

**Fully and Forever**  
**Hebrews 7:11–25**  
**January 28, 2024**

In the final volume of Tolkien’s trilogy—*The Return of the King*—there’s a chapter entitled, “The Houses of Healing.” This particular chapter is immediately after the battle in which the enemy—Sauron—is finally destroyed. That battle was not without cost. Many<sup>1</sup> were wounded and dying from the poison of the enemy’s weapons.

But in the capitol of Gondor, there are these houses of healing. Many of the wounded were brought there. And, in one scene, the eldest woman serving in those houses looked upon the face of one dying and said, “Alas! If he should die. Would that there were kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say! For it is said in old lore: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer*. And so the rightful king could ever be known.”<sup>2</sup>

An ancient text, repeated over generations, told them a way they might recognize their king. The rightful king would also heal. Knowing this, and looking, they eagerly longed for his coming.

Now put yourself in the sandals of generations of Israelites awaiting their Messiah. They had more than one ancient text instructing them concerning what to look for. What He’d *be* and what He’d *do* were written down, repeated, sung, and trusted in. One such promise is found in Psalm 110. Written by King David, it begins with Israel’s God saying to Another, **Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for Your feet** (Psalm 110:1). Based on this text, God’s people knew this Messiah to come—the Promised One—would rule.

But that’s not *all* Psalm 110 says. Only a few verses later, *still* speaking of the Messiah to come, that Psalm sings in verse 4: **The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”**

So, as they were looking forward, trusting in One to come, they knew He’d not *only* rule as King, He’d also serve as priest. And not just *any* priest, but a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the mysterious character we began to consider last week.

As noted, he’s mysterious in part because he’s only mentioned twice in the Old Testament. Verses 1–10 of Hebrews 7 focus on the first instance, that of Genesis 14. The balance of Hebrews 7—our text today—focuses on the second instance, that single verse in Psalm 110. We’ll break it up into these four, hopefully developing, statements: The priesthood has changed. The priesthood has changed for the better. This better Priest was promised. In and through Him, God saves fully and forever.

**1. The priesthood has changed (vv. 11-14)**

Verse 11: **Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?**

Just so we have the terminology right, we spent the majority of last week making the case that the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the Levitical one. But *here* the author mentions both the Levitical priesthood and one according to the order of Aaron. Is there a difference? Well, Aaron—the first high priest—was *of* the line of Levi. So, just to make sure we don’t trip over the

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<sup>1</sup> Including central characters Merry, Faramir and Eowyn

<sup>2</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 136.

terminology, the Levitical order and the Aaronic order are two terms that mostly mean the same thing.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of Aaron, to understand what verse 11 is getting at, it's helpful to *first* be reminded of the sequence of Old Testament events and revelation. In this verse, and in this Hebrews 7 context, Psalm 110 is in mind. That Psalm said a Priest from another order was coming. We might ask ourselves, "How long had the Levitical priesthood been around when Psalm 110 was written?" Longer than the US has been around.<sup>4</sup> The Levitical priesthood was well-established, having been the only priesthood Israel had known for hundreds of years. But, clearly, it wasn't sufficient. This verse asks, **Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood . . . what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?**

Psalm 110 doesn't merely imply this; it makes abundantly clear that the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood couldn't accomplish what was needed. The language of this verse says that "perfection" couldn't come by it. The logic is: if that structure and system accomplished *all* that was needed for God's people, then there would be no need for Psalm 110:4 to be written.

Now what is this perfection?<sup>5</sup> We've seen the word<sup>6</sup> used a couple times thus far, in 2:10 and in 5:9. The latter says that Christ, had **been made perfect**. Chapter 2 applied it to Him as well. However, *here* the perfection spoken of refers to God's people being perfected.

