

Melchizedek: The Priest of a Better Covenant

When we finished last time, I mentioned that we were going to look at God's promise of an inheritance to Abraham and to his Seed—singular. We're going to postpone that discussion for a little while because I want to move to the next section in our study. In Genesis 14 we come to one of the most remarkable, and often misunderstood, people in Scripture: Melchizedek.

For many people, discussions about Melchizedek cause their eyes to glaze over. They assume it's one of those subjects that's too deep or too technical to matter very much. I see it very differently. In my opinion, what the Bible teaches about Melchizedek is one of the strongest foundations for understanding the gospel, the character of God, His faithfulness to His promises, and the assurance of our salvation.

Nothing in Scripture is trivial, but this subject has been especially encouraging and strengthening in my own life. It has shaped how I understand God and His work on our behalf. If, by the time we're finished, you don't find yourself encouraged by these truths, then I'd like us to keep talking about them because I believe they really should change the way we see the Lord and the gospel.

Abraham Meets Melchizedek

The setting is familiar. Lot has been captured by the invading kings, and Abraham has gone after them, defeated them, and rescued both Lot and the people who had been taken captive.

After Abraham returns from the victory, Genesis suddenly introduces a man we know almost nothing about.

"And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. Now he was a priest of God Most High. Then he blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.' Then Abram gave him a tenth of all."

That's essentially everything Genesis tells us about Melchizedek. Before we look anywhere else in Scripture, it's worth asking what we actually learn from this passage alone.

First, he is the **king of Salem**. The word *Salem* comes from the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning peace. So Melchizedek is the king of peace.

Second, he is a **priest of God Most High**. Notice that he is not a priest of some false god. He serves the true God.

At this point in history there is no tribe of Levi. There are no Levitical priests. The passage tells us nothing about Melchizedek's ancestry. We are not given the names of his father or mother. Unlike so many other people in Genesis, no genealogy is recorded for him.

Another striking detail is that Abraham gives him a tithe.

Whether that tithe came specifically from the spoils recovered in battle or from everything Abraham possessed, it represented a significant gift. If Abraham owned ten thousand sheep, a tenth would have meant a thousand sheep. The same principle would apply to his cattle, grain, and everything else that belonged to him.

His very name is also significant.

The Hebrew word for king is *melek*, and the word for righteousness is *tsedeq*. Put together, they form the name Melchizedek, meaning **king of righteousness**.

So already we know that he is both **the king of righteousness** and **the king of peace**.

One more detail often receives very little attention. Melchizedek brings out **bread and wine**. I've seldom heard anyone preach on that, yet it is difficult not to notice how those elements foreshadow, in some way, the communion meal that appears much later in Scripture.

Still, that's all Genesis itself tells us. We know nothing about his family, nothing about where he came from, and nothing about what became of him afterward. Those observations become important as the Bible unfolds the story.

A Conversation Within the Godhead

The next place we turn is Psalm 110.

David begins by writing,

"The LORD says to my Lord..."

Most English Bibles print the first "LORD" in all capital letters, indicating the covenant name of God—Yahweh.

David is now recording a conversation.

The question becomes, "Who is talking to whom?"

The passage continues:

"Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

Yahweh is speaking to David's Lord. Given the rest of the Psalm, this can only be understood as God the Father speaking to the Son. In other words, Psalm 110 allows us to listen in on a conversation between the Father and the Son. As the Psalm continues, the Father speaks of the Son's reign and authority. Then we reach verse 4, one of the most important verses in the entire discussion.

"The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'"

That is an astonishing statement.

Back in Genesis, Melchizedek simply appeared, blessed Abraham, received a tithe, and disappeared from the narrative. Now, centuries later, God the Father says to God the Son, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

That is all the Old Testament gives us about the connection. Beyond Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, there are no further explanations. We are simply left with the fact that the coming Messiah will somehow be a priest like Melchizedek.

That naturally raises another question.

How did David know to write this? How could he possibly know that God had sworn such an oath?

The only answer is that God Himself revealed it to David. Left to himself, David could never have known about this conversation between the Father and the Son. But the interesting thing is that Jesus explains how David knew!

