

Melchizedek is Better

Hebrews 7

Turn to Hebrews 7. Who needs a priest? When God led Israel out of Egypt, God told them how to make the tabernacle, a small portable temple, and God chose priests. Aaron and his descendants would be Israel's priests.

God chose priests to be mediators between God and the people. God set ordinary people apart and gave them this special job. The priests made peace between God and the people. When people wanted to deal with God, they would come to the priests, who would help them.

So the priests offered the sacrifices, and the priests had the most important jobs in taking care of the tabernacle and its furniture. Priests worked in the tabernacle, and only priests. God told them, "you take care of these things, and it will go well for all the people."

Israelites were not the only ones who had priests. In those days each region had their own god, and their different gods had priests, and their priests did more or less the same thing as Israel's.

But now, we have had the Enlightenment and we have science. And now we have salvation by faith, and we have peace with God. So who needs a priest? Isn't it nice to be done with all that old mumbo jumbo? But the book of Hebrews says, "Don't kid yourselves."

Think about all the other ancient religions with their gods and their priests, that operated something like Israel with their priests and Levites. What if all those ancient people were on to something? What if all those ancient pagan nations and priests had grasped a basic truth about how the One True God relates to people?

These ancient pagan nations and priests all understood that their god, their deity, would take people and set them aside for priest work, special work. Their god would make them holy people, and they would be priests. And for other people to relate properly to their god, they needed to go through the priests that their gods had put in place.

What if that really is the way our God has always worked, and still works? And these other ancient people did not know the God of the Bible, but they did know this, and they were right, that a deity would of course put in place priests to bring the people to their god.

The writer to the Hebrews entirely supports this way of thinking. The core teaching of Hebrews is that Jesus is a better high priest than Aaron. He is from a better line of priests, he has a better covenant, he serves at a better sanctuary, he offered a better sacrifice, and he will live forever so there's no change of priesthood!

And we are scratching our heads all the way through, asking ourselves, “Yes, that’s nice, but who needs a priest? Are we not done with that?”

And the writer to the Hebrews cannot believe we would be so spiritually dense – of course we need a priest. So let’s assume that those ancient pagan religions, with their pagan gods and pagan priests, understood some important spiritual dynamics about the One True God better than we do. And one of them is: *Nobody comes to God without a priest to bring them close.*

Hebrews 7 ties Jesus to Melchizedek, a high priest Genesis mentions briefly. Hebrews 7 tells us that Jesus is that kind of priest, a Melchizedek kind of priest, and why that is far better for us. Hebrews 7 is also the hardest chapter of Hebrews to preach, in my opinion, because we don’t care about this stuff.

Hebrews was written to Jews, and they did care about this stuff. But we are not Jews, we are exactly why Jewish believers had so much trouble treating Gentile believers as equals, because not only are we ignorant of these vital things, but we are happy to stay ignorant. Nevertheless, God thinks Gentile believers have much to learn from Hebrews.

I remember this priest thing bothering me the first time I taught Hebrews as a seminary teacher. My evangelical theology taught me that the sacrifice of Christ was the great thing, we were saved because our Lord was the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

Hebrews frustrated me, because I thought the message of Hebrews should be that Christ was a better *sacrifice*, but that was not the message. The message of Hebrews was that Christ was a better *priest*, and his better *sacrifice* was one of half a dozen reasons that he was a better *priest*.

At first I thought that was not right, and I remember clear disappointment with Hebrews, that Jesus the great priest was more important than Jesus the perfect sacrifice. Well, I got over it. Often the Bible has not taught what I was sure was right. The priest in Hebrews was not the first or the last. Sometimes the truth is different than what I had be quite sure about.

In simplest terms, Jesus saves his people. We are saved by a person, Jesus, who saves his people. At the very core, we are saved by a person. His sacrifice is an important part of how he saves us, but how he saves us is his business. He saves his people, let’s be his people. Now, Hebrews 7.

We’ll look at Hebrews 7 in three sections.

1, Melchizedek and Abraham – Hebrews 7:1-10

You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. That’s a line from Ps 110, which is a psalm about the Messiah. Ps 110 says, “*You, the Christ, are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.*” The writer to the Hebrews has meditated long and hard on that line, and that line is the starting point of this whole letter.

He quoted that line in Hebrews 5, so his readers have already heard this applied to Jesus, but in Hebrews 7 we take a closer look.

In Hebrews 7:1-10, we read about a meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek, a meeting that gets just a few verses in Genesis 14. Abraham was coming home from a successful battle. He had defeated some kings that captured his nephew Lot. On his way home, Melchizedek came out to meet him.

