



A Better Priesthood

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • Hebrews 7:1 – 8:6 (PART 1)

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
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It is good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakeschurch.org/visitor. Or, you can use the cards in the pews this morning – not just if you are visiting with us, but also for special questions and prayer concerns. You can put those in the box on the wall in the entryway or give your card to me on your way out this morning.

Just a quick update on our schedule: We are heading to Tennessee for our daughter's graduation this week! Lord willing, she will be graduating this coming Saturday with a bachelor's and master's degree in accounting. And our goal, after graduation, is to head back north and worship with Bill Clary in Springfield, Illinois, next Sunday. Bill is the only person who knew both me and Keola before we knew each other. I think Bill grew up in Baraboo, he served as a deacon with my dad down in Freeport, Illinois, and then he moved to Alaska, where he ran into Keola's side of the family. I had asked Jim Vermillion whether he might be willing to preach next week, but he is traveling for work, so he arranged for a back-up Vermillion to preach, a fill-in for the fill-in. So, Lord willing, Dr. Phil will be with us next Sunday. I think Phil's degree may be in school administration, and I think he currently works as a high school chorus teacher down in Illinois. But he will be with us next week, and I just wanted to give you a heads-up.

We are here this morning to worship God, to encourage each other, and to preach the love of God, the good news that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son to save us; he died on the cross, he was buried, but then he was raised up on the first day of the week. We obey the good news by believing it, by repenting of our sins (by having a change of heart), by confessing our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And we've had many examples this week, starting with an update from the Lord's church in Glen Rock, Pennsylvania. They say that,

In early January, Jack's beloved wife went on to be with the Lord. Jack took that grief and asked friends to attend worship with him the following Sunday. Two of the people that came to support Jack were a husband and wife, David and Sue. They continued to attend worship week after week. They had a private Bible study with another couple, Shane and Becky. After several months of study, David and Sue accepted God's calling to be baptized into Christ. We are so excited for all of them. Jack, with some help from Shane, baptized both David and Sue.

So good to see this!

This next one comes from Clay Mason, in Trinidad, Colorado. What an awesome beard! Clay says,

We did another thing today!!! Welcome Veronica to the family of God and a new member of the Kingdom of Heaven! What a blessed day this has been thus far!!! Hallelujah!!!! And a hearty Amen!!! Veronica came to us this morning after having spent the last couple months in the local lock-up. She said she'd been praying and thinking and she said, "It's time to get it right!" So she did. Get it right. With God. We've known Monica for several years now and have walked with her through a lot of stuff. Today she gave it over to the Creator!!! All this and Heaven too! What a blessed blessed day!!! Shalom!!

So good to see this!

This one comes to us from the Lord's church down in Sullivan, Illinois. They say that "Turaisa made the decision to be baptized into Christ! We rejoice with her and Zach on their walk together!" Another wonderful beard this week! But so good to see a husband able to baptize his wife.

And this last one comes to us from right here in Wisconsin, in Waupaca, I believe. They start by quoting 1 Peter 3:21-22, ***"Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."*** And then they say that "God's Church welcomes Alexandra to the family as she was washed in the blood yesterday!" Good news from here in Wisconsin!

And we share all of this to help illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. Wherever you may live, we want you to know that God loves you and wants you to be saved. And if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship today or reach out using the contact information on the website or on the bulletin, and we would love to study together.

This morning we return to our study of Hebrews, and we pick up today with Hebrews 7 and the first few verses of Hebrews 8. The theme of the book is, "Jesus is Better," and he's writing to a group of Christians who are having a hard time listening to Jesus, and he's encouraging them to hang on: Do not give up, and whatever you do, do not turn back! And he does this by reminding them (over and over again) that Jesus is better. At the end of Chapter 5, he wanted to talk about Jesus being from a better priesthood, from the order of Melchizedek, but he realized that they could handle a lesson like that, so he takes a detour as he encourages them to grow up, to move beyond the basics. Well, today, we get to the steak. Today, we get to the meat. And this is a larger section, so although we'll be moving rather quickly through it, we do plan on dividing this part of our study into two studies.