The answer becomes clear when we come to Matthew 22.

Jesus asks the Pharisees a question:

"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?"

They answer immediately:

"The son of David."

That answer is correct as far as it goes.

Then Jesus asks another question that leaves them puzzled.

If the Messiah is David's son, why does David call Him "Lord"? Jesus then quotes Psalm 110:

"The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet.'"

Now notice Jesus' explanation.

He says that **David, in the Spirit**, spoke these words.

That answers the question.

David knew because the Holy Spirit revealed it to him.

To me, this is one of the most fascinating pictures of divine inspiration in all of Scripture. Think about what is happening.

The Son of God is standing before the Pharisees, quoting words that describe a conversation God the Father once had with Him. At the same time, He explains that David wrote those words because the Holy Spirit inspired him to do so.

When David sat somewhere, pen in hand, writing Psalm 110, he was recording words that the Holy Spirit was revealing to him—words spoken between the other two Persons of the Trinity.

That is an amazing thing to consider.

The Writer of Hebrews Takes Up the Subject

Now we arrive at Hebrews chapter 5.

The writer begins discussing the ministry of the high priest. Every high priest, he says, is appointed from among men to represent people before God.

Then he applies that truth to Christ.

He reminds us that Christ did not appoint Himself as High Priest. Instead, God said to Him,

"You are My Son; today I have begotten You."

Then he immediately adds the words from Psalm 110:

"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

So once again the New Testament brings us back to the same Old Testament promise.

Jesus has been designated by God as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Then something interesting happens.

The writer pauses.

He says,

"Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

I appreciate the honesty of that statement. He isn't pretending this is easy material.

He tells his readers they should already be mature enough to understand these truths, but instead they still need instruction in the elementary things of the faith.

For a moment it almost sounds as though he's going to abandon the subject altogether.

Chapter 6 follows with words of exhortation, and you might think the discussion of Melchizedek has ended.

But then, at the close of chapter 6, he returns to the same theme:

"...where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Then chapter 7 begins:

"For this Melchizedek, king of Salem..."

In other words, the writer says, "We're not going to skip this after all. This matters, and I'm going to explain it."

Hebrews Explains the Significance of Melchizedek

The writer of Hebrews begins by reminding us of the facts we already know from Genesis.

Melchizedek was the **king of Salem**, a **priest of the Most High God**, and he met Abraham after Abraham returned from defeating the kings. He blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. Then the writer begins explaining details we would never have understood simply by reading the Genesis account.

He tells us that Melchizedek's name means **king of righteousness**. I only know that because the writer of Hebrews tells me. Left to myself, I never would have discovered it simply by reading Genesis.

Then he explains that Salem means **peace**. So Melchizedek is both **the king of righteousness** and **the king of peace**.

Those titles immediately make us stop and think. Who else could truly be called the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace?

The writer then points out something that has generated discussion for centuries.

Melchizedek appears "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life."

This is where Christians often divide into two views.

One possibility is that Melchizedek was actually Christ appearing before His incarnation.

If that's true, then these descriptions fit exactly.

The other possibility is that Melchizedek was an ordinary man whose genealogy, birth, and death were simply never recorded. Unlike the long genealogies found throughout Genesis, nothing is said about his parents, his ancestry, his birth, or his death. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer of Hebrews uses those omissions to make his point.

Christian scholars have been divided on those two views for a long time. You can hold either position, and no one is going to strike you with lightning for choosing the wrong one.

One statement does make me lean toward the second view. The writer says that Melchizedek was **"made like the Son of God."** He doesn't say he *was* the Son of God. He says he was made *like* the Son of God. That wording suggests a comparison rather than an identification.

Either way, the point the writer wants us to see is the same. Melchizedek remains before us as a priest whose record has no beginning and no ending, making him a fitting picture of the eternal priesthood that belongs to Christ.

A Priest Greater Than Abraham

At this point we still haven't answered the practical question. Why should any of this matter?

The writer now begins to explain.

He says,

"Observe how great this man was."

Think about what happened.

Abraham—the man to whom God gave the promises—gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek.