Melchizedek was the king of Salem, which is an early name for Jeru-salem. And Melchizedek was also a priest of God Most High. Two things happened when Melchizedek came out to meet Abraham. One is that Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and the other is that Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham tithed to Melchizedek.

Abraham and those with him had taken plunder from the kings they defeated, and Abraham gave one tenth of his share to Melchizedek. Abraham treats Melchizedek as his priest, by giving him a tenth, and Melchizedek sees himself as Abraham's priest, because he blesses him. That's what priests do.

The Israelite priests came from tribe of Levi, the son of Jacob. Levi, the son of Jacob, was Abraham's great-grandson. The priests from Levi collected a tithe from other Israelites, and the priests from Levi were to bless the Israelites – *the Lord bless you and keep you and shine his face on you* – God told the priests to bless Israel that way.

Now the writer to the Hebrews does something that's a bit of a stretch for us, but he's got a point. Levi was Abraham's great-grandson, and that means that when Abraham met Melchizedek, Levi was in some sense already in Abraham's body. The levitical priests will come from Abraham's body, so Abe represents the levitical priests in this meeting with Mel.

And that means, says Hebrews, that Melchizedek is greater than the levitical priests, because with Abraham as their forefather, the levitical priests, who collect tithes from Israel, gave their tithe to Melchizedek, and the levitical priests, who bless the rest of Israel, receive their blessing from Melchizedek.

So, on this basis, concludes Hebrews 7:10, Melchizedek's order of priests is better than the levitical priests of Israel. He's writing to Jews, and for them this was a pretty radical statement. But that's what he wants us to understand – Melchizedek was a greater priest than Aaron and his line of priests, and he shows that from Genesis.

So this section talked about Melchizedek and Abraham, based on Genesis 14. The next section talks about Melchizedek and Aaron, based on Psalm 110.

Melchizedek and Aaron – Hebrews 7:11-19

The writer's foundation is still this line from Psalm 110 – *You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek*. “Think about that line,” he says to his readers. And then he asks them a disturbing question: (7:11):

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?

The writer tells us that there must be something wrong with Aaron's kind of priest, or why would God promise another line of priests, when Aaron's line had already been going a long time? Good question. And the writer makes clear that this is not really a question. Something indeed was very wrong with the Aaron kind of priests.

7:17 - For it says: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless, for the law made nothing perfect, and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

The goal is that we could draw near to God, that we could come boldly to God's throne, that we could approach God with confidence. That's was the goal all along, and Aaron's kind of priest could not do that. With Aaron, only the high priest approached God's throne, and only one day of the year. Clearly, that system was weak and useless – pretty strong language.

But now that we have a better priest, we can draw near to God, we can go right to God. I have heard people say that it's so nice we don't need a priest any more to approach God. In the rest of the NT, that might work. But not in Hebrews!

In Hebrews, we have this access to God himself *because* we have this great high priest, who is at the center of our relationship to God. That's why we have this freedom to approach God.

Jesus the Permanent Priest – 7:20-25

By v19, our writer is finished with Melchizedek and Abraham and Aaron, but he's not finished with Psalm 110:4. The first half of the verse says, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.” The psalmist pictures God raising his right hand and making a solemn vow to the Jesus the Messiah: “I swear that You are a priest forever!”

7:20 - Others became priests without any oath, 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.’”

Here's another reason Jesus is a better priest than Aaron: When Aaron became a priest, God did not make a solemn vow, but God made Jesus a priest forever with an oath.

7:23 - *Now there have been many of those [Aaron] priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

This last line is huge, people: *He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

My brothers and sisters, we take a lot of saving. It is a massive job, for every single one of us. We have been saved in the past, when we first came to Christ, and we are still being saved, and there is much more coming. We take a lot of saving. Jesus is up for it. He's in the Holy of Holies, interceding for us. He's there because God wants him there, merciful and sympathetic and gentle. God wants a priest like that who would completely save us.

He always lives to intercede for us, he is hard at it right now, while I speak and while you listen (or read). That's how we are saved. Who gets this saving? *Those who come to God through him.*

“Come to God” – draw near to God, come boldly to the throne, approach God with full assurance – Hebrews says it several ways. And this “coming to God through him” is not a one time event, it is a way of living. Let's always keep showing up before the Throne.

A better hope was introduced, by which we draw near to God ... he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. That's why we need a priest, and that's why Jesus is better. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, thank you for the priest. We praise you for how long and hard you worked to get us such a great priest. Lord Jesus, we praise you for always interceding for us. It is happening right now, as we come before you, and it does not stop. It is the reason we are still saved, and the reason we will soon stand before You, and be with you forever. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.