What might *that* mean? First, the idea is forward looking. As Hebrews does, it concerns itself with salvation in the future, our ultimate deliverance.<sup>7</sup> While it certainly means more than what I can describe in a single sentence, this forward-looking perfection includes full and final forgiveness, the transformation of believers, and the restoration of the rule humanity lost when Adam sinned.<sup>8</sup>

The Levitical order couldn't accomplish that. We don't say that to disparage it. It was God's purpose at that time. But *built into* the entire framework was a certain obsolescence.<sup>9</sup> Even while it was still functioning, it was *ultimately* ineffective.<sup>10</sup> What it did, everything it did, had to be done again, and again.

We sense this as we read the Bible. That the entire Old Testament *leans* forward. You don't finish Malachi, shut the book, and never open Matthew. We know we need something *more*.

In this sense, in the way Hebrews uses the term, you're all perfectionists. Full forgiveness, transformation, future hope is what you long for. On this earth, it's why you're so often disappointed.

The Levitical priesthood *couldn't* bring this perfection about. But there's a hint at what, or who, *could* here in verse 11's question: **What further need was there for another priest to arise?**<sup>11</sup> That final word, that verb, is the same word used in John 11, in Luke 24, and elsewhere. Verse 15 will use it again; verse 16 will make evident its meaning.

But the Levitical priesthood couldn't bring about what we long for, nor what God purposes for His people. There needed to be a change.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/difference-between-levitical-and-aaronic-priesthood>

<sup>4</sup> Anywhere from 300 to 500 years.

<sup>5</sup> Reputable scholars have written books on the theme of perfection in Hebrews. For example, David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*.

<sup>6</sup> Or its cognate

<sup>7</sup> Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 169; Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 215.

<sup>8</sup> Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 216.

<sup>9</sup> Schreiner, 229.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, 170.

<sup>11</sup> "Appear" isn't a good enough translation.

And then begins the string of “fors” I mentioned last week. The first word in verse 12, verse 13, verse 14, verse 17, verse 18, verse 19, and verse 21 all begin with that conjunction, functioning as a connector in an argument. Verse 11 made clear that a change was needed. Verse 12 continues: **For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.**

Before anyone gets concerned, what the author primarily means by law is clarified in the next verse, as well as in the broader context. When we think law, maybe we first and only assume Exodus 20, the moral law expressed in the Ten Commandments. But, of course, that’s not *close* to the *only* law given Israel. After Exodus 20, in the balance of Exodus and then in Leviticus and Numbers, there is chapter after chapter of instruction for the people of God. We call these the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law.<sup>12</sup> And much of that law involved the priesthood, detailing the *ones permitted* to serve in that role and what they were *to do*.

How do we know *this* is the aspect of the law verse 12 refers to? Here’s another “for” in verse 13: **For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar.** To speak of a change in the law, the author is concerned with which tribe has in the past, and which one *now*, officiates at the altar. This was an essential duty of priests.<sup>13</sup> Numbers 18:5 tells us that. And only a few verses *before* that, Numbers 18:1 makes clear that Aaron and his sons are the ones to do it.

Is the priest Hebrews 7 points us to from that line, the tribe of Levi? No, He is not. Therefore, **when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.** Because, v. 13, **the one concerning whom these things are spoken** (meaning Psalm 110!) **belongs to another tribe.** Verse 14 tells us which tribe that is, and if there’s any mystery as to the One he’s referring to, it’s cleared up: **For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.**

Nothing was said about priests being from the tribe of Judah. As you recall, Israel’s *kings* came from the line of Judah. This priesthood is a royal priesthood.

Something needed to change. And something has.

## 2. The priesthood has changed for the better (vv. 15-19)

Verse 15: **And this is clearer still.**

What does he mean by this? Keep in mind that these believers were struggling with perseverance, tempted to turn back. But what the author’s written thus far, and what he’s *about* to say, is that the comparison between the two isn’t close. This isn’t you comparing two ceiling fans at Home Depot, comparing LeBron James to Michael Jordan, or blind taste-testing two ten-dollar cheeseburgers, swishing the glass around to mull over and decide which is better? This comparison does not whiff close.

