

MADE PERFECT FOREVER

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 7:20-28

19th Message

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The 2024 Paris Olympics start in twelve days' time. Over ten thousand athletes will compete. Some have dreams of winning; others will be pleased just to be there to participate. In points-based events, gymnasts and divers will seek a perfect score. Athletes in timed events will seek their own version of a perfect race. Some will win a medal; for some only a gold medal will do. Some will set records, be it world, Olympic, national, or personal. All will have tried to time their years of preparation to arrive in Paris in peak form, in perfect condition.

A hundred years ago the 1924 Olympics were also held in Paris. They are most notable now for the participation of Eric Liddell. He has been remembered this past week for the hundredth anniversary of two notable events. Last Sunday, July 7, for a race which he did not run. Last Friday, July 12, for a race which he did run and unexpectedly won. The Scottish athlete from Edinburgh was selected to compete for Britain in the 100 m race. It was his best event and he was one of the favorites. But when he learnt, several months ahead, that the heats would be on a Sunday, he withdrew. As a devout Christian he believed Sunday to be a day of Sabbath rest. Instead he trained for the 400 m race, despite being a sprinter. In the final he was placed in the outside lane, meaning he ran blind, unable to see any of his competitors. He ran the race as a sprint, thought at the time be impossible. He won by nearly a second, setting a new record. His running style was anything but perfect but it worked.

Eric Liddell came to wider public attention through the movie *Chariots of Fire* (1981) with its well-known film score by Vangelis. But he has always been well-known in Edinburgh and Scotland.

Famous though Liddell was at the time, he gave up his fame and went back to China, the land of his birth, to join his parents as a missionary. There he died in a Japanese internment camp in 1945, shortly before the end of World War 2. His dying words were "Complete surrender." He surrendered himself completely to God in death, as he had been doing in life for so many years. Thereby lay the path to perfection. He successfully completed the course of life, faithful to the end to the God whom he served. For him that was worth far more than winning a gold medal, setting a world record, and becoming a national hero.

What is the path to perfection? And what even is perfection?

Last Sunday, in Hebrews 7:11-19, we saw that perfection cannot be attained through the Levitical priesthood (7:11), and that the law perfected nothing (7:19). The former commandment was weak and ineffective (7:18). Its setting aside has cleared the way for the entrance of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. This hope is Jesus himself.

The preacher showed the need for change: the inadequacy of both the priesthood and the law to make perfect. In the next section (7:20-28) he shows the superiority of Jesus the new priest. He is exactly the priest that we need. He has been made perfect forever. In this lies our hope of perfection.

The preacher continues to show the differences between the for-

mer Levitical priesthood and the better priesthood of Jesus. Four times he contrasts the two priesthoods.

I. With or without an Oath (7:20-22)

First, the priesthoods came into effect in different manners:

²⁰And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

"The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
'You are a priest forever.'"

²²Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. (Heb 7:20-22 NIV)

The others, that is the Levitical priests descended from Aaron, became priests without an oath. God did not swear an oath in designating Aaron and his four sons as the first priests. Aaron's descendants took office as priests without any oath. Instead they became priests through their genealogy, through their descent from Aaron. They inherited the office. But he, that is Jesus, became a priest with an oath.

Today many who take public office, whether elected or appointed, do so with an oath. Most notably, the inauguration of the President includes the oath of office administered by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The new president places his hand on a Bible, representing a superior authority, and says, "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

But in the case of Jesus, he himself did not swear the oath on taking office. The oath was sworn by God in appointing him to the office: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" Yet again the preacher quotes Psalm 110:4, but now for the first time he includes the first part of that verse: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind."

What is the significance of God's oath? Previously in chapter 6 the preacher has shown that God backed up his promise to Abraham with an oath confirming that promise. "God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised... so that...we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged" (6:17). When God swore that oath confirming his promise to Abraham, he had an eye on *us*. And on all others who, through union with Christ, have become children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:25). God's confirming oath strengthens *our* confidence in the reliability of God's word. We are thereby greatly encouraged to persevere in our journey of faith, in our journey following Jesus to the end.

