

Sermon 37, Made Surety by an Oath, Hebrews 7:20-22

Proposition: The oath by which Christ was made surety of the new covenant establishes the superiority of that covenant.

- I. The Lord Has Sworn, vv. 20, 21b
- II. The Levitical Priesthood Was Constituted Without God's Oath, v. 21a
- III. The Superiority of God's Oath Measures the Superiority of the Better Covenant, v. 22

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to yet another way in which the priesthood of Jesus Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The Hebrew writer pursues this theme at length, because his purpose is to honor and glorify Jesus Christ. As we have said many times, he is not doing that by running down and minimizing the Levitical system, but rather, by highlighting the greatness of the Levitical system and then telling us how much greater Jesus Christ is than the Levitical priesthood was. Christ is not better than something terrible, but better than something great. Nonetheless, as we will see today, because Jesus was made high priest by God's unchangeable oath, His priesthood is superior and administers a better covenant.

I. The Lord Has Sworn, vv. 20, 21b

The writer emphasizes the words of Psalm 110: "The Lord has sworn and will not relent." He first explains what these words mean: the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus Christ was constituted by an oath. Then he quotes the words themselves from Psalm 110.

Now, why is this significant? We can identify several reasons. The first is simply that Scripture records it. The Bible records nothing insignificant. Especially in Psalm 110, which is so short, anything that is mentioned is most likely important.

But we can go beyond this. A second reason that God's oath is important is that oaths from His lips are extremely infrequent. As one of the commentators mentioned, we do not expect a good man to be constantly swearing and taking oaths. I was just at the rec center this morning, and there I overheard a woman saying to her friend, "Yeah, I need to cuss less too, especially in this place!" A godly man doesn't swear to God all the time. He uses oaths with great moderation. You might hear him take one on his wedding day, and another on the day he takes office in the church or in the state. And other than that, you probably won't hear him invoke God as His witness. Frequent swearing is not a sign of moderation, or of solidity and seriousness — quite the reverse. The more frequently you swear, the less trustworthy your word is.

So, for that second reason, we know that God's oath is important. Our God's lightest word is weightier than a freight train. Yet He deigns to highlight the importance of this speech to His Son by swearing an oath by Himself: "I swear by Myself that you are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." God is not doing this on any light or unimportant occasion. He is

swearing because the ordination of the Son of God to the priesthood is an event of earth-shattering importance.

The third reason we can see for the Almighty's oath is that it relates to a concept the writer is about to introduce. That concept is the Covenant. Look, for instance, at Deuteronomy 29, where Moses keeps referencing the concept of "sworn covenant", or God's covenant and His oath as the KJV translates it.

You are standing today all of you before the LORD your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today. (Deu 29:10-12 ESV)

God's oath is intimately related to His covenant. A covenant is a bond in blood, sovereignly administered. It's a particular type of binding relationship — one that God uses to describe His relationship with His people. He is bound to us by covenant, and that covenant is a sworn covenant or oath-based covenant. Just as marriage is properly entered into by the taking of vows before God, so this covenant with God is properly entered into by the taking of vows. God's oath to His Son, then, is related to the covenant. In fact, many theologians have spoken of a covenant between the Father and the Son for precisely this reason. God's appointment of Jesus to the work of being a covenant surety was accomplished by an oath, an oath marked as unchangeable and unrelenting. God's decision to set up His Son as a great high priest is not a light decision, but is His settled purpose as expressed by His unchangeable oath.

The biggest application here for us is to strengthen our faith. God swore; He added an unchangeable thing to His already-unchangeable word so that we could have refuge in the hope set before us. The second thing to realize is that it is appropriate for us to commit ourselves to God by oaths and vows. That is why our church requires a public vow of membership. God has sworn to you in His Son; you should swear to Him. These oaths and vows should probably not be frequent, but when they are engaged in you need to mean it.

II. The Levitical Priesthood Was Constituted Without God's Oath, v. 21a

Now, all of that said about the importance of oaths, the writer points out that the Levitical priesthood was constituted without an oath. You can search Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers for instances of the word "oath" (*sheba* in Hebrew) but you will not find it said anywhere that the Levitical priesthood was established by an oath. I looked just to confirm what the Hebrew writer says here, and neither I nor the commentators saw any signs that the writer is wrong. God did not swear to Aaron that his priesthood would be perpetual. He simply told Moses to ordain his brother Aaron as a priest.

We have talked about the relative value of the Levitical-Aaronic priesthood over the last few weeks. The fact that it was an oathless priesthood does not make it a worthless priesthood.

But it does make its establishment less solemn, less serious, less important than the moment recorded in Psalm 110 when God took an oath to constitute His Son a priest forever.

