

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
The Melchizedek Factor
Hebrews 7:1-25

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “priest?” I’ve asked that question to a couple of people this past week. Pastor Daniel here, who grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, has very positive memories of the various priests who pastorally cared for him and his family. Unfortunately for many, however, more negative thoughts come to mind, things such as the mysterious intrigue described in Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code*, or the sexual abuse that we’ve heard so much about in the news, or an austere celibate lifestyle.

By the way, during our years in France, one of our daughter Rebecca’s classmates was trying to figure out exactly what my profession was. Rebecca tried to explain my role as an itinerant pastor, but was not doing a very good job of getting her point across. The concept of a “pastor” is not nearly as well understood in France. Finally, her friend asked, “Then your dad is sort of like a priest?” “Yea, I guess you could say that,” Rebecca replied. Her friend had a puzzled look on her face, and then asked, “Then how did you get here?”

The other day I asked Justin what comes to his mind when he hears the word “priest.” His answer was what I anticipated. He described a rather austere man, balding on top, dressed in a long black robe, and holding an oversize Bible. We all have stereotypes of what a priest is and what a priest does. These chapters in Hebrews make a big deal out of Christ’s role as our High Priest. And what we discover is that this is not simply some dry, stale theological information totally removed from the realities of our daily lives. In fact, just the opposite is true.

To help understand this, let’s take a look again at our chart giving an overview of the book. Remember, the main theme of this book is “Consider Jesus, our Great High Priest.” The entire message of Hebrews turns on this theme. That’s why in Hebrews 8:1 the speaker sums up his entire message this way: “The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest...” That’s why this entire section from 5:1 to 10:18 is dealing with the qualifications, office and ministry of Christ as our high priest.ⁱ And yet we still, as modern day believers, ask the question: What does this have to do with me? After all, what is a priest and am I in need of a priest?

The writer to the Hebrews well knows the struggles these believers are facing. He knows that some are discouraged and ready to “throw in the towel.” He knows that some are pulling back from the Body of Christ and beginning to isolate themselves. But he also knows that, at such times, what is most needed is a fresh perspective on who Jesus is as our High Priest.

What is a priest? A priest is a go-between. Hebrews 5:1 tells us exactly what a priest does: “Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin.” A priest stands between the sufficiency of God and the neediness of man...between God’s sufficiency and *your* neediness (7:26). Because Jesus is our high priest, we have boldness in coming to God at any moment and for anything (Hebrews 4:14-16). That’s why in our oftentimes difficult journey towards spiritual maturity, the priesthood of Christ is our greatest comfort. And these chapters tell us how and why.ⁱⁱ

The speaker is telling us one truth in Hebrews 7:1-25. It's this – ***It is only through Jesus Christ, our High Priest, that you and I can draw near to God and be brought to maturity.*** He demonstrates this first of all *historically* as he recounts the story of Melchizedek from the early history of Israel. Then he tells us *doctrinally* (i.e. by way of biblical teaching) just what this signifies. And finally he outlines the *practical* implications for our everyday lives.

HISTORICALLY (Hebrews 7:1-10; Genesis 14:18-24)

Let me tell you a story. It's a true story that took place nearly 4,000 years ago, late in the 21st Century B.C. The story is taken directly from the family history of the origin of Israel as recorded in Genesis 14.ⁱⁱⁱ

Four kings far to the east of Jerusalem, then called Salem, marched on a confederacy of five kings from Sodom, Gomorrah, and three other lesser known cities. These five kings were defeated, their cities plundered, and their inhabitants enslaved.

One servant, however, escaped the vicious battle and came to inform Abram of what had happened. You see, Lot – Abram's nephew – was a resident of Sodom at this time. Realizing his nephew Lot had been taken captive, Abram immediately rallied his little army of 318 trained servants, pursued the four invading kings and conquered them in a night-time attack. He courageously recovered the stolen plunder as well as his nephew Lot.

The interesting part of this story, however, is what happened when Abram returned home. First, the King of Sodom came out to meet Abram, and offered him the privilege of keeping all the plunder for himself. After all, this was in keeping with the rules of war – “to the conqueror belongs the spoils.” But Abram wisely refused, realizing that accepting such an offer would inevitably lead to an unholy alliance with a pagan king.

But upon his return, Abram met another king, named Melchizedek, the King of Salem. But this Melchizedek was not only a king, he was also a priest – “priest of God Most High.” This king-priest brought out bread and wine to refresh Abram's troops. And then he blessed Abram, saying:

Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And blessed be God Most High,
Who delivered your enemies into your hand.