The elements of the old covenant have been put aside because they were weak and ineffective: both the law and the Levitical priest-

hood. But the promise to Abraham still stands. The rest of the Bible is the account of how God fulfills his promise to Abraham (Gen 12: 2-3). God bound himself with an oath to do so. We can have confidence in his word and in his promise. He will be faithful.

God made a second oath, designating a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. None of the Levitical priests were in that order; they were all in the order of Aaron. But the preacher is showing emphatically, again and again here in chapter 7, that Jesus is this priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

God's sworn oath to Abraham confirmed his promise to him—guaranteeing it, as it were. In similar manner, God's designation by oath that Jesus is priest forever confirms, establishes, and guarantees. Jesus himself is the guarantor of a better covenant. The passing away of the former arrangement of priesthood and law allowed the introduction of a better hope, which is Jesus himself. He guarantees the covenant. In the archaic language of KJV, he is the *surety*.

Charles Wesley's hymn *Arise, My Soul, Arise* draws on today's passage. It includes the line "Before the throne my surety stands."

This is the first reference in Hebrews to covenant. Not only were the Levitical priesthood and the Law weak and ineffective, and have now been put aside. But even the covenant made at Sinai, the Mosaic covenant, needs replacing. A new covenant is needed. A better covenant. A covenant that is effective. Because Jesus's priesthood is affirmed with God's oath, he is the guarantor of this new, better covenant. He guarantees that it does actually work, that it is able to make perfect forever, that it does actually achieve the goals that God intends for the covenant.

2. Dying and Living Priesthoods (7:23-25)

Next the preacher draws a second contrast between the many dying priests of the Levitical priesthood and the one new living priest who is Jesus:

²³Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (7:23-25)

The former priesthood was a dying priesthood. The preacher has stated this several times now in this chapter. The priests kept dying, generation after generation. Death prevented them from remaining in office. The result was many, many priests, all of whom died. In this case, there being many priests was not a good thing; it indicated failure. The two great enemies were death and sin. The former priesthood was weak and ineffective in dealing with both. As a result that priesthood could not bring the perfection of full access to God's presence.

The priesthood of Jesus is different and better (24). He "lives forever." But the preacher doesn't use the regular word "live" here. He uses a wordplay to contrast the two orders of priests. The former priests didn't remain or abide in office, but Jesus does remain; he abides. The preacher uses the verb that is such a favorite of John's, in both his gospel and his first letter. Jesus abides in office; he abides in God's presence. Death cannot touch him, for he has the power of an indestructible life. Therefore he remains a secure guarantor of the new, better covenant. Because he remains, he has a permanent, unchangeable priesthood.

With *therefore*, v. 25 presents the consequences of Jesus remaining in this permanent, unchangeable priesthood. Jesus does two things:

he *saves* and he *intercedes*.

Firstly, "Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him."

Jesus is *able*. The former priesthood was weak, ineffective, and unable. But Jesus has power. He is effective. He is able.

He is able to *save*. What is salvation? We are saved *from* something and saved *for* something. On the one side salvation means delivering us from the two great enemies of sin and death. On the other side it means ushering us into the full presence of God. The God who desires to dwell with his people. The God who has created people for his presence. The Levitical priesthood was only able to manage sin; it could not deliver from sin. It could not transform people's hearts and minds. And it could not usher God's people fully into his presence.

Jesus is able to save *completely*, to the uttermost (KJV). English versions translate this term as either *completely* or *forever*. Both are true. Complete salvation implies forever. And if it is forever it must be complete. In both senses it is perfect. The goal has been attained. Humanity has been brought to the state that God intended all along. Mission accomplished: made perfect forever. The Levitical priests kept having to offer sacrifices over and over again, day after day, year after year, generation after generation. They were never complete; they were never forever.

