

Genesis: *The Mystery of Melchizedek*
Genesis 14:17-20; Hebrews 5:1-10

As we've walked through the book of Genesis, we have seen time and time again how the promises uttered by God in Genesis are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Today we will connect the dots between the mysterious priest/king of Salem named Melchizedek in Genesis 14, a prophecy in Psalm 110, and the role Jesus plays as the intercessor for our souls as presented in Hebrews. Please stand and let us read Genesis 14:17-20, and then we'll also read Hebrews 5:1-10. First, Genesis 14:17-20:

¹⁷ After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). ¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) ¹⁹ And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor^[al] of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Then, from the writer of Hebrews, we read in 5:1-10:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; ⁶ as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." ⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Thesis; 2) The Argument; and 3) The Conclusion.

I. The Thesis

My message today is going to cover a lot of ground, but sometimes it's best to know what the point is before we get into the weeds. So, the passage that we just read in Hebrews 5 sums up the thesis, and here it is: Jesus is the perfect High Priest who made the perfect sacrifice to accomplish our eternal salvation, and the nature of His priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek as previously prophesied by King David in Psalm 110. Hold on to that thesis and you will be able to track with me through the rest of this message.

Now, why should you care? Well, everything that we're going to discuss this morning will address some of the big questions that come up when you discuss Christianity with unbelievers. For example, this message today will address the question: "How can the death of

one man 2000 years ago provide forgiveness for my sins and the sins of the whole world?” This message will also address the questions: “Why Jesus? Why is Jesus the only way? Why do we insist that other religions can’t save our souls and get us into heaven? Why did Jesus believe that He was ‘the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one could come to the Father but through Him?’”

These are big and important questions, so this is an important message, and the original catalyst from this message traces all the way to four simple verses at the end of Genesis 14:17-20 when this mysterious priest/king of Salem brings bread and wine out to Abram following the battle of the kings. Upon serving Abram, Melchizedek blesses Abram and blesses God, and then Abram responds by giving a tithe to Melchizedek. We just read those verses, and we won’t spend too much time here, but I need to do some setup work in Genesis 14 before we get into the NT argument.

First of all, note that we know nothing about Melchizedek...not a single thing. We have no genealogy. We don’t know where he is from originally. We don’t know his parents, and we never hear of him again in the biblical narrative. For those reasons, Melchizedek is a mysterious character in the scriptures, and people have been predictably constructing theories about this enigmatic priest/king of Salem ever since. Some people believe he was an angel; some believe that this was a cameo appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ who served Abram communion with the bread and the wine; and others think of him as a “type” of priest that points to Christ. I won’t spend a lot of time unpacking all the various interpretations because when we turn to the book of Hebrews, we find a thoughtful and biblical interpretation of this encounter, and I think it best to remain under the authority of God’s Word rather than to wander outside of what the text actually says.

Secondly, we need some historical context when it comes to the Jewish mindset about “priests.” Note that the formal “priesthood” for Israel will not come about until the time of Moses, which is hundreds of years after Abram meets Melchizedek here in Genesis 14. Remember, there is no such thing as a “Jew” or an “Israelite” in the days of Abram. Abram is just getting to know the one true God. He is coming out of his own pagan background; and, up to this point, Abram did not have a priest. As we’ve noted several times already, Abram made his own altars and he made his own sacrifices to God.

All that being said, when Moses received the Torah from God in the tabernacle following the Exodus, and he read this story to the Israelites in the wilderness for the first time, the recently liberated Israelites believed that only the sons of Aaron (Moses’ brother) could be priests before God. In fact, the Aaronic lineage of priesthood continued all the way up through the days of King David and into the first century when Jesus walked the earth.

So, here is the tension: Abram, the father of Judaism, is being blessed by a Canaanite priest/king in Salem who is not a son of Aaron, nor is he even a son of Abram! Melchizedek is somehow knowledgeable about the one true God, possessor of heaven and earth, but he apparently has no

connection with the priestly line of Israel. These observations render Melchizedek's priesthood unique and authoritative, even over Abram and his descendants as we will see when we turn to Hebrews 7.

Finally, you should know that the literal translation of Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness," and his formal title 'King of Salem,' means "king of peace." So, Melchizedek is the King of Righteousness and Peace, and his throne is in Jerusalem, which will one day be the capital city of Judah!

Can you feel the tension that is in Genesis 14:17-20? Now, that tension and the mystery surrounding Melchizedek greatly increases a thousand years later when the Holy Spirit inspires King David to write Psalm 110. I touched on this psalm on Christmas Eve, but listen again to Psalm 110:1-4

The Lord says to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool."

²The Lord sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

³Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;

from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.

⁴The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind,

"You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek."

This Psalm perplexed the Jews in the days of David and for centuries to follow. Why? Because if David is the writer, as is usually the case, then David is quoting God who is speaking to David's "LORD," and ancient kings don't have "lords." So, who is God talking to? Everyone in the New Testament who quotes this verse, including Jesus, believed "the LORD" that God is addressing in Psalm 110:1 is Jesus, Himself. God says to the "Lord" of David, "Sit at my right hand..." The right hand of God is the ultimate position of power and righteousness...it is the throne of an eternal King. And then God says to David's Lord, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." So the anointed One of God, who is the heavenly LORD of David, is referred to as priestly/king...similar to and after the order of Melchizedek.