But this is where we come back to Melchizedek. And I realize we may be thinking, "Great! Just what I need, two lessons on some random guy from the Old Testament! I've got marriage and family issues, I'm having a hard time at work right now, I've got finals coming up," and so on, "So, let's just skip over Chapter 7!" And yet, this is the word of God, and there is a value to it. As we move into this section of Hebrews, we need to remember that God is holy, and we are not. We can't just walk up to God and start a conversation. We have sin that needs to be dealt with; so, we need a priest, a go-between. This, by the way, is a major theme in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus was a manual for the priesthood. When I took a college class on Hebrews under

Dowell Flatt down at Freed-Hardeman University, before we ever cracked open the book of Hebrews, brother Flatt spent the first two weeks looking exclusively at the book of Leviticus. I didn't sign up for a study of Leviticus, and I was a bit frustrated, but once we got to Hebrews I finally understood the value of doing that. God is holy, we are not, so we need a go-between. Well, the author of Hebrews is now convincing these people that Jesus is far better than the old Levitical priesthood. I think we understand today that religious traditions die hard, don't they? It is hard to give up the past. Well, these people had lived under the Law of Moses for the past 1400 years, and they are having a hard time leaving it.

The author of Hebrews, then, appeals to this ancient king and priest, a man by the name of Melchizedek. And as I understand it, the only real command in this chapter comes in Hebrews 7:4, when he says (with reference to Melchizedek), ***"Now observe how great this man was..."*** The word ***"observe"*** refers to looking at or gazing at something; it's the basis of our English word "theater." Melchizedek, then, is on the stage this week, so to speak. All we know about Melchizedek comes from the original account in Genesis 14, a brief prophecy in Psalm 110, and here in the book of Hebrews. Back in Genesis, Lot had been kidnapped by a coalition of foreign kings, and Abraham (a wealthy man) rustles up his own personal army and heads out on a rescue mission, the ancient equivalent of Seal Team 6. And these guys are wildly successful. They not only rescue Lot and the others, but they also come back with the spoils of war, coming back with everything that had been taken. Well, on the way back, they are met by this guy named Melchizedek, who is described as the ***"King of Salem,"*** and ***"a priest of the Most High God."*** Melchizedek blesses Abraham by greeting him with a gift of bread and wine, and Abraham responds by giving Melchizedek one-tenth of everything. And that's about all we know. So, we are invited to ***"observe"*** Melchizedek this morning, but the point of studying Melchizedek is to teach us something about Jesus. And that's what I'd like for us to do this morning (and in two weeks): I'd like for us to observe Melchizedek as we note six reasons why Jesus is a better priest than those who served under the Law of Moses – we'll look at three of these today and three of these two weeks from now.

- I. **But the first lesson this morning comes in verses 1-3 as we find that like the priesthood of Melchizedek, the priesthood of Jesus is also PERPETUAL (as opposed to those priests who served under the Law of Moses).**

We start, then, with Hebrews 7:1-3,

¹ For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. ³ Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.

We have a few things going on here, starting with the reminder that Melchizedek was both a king and a priest. He is described here as being the ***"king of Salem."*** ***"Salem"*** is a word meaning "peace," and may be referring to the area that would later be known as Jerusalem. And then, the name Melchizedek literally means ***"king of righteousness."*** But he is also described as being a ***"priest of the Most High God."*** He was a king and a priest, and this was not possible under the Law of Moses. You could be a priest and a prophet (like Samuel), and you could be a king and a prophet (like David), but you could never be a king and a priest. The king's job was to enforce the Law, while a priest's job was to empathize and to offer sacrifices and to reconcile those who had broken the Law. Under the Law of Moses, you couldn't be both a king and a priest. In fact, several tried and were condemned for it. We think of Saul, who gets impatient waiting for Samuel to show up and (in 1 Samuel

13) he goes ahead and makes the sacrifice, and when Samuel finally shows up, he says, ***“What have you done?”*** Saul explains, and Samuel replies by saying, ***“You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”*** And this is part of what leads to Saul’s downfall: He tries to serve as both king and priest.

And then we have King Uzziah who also (quite arrogantly) tries to take on both roles. He enters the temple to offer incense, and Azariah the priest very courageously stands up with eighty other priests of the Lord, they oppose the king in what he is doing, and they say (starting in 2 Chronicles 16:18),

It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful and will have no honor from the LORD God.” But Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the altar of incense. Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous on his forehead; and they hurried him out of there, and he himself also hastened to get out because the LORD had smitten him. King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the LORD...

