### “The Law Was Weak” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 27, 2024

**Hebrews 7:17–19, 23–25**

17For it is attested of him, “You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” 18There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual 19(for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God. . .

23Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. 25Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

**Mark 10:46–52 (v. 52 in RSV)**

46They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 48Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 49Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” 50So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” 52Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

This Sunday and next Sunday we will have some hymns that touch upon the theme of All Saints Day. All Saints and All Souls Days have been important observances in the churches since at least the 9th century, commemorated on November 1st and 2nd, respectively. These holidays turn our thoughts toward our loved ones, and toward the afterlife. I think you’ll find there is some relevance of today’s Scripture passages to this topic.

We have seen in recent weeks how important the image of priesthood is for the author of the letter to the Hebrews. It is an anonymous writing, and I refer to its author as “Hebrews,” as thought that were the author’s name, too. We see Hebrews’s priestly idea here, when he says Jesus holds the priesthood perpetually, making intercession for believers (7:24–25). But Hebrews also argues that the *old* law and the *old* priesthood are “weak and ineffectual” (Heb 7:18), and even uses the word “obsolete,” in another passage (8:13). Hebrews has a complicated relationship with the Torah and the Jerusalem priesthood, which we could call the Aaronic priesthood, since it had its origin with Aaron, Moses’ brother. Hebrews sees this priesthood as now superseded by a better method for approaching God, which he calls “a better hope” (7:19), and by a heavenly priesthood, the Melchizedek priesthood, much more important than the Aaronic priesthood.

When Melchizedek appears in the Abraham story in Genesis, he is given no genealogy or origin story. He just shows up, a “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18), and Abraham shows him great respect, giving him a portion of his wealth. Hebrews says Melchizedek came without any mention of a father or a mother, “without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (7:3). Abraham treats him as a superior (7:4). Hebrews says Jesus, “resembling Melchizedek . . . has become a priest . . . through the power of an indestructible life” (7:15–16). So it is Jesus’ resurrection and ascension that qualify him for this heavenly priesthood.

Yet Hebrews, even though he believes the actual sacrificial ritual in the Temple has become obsolete, remains thoroughly sacrificial in his thinking, but he says the earthly sacrifice has been replaced by Jesus presenting himself in heaven. Jesus, the heavenly priest, replaces the earthly priests. The earthly temple is just “a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one” (8:5), he says. “The law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities” (10:1).

Hebrews says Jesus is “another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron[.] For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well” (7:11–12). Jesus inaugurates a change in the law, a change in salvation history. Christ himself becomes the new law, the new way. It is a “new and living way that he opened for us” (10:20). Believers will no longer follow the Aaronic priests, for there is “a change in the priesthood” (7:12).

Hebrews does have an idea of atonement, but he wants Christians to think of Jesus as performing atonement for them in the heavenly sanctuary. Of course, this is an act of imagination, since no human could see what Jesus was doing in heavenly places. But that is how Hebrews pictures the atonement. It did not happen at the cross, for Hebrews, but in heaven. Hebrews writes, “Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself” (9:24).

Further, it is the heavenly power of Jesus that acts upon believers in the present. While “the law made nothing perfect” (7:19), Jesus is able to “purify our conscience” and “take away sins” (9:14; 10:11). Jesus is able to act upon our conscience and our soul, to change us. We are able now “to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (10:24).

I think even the physical healing power of Jesus could be called a heavenly power. We see that power in his healing of the blind man at Jericho. The man is crying out for Jesus. Jesus’ followers tell him to be quiet, but he cries out all the more. What I like is how straightforward Jesus is. He asks the blind man what he wants. He wants to be healed. “Go your way,” Jesus says, “your faith has saved you” (10:52 RSV). The blind man follows Jesus on his way, the text says. We don’t know if his conscience was changed, or if he was conscious of being forgiven of sins. All we know is that his physical and social life are changed. He will no longer be a blind beggar sitting by the roadside. He has gotten up and is following Jesus. It seems his life will no longer be handicapped, either physically or socially.

Now the old law, the priests, and the sacrificial ritual did nothing for this man. For this fellow, Jesus indeed embodies a better hope than the old religious system could offer. One can see Hebrews’s point, that the whole religious system was but an anticipation and a symbol for the better hope that was to come. Jesus’ power on earth was related to his significance and power in the heavenly realm.

How does this complicated theology affect us now? I think we should see Jesus as inaugurating a new age, revealing a new way of living faithfully, of putting justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23) foremost in our spiritual lives. Further, we should trust in Jesus’ heavenly power, and that he will take care of our souls in the heavenly realm. We will be spiritually healed, taught, and guided. This hope for the afterlife is part of the “better hope” that is promised. Jesus has opened for us a “new and living way” (Heb 10:20).

Despite the chaos and turmoil so common in the material world, there is stability and purpose in the afterlife, with spiritual growth being the main purpose. Trust that Jesus is a heavenly savior. He has prepared a place for us, and will “save those who approach God through him” (Heb 7:25). You can have a vision of this future life that will enrich your present life, instilling a kind of optimism about everything ultimately working for our good, even in this sometimes difficult mortal life. Our faith in Jesus, in his divine guidance, will help us navigate the daily chaos and turmoil of our material life on earth.

Death is but the entrance to a new dawn. The Indian thinker Rabindranath Tagore said “Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come” (www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/here-there-and-everywhere/201206/whats-after-this-30-quotes-on-the-afterlife?msockid=14d32958e672606538ab3d80e7826162).