Salvation means *coming to God*. He is our Maker; he knows what he has made us for. He has made us for his presence. Therefore the end goal is to be in his presence. This is perfection, the attainment of our purpose. We have to come to him. We cannot go to anyone or anything else. Perfection lies nowhere else than God's presence, for which we are made. Under the Levitical system the people brought their offerings to the temple courtyard but they couldn't come any closer to God. The priests could get a little closer, and the high priest a little closer still but only once a year. But God was still at a distance.

Salvation means *coming through him*, that is, through Jesus. He is the only mediator whom God has appointed. He is the mediator of the new, better covenant. He is the mediator between God and humanity. He can play this role because he unites in himself both God and humanity. The Levitical priests, through whom the people brought their offerings, were weak, unable, and had only restricted access to God's presence.

So, Jesus is able to save completely and forever those who come to God through him. He can do this because he always lives to intercede for us.

He is *always living*, having defeated the enemy of death by dying, by entering into the enemy's territory and bursting it asunder. The order of constantly-dying priests has passed away, replaced by a high priest who has the power of an indestructible life. It is this that qualifies him to be high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Always living, he *intercedes* for us. In another line from Wesley's hymn, "He ever lives above for me to intercede." What does it mean to intercede? It means putting yourself in between two parties as a mediator. Jesus enters into the space where he is between us and God. He alone can be the perfect mediator there. As the eternal Son he is in perfect communion with God the Father; they are one. As a human being he is one with us, having shared in our humanity. How does he intercede? How does he mediate the new covenant?

I like this recent translation: "he always lives to speak with God for them" (CEB). Jesus our high priest, seated at God's right hand,

speaks to his Father for *us*. He represents us to God. He is our advocate. He tells his Father, “These are my brothers and sisters,” for “he is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters” (2:11). What a wonderful thought, that Jesus continually speaks to God for us. He is seen and heard. As a result we are seen and heard.

3. How Great a High Priest (7:26)

Next the preacher summarizes just how great a high priest we have:

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. (7:26)

Jesus is holy, blameless, and pure. He is *holy*, but this is not the usual word for holy. The Levitical priests were holy if they went through their purification rites. But this word identifies those who are faithful to God, loyal to his covenant. Those who are devoted to him and live lives oriented onto him. Jesus is *blameless*, literally without evil. He is free from sin and its associated guilt. And Jesus is *pure*, literally without stain, impurity or uncleanness.

Next he is *set apart from sinners*. This did not apply when he was on earth. He mingled with sinners. The Pharisees took offense at the company he kept. They tried to live at the same purity level as the priests, though most were not priests. They tried to avoid sinners, and those who were ceremonially unclean. But Jesus mixed with the unclean, with lepers, with sinners, even the dead. In the Pharisees’ mindset, he should have contracted unholiness and impurity from them, but he didn’t. Their uncleanness was not contagious. Instead it was his holiness that was contagious. For example, when the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched the hem of Jesus’s garment, it wasn’t her uncleanness that entered him and contaminated him. Instead he sensed that power had gone out from him. He was contagious not her. Power went out from Jesus to her and she was healed.

But now Jesus is set apart from sinners because of the next clause: he is *exalted above the heavens*. He has entered God’s presence in the space that is pure holiness. But he does not forget us. In his intercession he carries us into that space. There he speaks to God about us.

It is fitting that we have such a high priest, that God appoint such a high priest for us. For it to be fitting it must meet our real needs—not necessarily our perceived needs. So what are our real needs? Deliverance from the enemies of sin and death, and full admittance to God’s presence. He has made us for life, and he has made us for his presence. Just this sort of high priest meets these needs. The Levitical priesthood and the law did not meet these needs.

