



The Perfect Priest

Hebrews 7:1-28

Grace Church | 11.13.22

Raise your hand if this week you felt guilt over something you had done. There are few more universal experiences in the human condition than the feeling of guilt or remorse: the need to cover up, pay for, or remedy what we deem to be shameful, wrong, or culturally unacceptable. It doesn't matter if you are religious or not—we call those who are guiltless “monsters” and make documentaries about them. Even American monsters develop guilt though: both Ted Bundy and Jeffery Dahmer, famous for their shockingly evil acts of serial murder, professed a real remorse and an alleged turn to Christian faith late in their prison sentences. Whether or not this is genuine, it should highlight for us that even the most calloused are prone to strategies to cope with what they have done. No one is truly remorseless.

Hebrews 7 is all about dealing with that guilt. In chapter 6 we arrived at two conclusions. First, if we are going to hold fast to Jesus and reach full maturity, we need faith. Then last week we saw that we have good reason for faith—God is an unchanging God who doesn't go back on his promises to bless us, a promise that goes all the way back to Abraham, the father of faith. Our reservations are not quite finished though. Even if we can trust God to fulfill his promise to us, how can we trust that we can fulfill our end? What happens when we incur guilt, wrongdoing against God that naturally throws into question the blessing coming for us? (What is this blessing?)

In the ancient world, there was a simple way to clear guilt: go to the priest. Offer sacrifice, and you would be cleared. Although there were major differences between the priesthood set up by God for Israel and Pagan Priests, the mechanics were generally the same. In fact, priesthood as a cultural institution is naturally assumed by the Biblical text. But what if priests aren't enough? Hebrews 7 answers that question, and it does so through a complex comparison between two kinds of sacrificial systems, or covenants, presided over by two different kinds of priests. I want you to be prepared as we jump all over this text and do not have time to cover everything in detail. But we will instead view this text under two headings: 1) the failure of your priests, and 2) the perfection of Jesus the priest.

The Failure of Your Priests

According to the Christian worldview, our guilt comes from the beginning. Adam and Eve were tasked to be royal representatives of God's kingdom on Earth, but it was their rebellion that caused shame—a desire to hide, to cover up—a real guilt that has persisted throughout



generations and generations. If we take a peek into the history of God and his people on earth, we find a story of a people marked by guilt. God was nothing but faithful to his people. He called Abraham, blessed his descendents, brought them out of Egypt, gave them his Law to know and obey him, promised them a fruitful land, protected them and gave them a Godly king when they asked. But they couldn't measure up to his law and covenant. Guilt heaped up. So how did they get rid of their guilt? God set up a system for them, a system of priests and sacrifice. Leviticus 5 gives us a picture:

“If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realizes his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity. He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him for the mistake that he made unintentionally, and he shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering; he has indeed incurred guilt before the Lord.”

But this isn't the first time a priest of Yahweh is mentioned. The first time the word “priest” is used in Scripture is actually in Genesis 14, where a strange figure shows up. Abraham has just won a great battle against several rulers in his area, rescuing his nephew Lot. As he passes by the city of Salem, meaning peace, the king of the city comes to greet him and bless him.

This is recapped for us in **verses 1-2**. Melchizedek is an interesting figure. Other than Hebrews and his appearance in Genesis, We see no other mention of Melchizedek in the Bible except a Psalm that we will see quoted later in our text. But we learn several things about him. First, he is a king—his name means “king of righteousness” and he is king of a place called “peace”, possibly the future city of Jerusalem. Secondly, he is a priest of Yahweh. But what is so interesting about him is that **verse 3**, he is not mentioned to have any genealogy. He receives his priestly title not like the Levites, who were given it by birth. The author of Hebrews says that he is even greater than Abraham, the father of Israel, since it is he who blessed Abraham and Abraham who tithes to him! In receiving these tithes, he is showing he is even superior to the Levites, since they descended from Abraham.