Hear the verbal hint in verse 15 again: **And this is clearer still, if another priest *arises*.** If we go on, **if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek**, the mysterious priest we considered last week from Genesis 14. He seemingly came “out of nowhere,” which Hebrews takes literally to mean he’s **without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life** (7:3). What if another priest *arises* in his *likeness*?<sup>14</sup>

Verse 16 tells us that One has, and *how* He has. But let’s hear it in context. Verse 15: **And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has**

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<sup>12</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, 171.

<sup>14</sup> “Likeness” speaks to the typological connection, Harris, 173.

**become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life.**

What if another Priest *arises*? And what if He's priest—*not* because he's part of the right family tree—but because He conquered death itself.

Which priest would you prefer?

The readers of this letter did not have to list out the pros and cons. The case wasn't ambiguous; the decision making didn't have to be complex. Because they could no longer—not with any intellectual credibility—claim that the Levitical priesthood was the best option for them.<sup>15</sup> If it's full and final forgiveness they want, if it was transformation, if they or we desire ongoing access to our Maker, you don't prefer a corpse representing you. Not when there is a Risen Priest–King seated at the Father's right hand.

The priesthood has changed for the better.

Verse 17 begins the phrase-by-phrase exegesis of Psalm 110. On the heels of considering His **indestructible life**, we note Psalm 110's emphasis on *forever*. Verse 17: **For it is attested of Him, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."** Could *that* be said of Aaron or any of the Levitical priests?

Verse 18 continues the contrast, with "on the one hand" language: **For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness.** Verse 11 told us what this referred to. The first clause of verse 19 reiterates: **for the Law made nothing perfect.** By law, again, it refers to those laws concerning the priesthood, a priesthood which was dependent on mortal humans. This priest would die. The next one would too. That's plenty to render it less than perfect. Furthermore, it was a system that could not give final forgiveness. Even if the priest continued to live into next year, he would have to, once again, offer sacrifices for the people. And not in one single year could that priest's act transform a heart fully. It made *nothing* perfect.

That's "on the one hand." The other hand comes in verse 19: **and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.** To say this all yet another way, on the one hand, under the Levitical system, one priest, on one day a year, entered within the veil into the holy of holies. And on the other hand, we—and I mean each and every one of us that trusts Christ—we draw near repeatedly, with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

They offered sacrifices again and again and again. Then it was done once for all time, so that we might draw near again and again.

Jesus is better than the angels (1:4). He's better than Moses (3:3). He's a better High Priest (4:14–16). The author wrote of **better things concerning you** (6:9). *All* this, along with the ten "betters" to come, add up to what verse 19 describes, **a bringing in of a better hope.**

So, what is it that you're tempted to fall back on? If there were something that would cause you to listen less closely, or to ultimately walk away from the Lord, what is it? Is it a particular future you have in mind? Is it power at whatever cost? Is it a relationship you think you deserve?

Whatever it is that's tugging at you, is it truly better than what Christ offers you? Or are we "half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us"? Are we far too easily pleased?<sup>16</sup>

The priesthood has changed. The priesthood has changed for the better.

### **3. This better Priest was promised (vv. 20-22)**

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiner, 222.

<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*,

In Hebrews 4 we saw the author scour each phrase of Psalm 95 to teach and apply. Here he does so with Psalm 110. In the last citation, the emphasis was on this priest's eternity. He was to be a priest *forever*. Here the emphasis is on the oath made. Verse 20: **And inasmuch as it was not without an oath (for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever.'")**

While the Levitical priests took up their role *without* an oath, this better Priest was promised. In fact, Yahweh didn't just *say* in Psalm 110 that this better priest would come, He *swore*. As it was in Hebrews 6, the oath *isn't* to hold Him accountable, as if that were a thing. It's for *our* sake. It's recorded to underscore the reliability of God's promises.<sup>17</sup>