Under the Law of Moses, the priests from the tribe of Levi were commanded to receive tithes from their fellow Israelites. That was their God-given office. Melchizedek was different.

He wasn't from the tribe of Levi. In fact, Levi had not even been born yet.

No law required Abraham to give him a tithe.

Yet Abraham voluntarily gave him one, and Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

Then the writer makes an important observation:

"Without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater."

That tells us how we are to understand the relationship between these two men.

Melchizedek was the greater.

Abraham was the lesser.

That may surprise us because Abraham is the one who received God's promises. Yet the Holy Spirit says Abraham received a blessing from someone greater than himself.

Melchizedek occupies a higher position than Abraham in this encounter.

Levi Paid Tithes Through Abraham

The writer then takes the argument one step further.

The Levitical priests ordinarily received tithes. But in this case, the one receiving the tithe is someone whose priesthood stands above theirs. How can that be?

The explanation is remarkable.

Levi had not yet been born when Abraham met Melchizedek. Yet Levi was still "in the loins" of Abraham. The future tribe of Levi already existed in Abraham in the sense that its descendants would come from him.

So when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, Levi, in a representative sense, paid tithes through Abraham. That completely reverses the normal order. The tribe that would later receive tithes is now pictured as giving tithes. Levi, who would become the priestly tribe under the Law, is represented as acknowledging the superiority of Melchizedek.

We never would have drawn that conclusion simply by reading Genesis. The writer of Hebrews explains it for us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

That means Melchizedek's priesthood is higher than the Levitical priesthood.

Why Another Priest Was Needed

Now we begin to see why all of this matters.

The writer asks a question.

If perfection had come through the Levitical priesthood—the priesthood established under the Law—why would there have been any need for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek?

The answer is obvious.

There would have been no need.

If the Law and the Levitical priesthood had accomplished God's ultimate purpose, another priesthood would never have been introduced. That tells us something very important.

The Law was never the final answer.

The writer continues by saying that when the priesthood changes, there must also be a change in the law. That's a striking statement.

The Law itself established the Levitical priesthood. If God introduces a different priesthood, then the legal system connected with the first priesthood must have given way to the new system.

Now think about Christ. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. Under the Law, no one from Judah had the legal right to serve as a priest. The priests came from Levi.

So what legal claim did Jesus have to the Levitical priesthood? None.

That isn't a criticism of Christ. It's exactly the point the writer is making. Jesus is not a priest because He belongs to Levi. He is a priest because God Himself declared,

"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

His priesthood belongs to an entirely different order. It rests, not on the requirements of the Mosaic Law, but on God's own declaration.

A Priesthood Established by an Indestructible Life

The writer presses the point even further.

Christ became a priest,

"...not according to the law of a physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life."

Once again he quotes Psalm 110: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Everything comes back to that oath God made concerning His Son.

Then the writer says something that would have startled his Jewish readers.

He speaks of "**the setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness.**"

Those are strong words. This is Scripture speaking about the Law itself.

Why?

Because, as the next verse explains, "The law made nothing perfect." The Law could not accomplish what was ultimately needed. Instead, God brought in **a better hope**, through which we draw near to Him.

That brings us back to the oath. The Levitical priests entered their office without an oath.

Christ did not.

God swore an oath concerning Him:

"The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, 'You are a priest forever.'"

That oath establishes Christ's priesthood forever. It also establishes something else.

Jesus has become **the guarantee of a better covenant**.

That better covenant is the New Covenant.

Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we hear the familiar words:

"This is the new covenant in My blood."

God has bound that covenant with His own oath, appointing Christ as its eternal High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek rather than the order of Levi.

Our High Priest Lives Forever

The writer of Hebrews now brings everything together.

The Levitical priests were many in number because they kept dying. One priest would serve for a time, then death would end his ministry, and another priest had to take his place. Throughout Israel's history there was an ongoing succession of priests because none of them could continue forever.

Christ is entirely different. Because He lives forever, He holds His priesthood permanently. That alone makes His priesthood better. It isn't passed from one person to another. It never has to be replaced. There is never a moment when God's people are without a High Priest because Jesus continues forever.