This mysterious priest is superior because he is *other*. He is ancient and stands alone. If you were a Hebrew, an Israelite, and someone told you Jesus was your priest, that wouldn't mean that much to you. You've had plenty of priests. In fact, you may be appalled or confused, since you know priests must come only from the tribe of Levi or risk the wrath of God. But here is what Hebrews is saying: Jesus is different, not like any other priest at all. Jesus is not like the Levitical priests. He is after the order of Melchizedek, he does not come from the line of Levi, **look at verse 14**. He comes from the line of Judah, the line of kings, not priests. And then **verse 17**, quoting the prophecy of David about Jesus. So if there was a need for a new, different, better priest, a priest who was not a Levite, it must mean that the Levites weren't getting it done. They were imperfect priests. For the Hebrews to continue to trust in their old priests of the old covenant is to continue in their perpetual guilt. It's already proven that it won't work, and something greater had to come. This is what is meant by **verse 11-12**. Not only did the priesthood fail, since the law of Moses was given by



priests, the law itself showed that it does not have enough power to save.

What is so inferior about the levitical priesthood? First, we notice that their priests were **flawed**. Again and again in Scripture we are given examples of priests who used their office to exploit the people. But a simple demonstration of their imperfection is the fact that they had to offer sacrifice for their own sin before offering sacrifice for the sins of the people. This is the argument of **verse 27**. How could impure priests be trusted to continually offer up pure sacrifices? How could a system which required an advocate to have an advocate stand up in the end?

Second, the intercession of the old priests was **temporary**. Intercession is the work of a mediator—the one who makes peace. This is the primary job of the priest, to offer sacrifice that will make peace between guilty people and a holy God. The Levitical priests, however, varied in their ability to intercede, for two reasons. First, they became priests on the basis of legal requirements, **verse 16**. In other words, it was not their character qualifications that gave them the ability to become priests, but simply their lineage. Not only that, but **verse 23**, there were many of them, and they were always dying and being replaced! There was always the possibility then of having a faithful priest replaced by an unfaithful one. Their intercession was not constant, consistent, or overall trustworthy.

Thirdly, the atonement of the levitical priests was always **renewing**. The payment that was needed was never enough, but always up for renewal. It's like renewing your car's inspection and registration—what a pain. Except it's not just a ticket that is in the balance, but the salvation and purity of your soul. Guilt always required a new sacrifice, which is why in **verse 27** it is described as happening "daily"! Can you imagine? Every time you sin, disobey one command of God, even if you don't realize it at the time or mean to do it, you go to the priest. The priest makes atonement, or payment, for you by blood. So here you have a visible picture of your guilt, of your inability to measure up to God's holiness. You hear the ram cry out, you watch as it is killed and sacrificed to pay for your failure. And then you do it all over again, and again, and again. How much blood is enough?

Fourthly and lastly, the status of the Levitical priesthood was **uncertain**. **Verse 20** says that this priesthood was made "without an oath". Now we saw last week that God's word is always good, but when he swears an oath, he does so by himself, meaning he holds himself on the line. He cannot go back on his oath, or he would cease to be God. But the Levitical priesthood is not held by an oath or promise: there is no guarantee that it will last. Under this system, there is always the likelihood that it could collapse all together, the mortal priests die, the immoral priests fail, and eventually we are left with the overall sensation that God will simply have enough.

This overwhelming evidence leads the author of Hebrews to say in **verse 18** that this sacrificial system is set aside because in contrast to the one to come it is "weak" and "useless". Offering the blood of bulls and goats, Hebrews will later say, will *never* wash away sin. It's useless.

Now, bear with me as I want to apply this need to you. What's it to me, you say? I would never in a



million years think about going to a temple and getting a priest to sacrifice an animal on my behalf. And yet, you are still guilty. So where does your guilt go? We may not turn to the levitical priesthood to remedy our guilt, but we turn to other priests. A priest is simply something that you turn to to act as your mediator and atonement, to clear your guilt. An advocate in the courtroom of your own measuring up. All you have to do is ask the question: where do I turn when I feel guilty, who do I turn to to plead my cause?