4. Different Sacrifices (7:27)

The recognition of how fully sufficient our high priest is leads into the third contrast between the two priesthoods. They offered different sacrifices:

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (7:27)

The offerings of the two orders of high priests are very different. The other priests, that is the Levitical priests, offered animal sacrifices; Jesus offered himself. The other priests offered sacrifices every single day. This probably refers to the *tamid* offering: a lamb was

wholly consumed on the altar morning and evening every single day, year after year. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer the blood of a bull for his own sins, before he could offer the blood of a goat for the people’s sins. Jesus, being without sin, being holy, blameless, and pure, did not have to offer for his own sins. Therefore he could offer his own pure, sinless self for the sins of the people.

5. Made perfect forever (28)

The preacher closes this section with an explanatory sentence (*for*) in the form of a fourth contrast between the two priesthoods:

For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. (7:28)

The reference to law echoes the beginning and end of the previous section (7:11-19), which had exposed the weakness of the Levitical system. The reference to the oath echoes the beginning (v. 20) of this section.

The law appoints high priests (plural). The word of the oath appoints a singular high priest; only one is needed. The law appoints men—all the priests were male descendants of Aaron. These men had inherent weakness in that they were beset by the twin enemies of sin and death—again an echo of the previous section: the law and the priesthood were weak and useless (18).

But the Son whom God’s oath appointed as high priest has been made perfect forever. In his superb opening sentence (1:1-4) the preacher identifies the eternal Son as “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1:3). There is a very close identity between the Son and God. The Son is perfect from eternity past. But at God’s behest this Son, God’s Beloved, entered into our human history. He shared in our humanity. Our Scripture reading was a selection of verses from chapter 2, showing how the eternal Son became human like us. He was

made like [us], fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:17-18)

The eternal Son did not need perfecting. But the Son incarnate as the human Jesus did.

it was fitting that God...should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. (2:10)

This does not mean that Jesus was previously weak, useless, and sinful. To perfect something means to bring it to its intended goal and purpose. When something is perfected, it is complete and finished. It fulfills its design. The path to perfection for Jesus was to live out a full human life, complete with suffering, but faithful and obedient to the very end, to death, even death on a cross, even death in the most humiliating, shameful, degrading, violent, painful manner ever known. When Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” he had reached that end-point in his humanity. When he committed himself to his Father, gave up his spirit, and died, his path to perfection was complete. Yes, he was dead. But he died as the one, true, faithful human being. He died as the only one who had ever lived the life that God intended humans to live. He lived a life of total surrender to his Father and his Father’s will. He lived a life of complete devotion and loyalty to his Father. At the end it was to his Father that

he committed his spirit.

He shared in our humanity even in death:

he shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil (2:14).

He entered death, and on the third day Death was burst asunder. God raised him in the power of an indestructible life.

Jesus has been made perfect forever. He is now able to be our high priest after the order of Melchizedek. He is our better hope. He is the guarantor and mediator of a new, better covenant. Such a high priest truly meets our need. If we faithfully follow him to the end, hearing God's voice, keeping our eye on Jesus, Christ before us, we will reach journey's end. We will be made perfect forever, for it is God's intention to bring "many sons and daughters to glory" (2:10), into his very presence where Jesus our forerunner has already entered.

What is perfection and how do we attain it? Perfection is to be the human beings that God has always intended us to be. He made us for his presence, so perfection means to be made ready for his presence. Jesus lived his earthly life devoted to God. He was faithful and

obedient to the end, victorious over sin. Risen, he is victorious over death. Made perfect forever, he is in God's presence. There he speaks for us, and is available to us as our merciful and faithful high priest. Through him we can "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:16). We faithfully follow him to journey's end. We don't do so alone, but together. We encourage one another as we journey together. When we reach journey's end and Jesus returns, then we shall be made perfect forever.

The preacher writes this homily to people he knows and loves dearly. He encourages them to keep going, to walk the path together, holding on to Jesus and upholding one another, remaining faithful to the end: to be made perfect forever.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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