You couldn’t be both a king and a priest under the Law of Moses. Melchizedek, though, was both a king and a priest. He served BEFORE the Law of Moses ever went into effect. And this, of course, points to Jesus, who was also a king and a priest. This is significant, but the truly big idea in this first paragraph (now that we’re making comparisons, now that we know who we are really talking about) is that like Melchizedek, Jesus is also a king and priest ***“perpetually.”*** Melchizedek is described as being ***“without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.”*** Think about the importance of genealogies in the book of Genesis. We’ve been looking at Genesis in our Wednesday class for nearly a year now, and over and over we’ve had these huge lists of names. Under the Law of Moses, it was really important to know who your ancestors were, especially with reference to the priesthood. We think back to Numbers 18:7, where God said to Aaron, ***“But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”*** To approach God under the Law of Moses, you had better be a descendant of Aaron, or you will die. But with Melchizedek, no genealogy at all – nothing! Not that he was supernatural, not that he was an angel (as some have suggested), not that he was some pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus (as some have suggested), not that he didn’t literally have parents, not that he literally never died, but we have no RECORD of these things. Melchizedek just appears out of nowhere. He’s a king and he’s a priest, but his priesthood wasn’t tied to some lengthy family tree. Instead, he is a priest because God made him a priest. He is a priest ***“perpetually.”*** And this is a huge part of what makes Jesus a much better priest than the priests who served under the Law of Moses. The priesthood of Jesus (like that of Melchizedek) is perpetual, and we will get back to this in the second part of this chapter.

II. As we come to the next paragraph here, we notice that the priesthood of Jesus is GREATER than that of Levi.

Let’s notice verses 4-10, where the author says,

Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham. But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater. In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.

We won't spend much time on this, other than to note that the author uses the priesthood of Melchizedek to prove that the priesthood of Jesus is greater than the priesthood of Levi. And I love how Abraham is described here as a "*patriarch*." That's a rare term, Abraham didn't go around calling himself a "*patriarch*," but it's a term of respect. Abraham is the father of the faithful, the most blessed man on the face of the earth at that time. And the author is saying: As great as the patriarch Abraham is, Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek, indicating that Melchizedek is even greater. And since Levi descended from Abraham, Melchizedek (logically) is greater than Levi. And Jesus traces his priesthood not to Levi, but to Melchizedek. Jesus, therefore, is greater than Levi. So, if we are looking for a priest who is truly qualified to give the best possible blessing, look to Jesus! And do not look back to the inferior priesthood of Levi. Jesus is better! Jesus is a greater priest.

III. Before we wrap it up this morning, let's look at one more lesson from this chapter, as we note that Jesus, serving in the likeness of Melchizedek, is a GUARANTEE OF A BETTER COVENANT.

Let's take a look at Hebrews 7:11-22,

¹¹ Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. ¹³ For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. ¹⁵ And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is attested of Him, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK." ¹⁸ For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. ²⁰ And inasmuch as it was not without an oath ²¹ (for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, "THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, 'YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER'"); ²² so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

There's a lot in this paragraph, but if I could summarize: Even back in Old Testament times, Melchizedek pointed to a new arrangement, a new agreement, a new covenant. And the author starts right away (in verse 11) by suggesting that if the Levitical priesthood had been perfect, there would not have been a need for

something better, implying that the Levitical priesthood was less than perfect. This doesn't mean that the old priesthood or the Old Law was necessarily bad; it simply means that the new is better. We might compare it to a company releasing a product that is "new and improved." Just because the new product is improved does not mean that there was anything necessarily wrong with the old one. The new one is simply better. And the fact that Melchizedek was something of a preview indicates that an improvement was on the horizon. And that improvement, of course, is Jesus.

Then, starting in verse 12, the author introduces this new priesthood by suggesting that with a new priesthood there must also be a change of Law. We can't have Jesus as a priest under the Old Law, because Jesus wasn't from the right tribe, the right family. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, and people from Judah weren't qualified to serve as priests. Jesus, though, serves as a priest, not on the basis of a *"physical requirement"* (in verse 16), but according to *"the power of an indestructible life."* This may not be the perfect illustration, but I think of someone applying for a job who looks absolutely perfect on paper. They may be highly educated, they may check all the boxes, but if they can't do the job, then they can't do the job. On the other hand, we have this other candidate who may not have the degree, but he or she is an absolute expert at doing exactly what needs to be done. I want the guy who can get it done. Again, there's really no such thing as a perfect illustration, but I think about the difference between the Levites and Jesus. The Levites were born into the right family, but Jesus could get it done. Jesus serves as a priest, not on the basis of the physical requirements, not based on his family tree, but Jesus serves as a priest based on the *"power of an indestructible life."* And I see that as a reference to the resurrection. The Levites were qualified to serve under the Law of Moses, but Jesus came back from the dead. He serves in a way that nobody else ever has.

