

Hebrews 7

A Better Priest

In our study of Hebrews we have arrived at a difficult section. It is difficult because the imagery and rituals and form of argument is strange to us. We are far, far removed from the rules and rituals of ancient Israel. And if we are not careful we can miss the main point—the forest for the trees so-to-speak. So I have done my best to try to make this section of Scripture not only understandable, but inspirational and applicable.

The central theme of Hebrews is to encourage believers to trust in Jesus Christ and hold firm in the faith even in difficult times. The Jewish converts to Christ who originally received this letter were being persecuted for their faith. As a result many thought about returning to the supposed security of Judaism. But the Old Testament system of religion, as good as it was, was not really able to cleanse us from sin and bring us close to God.¹

As good as the law was no one could keep the law. So God provided a priesthood from the tribe of Levi and the family line of Aaron, Moses' brother. This priesthood offered sacrifices for the covering and forgiveness of sins. But these sacrifices were never meant to be the final remedy for sin. They were temporary and pointed to a new and final sacrifice and priesthood in the Messiah.

We have been told several times now in this letter that Jesus is our High Priest not according to the order of Levi, but according to the order of Melchizedek. Now we will learn why the order of Melchizedek makes Christ's priesthood for us so much better.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated “king of righteousness,” and then also king of Salem, meaning “king of peace,”
(Hebrews 7:1, 2)

Melchizedek first appears in Genesis 14 in an historical account. But he comes onto the scene out of the blue. The great patriarch of Israel, Abraham,

¹ Even the High Priest could only enter the inner Holy of Holies in the Temple where the presence of God was once a year. And he had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins first or he would die upon entering the inner sanctuary

returns from a victorious military battle against a coalition of Canaanite kings. These kings plundered cities and took captives including Abraham's nephew Lot and his family. Abraham rescues these captives and is now loaded with riches, the spoils of war. Upon his return he is met by Melchizedek who is the king of Salem² and also the High Priest of God Most High.

Melchizedek, according to his name means "king of Righteousness" and from his realm "King of Peace." The order is at once important. Righteousness must always come before peace. Without righteousness there can be no such thing as peace.³ There can be no peace in society and especially in our own hearts. This is why the letter to the Romans tells us that Jesus Christ,

...was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. Therefore, having been justified [or made righteous] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ
(Romans 4:25-5:1)

At its core all of life is a search for peace. People look for it in work, love, escape, in their achievements, in evasions, in compromise. And all of this can bring a sense of peace but it never lasts or satisfies us. But when you trust God and love God and obey Him, when we live in righteousness, there is peace even in very difficult circumstances. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane under such pressure and fear that he sweat great drops of blood. But when he prayed to God and said "Not My will, but Yours be done."⁴ He had peace.

Melchizedek was King of Righteousness and King of Salem. And he was the High priest of the one true God. Upon meeting Abraham, Melchizedek brought bread and wine and blessed Abraham. And Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe or 1/10th of the spoils of war to honor Melchizedek. Now you would think that such an impressive person as Melchizedek would have an equally prestigious pedigree. But that's not the case.

without father, without mother, without genealogy,
having neither beginning of days nor end of life,
but made like the Son of God, remains a priest
continually.
(Hebrews 7:3)

² Later called Jerusalem

³ Proverbs 29:2 When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules the people groan.

⁴ Luke 22:42

At first these words sound mysterious and strange to our ears. But this does not mean that Melchizedek was not human. He was; he lived and served and then died. The Aramaic translation of the Greek text makes this clear saying "whose father and mother are not written in the genealogies." This is important because the Levitical priesthood from Aaron was based solely on your genealogy. Therefore Melchizedek's priesthood, before the law, was special and unique. And the phrase "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" simply means there is no record of when he was born or began to serve as priest or died and stopped being a priest.

Melchizedek comes on the scene and from the record of Scripture we see him as High Priest. And from the silence of Scripture about his death he seems to continue as a priest forever. In this Melchizedek was a type of Christ. Just as the sacrificial lamb pointed to Jesus Christ, so to the priesthood of Melchizedek points to Christ as a priest forever.

Genesis 14 is the only historical narrative about Melchizedek. But one thousand years later Melchizedek's name show up in the prophecy in Psalm 110. The prophecy is about the coming Savior, the Messiah. In that Psalm in verse 4 God makes an unbreakable vow that the Messiah will be a High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. It doesn't matter that Jesus is not from the line of Levi or Aaron. Just as God appointed Melchizedek to be High Priest so God has now appointed Jesus Christ to be the High Priest for us forever.

And Melchizedek's priesthood and thus Christ's priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood for several reasons; res⁵sons revealed three thousand years after Melchizedek appears in Scripture and two thousand years after the prophecy in Psalm 110!

Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils.

⁵ And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; ⁶ but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

⁷ Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. ⁸ Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives *them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives. ⁹ Even

⁵ Melchizedek appears historically in Geneses 14, prophetically in Psalm 110 and theologically in Hebrews 7.

Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.
(Hebrews 7:4-10)

Abraham is a giant of importance in the Bible. He is the father of ethnic Israel and spiritually the father of all who believe. But we are asked to consider how much greater Melchizedek is than Abraham. First, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, the father of Israel and of all who believe. And it is always the greater one who blesses the lesser one. Secondly, Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek and it is always the lesser one who gives to the greater one. Thirdly, all the Levitical priests, yet unborn, being in the loins or DNA of Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek when Abraham tithed. And finally, Melchizedek's seemingly endless life points to Christ's greater, eternal priesthood.

Now in verses 11 and following a crucial question is raised. If the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the Levitical priesthood is the Levitical priesthood still needed? And the answer is no.

Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was *there* that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.

¹³ For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For *it is* evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.
(Hebrews 11-14)

Since Jesus Christ is now the one and only High Priest and since he was of the tribe of Judah and not Levi, his priesthood is beyond and above the law. Since God has established a new priesthood not associated with the Old Testament law this proves that the Old Testament law and priesthood is revoked. It has been terminated. Our relationship with God is not based on our fully following the law, but by our full trust in Jesus Christ.

And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest ¹⁶ who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. ¹⁷ For He

testifies:

“You *are* a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek.”⁶

¹⁸ For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, ¹⁹ for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.
(Hebrews 7:15-19)

If the law of Moses and the Old Testament priestly sacrifices could truly make one righteous and bring us to God and give us peace, there would be no need for a new priesthood like Melchizedek's. The law made no one truly righteous. It only succeeded in pointing out sin.⁷ The law is good and holy, but no one, on their own, can keep it.

Therefore sacrifices were made daily and every year over and over again. But Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and God laid upon him the iniquity of us all.⁸ And Jesus suffered and died for our sins. And because he has been raised up from the dead Jesus Christ now brings us near to God. We can boldly and freely go to the throne of grace to have access to all of God's power, love and grace.⁹

This seems so common an idea to us today. We are taught that we can draw near to God in prayer boldly, freely and with confidence. But for a first century Jew this was earthshattering truth. The whole Levitical system was designed to show people that because of sin they could not draw near to God. To draw near in any way you needed a priest and a sacrifice. No one could freely approach God and live; not even the High Priest. In fact the veil that separated the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God in the temple was three feet thick. But Jesus Christ as our full and final sacrifice and High Priest brings us a better hope for he brings us to God freely. The relevance of this is not just a first century Jewish affair. It is of the greatest importance to every one of us in the twenty first century and beyond.

Like all sinners we were without moral strength.¹⁰ We were without hope and without God in the world.¹¹ In fact we were in darkness and morally blind.¹²

⁶ Psalm 110:4

⁷ Romans 3:19, 20

⁸ Isaiah 53:5, 6

⁹ Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁰ Romans 5:6

¹¹ Ephesians 2:11, 12

Without Christ what hope do people have in the world? Is there true hope in the retirement accounts, their vacation homes, in worldly achievements or temporary celebrity? No, there isn't! But through Jesus Christ we will inherit everlasting life and glory. God is now our Father. One day we will be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.¹³ And He will give us dominion over the works of His hands.

For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness,¹⁹ for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰ And inasmuch as *He* was not *made* priest without an oath ²¹ (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him:

“The LORD has sworn
And will not relent,
'You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek'”),

²² by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.
(Hebrews 7:18-22)

Over and over it has been stressed that Jesus Christ is a High Priest forever. The Lord God Almighty has sworn it. When God says something it is done!¹⁴ What God says are not mere words. His words have the power to initiate an event—to bring it to pass. The fact that God has sworn and will not relent is for our benefit, not His. God has made Jesus Christ the guarantor of our salvation. Should we die and sleep in death for thousands of years we will not lose salvation. We will be raised to life and glory. Christ's power knows no limits and his life knows no end! Therefore he is able to save his people fully and completely.

Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing.²⁴ But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood.²⁵ Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since

¹² 2 Corinthians 4:4

¹³ 1 John 3:1-3

¹⁴ Isaiah 55:11

He always lives to make intercession for them.
(Hebrews 7:23-25)

Jesus Christ prays for us—for you and me. Think of this. James 5:16 tells us that “the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Consider then the power of Christ’s prayers for you! He knows the best we can be and what hinders that. He knows your heartaches and pain and he prays for you.

For such a High Priest was fitting for us, *who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens;* ²⁷ *who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.* ²⁸ *For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.*
(Hebrews 7:26-28)

There is much in Hebrews that is difficult. But there is also profound and relevant truth here. Study deeply the spiritual needs of humanity and you will see how Jesus Christ meets those needs.

For our sinful pride Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart.¹⁵ For our moral darkness Jesus is the light of the world.¹⁶ For our weakness he is our strength.¹⁷ For our guilt he brings justification and makes us righteous.¹⁸ For our despair Jesus Christ offers us hope for he brings us to God.¹⁹

We end this study of ancient and far away days with a conviction that a massive, valid truth is revealed. Since the day Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden every person, in some way, has longed for access to God. Through religion, ritual and philosophy and every “ism” there is we have tried to draw near to God but we have failed.

The King of Righteousness, the King of Peace, Jesus Christ, our High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, brings us close to God and gives us peace. And every one can draw near and have joy. In the words of the apostle John,

¹⁵ Matthew 11:29

¹⁶ John 8:12

¹⁷ Philippians 4:13

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁹ 1 Peter 3:18

that which we have seen and heard we declare to you,
that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our
fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.
⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.
(1 John 1:3, 4)