



“The Mystery of Melchizedek”

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Text: Hebrews 5:1-10

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

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SERMON OUTLINE in brief

- I. Introduction to Hebrews
 - a. *Author and Audience*
 - b. *“Greater than” theme; seen, e.g., in today’s text*
- II. Melchizedek and “the order of Melchizedek”
 - a. *Summarize Genesis reading, with help from Hebrews 7*
 - b. *Melchizedek similar to Jesus*
 - c. *Who was he? A mystery*
- III. Conclusion: Here is the important thing Melchizedek highlights
 - a. *We need an eternal priest and a once-for-all sacrifice: no one is good*
 - b. *We have one in Jesus*
 - c. *Hebrews 4:14-16—so let us come to the throne of God*

1. Introduction to Hebrews

Author and Audience

Melchizedek. Not a name you hear every day. This Bible character may be new to you. Or maybe the name rings a bell, you know it’s in there *somewhere*, but the details are fuzzy. Melchizedek appears in just five passages of Scripture, two of which are just one verse long, but he helps us understand who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. But before we look at Melchizedek, and the mystery

surrounding his identity, we are confronted with another mystery. That is, three of these five passages about Melchizedek come from Hebrews, a book with no author listed! Who wrote Hebrews?

Various theories have been offered. The go-to guy for a New Testament letter would be Paul. But virtually all Biblical scholars today agree that it wasn't Paul, because the Greek language in which the author of Hebrews writes is a different, more polished style than what Paul used. Not only that, but the author of Hebrews writes as one who is depending on others' eyewitness testimony regarding Jesus, whereas Paul in his letters speaks about seeing Jesus firsthand, about having had direct revelation from Jesus himself; think about his conversion on the road to Damascus, for example. Others have suggested Barnabas, one of Paul's companions, Luke, Clement (an early Bishop of Rome), or perhaps Priscilla, another companion of Paul's who would have left any letter she wrote anonymous, because a female author would have been culturally unacceptable at the time Hebrews was written.

At any rate, the 3rd century theologian and teacher Origen, writing just a century or two after Hebrews was composed, sums it up very well: "Who wrote this epistle? Only God knows!"

"Greater than" theme; seen, e.g., in today's text

The author of Hebrews has two main goals. The first is to compare Jesus to those who have gone before him, showing how he is both a part of that line, yet superior to all. Even with this continuity between Old Testament Judaism and now New Testament Christianity, Jesus is superior to all who have gone before him, and he fulfills what was only hinted at and promised under the old covenant. In light of this theme—we might call it the "greater than" theme of Hebrews—the author's second goal is to encourage Christians to stand firm and remain strong in their faith. (We have indications in the text of Hebrews that the readers had begun to fall away and even desert their faith, for fear of persecution.)

The author of Hebrews jumps right in to this theme of Christ's superiority to everyone and everything before him. (If you want to follow along, we'll be spending time in Hebrews this morning, so you can open your pew Bible to that if you like.) Hebrews 1 begins, "¹In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs."

Jesus "provided purification for sins," which is Old Testament language, something the priests of the Israelites did in an organized, regular fashion for the people of Israel. Through an elaborate sacrificial system, with detailed rules and regulations that had to be followed, the tribe of the Levites, Aaron's tribe, offered sacrifices and purifications for the sins of Israel. But we already see a different kind of purification for sins here: after Jesus provided this, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." He sat down.

Have you ever had one of those days where you were just on your feet the entire day? Where you couldn't wait to just *sit down*? Well, if you're in the middle of a busy day where you're constantly on your feet, you know that you can't sit down until your work is done. And here we read that Christ *sat down*. His work was done. The sacrifice he provided, his life to cover the penalty we deserve for our sins, was a one-time sacrifice, unlike the repeated sacrifices we see offered in the Old Testament for the sins of the people. So he "provided purification for sins," and then, with his work done, he sat down.

These first four verses set up the whole book. This theme of Christ as "greater than" or "superior to" will show up constantly in Hebrews. He is greater than the Old Testament prophets. He is greater than the angels, chapters 1 and 2 (1:3b-2:18). He is greater than Moses, chapter 3 (3:1-6), Joshua, chapter 4 (4:1-10), and

Aaron and the Levites, chapters 5 through 12 (5:1-12:29). Name an Old Testament hero, and Jesus is greater than that person.

Our reading today, for example, points out the similarities between the priest Aaron and Jesus, representing the continuity between Judaism and Christianity:

- Aaron was appointed a priest by God—so was Jesus.
- Aaron was appointed to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people—so was Jesus.
- Aaron could sympathize with the people—and so could Jesus, because he shared fully in our humanity.

But Jesus is greater than Aaron:

- Unlike Aaron, Christ is eternal.
- Even though Jesus was tempted like Aaron was, Jesus never sinned, so he never needed to offer a sacrifice for his own sins—just for ours.
- And Christ’s sacrifice never needs to be repeated. It is once for all.

But then, still highlighting the difference between Aaron and Jesus, the last verse in today’s New Testament reading says that Jesus was, “designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.” The word “order” does not mean a monastic order, like how we might say the Dominican order or the order of Saint Benedict. It means way or manner, along the lines of. Jesus is a priest forever, in the manner of Melchizedek. But what was the “manner” or “way” of Melchizedek? Who was Melchizedek?

