchizedek met Abraham. It has functioned for centuries, not just one time, as Melchizedek's priesthood with Abraham did. How then can you say that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the Levitical priesthood?"

To answer this objection, the author cites Psalm 110, which David wrote at the height of the Levitical priesthood. In that Psalm, which is clearly Messianic, David predicts that one who will sit at God's right hand as king will also be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. So the author's argument is, if the Levitical priesthood and the Law were good enough, why did God predict this new priest according to the order of Melchizedek?

Philip Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 255-256) points out that the first century Jewish Dead Sea Sect "looked for the appearance of two messianic figures, one priestly, 'the messiah of Aaron,' and the other lay and kingly, 'the messiah of Israel'..." The priestly messiah would be the head of the nation, with the kingly messiah, from the line of David, subordinate to him. Hughes suggests that if the original readers of Hebrews had been influenced by this or similar teaching, then the author's point that Jesus fulfills both roles in the same person, according to the superior order of Melchizedek, is quite relevant.

- B. The Law and the priesthood are linked, so that when the priesthood changed, the Law had to change (7:12).

In this verse, the author shows the radical implication of a change in the priesthood: it necessarily also demands a change in the Law. Again, to understand this we must keep in mind that for a conscientious Jew, this was unthinkable! The Law of Moses was the bedrock of the Jewish religion and culture. How could you even *talk* about changing the Law? But the author is arguing that the Law and the Levitical priesthood were so closely linked that you could not change the priesthood without changing the Law.

This plunges us into one of the thorniest theological matters in all of Scripture, the question of how are we, as New Covenant believers, to relate to the Old Covenant Law? Do we have to obey the commandments in the Old Testament? I read a book, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, by Greg Bahnsen, Walter Kaiser Jr., Douglas Moo, Wayne Strickland, and Willem VanGemeren [Zondervan]. Each author argues for his view, followed by the other four authors critiquing it. They represent a spectrum, from the theonomist view (Bahnsen), that the Law very much applies to believers today, to the dispensational view (Strickland) and the modified Lutheran view (Moo), that New Testament believers are not under the Old Testament Law in any sense. I finished the book thinking that each view had some valid points, but they all had some weaknesses. I couldn't declare a definite winner!

Reformed theologians, for the most part, have divided the Law of Moses into the civil law (for Israel as a theocratic nation), the ceremonial law, and the moral law. They say that we are not under the first two aspects of the law, but that God's moral law stems from His holy nature, and thus is always in effect. They view the Ten Commandments as a summary of the moral Law, spelling out the ramifications of the two Great Commandments: "Love God" (commandments 1-4); and, "Love your neighbor" (commandments 5-10).

Those in the Reformed camp debate how to apply the fourth commandment ("keep the Sabbath holy"). Some view Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, with strict requirements as to what we can or cannot do. Others view the fourth commandment as being spiritually fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 4). They point out that the other nine commandments are repeated in the New Testament epistles, but the Sabbath command is omitted, and seemingly dis-

paraged (Rom. 14:5-6; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16-17). Thus while there are *principles* from the Sabbath commandment that apply today, we are not under the Old Testament Sabbath laws. (This essentially is my view; see my sermon, "God's Day of Rest," on Genesis 2:1-3, on the church web site.)

However, others point out that the distinctions between the civil, ceremonial, and moral aspects of the Law are not biblical distinctions (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 145). The Jews viewed the Law as a unity. You can't separate it into various categories, because these categories are all mixed together, often in the same context. Thus we must say that either we are still under the entire Law (contrary to Paul and the author of Hebrews), or we are not under the Law at all, because it has been fulfilled and superseded in Christ. Dispensationalists and those who hold to New Covenant Theology advocate this view.

Without resolving that debate (which I am not quite sure *how* to resolve!), we can say that in our text, the author *at least* views the laws of the priesthood and sacrifice as changed by Jesus Christ. He is not in the line of Levitical priests. That whole system of approach to God through priests and sacrifices has been abolished.