You could almost relate the difference between Aaron's priesthood and Jesus' to the difference between common law marriage and real marriage. In common law marriage, you claim to be married, but you never actually stood up and took an oath to that effect. You did not take the trouble to swear your faithfulness to her so long as you both shall live. You are still married, just like Aaron was still a priest. But there is just something missing in a common law marriage, something that is supposed to be there. That something is the oath. But in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, nothing is missing. God has verbally committed, put Himself on the line as witness, that He will never cease to regard His Son as a perfect priest. He never did that for Aaron's order. That's why He could cancel it, let it go, along with the Temple in which Aaron's service was to take place. God is immutable, but the change from the patriarchal economy to the Mosaic, and then from the Mosaic to the Christian, proves that He can and does change the way in which He administers His promise. But this oath to Christ is a promise that He will never change it again.

III. The Superiority of God's Oath Measures the Superiority of the Better Covenant, v. 22

Well, v. 22 goes on to make this point: the superiority of God's oath measures the superiority of the new covenant. Inasmuch as Christ was not made surety without an oath, by that much more He has become the surety of a better covenant.

Now, this marks the first appearance in Hebrews of the word "covenant". As I said a moment ago, a covenant is a bond in blood, sovereignly administered. How much better is the better covenant? It is as much better as God's oath is than His non-oath. God affirmed that Aaron was a priest, but He swore that His Son was a priest forever in an order altogether superior to the Aaronic order.

In what other ways can we see the superiority of God's oath over His non-oath? We can certainly see that when God swears He really means it. He means it perpetually, permanently, forever. We can also see that when God swears, His promise is unchanging. We can rely on it for our whole lives.

This superiority is marked in Jesus' suretiship within the better covenant. A surety is one who volunteers to be responsible. In our day, we often refer to financial suretiship as "cosigning." One of our friends recently bought a Ford pickup. He had no credit, so his father cosigned on the car loan. Now, if this friend were to default, his dad would be left holding the bag. If the dad did not pay for the pickup, then his credit would take a hit, even though it's not his car and he didn't buy it. Because he agreed to be the surety for his son, he is on the hook to pay that monthly car payment if his son fails to do so.

Now, Proverbs repeats over and over that the one who hates suretiship is sure, that only a fool agrees to be surety for his neighbor, and so on. How, then, do we find the wise son signing up for this office of surety within the covenant? And who is he a surety for, anyway? Does God need a surety on His side? Or is it we irresponsible humans who need a surety on our side? I

think that we can actually say that in keeping with his dual nature Jesus Christ is a surety for both sides. He guarantees God's promises to us — and He guarantees our faithfulness to God. He is truly caught in the middle, absorbing all the disappointment and friction from all sides. That's why the one who hates suretiship is sure. Being a surety involves a lot of pain. But Jesus is the one who guarantees the covenant, who promises to pay any unpaid debts, who picks up the tab if anyone fails, who generally makes the whole thing work. You see, unlike my friend, who paid every payment for his pickup on time and never made his cosigning dad pay a cent, we don't measure up. We frequently leave Jesus holding the bag; we frequently sin in ways that He has to pay for to His Father. Now, God's relationship to time is different than ours and I'm not saying that Jesus has to suffer again daily when you sin. The Hebrew writer is about to tell us that Jesus suffered once for all. In other words, every way in which we are going to sin next week has already been paid for, for God knows all about it all already. But the point here is that Jesus has suffered the pain of being that surety. Everything that has come upon Him has come upon Him through His own willing choice to be our surety.

Can you praise and worship Jesus Christ, who voluntarily agreed to take on your debts and give you His riches?

Notice also, beloved, that the covenant He administers is better. Put in terms we would more easily recognize, we can say that His administration of the covenant is better than Aaron's administration of it. We have talked about this at length. The Levitical system had no provision for high-handed sins. David had no recourse when he committed adultery and murder. The OT saints were saved, not by the Levitical system, but by the cross-work of Jesus Christ. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. Thus, in biblical terminology the new covenant or the better covenant — what we call the new administration of the one covenant of grace — is as much greater than the Levitical-Mosaic administration as Jesus is greater than Aaron or as God's oath is greater than His affirmation.

How is the better covenant better? Through its provision for high-handed sins. Through its better surety. Through its more copious supplies of the Holy Spirit. Through its universality for all nations rather than being confined to a single nation as it was under the Levitical administration. The better covenant is better not because it offers a different salvation or savior, but because it offers the same Savior and His same salvation in a clearer, fuller, more intense way.

Don't be a Hebrew roots person. Don't go back to the Levitical system. Stick with Jesus Christ. When you mess up, call on Him as your surety, the one who pays all your debts and sets you free. He is your Lord; bow to Him and adore Him as the one who saves to the uttermost all those who come to God through Him. His priesthood will never change or go away; it is yours forever. Amen.