This king-priest, Melchizedek, is a reminder to Abraham that he doesn't need to depend on the possessions of this life or enter into questionable alliances in order to enrich himself. The God of Abraham is the possessor of heaven and earth and can fully supply his every need! But there is more. This God, who is able to meet Abram's every need, is also the one who is responsible for the victory in the first place. Abram didn't win this battle. God did!

In response, Abram gave a tithe of all that he had to God's priest. Someone has said it well: “Abraham had gained a greater victory than the one over the four mighty kings. He had gained a victory over *Abraham*.”^{iv}

It was immediately after this experience that the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward.” (Genesis 15:1). Though this is not the main emphasis on the passage in Hebrews, there’s an important principle here for you and me. It’s this: As we give back to God in proportion to what he has given, we acknowledge that He is sufficient for our every need.

DOCTRINALLY (Hebrews 7:1-24; Psalm 110:4)

Who is this mysterious person Melchizedek and why is he important? And more than that, what possible relevance could this story have to our daily lives nearly four thousand years later?^v

Chart: Melchizedek a Type of Christ

In the story of Genesis 14, Melchizedek is a *type* of Christ.^{vi} Melchizedek is not the Son of God but he is *like* the Son of God (verse 3). He is a model or a foreshadowing of what Christ would be like. Another example of this is the serpent in the wilderness mentioned in the book of Numbers. When Moses lifted up the brass serpent, and as people looked on it, they were healed of their afflictions. In John 3, Jesus applies this to himself, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes on him may have everlasting life.” That is a “type” of Christ just as Melchizedek is a type of Christ.

The fact that Melchizedek is a type of Christ is seen first of all in his *name*. Hebrews 7:3 says, “First, his name means ‘King of righteousness.’” His name, Melchizedek, comes from two words – *melek* meaning king and *sedeq* meaning righteousness.^{vii} But verse 2 goes on to point out that he is also the “king of Salem,” meaning the “king of peace.” By the way, that’s God’s order of things: first righteousness, then peace; and not the other way around. Our world wants peace without righteousness. But that’s impossible. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:1 “Therefore being justified by faith (i.e. declared righteous), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The peace *of* God in our hearts begins with having peace *with* God. And the starting place of peace *with* God is being declared righteous *by* God.

But not only does the name of Melchizedek typify Christ, so does his *role* as both king and priest.^{viii} Melchizedek was *both* king of Salem and priest of God Most High (verse 1). These two roles in Israel were clearly distinct. But in Christ they are one. Jesus Christ is prophet, priest and king. A priest represents man before God and a king rules over man for God. Apparently, Melchizedek, like Christ, fulfilled both of these roles.

However, what is particularly interesting about his Melchizedek is his *ancestry* – or rather lack of ancestry. Verse 3 can be read this way: “Without [recorded] father or mother, without [recorded] genealogy, without [recorded] beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.” Here, what the Bible doesn’t say is more important than what it does say. In contrast to the Levites of the Old Testament, whose role as priests was based firmly upon genealogical heritage and whose role ceased with death, nothing is said here about Melchizedek’s ancestry.

After telling us about Melchizedek’s name, role and ancestry, he now talks about his *greatness* in verses 4-10. Here’s what he writes:

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! 5 Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a

tenth from the people—that is, their brothers—even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. 6 This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. 8 In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.^{ix} 9 One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, 10 because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. Hebrews 7:4-10

Now all of this explanation may appear rather perplexing to you. Let me try to simplify. We can't really appreciate the speaker's argument unless we understand the degree to which the Jews held tenaciously to their ideas of priesthood. If you're going to argue that the old priesthood of the Levites has been set aside, you better be able to prove your case! That is what the speaker is doing here by historically referring to Melchizedek.

Chart continues

His argument runs like this: If fellow Israelites paid tithes to Levites, then the Levites have a superior role.^x But if the Levites descended from Abraham, then Abraham has a superior role. But finally if Abraham pays tithes to Melchizedek and is blessed by Melchizedek, then Melchizedek has the most superior role of all! Essentially, then, Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and certainly greater than the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel.

This is what the speaker is developing in greater detail in verses 11-24. But before looking at these verse, turn with me to Psalm 110:4 which is cited twice in these verses, both in verse 17 and verse 21.^{xi}

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Psalm 110:4

I can just see the puzzled look on David's face as he wrote these words. David was already challenged by the thought of his descendant sitting forever as a king on God's right hand as described in verses 1-3 of this psalm. But now he writes that he will also be an eternal priest! And maybe David was surprised as the Spirit of God brought the name Melchizedek to his mind. Maybe he called his servant to bring his personal handwritten copy of the account in Genesis so he could read it again and try to understand what the Spirit of God was saying.