Thus his argument so far is that if the Levitical priesthood had been perfect, God would not have predicted a new order of priesthood according to Melchizedek. Further, the Law and the priesthood are linked, so that when the priesthood changed, the Law changed, too.

- C. Melchizedek and Jesus are clearly not of the tribe of Levi, and thus represent a new order of priesthood (7:13-14).

The author states what everyone knew, that Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi, but rather from the tribe of Judah. He calls Jesus "our Lord," a title that he uses only in 13:20 (in 2:3, "the Lord"). He wants us to recognize that Jesus isn't just another human priest, but that He is "our Lord," God in human flesh. The word translated "was descended" is literally, "has arisen from," and is a messianic reference (see Luke 1:78, "sunrise from on high"; Mal. 4:2, "sun of righteousness"; 2 Pet. 1:19, "the morning star arises"). Verses 11 and 15 speak of *another* priest arising, and the

Greek word means “another of a different kind.” Jesus is the *only* priest who represents the order of Melchizedek.

Again, as Hughes points out (p. 260), if the author is countering the false teaching of a Dead Sea Sect, that there would be two messiahs, one from the priestly tribe of Levi, and another from the kingly tribe of Judah, then his point here corrects that error. In one person, Jesus is both our king and our priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The old Levitical order has been set aside.

So his overall point in 7:11-14 is that the Law and the Levitical priesthood were inferior because they could not make anyone perfect. His readers must not go back to Judaism! He goes on to show,

2. The New Covenant and the priesthood of Jesus are superior because they provide the way for us to draw near to God (7:15-19).

Again, his argument proceeds in three steps:

- A. The priesthood of Jesus is superior because it is based on the power of an indestructible life (7:15-17).

The qualifications for being a Levitical priest were all external. They were chosen strictly by their physical lineage, along with being free from a number of physical defects (Lev. 21:16-23). The ceremony for ordaining them was also external, involving clothing them with the priestly garments, purifying them with water and with offerings, etc. (see Exod. 29).

But Jesus has become a priest, like Melchizedek, based on something internal, namely, “the power of an indestructible life” (7:16). The mysterious silence of the Genesis record seemed to indicate that Melchizedek had “neither beginning of days nor end of life” (7:3). But he only foreshadowed Jesus, who truly is eternal. John 1:4 says, “In Him was life.” Although He died for our sins, the grave could not hold Him. He is risen and lives as our priest forever! Nothing can remove Him from that office. As long as He is there in heaven for us (which is forever), we have access to God through Him!

- B. The old covenant and the Levitical priesthood are now set aside because they were weak and useless (7:18-19a).

“Setting aside” is a legal term that means to annul. The weakness and uselessness of the Law was not inherent in the Law itself. As Paul explains (Rom. 7:12), “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” Rather, the problem was in the weakness of sinful flesh that could not keep the Law (Rom. 7:13-14; 8:3). One reason that God instituted the Law was to show us the utter sinfulness of our hearts (Rom. 5:20; 7:13). As such, it was never designed to bring sinners near to God. This is what the author means by, “for the Law made nothing perfect” (7:19a). Sinners were prevented from entering the Holy of Holies. And, the sacrifices prescribed by the Law could never completely cleanse the sinner’s conscience or take away his sins (10:1-4).

You may wonder, then, how David could extol the blessings of the one “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Ps. 32:1)? How could the psalmist say, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good” (Ps. 73:28)? As F. F. Bruce explains (p. 149), these blessings have always been available to the man of faith. “But these experiences had nothing to do with the Levitical ritual or the Aaronic priesthood. The whole apparatus of worship associated with that ritual and priesthood was calculated rather to keep men at a distance from God than to bring them near.” This leads to the third step of the author’s argument:

- C. The New Covenant and the priesthood of Jesus provide a better hope through which we draw near to God (7:19b).

The “better hope” refers to Jesus, “the guarantee of a better covenant” (7:22), namely, the New Covenant (8:6-13). He will explain the theme of drawing near in more detail in 10:19-22, where he says, “since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near....”

