

The Superiority of Faith to Law As seen in Hebrews 7-9

**(Part Two of a Four Part Series on
The Relationship Between Law and Grace)**

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Hebrews chapters 7-9 were written to address the obsolescence of the Law and its replacement by the new covenant. Let's simply step through these three chapters and see what they have to say about the present applicability of the Law. (We will not comment on every statement.)

(Heb. 7:1-10) For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, (2) to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. (3) Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually. (4) Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. (5) And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham. (6) But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. (7) But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater. (8) In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. (9) And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, (10) for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. [NASB]

Melchizedek was a priest-king in the pre-Israelite city of "Salem," later to be called "Jerusalem." All that is known of this man is recorded in Genesis 14:17-20 and Psa. 110:4. According to Hebrews 7:1-10 he seems to have been a prefigurement of Christ (that is not to say that he was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ—he was not, but rather that in some ways he illustrated what Christ would be like when He came). The writer of Hebrews goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the priesthood of Melchizedek was superior to the Levitical Priesthood under the Law. His argument is simply that Abraham, and thus by extension, Levi, who was as yet unborn within Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek; and since the lesser pays tithes to the greater (v. 7), Melchizedek must have been greater than Abraham (and hence greater than Levi), and thus his priesthood greater than the Levitical Priesthood. As we are about to see, the superiority of the Melchizedekian Priesthood is a precursory argument leading to the conclusion that the new covenant (based upon the Melchizedekian Priesthood of Christ) is superior to and replaces the Law (which is based upon the Levitical Priesthood).

(Heb. 7:11-17) 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? (12) For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. (13) For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. (14) For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. (15) And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, (16) who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. (17) For it is attested of Him, “YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK.” [NASB]

In verses 11 and 12 the writer makes the point that the priesthood and the covenant (i.e., the law) cannot be separated, a change in one requires a change in the other. Verses 13 through 15 demonstrate that a change of priesthood has already taken place: Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek—a superior priesthood. The stage is now set for the argument that since the priesthood has changed, the covenant (the Law) has been set aside. Some argue that this is “antinomian” (against law), and they have sought to castigate others as “lawless” on that basis. Such an argument is unfounded. The righteousness did not originate with the Law; righteousness has its roots in God’s eternal character. The Law was a mere candle in a dark, sinful world to allow fallen men to walk without stumbling until God sent a greater light. Christ, on the other hand, is like the noonday sun! He not only illuminates the way, but also infuses life and transforms the landscape of our lives.

(Heb. 7:18-25) For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (19) (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. (20) And inasmuch as it was not without an oath (21) (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’”); so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. (23) The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, (24) but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. (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. [NASB]

If there as been a change of priesthood, it is indicative that there has been a change of covenant. (Law, covenant, and commandment are used somewhat interchangeably in this

epistle.) Why was the former covenant set aside? Because it was “weak” and “useless;” it had no power to perfect, or transform. (Note that this is God’s assessment of the Law as contained in inspired Scripture.) Did God do a poor job in giving the Law? No, it was only a temporary light, a candle, and when seen for what it was, the Law was good and served its purpose. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18, (17) “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. (18) For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.” [NASB] It is sometimes claimed that this statement supports the eternity of the Law, but those who so claim fail to hear what Jesus is saying. It is not uncommon to see the last few words of this passage omitted when the passage is quoted, and no wonder—those words tell us that the Law is *not* eternal! Both the Law and the Prophets will be “fulfilled.” The Law was fulfilled in Christ’s righteousness and atoning death (Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4; Heb. 10:1-18), and the message of the prophets will also be fulfilled just as it was spoken—even to the smallest letter. (The term “law” as used in verse eighteen encompasses the entire Old Testament, which is variously referred to as “the law,” “the prophets,” “the writings,” or some combination of these terms) Christ’s priesthood is evidence of a better covenant (vv. 20-22), and His priesthood abides forever (vv. 23-25); thus, “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him...”

(Heb. 7:26-28) For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; (27) who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. (28) For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever. [NASB]

Hebrews chapter 8 serves to summarize and reinforce the concepts communicated in chapter seven. The amount of space devoted to this subject underscores its importance.

(Heb. 8:1-13) Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. (3) For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. (4) Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; (5) who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, “SEE,” He says, “THAT YOU MAKE all things ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN WHICH WAS SHOWN YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN.” (6) But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. (7) For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no

occasion sought for a second. (8) For finding fault with them, He says, “BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH; (9) NOT LIKE THE COVENANT WHICH I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS ON THE DAY WHEN I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; FOR THEY DID NOT CONTINUE IN MY COVENANT, AND I DID NOT CARE FOR THEM, SAYS THE LORD. (10) FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. (11) AND THEY SHALL NOT TEACH EVERYONE HIS FELLOW CITIZEN, AND EVERYONE HIS BROTHER, SAYING, ‘KNOW THE LORD,’ FOR ALL WILL KNOW ME, FROM THE LEAST TO THE GREATEST OF THEM. (12) FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE.” (13) When He said, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. [NASB]