Able to Save to the Uttermost

That permanent priesthood leads directly to one of the most encouraging statements in Hebrews.

"Therefore He is able also to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

Think about that expression: **able to save to the uttermost**.

What does "uttermost" mean?

It means completely. Forever. To the very end.

Our High Priest is not merely someone who once accomplished salvation and then stepped aside. He lives forever, and He continually ministers on behalf of those who belong to Him.

Right now He is making intercession for us.

He isn't simply sitting in heaven waiting for history to unfold. He continually intercedes before the Father for His people. Why is that important?

Because this is the very ministry God appointed Him to perform.

God swore an oath and declared that Christ would be a priest forever—not after the order of Levi, but after the order of Melchizedek. That eternal priesthood is the foundation of our assurance.

One Sacrifice for All Time

The writer goes on to describe the kind of High Priest we have.

He is holy, innocent, undefiled, separate from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the Levitical priests, He never needed to offer sacrifices for His own sins before offering sacrifices for others.

Instead, "He did this once for all when He offered up Himself."

That one statement explains the difference between the old priesthood and Christ's priesthood. The old priests continually offered sacrifices because the work was never finished. Christ offered Himself once for all. His sacrifice does not need to be repeated.

What the Repeated Sacrifices Revealed

That raises an important question.

What did it tell you that sacrifices had to be offered again and again? It tells us they never fully accomplished what people needed.

Later in Hebrews, the writer makes a statement that deserves careful thought.

He says that if those sacrifices had actually "worked," two things would have happened.

First, they would have stopped being offered. Most of us understand that point fairly well.

If the sacrifices had truly completed the work, there would have been no need to continue bringing them.

But the writer gives a second result that we often overlook.

If they had worked, people would no longer have had **a consciousness of sins**.

Think about the Israelite who had to bring a sacrifice day after day. Every morning he takes another turtle dove or another lamb to the altar. What does that remind him of? It reminds him that he is a sinner.

The next day he does it again.

Once again he is reminded that he is a sinner. The continual sacrifices continually reminded the worshiper that the problem had not been finally settled.

That is exactly what the writer of Hebrews says.

If those sacrifices had accomplished their purpose, not only would they have ceased, but the continual consciousness of sin would have disappeared as well.

Living in the Reality of Christ's Finished Work

This is where my passion comes in. Most Christians understand the first part. We believe Christ offered the final sacrifice for sin. We no longer bring animals to an altar because His one sacrifice has accomplished what all the others never could.

But we often miss the second part.

Although we say Christ has forgiven us, we continue carrying that constant consciousness of sin. In our minds we keep returning to the altar over and over again. We keep reminding ourselves, "I'm such a sinner."

We keep acting as though the sacrifice still needs to be brought. Yet God says the sacrifice has already dealt with the sin problem. There is no longer a sin issue standing between Him and us.

God says,

"Their sins I will remember no more."

When I was growing up, we used to sing,

"Gone, gone, gone... yes, my sins are gone."

Do we really believe they're gone?

Or do we keep dragging them back into our thinking and continually carrying them as though Christ had never fully dealt with them?

Certainly we confess our sins.

But confessing our sins is not the same as continually living under the weight of a conscience that never believes the sacrifice was enough. God says the sin issue has been dealt with. Now live for Me.

Enjoy the Christian life.

Worship Me.

Have fellowship with Me.

Don't keep bringing sacrifices in your mind.

That work has already been completed.

The Message of Melchizedek

To me, that is the message of Melchizedek.

It took us the whole hour to arrive there, but that's the point.

God the Father swore an oath that His Son would be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

That priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood.

It belongs to an entirely different order.

Christ is our eternal High Priest.

His intercession for us continues even now.

His sacrifice has completely dealt with our sins.

Instead of living as though we must continually return to the altar, we can worship our gracious God, rejoicing that the issue of sin has been settled through the work of Christ.

We have such a High Priest.

Not one who must continually offer sacrifices, but One who lives forever, continually intercedes for us, and has secured for us a better covenant through His own finished work.