David well knew that Aaron and his descendants (the Levites) had been given by God the monopoly on the priesthood. But now, in one sweeping statement, the priesthood connected to Aaron and the Levites – which had been established and functioning for 1500 years when Christ came – was going to be laid aside.

For those of you who saw the Passion of the Christ, you'll recall that memorable scene when the High Priest, Caiaphas, tears his priestly robe down the front. That action is symbolic of the major shift of which these verses 11-28 speak.

11 If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?

12 For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.
13 He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. 15 And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears 16 one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. 17 For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."
18 The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless 19 (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. 20 And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, 21 but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:
"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'"
22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.
23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; 24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood....

It is only through Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, that you and I can draw near to God and be brought to maturity. The Jewish historian Josephus estimated that 81 high priests served from Aaron to the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70AD. Why? Because each one died! In contrast, Jesus is the first and last of a new line of priests and can be counted on to be our only and permanent way to God - we don't have to look back nor look anywhere else.

PRACTICALLY (Hebrews 7:25)

How does all of this change our lives? What practical meaning does all of this have for our daily existence? Notice, the speaker concludes in verse 26: "Such a high priest meets our need -- " Just how does he do that? Today, we'll look at one specific way. It's found in verse 25:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25

As our high priest, Jesus Christ is able to bring us "complete salvation." In the context of Hebrews, this is not just salvation from hell, but includes all the things that should accompany salvation: grace to persevere in this life and Christ's rich reward in the next.

But why is he able to save us completely? Because he always lives to make intercession for us! Robert Murray McCheyne once said this: "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me."

Do you catch the significance of that awesome truth? Whatever you are facing right now, -- whether it be sickness, temptation, loss, or despair -- Jesus is interceding for you right now. What Jesus did while on this earth for Peter, he continues to do for each of us. Do you remember what Jesus told Simon Peter?

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.
Luke 22:31-32

Satan wants to sift us like wheat. He wants to destroy our faith. He wants to ruin our lives. But just like he did for Simon Peter, Jesus is praying for you and me. He prays that we might run with endurance the race set before us. He prays that we will cling tightly to his all-sufficient grace. He prays that we will keep our eyes on himself, Jesus, our great high priest. Distance makes no difference. He is praying for you and me.

But this intercession is not just verbal prayer. It also includes the redemption price paid for our sin, as illustrated in this bread and cup. “This is my body, broken for you,” Jesus said. “As often as you eat of this, do this in remembrance of me.” And then he took that cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. As often as you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.” As you take part in this communion supper today, remember that Jesus, as your high priest, is praying for you. Remember too that Jesus gave his very life for you.

ⁱ In this section, we are moving into the major doctrinal section of the book of Hebrews. This section is quite lengthy. Remember, the speaker already said in 5:11, “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain, because you are slow to learn.”

ⁱⁱ The doctrine of Christ’s priesthood not only brings us comfort, but it is also an encouragement towards maturity. This section (7:1-10:19) is sandwiched between two warning passages. The first is “Don’t fall away” (5:11-6:20) and the second is “Don’t deliberately sin” (10:19-39). The doctrine of Christ as our High Priest is a great encouragement to avoid both of these tendencies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Archeology has unearthed for us some bricks found at Tel el-Armana, now in the British Museum, that have inscribed on them letters written by a certain Ebed-Tob, who was a priest in Jerusalem after Melchizedek. They say, “It was not my father nor mother who installed me in this place, but the arm of the Mighty King gave it me.” W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Let us Go On* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: n.d.), 84.

^{iv} M.R. DeHaan, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 115.

^v Christ’s priesthood in the order of Melchizedek is mentioned in 5:6, 10 and 6:20. We can’t really appreciate this section about the priesthood of Christ unless we understand the degree to which the Jews tenaciously held to their ideas of priesthood. To argue that, with the coming of Christ, the old priesthood had been set aside, you better be able to prove your case!

^{vi} The word comes from the Greek *tupos* meaning “pattern, figure, impression, model, foreshadowing.”

^{vii} Cf. Hebrews 1:8; Psalm 45:6-7; 85:10; Isaiah 32:17.

^{viii} Cf. Zech. 6:13.

^{ix} The writer’s statements (ex. “declared to be living”) must be interpreted in light of Psalm 110:4 “You are a priest forever (*eis ton aiona*) in the order of Melchizedek.”

^x Numbers 18:21-32 details the honor and responsibility of collecting the tithe.

^{xi} Cf. Hebrews 5:6. Psalm 110 is cited more than any other psalm in the Old Testament: Cf. Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34; Heb 1:13; Heb 7; cf. Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1.