Notice how this section begins with a summary statement: “Now the main point... is this.” And what is the main point? We have such a high priest as has been described in the previous section; it is an accomplished reality. He is now seated at the right hand of the Father—demonstrating the completeness of His work. He ministered the true sacrifice in the true sanctuary, of which the earthly was only a copy, and therefore inferior. He is the mediator of a better covenant (v. 6) enacted upon better promises (i.e., the unconditional promises made to Abraham, *cf.* Gal. 3:15-18). Again, he states the temporary nature of the Law in verse 7 and backs up the statement by quoting the prophecy of the new covenant from Jeremiah 31:31-34. In verse 13 he restates the main point that the Law is now “obsolete” and ready to disappear. (At the time this letter was written the ceremonial worship system was still in place and Jewish Christians still participated as they had been taught for generations, but this would soon change with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70.) The writer next begins a supplemental line of argumentation based on the nature of worship in the temple.

(Heb. 9:1-10) Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. (2) For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. (3) Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, (4) having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; (5) and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail. (6) Now when these things have been so prepared, the

priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship, (7) but into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. (8) The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, (9) which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, (10) since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation. [NASB]

The writer goes on to describe the earthly tabernacle, or temple, in which the sacrificial provisions of the Law were carried out. He describes the outer area—the holy place—wherein were kept the lampstand, the table, and the holy bread. Behind the holy place, separated by a veil, was the Holy of Holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant. Having given the physical description, he goes on to describe the system of worship that took place in the temple. While the priests regularly entered the outer room (the holy place), only the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, having offered the appropriate sacrifices for himself and for the people. The point is this: As long as the outer tabernacle stood, it signified that the way into God's presence was not open—man could only approach God through the sacrificial system given under the Law. (Men were, of course, still saved by faith alone.) No doubt the hearers would have been familiar with the fact that upon Christ's death the veil of the temple (a covering several inches thick) was ripped from the top to the bottom (Matt. 27:51). While the rending of the veil was an immediate sign of the obsolescence of the Law, it would be the final destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 what would bring an end to the practice of temple worship. What is the implication of this line of argumentation? Simply that the old covenant is passé. In the light of what Christ accomplished on the cross, the former covenant is no longer needed, and it is precisely the implication of that point that many miss; if the Law were still needed, that would imply some insufficiency in the atoning work of Christ.

(Heb. 9:11-17) But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; (12) and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (13) For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, (14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (15) For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (16) For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who

made it. (17) For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. [NASB]

Since Christ has entered the greater and more perfect tabernacle, what need is there for the copy? He entered not through the blood of sacrificial animals, but by His own blood. He entered once and for all—the Just for the unjust—and obtained our eternal redemption. We see here the great difference between the “shadow” and reality. The sacrifices made under the Law could only sanctify the flesh—merely covering sin from sight (10:4), but Christ’s sacrifice cleanses the conscience (the inner man) from dead works to serve the living God. It’s not the Law working externally that empowers one for divine service, but the transformation from within, made possible only by faith in the atoning work of Christ. There is no greater source of power and motivation for holy living than that of inner transformation—something the Law is powerless to accomplish. So, which covenant is superior—the Law, or the new covenant in Christ’s blood (which is an outflow of the promises made to Abraham *cf.*, Gen. 12:3b; 1 Cor. 11:25)? To which will we resort? If we re-establish the Law that God has removed out of the way, we simply make ourselves prisoners to the powerlessness of dead works—the same prison cell from which Christ has freed us.

(Heb. 9:18-28) Therefore even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood. (19) For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, (20) saying, “THIS IS THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT WHICH GOD COMMANDED YOU.” (21) And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. (22) And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (23) Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. (24) For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; (25) nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. (26) Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. (27) And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, (28) so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. [NASB]

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant (v. 15). That covenant was sealed with His own blood and is the only basis of genuine sanctification from sin; even sins committed by God-fearing worshippers in the Old Testament who offered sacrifices according to the

Law could only be remitted as a result of what Christ did on the cross. Under the Law, the sprinkling of the blood of animals sanctified the earthly tabernacle and its implements, but the blood of Christ sprinkled the heavenly tabernacle. The earthly tabernacle was only a shadow of the heavenly. Why return to the shadows when one has access to the reality? To illustrate the folly of this, we may well imagine a young woman who has fallen in love with the picture of a man, who when he appears in the flesh finds that she does not love Him so much as the picture. In the same way, some are unwilling to give up the picture for the reality. They are so stuck in externalistic thinking that they are blinded to the true nature of the redemptive work of Christ, a redemption of the world not through Law, but through the power of a resurrected Savior who, as Scripture so unmistakably says, will come again in power to claim what He has purchased, and personally rule in righteousness over His kingdom forever.

The Law is obsolete as a binding covenant because it was fulfilled at the cross. Paul says in Colossians 2:13-15, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.” For the one who places their faith in Christ, the Law is completely fulfilled at the cross—much as a deed of trust is canceled when a debt is paid. One might well ask what purpose the Law still serves (i.e., if it still has a use beyond historical and informational purposes). This is the principle question addressed in Paul’s letter to the Galatian Churches, which we will consider next.

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