

Hebrews 7:20-28

“Jesus, Our Unfailing, Eternal Servant-Priest”

October 31, 2021

Pr Josh Anderson

Reformation Sunday

The Protestant Reformation, which we remember and give thanks to God for today, was of course, a reformation of theology, as encapsulated in the five Reformation solas: “Scripture alone,” “Faith alone,” “Grace alone,” “Christ alone,” “To the Glory of God alone.”

But if you dig a little deeper and read the writings of men like Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Bullinger, Zwingli, Cramner and Knox, and really look at the way in which they set up the life of the churches they pastored and led, you begin to realize that the Reformation was also at least as much a reformation of worship as it was a reformation of doctrine or theology.

The reformers wrote liturgies and hymns and administered the sacraments in radically different ways than had been the experience of the late medieval church.

And through their work, worship was transformed - no longer was Christian worship spoken in Latin and consisted mainly of a priest speak prayers and perform rituals on behalf of the congregation while the watched - now worship was not only intelligible to the laity, but also participatory - they were drawn into worship and given a part, invited to speak prayers and recite creeds and sing hymns in their native language and also partake again regularly of both the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper.

And of course, a huge part of that reform of worship included preaching. One reformation scholar puts it this way:

“Whatever else it was, the Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church. Riding a rising tide of preaching in the late Middle Ages, the Reformers expanded the practice still farther, and gave it a significantly new function and character.”

Among other things, the Reformers joined the church fathers in placing preaching at the center of the worship of the church - and particularly what I would call expository preaching - preaching consecutively through whole books of the Bible and seeking to explain and apply each text on its own merits to the people before them.

Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Bullinger, Zwingli, Cramner and Knox - all these men were, perhaps above all other things, preachers, and today our church gladly continues in their example, seeking to preach each week faithfully from the Scriptures, and trusting that Christ himself speaks to his people each week in a primary way through the faithful preaching of his word.

As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it: *“When the Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven.”*

In some mysterious and holy way, as Protestant Christians, we believe that Christ speaks to us not only through the reading of the word, but, as our Larger Catechism puts, *“especially through the preaching of the Word of God,”* and it is for that reason that our worship is so focused on the public reading and preaching of the Scriptures - because this is the way, above all ways, that the Living Christ addresses his people.

With that in mind, let us turn now to Hebrews 7:20-28 and see what Jesus has to say to us today.

Listen now carefully to God’s holy and inerrant word, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

20 And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, 21 but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him:

*“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind,
‘You are a priest forever.’”*

22 This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

One of the most important questions in our lives is the question of to whom we will entrust ourselves.

All of us have needs - spiritually, emotionally, physically, and all of us depend on others to care for those needs.

None of us are immune from this reality. It doesn't matter how strong you think you are, how self-sufficient you imagine yourself to be throughout your life - we have to depend on others.

And so, over our lives we depend on a lot of people - we depend on parents, on siblings, on teachers, on friends, on pastors, on leaders, on bosses, on co-workers, on fellow students, on roommates, on spouses to help us in all the ways we need help — all the ways we need love and affirmation and protection and provision and everything else.

But here's the dilemma. All of those people we depend on, every parent, every sibling, every friend, every pastor, every husband, every wife - because they're human and they're sinners and they're mortal, will, in some way, let us down.

All of them, no matter how strong their character, how good their hearts, how fierce their love, will fail us in some way.

And this dilemma about our need for others and the unreliability entrusting ourselves to others is the first thing that our text this morning highlights.

In verse 23, the Apostle points out that *"the former priests where many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office."*

And in verse 27, the Apostle notes that other men who served as priests had *"to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people."*

And in verse 28, the Apostle sums this up by saying, *"For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests."*

I think the apostle is making a really tender point here. He's being gentle, he's not castigating anyone, but essentially what he's saying is this:

Friends, all the human beings you rely on will ultimately fail you.

And the Apostle is saying that they'll fail you in two main ways.

First, they'll fail you because they're sinners. And second, they'll fail you because they won't last forever. They'll die. And of course, these two things - sin and death, are linked to one another, because the wages of sin is and has always been death.

And all of these fatal flaws regarding the unreliability of human beings are summed up by that word in verse 28 - "weakness."

And of course, we know what the apostle is talking about here, don't we? We know what it is to entrust ourselves to men and women who fail us. That's a fundamental and universal experience of what it means to be human in this fallen world.

Sometimes, men and women to whom we entrust ourselves fail us in deeply painful ways.

They betray us. They abandon us. They disown us. They break off relationship completely. They abuse or harm us directly by their words or actions. These are examples of what we might call failure by sins of commission.

Other times, men and women to whom we entrust ourselves fail us simply because they're not strong enough.

They try to love us well, but they're just not strong or mature enough. They have their own wounds, their own weaknesses, and so they don't know how to help us, how to serve us, how to be there for us when we need them to be. These are examples of what we might call failure by sins of omission.

And of course, even the strongest of the men and women to whom we entrust ourselves fail us ultimately in another way. And I want to be gentle here, but we have to be honest about this, because our text is honest about it.

Ultimately, anyone we might entrust ourselves to will fail us because they will die. They won't be strong enough to live forever. And so, one day, they won't be there when we need them.

And of course, this is the record of the Scriptures. Aaron was priest of Israel, and he died. And Moses died. And all of the great patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith died as well.