The author continues (in verse 17) by quoting Psalm 110, the psalm that is quoted more than any other anywhere in the New Testament. And in that passage, he predicts that someone would be coming at some point in the future who would be *"a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."* This is the only reference to Melchizedek outside Genesis and Hebrews. And he's making the case here that since Jesus is the priest who was prophesied, and since Jesus is from the tribe of Judah (not Levi), that Jesus must have ushered in not only a new priesthood, but a new covenant as well. And we will get back to the covenant chapter 8, but for now we have a few interesting notes to make, going back to the reminder (in verse 14) concerning the importance of silence in the Bible. This whole argument about a new covenant is based on the fact that Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, *"a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests."* He's saying that Jesus cannot be a priest under the Law of Moses, because Moses didn't say anything about priests coming from the tribe of Judah. He didn't forbid it, but the law only authorized priests from the tribe of Levi. God didn't have to say, "not from Reuben, not from Simeon, not from Judah," and so on. We learn something here concerning how God authorizes. He doesn't have to tell us what he DOESN'T want, but he tells us what he WANTS, and that eliminates so many other possibilities. We've used this argument with reference to worship. When God tells us to *"sing,"* he doesn't have to tell us not to use a piano or an organ, but we just sing, and we leave it at that. I have a birthday coming up in a few weeks. If I ask for a burger with cheddar and ketchup on my special day, I don't have to specify that I do NOT want onions, and pickles, and mayo, and anchovies on it. If it shows up with anchovies, I would have every right to say, "No way! Remove this abomination from my presence!" Some day I need to tell you about the incident we had at our house with a can of scallops cooked into a pan of brownies. Not cool at all! But the side lesson (from verse 14) is that when God said nothing about priests coming from the tribe of Judah, those from Judah could not serve as priests, because they did not have God's permission to serve in that way. They were excluded by God's silence.

Nevertheless, the author makes the argument that since Jesus is a priest, and since Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi, that there must have been a change in the Law, a change in the covenant. Again, we will get back to

this in Chapter 8, but for now, we have the idea that the new covenant is better than the old. The Law of Moses was good; *“glorious,”* in fact (according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 3), but the New Covenant is even better. The New Covenant is even more glorious, and the glory of the Old was fading away. And so, we end this passage with the suggestion that *“Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.”* And this is the first use of the word *“covenant”* in the book of Hebrews. But again, more on that in Chapter 8! For now, just the existence of Jesus as our high priest indicates that we are now living under a *“better covenant.”*

Conclusion:

As we wrap it up, I would just briefly suggest a practical application this morning, and that is: What we believe about Jesus is incredibly important. The people heard this sermon or read this message for the very first time were in danger of falling away because they really just couldn't understand how much better Jesus was than the old priesthood under the Law of Moses. And one reason for this is that they never really understood Melchizedek. There was this weird guy just briefly mentioned way back in Genesis, but they didn't get it. They couldn't handle it. And so the author of Hebrews slows down and he explains it. In Melchizedek we have a preview of Jesus. And to understand who Jesus really is, it really helps to understand this rather unusual character from the book of Genesis. So, keep joining us for our study of Genesis every Wednesday at 7! If you aren't, this would be a good time to jump in; we only have three chapters left! But we learn today that all of the Bible is important. Don't turn back! Jesus is better! And hopefully we can come back in two weeks as we wrap up our study of Melchizedek, which is really a study of Jesus.

Before Caleb leads us in a song to prepare us for the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God of our salvation, and we praise you this morning for sending your only Son to this earth to live among us and to save us. We thank you this morning for providing us with a great high priest, greater than Levi and Aaron, even greater than Melchizedek. Thank you, Father, for the New Covenant, sealed with the blood of your Son.

We come to you today through Jesus, our Savior and Priest, the great King above all others.
AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com