The author of Hebrews likes the word “better.” He uses it 12 times in the original Greek (out of 18 total uses in the N.T.). Jesus is better than the angels (1:4). The author is convinced of better things concerning the Hebrew Christians (6:9). The New Covenant is a better covenant with better promises (7:22; 8:6). Jesus is the better sacrifice, whose blood speaks better than the blood of Abel (9:23; 12:24). Christians have a better possession in heaven (10:34).

Thus men of faith sought a better country, that is, a heavenly one (11:16). We receive a better resurrection (11:35). God has provided something better for us than for the Old Testament saints (11:40). And, here (7:19), we have a better hope through which we draw near to God.

The author's point is, if you've got something better, why go back to something worse? Maybe they were nostalgically thinking of "the good old days," but they were losing sight of the fact that what they presently had in Christ was far better than anything that they had under Judaism. What the Old Testament saints looked forward to, we have received! We have full forgiveness of sins through Christ's better sacrifice. We don't have to stand out in the courtyard while a priest represents us in the Holy of Holies. We have a high priest within the veil, and He invites us to draw near to the very throne of God, which is a throne of grace, to receive grace to help in our times of need!

Conclusion

You may be thinking, "This is great stuff for the Jews who were tempted to go back to Judaism. But I've never dreamed of doing such a thing. How does this relate to me?"

First, *make sure that you understand and revel in the fact that you have been made acceptable to God totally through what Jesus has done and not at all through anything you have done.* Every religion in the world, except biblical Christianity, teaches that you must do something to gain acceptance with God. Even the Roman Catholic Church teaches that you cannot be justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Rather, you must add your good works to your faith in Christ in order to gain merit towards heaven (see The Canons and Decrees of Trent, Session 6, Canons 9, 12, 24).

But Paul is abundantly clear that we are saved by God's grace (*unmerited* favor) totally apart from any works that we do: "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4-5). If you properly understand what Paul is saying, your initial reaction will be, "Well, then, should we continue in sin that grace may increase?" Paul anticipated that reaction (Rom. 6:1) and re-

futed it. But that thought should at least pop into your mind if you understand the radical nature of salvation by God's grace *alone*. If you are seeking to draw near to God through anything that you do to qualify, you do not understand the gospel.

Second, *make sure that you are utilizing and enjoying the great privilege of drawing near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ*. If you are right with God for time and eternity because of what Jesus has done for you, then you have "a better hope." You should abound in hope in God (Rom. 15:13). Whatever daily problems you face, whether trivial or major, you have access to the presence of God through the blood of Jesus. *Draw near!*

When Donald Grey Barnhouse was a student in France, he pastored a small Evangelical Reformed Church in the French Alps. Each week as he went to a neighboring village, he would pass the local priest, going in the opposite direction. They would often stop and chat, so that they became friends.

On one occasion, the priest asked Barnhouse why Protestants do not pray to the saints. "Why should we?" asked Barnhouse. The priest launched into an illustration of how one might get an interview with the French President. One could go through one of the cabinet members, who might succeed in opening the door to the President's office so that Barnhouse might get in to see him. The priest's triumphant smile implied that the simplicity and clarity of the argument were such as to preclude any rebuttal.

But Barnhouse said to his friend, "Suppose that I were the son of the President. I am living in the palace with him. I get up from the breakfast table, kiss him goodbye as he goes 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 friend was thunderstruck as Barnhouse added that he was a child of God, heir of God and joint-heir with Christ. As such, he had immediate access to the Father (Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Let Me Illustrate* [Revell], pp. 15-16). That is our great privilege through Jesus, our priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that we are not under the Law (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:1-4)? Do we still have to obey the Ten Commandments?
2. Why did God institute the Law if it was imperfect, weak, and useless?
3. Are there any Christian traditions that we need to re-examine and perhaps discard? If so, what are they?
4. Discuss: If the thought does not pop into your mind, "let's sin that grace may abound," you do not understand the gospel.

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