None of them were strong enough to overcome sin and death. All of them are trapped and bound, just as we are. And it is for that reason, Hebrews argues, that an imperfect and mortal priest can't help us.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, the Psalmist reflected on this reality about the weakness of human life in Psalm 102, writing: *"My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like the grass...my strength is broken in midcourse; my days are shortened."*

So what is the way out? We need a priest, we need a servant, we need a mediator who we can count on, who won't harm us by sinning against us, and won't fail us by losing his battle with death.

And beloved, that is exactly what we have in the Son of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that's the second point that this passage makes for us this morning - the worthiness of Jesus.

As the Apostle told us earlier in Hebrews 7, Jesus has been made our high priest not by bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.

The life that the Son of God has received from his Father in his resurrection is indestructible. It's un-ruinable.

As Paul boasts in Romans 6: *"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."*

And indeed, Christ's status as our perfect, unfailing, eternal high priest rests on the oath his Father has sworn to him by raising him from the dead.

As the writer to the Hebrews puts it in our passage this morning in verse 21, *"Christ was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him, 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever.'"*

And it was in his resurrection that this oath by the Father was sworn. As Paul puts it in Romans 1, Christ Jesus *"was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Holiness by his resurrection from the dead."*

All of the worthiness, the indestructibility, the faithfulness of Jesus in contrast to the weakness of anyone else that we might entrust ourselves to is summed up by the Apostle in verses 26 - 28, where we read:

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Friends, what I am saying to you is this.

Others will fail you, either by sin or death, or both. But Jesus will never let you down. Jesus is absolutely trustworthy, absolutely reliable, and he will remain forever.

Even as the Psalmist says of Christ in Psalm 102: *“Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years will have no end.”*

So, the first thing our passage teaches us this morning has to do with the unreliability of human persons. And the second thing our passage teaches has to do with the absolute worthiness and reliability of Jesus as our high priest.

And that leads us to the third thing our passage teaches us this morning, our third point, which is simply this - what is it that Jesus does for us, as we rely upon and put our trust in him?

That, beloved, is summed up in verses 24-25, which is, for my money, two of the most wonderful verses in all of the Scriptures in terms of the way they describe Jesus’ ministry to us.

Listen.

The Apostle writes: *“24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*

He is able to save you to the uttermost. Beloved, that is what your Lord Jesus, your indestructible, eternal, perfect High Priest is able to do for you. He is able to save you utterly and completely.

And that means that there is nothing you can do to put yourself outside of the reach of his powerful grasp.

Friend, you are absolutely safe with Jesus. When others let you down, you can count on Jesus. He sees you. He knows you. He will not let you go.

In other words, what these two verses mean is that not only that Jesus has definitively saved you in his death and resurrection two thousand years ago, long before you were born, but that also Jesus will go on saving you - from today all the way until the last day when he will raise you from the dead and give you his own resurrection life forevermore.

And nothing, not Satan, not the world, not your weak faith or your sins or your doubting heart, indeed, nothing in all of creation can stop Jesus' act of saving you. This is what it means that Jesus is able to *"save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him."*

This is the kind of salvation that Paul is talking about in Romans 8 where he writes those glorious words we heard already this morning:

"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Friends, see the connection here.

Your salvation is secure, and nothing will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord not only because of what Jesus did for you two thousand years ago in the cross and the empty tomb, but he because of what Jesus is doing for you right now, in his indestructible and eternal life that he lives for you.

And beloved, do you know what Jesus is doing for you in heaven right now, as your ascended priest? Do you know what he is doing to save you to the uttermost?

He is serving you, just as he served his friends in his earthly ministry. He is washing your feet, just as he washed theirs.

And the one of the main ways that Jesus is saving you to the uttermost, one of the main ways that he is serving you as your high priest, is by interceding with the Father for you.

Listen again to how the Apostle puts it: *"He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."*

Friends, as we close this morning, I want you to know this. Jesus is always praying for you. That's what he's doing in heaven for you right now. That is how he serves you. He is praying for you. He lives forever to make intercession for you.

And so when you sleep, Jesus does not slumber. No, he's praying for you. And when you wake, and when you pray for God to help you in your day, you're not praying alone - not Jesus is praying for already.

And when you're grieving or sad or discouraged or sick or despairing and you don't even know how to pray - Jesus is praying for you.

He doesn't give up. His faith doesn't fail. He does not grow weary. No, he lives forever to make intercession for you.

And he offers all of who he is to his Father on your behalf.

And what exactly is Jesus praying for you?

I think we can know from some of the prayers he offered on earth for those whom he loved.

Jesus is praying that your faith will not fail. Jesus is praying for you know that to see him is to see the Father.

Jesus is praying that his Father's Kingdom will come, and that his Father's will would be done in your life.

Jesus is praying for your daily bread.

Jesus is praying for your sins to be forgiven and that you will forgive the sins of those who sin against you.

Jesus is praying for you to be delivered from temptation.

Jesus is praying that you will trust him more and more, and that you will know fully the glory and power of his kingdom.

And beloved, know this. The prayers of Jesus, the prayers of the one who lives always to make intercession for you will always be heard.

For Jesus is not like other men. He will never sin against you. He will never abandon you. He will never die and leave you alone to face the world. He will never let you down.

And so beloved, know this. Because of Jesus, because of his indestructible life, because of his oath-sworn priesthood, because of his sinless perfection, you will indeed be saved to the uttermost as you draw near to God through him.

For he is the Son who has been made perfect forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.