Let's consider three tribes of imperfect priests that we turn to. Maybe the first priest you run to when you feel guilty is the **The Priest of Blame**. This is quite easy and simple—how do we get rid of our guilt? We blame it on someone or something else. I don't have to feel guilty, because it's not my fault, it's their fault. Or, we blame our circumstances to appease our guilt. Really, I couldn't help my sin. It's been a long day, a long week. I've been through a lot lately. Or we blame it on our temperament or our personality or enneagram number. Or maybe even you do blame yourself, falling into a pit of self-loathing and despair. We try to bear our guilt just by wallowing in it, leading to feelings of depression or lack of self-confidence. Ultimately, the priest of blame cannot clear our guilt because no one can bear the weight of our sin. You can't hate someone enough or hate yourself enough to get rid of our guilt. All that blame does is accrue more guilt, spreading it around to different places like wildfire.

Second, **The Priest of Penance**. You might call this the priest of works, or of good deeds. When you feel guilty about something you've done or haven't done, how often do you attempt to make up for it by your own work? Most of all, we do this with God. We fail him, we let him down, and so we get to work. I will never go back to that sin, we say. I will pray harder and read my Bible more, I will get the appropriate accountability, I will do, do, do. I can't escape my guilt, so I've got to get busy outweighing guilt with good works. But it doesn't work. Even Hebrews shows us, in **verse 12**. Since there is a change in the priesthood, there is a change in the law. After Christ, the way to God is not through the Law. In fact, it never was. Your future obedience can never outweigh your past disobedience. Why? Because you'll never be perfect. You'll never be pure enough to atone for your own sin by your own self-sacrifice. You'll never be able to plead your own case. Get rid of the priest of penance.

Let me give you one more imperfect priest you might go to. It's **The Priest of Apathy**. When you are overwhelmed with guilt, maybe your strategy is simply to bury it. Forget about it, shrug it off. No big deal, I'm just an imperfect person. Let me focus on something else, and eventually it will go away. Ultimately, this priest will fail you, because there is only so far you can dig. There will come a day in your life, some of you may have already experienced it, where you cannot outrun your guilt. All of a sudden, it comes back with a vengeance. It's never gone, it just might be hiding.

So in all these priests, here is the reality: God himself set up the Levitical system. He spoke it's rules from Heaven. Who are we to think our priests are better than his? And yet, that system was never meant to achieve perfection. So neither can yours. Your penance, your blame, your apathy, should all be pointing you to a great need for a perfect priest, and today, like **verse 19**, a better hope, through which we draw near to God. What is that better hope?



The perfection of Jesus the priest.

If you feel guilt (or are guilty) today, let the good news of Jesus flow over you for the next few minutes as I expound to you just how glorious it is that Jesus is our high priest. Remember those three high priests you are tempted to set up: blame, penance, and apathy. Let's see how Jesus is the answer.

First, **his holiness outworks your blame**. While all other priests are sinful and flawed, he is holy. **Verse 24**, he is holy, innocent, unstained, separated, and exalted. He was tempted in every way as we were, yet without sin. What this ultimately means is that when you feel guilt that leads you to point the finger, all you are doing is trying to make up for your lack of holiness. You are trying to explain away the reality that *you* are the one to blame.

I am reminded of the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12, when the prophet Nathan comes to David and tells him the story of a man who took a precious sheep from the innocent. David is oblivious to his sin of adultery, taking of his friend's wife, and his blame is elsewhere, inquiring what man could do such a thing as steal from a friend and have him put to death, until Nathan points the finger and says: "you are the man!" All of a sudden David realizes just how unholy he is, and where does he turn? To God, where he says:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

What we see is how God deals with sin. When you realize you are far from holy, you can turn to Christ your priest. He is one whose holy blood can create in you a new heart. He is the one who died so that the Holiness of God's Spirit can be guaranteed to you and sealed in you. And not once did he possess any imperfection that would keep him from offering himself once for all as a holy sacrifice for you, as **verse 27 says**, the holy Son offering up himself. His holiness assures that between you and the court of God there is peace. It would be unjust for God to turn you away, since the Holy blood of Jesus makes a perfect case for your absolution.

Secondly, the **eternity of Jesus outlasts your penance**. Penance says you can atone for your sin and guilt by fulfilling the law. The Levites fulfilled one part of the law: they didn't allow anyone to be priests who were not levites. Maybe then you can make your penance by doing a few good works here and there?