In the introduction I mentioned what had been said in old lore concerning the king of Gondor: "*The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known.*" The woman quoting that line had said it as she wept, looking into the face of one dying, a man named Faramir. A page later, Gandalf enters the houses of healing "and with him one cloaked in grey." That cloaked man soon knelt beside the dying Faramir, and with a hand upon his brow, Tolkien writes that he began, "calling for one that was lost."<sup>18</sup> And though moments prior Faramir had been near death, he opens his eyes and speaks softly, "My lord you called me. I come. What does the king command?"<sup>19</sup>

They knew the lore. They recognized their king.

Psalm 110 isn't a line in a novel. It's the sworn word of Yahweh, Maker of heaven and earth. And *all* His promises—His oaths, even—find their "Yes" in His Son (2 Cor. 1:20). Which is what verse 22 says, in—if it's possible—in *even more* certain language, **so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.**

We'll spend significant time in Hebrews 8–10 spelling out the details of this new and better covenant. But note the legal language here calling Jesus the guarantee of it. In fulfilling every syllable God ever spoke, He Himself is the guarantor of what God's assured us. To say it another way, He's the pledge of this new covenant, guaranteeing that it will be eternally effective.<sup>20</sup>

The Levitical priesthood wasn't sufficient. It had a built-in shelf life. But the true story of the history of the world—past, present, and future—is this: God Himself, having put on flesh, entered into a world that rebelled against Him. And in doing everything we *should've* done, He—as truly human—was perfected. And in taking a body unto Himself, and then dying and rising, He conquered what our imperfection—our gross transgression—earned. And now, as King—ruling over all things—and Priest—interceding for His purchased and precious people, He offers us the perfection He'd earned. He went where we couldn't go. And then He welcomes us in, bringing many sons to glory.

What you long for, He offers freely.

The priesthood has changed. It's changed for the better. Because this better Priest was promised. And the promises are true.

#### 4. In and through Him, God saves fully and forever (vv. 23-25)

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<sup>17</sup> Harris, 180.

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Schreiner, 231.

The contrast continues with more “on the one hand” language in verse 23: **The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing.** We’ve noted this already. There were *more* priests that served in the Levitical order than the Melchizedekian. Why? Because they, and this is the most *indirect* way to say this, **they were prevented by death from continuing.**

The passage then gives us the “other hand” in verse 24, **but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds his priesthood permanently.** He’s not of the Levitical line. His priesthood isn’t bound by it. Instead, He continues forever, holding his priesthood permanently, because He became so by the power of an indestructible life.

And that means something for our salvation, according to verse 25: **Therefore, He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.** As I noted last week, there are a few important concluding statements left, but the argument of Melchizedek has been building to this point. *For this, for this, for this, for this,* and now, “therefore.” Some of the best “therefores” are those that you sort of anticipate coming. The argument has been so clear and compelling that the conclusion is evident.

Here it is again. If He is all that Hebrews 7 says He is, then what does He do? He saves *forever* those who draw near to God through Him. Maybe your translation says He saves *to the uttermost*, and you want to know, “Which one is it? Does He save fully *or* forever?” They’re not mutually exclusive.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it’s both.<sup>22</sup> The perfection the Levitical priesthood couldn’t bring about, He has.

He saves *all* of us—every *aspect* of us—and He does so *always*.

The priesthood has changed, for the better, because God said He’d save us through a better priest.

## Conclusion

How might we be certain that we can be saved *both* fully and forever? We might go back to the first lines of the book: **When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high** (Heb 1:3).

The throne of the King is the throne of a Priest.

Forever, He rules. Forever, He purifies. Forever, He sustains. Forever, He intercedes. And it’s for that reason—that reason alone—we might draw near to God in this meal before us. We do so **through Him, since He always lives to make intercession** for us.

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<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, 233.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, 183; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, 391.