2. Melchizedek

Summarize Genesis reading, with help from Hebrews 7

When our Genesis passage begins, Abraham, still called Abram at that time, had just rescued his nephew Lot from captivity. Lot was living in Sodom at the time and had been carried off, a casualty of a series of ongoing wars between kings. Abram took a measly 318 trained men with him to go rescue Lot, and defeated

the powerful King Kedorlaomer and his alliance. Then, out of the middle of nowhere comes Melchizedek, King of Salem, bringing bread and wine to provide Abram with some nourishment and to bless God for giving him victory over the alliance of King Kedorlaomer. But Melchizedek wasn't in any of these battles of kings. He just sort of shows up. And it says he was not only a king, but also, "priest of the Most High God." Abram then gives Melchizedek a tenth of all his possessions, the first explicit Biblical mention of tithing 10%.

The fact that Melchizedek is both a king *and* priest, that he brought bread and wine, his blessing of Abram, and Abram giving him a tenth are all clues that there is more going on here than just a friendly post-battle exchange of food and drink and possessions.

To help us understand "the order of Melchizedek," the author of Hebrews explains what is going on in Genesis. Hebrews 7 says, "¹This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ²and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." ³Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever."

Melchizedek similar to Jesus

Melchizedek is like the Son of God, and here is how:

- First, they were both priests of God.
- Second, Melchizedek means king of righteousness, as we mentioned, and king of Salem means king of peace. More literally, Melchizedek in the Hebrew language means "my king" (melchi) "is righteous" (zedek). And Salem, a shortened form of Jerusalem, is closely related to the Hebrew word shalom, which means a state of peace, completeness, fulfillment. Melchizedek is the king of righteousness and the king of peace. And righteousness and peace are part of Christ's ministry.

- Third, Christ is eternal, and it certainly seems from these passages that Melchizedek was eternal, in some sense, as well. At least, there was no recorded genealogy or birth or death for Melchizedek. It says, “Like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.”
- Fourth, both Jesus and Melchizedek are shown as superior here. The author of Hebrews writes that the greater person blesses the lesser person, so Melchizedek, who blessed Abram, is greater than Abram. And Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth, a sign of deference. Just like Melchizedek is greater than Abram, Jesus is greater than Aaron.
- Finally, not only was Melchizedek a King, but he was a priest, too. This would not be the case in Israel: the kings and the priests were two separate groups of people. A king could not offer sacrifices for the people (in fact, when King Saul tried to do this once he got into a heap of trouble) and the priests were not meant to be kings and rulers over the people. But Jesus is both our king and our priest, like Melchizedek.

Who was he? A mystery

Commentators and theologians and teachers and preachers have offered various answers to try to explain the identity of Melchizedek. Some have said he was Shem, Noah’s son, who had lived long enough to be around to see Abraham. Others have said Enoch, who walked with God and then seems to have just vanished, because God took him away.

Most Biblical interpreters today have accepted Melchizedek as either Jesus himself, or at least as a representation of Jesus, someone who prefigured Jesus long before Jesus came to earth in human form to live among us. We can see Jesus in Melchizedek, even if we don’t understand exactly how that all works. There is a mystery in Melchizedek. But what is not a mystery is that from the very beginning of the Bible, Jesus was present, whether we take Melchizedek to be a symbol of Jesus or actually Jesus.

3. Conclusion: Here is the important thing Melchizedek highlights

We need an eternal priest and a once-for-all sacrifice: no one is good

Here is the important thing that Melchizedek highlights: we need a priest, an *eternal* priest, and a once-for-all sacrifice. And, oh, how we need a priest. Not a priest to sacrifice animals on our behalf every time we sin. Not any rituals or performances or good deeds that we do. Not repeated sin offerings and guilt offerings to make us right with God, because that kind of offering, that kind of priest never *can* make us right with God.

Scripture says, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” “There is no one who does good.”

But through Jesus, who came down from heaven, who became for us both our king and our priest, a priest forever in the way of Melchizedek... through this Jesus, we have found favor with God. One of my seminary professors, Dr. Carol Kaminski, says, “God does not save good people... because there are no *good people* to save.” We find favor with God only because of his mercy, and because of what Jesus has done.

We have one in Jesus

We read in our Congregational Call to Worship this morning, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53: 5)

Melchizedek—my king is righteous. King of Salem—king of peace. Even this order of righteousness and peace in the name and title of Melchizedek is important, as it appears elsewhere in Scripture. Isaiah 32:17 says, “The fruit of righteousness shall be peace.” Psalm 85:10 says, “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

Hebrews 4:14-16—so let us come to the throne of God

And Romans 5:1 says, “Having therefore been justified by faith, we have peace with God.” The sacrifice that Jesus makes on our behalf—his life for our sins—

that is what justifies us, that is what makes a sinner like me *righteous*. When I accept that on faith, I can at last experience *peace* with God.

Author and Methodist Bishop William Willimon writes of an interaction he had with a dying woman.

“She was in the last stages of lung cancer, gasping day after day for breath. It was obvious she was in great pain and exhausted from fighting. She clutched a crucifix daily, given to her by her grandmother when she was a girl, carved by a monk in Europe. It was a symbol of all that her Catholic faith meant to her.

“When I entered the room that afternoon,” Willimon writes, “I could see she was very near the end.

“Would you like me to pray for you?” Willimon asked. “Would you like me to summon a priest?”

“With her last ounce of energy,” he writes, “She held out the crucifix toward me, which depicted the body of Christ nailed to the cross. She said, ‘Thank you—but I have a Priest.’” (Source: William Willimon, “You Need a Good Priest,” *PreachingToday.com*)

“¹⁴So then,” Hebrews says (NLT), “Since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. ¹⁵This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

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