But the priesthood of Christ crushes this assumption. Why? Because he's not a Levite, he isn't a priest according to the law. He is made a priest by a new law with new power. What does the text say, **verse 16**? He is made a priest by the power of an indestructible life. This refers to a life that



cannot be brought to an end, a life that is shaped by resurrection, a priest who can never die. And because he is eternal, what does Hebrews remind us? He is a priest forever. We see this come up again in verses **23-24**. All the other priests met one little requirement, they were levites. But that requirement could not save them from death. They failed in the end, their priestly ministry ceased. But Christ our priest is eternal, the resurrected king who never dies.

Let me urge you to consider the weight of the eternity of Christ versus your own acts of penance. You can work, work, work, and work, your whole life. And all of this adds up to what? A few specks in eternity. A single dot on the timeline of history. Pile all your good works on the scale, and measure it against the weight of sin that has been accumulating since the garden. Your feeble attempts at penance are like a single raindrop trying to outweigh the oceans. You'll never ever get there, because you don't have enough time. Just like the priests of old, death will find you. You can never clear your guilt with your own works, because it would take an eternity that you simply don't have.

But there is the kicker. Jesus Christ is eternal, enduring forever with an indestructible life. From the beginning he has existed, until the end he will never cease. The Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, **verse 24** says he holds his priesthood permanently. And what is it that the priest does? He makes intercession for the guilt of sinners *forever*. Peter asks Jesus, how often am I to forgive? Seven times? To which Jesus replies, Seventy times seven, indicating a number too high to reach—eternity, infinity. And he only calls us to forgive continually because his eternity allows him the ministry of eternal forgiveness. You won't wake up tomorrow and realize Jesus is no longer your priest. Because look at **verse 25**. Because his ministry of atonement lasts forever, you will not be condemned. Christ is able to save us from our guilt not just once, or twice, or a few times. He does not just give us a second chance at this whole following God thing. Jesus doesn't save us half-way from our guilt, he goes the whole way and more. He is able to save to the uttermost, to the very height, to all time, those who draw near to God through him. Bring your guilt to Jesus, because when your works of penance fade, he lasts forever.

Lastly, **the finality of Jesus outweighs your apathy**. In the old covenant, the routine made it easy to forget the severity of it.. Again and again—sin is committed, blood is shed, sin is committed, blood is shed. That's just life, the blood of dead animals piling up over the years. So you too can start to feel like sin is not such a big deal, since it feels like you'll never *really* be rid of it. Or, your sin is so overwhelming, the lengths you go to deal with it so costly, that you despair if it will ever end and turn to apathy.

But make no mistake, in Christ your sins aren't piling up. God doesn't stockpile your guilt away, he wipes it from the very fabric of the universe forever. How? Look at verses **27-28**. You see, it's not just the priests who were imperfect. The sacrifices the priest offered were also imperfect. To truly keep guilt from piling up, to really wipe it off the face of the earth, a perfect sacrifice was needed, a final one. His office is not up for debate, it's not uncertain—it's sealed with perfect blood and with a perfect oath of God that he is a priest forever.



That day when Jesus took to the cross, he knew what was coming. He knew that day was the final day of atonement. He knew the only sacrifice that could fully and truly clear the guilty once and for all was himself. And he went to that bloody, Roman cross to be crucified by the very people he loved. Like a lamb led to the slaughter is silent, he did not cry out like all the lambs before him. God's promise was never that he would forget your sin in deistic apathy, his promise was that he would nail every last square inch of your sin to his Son who is forever perfect.

Friends, the gospel is good. We have a high priest who clears us of our guilt. **Verse 22** teaches us Jesus is not just the priest of the better covenant, he is the guarantor—his perfect life pays the debt you cannot. A guarantor is willing to pay a debt on behalf of someone who can't. His perfection makes your welcome secure. Stop placing your guilt anywhere else but him. Stop blaming yourself, God doesn't blame you if you are in Christ. Stop ignoring your sin, remember that it has been paid for and forgiven and deal with it by placing it on Christ who can bear it.

Would you stand with me and read together from Isaiah 53?

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth... Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Amen and amen, our guilt is gone and our priest is perfect.