It is *this* reference to Melchizedek in Psalm 110 that will elevate the importance of Melchizedek and his priesthood for the writer of Hebrews. In fact, had David not been inspired to write these words, Melchizedek would have likely been long forgotten as a random, mysterious dude who showed up after the battle of the kings, and that's it. But because the greatest king of Israel's history was led along by the Spirit to capture this dialogue between God and "the LORD," we are now pressed to know what it means that the one who will be seated in kingship at the right

hand of God is also the one God has designated as a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

By the way, some scholars suggest that David didn't write Psalm 110 but insist instead that a scribe wrote the psalm as a way of celebrating David's kingship. So, in other words, the scribe would be saying, "The LORD said to (King David), 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" That sounds like a reasonable theory, and we could possibly read the psalm that way in the first three verses, but that theory breaks down when we get to vs. 4. David never served as a priest. As a faithful Israelite from the tribe of Judah, King David would have never dreamed of serving as a priest given that he was not from the line of Aaron, and we have no evidence that David donned the role of a priest.

Yet God declares in vs. 4, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." So, who is God inviting to sit at His right hand in Psalm 110, and why would God declare His Anointed One to be "a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek?" You are asking great questions, and that will lead us to...

II. The Argument

If you've ever read the New Testament book of Hebrews, you know the author builds a very strong case throughout the first 10 chapters that Jesus is our perfect, final, ultimate high priest—a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Now, I don't have time to thoroughly preach through the first 10 chapters of Hebrews...but man I wish I did! I'm ready to go if you'll sit here for the next three or four hours. Do I hear a motion to extend my sermon time? Hearing none, I will press on with a high-level overview, but I hope you will read through the book of Hebrews this week and then come back and listen to this sermon again. It will help you make sense of what we are about to cover.

I'm going to first walk through the opening segments of the argument in Hebrews 1-6, though we won't linger there. If you have your Bibles, turn to Hebrews 1, and underline these passages as we go.

First, in Hebrews 1, the author establishes that Jesus is, in fact, the LORD from Psalm 110 who sits at the right hand of the Father. We read in Hebrews 1:2ff: In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins (the role of a priest), [Jesus-God's Son] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

He goes on to compare Jesus, the Son of God, to the angels, and writes in vs. 13, "And to which of the angels has [God] ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'?" So, right from the get go, the author of Hebrews (possibly the Apostle Paul or one of his disciples) argues that Jesus is the LORD that God is speaking to in Psalm 110. Which means, of course, that "the LORD" being addressed in Psalm 110...the Son of God...is both a king and a priest after the order of Melchizedek, right?

OK, as we turn to Hebrews 2, I would draw your attention to vss. 17-18 where we find the first reference to Jesus as a ‘high priest’: Therefore [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because He himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

This is so powerful, and so important. Jesus took on flesh. He became one of us so that He might understand and sympathize with our weaknesses. The Word made flesh serves as our representative and our ambassador, but even more than that—Jesus will make intercession for sinful souls. Remember what it meant in the ancient world for a person to be called a “high priest.” The high priest represented the nation of Israel as he went into the Holy of Holies to repent and make a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. For the writer of Hebrews to refer to Jesus as a “high priest” means that Jesus accomplished what only the High Priest could accomplish, and that is always the work of intercession.

OK, on account of time, we are going to jump over Hebrews 3 (sadly) and look to Hebrews 4:14-16 where the author recasts Jesus as our High Priest: Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Do you hear the argument? Jesus became one of us to save all of us. Because of the incarnation of Christ, we have a God who understands our weaknesses, and we have a perfect intercessor, the ultimate high priest, who intercedes on our behalf. And because of his intercession, we have access to His “rest.” The whole concept of rest through our faith in Christ is the central theme of Hebrews 4, but we must keep moving.

When we get to Hebrews 5, we come to the passage we read at the beginning of the service where the connection between Jesus and Melchizedek is stated explicitly. In vss. 5-10 we read: So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
6 as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 10 being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

As you read the book of Hebrews, you will pick up on the fact that the author is addressing the early church during a season of intense persecution. He is writing to give the church hope, and to encourage them to endure, to keep the faith. We see his heart for the persecuted church toward the end of Hebrews 6 when he writes (vss. 18b-20): So that we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this hope as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain (veil), where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Our hope as the Church comes in knowing that Christ has gone before us as our priest, our intercessor, and our King, amen? But why is it significant that Christ is our high priest forever “after the order of Melchizedek”? Let us now look at the meat of the Argument in Hebrews 7.

The author begins the argument by appealing back to Genesis 14, and he’s going to make several arguments for connecting the priesthood of Jesus to the priesthood of Melchizedek. His first argument is that they are both “forever” in their priestliness, and they are both Kings of righteousness and peace. Beginning with vs. 1 we read: For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. ³ He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

Granted, we assume that Melchizedek was born and died like any other man, but the point here is that he is presented mysteriously in the narrative as one that God chose, set apart, and anointed to serve as a priest. He did not become a priest because of his family heritage. He was and is and will always be remembered as Melchizedek, the priest/king of God’s choosing. In the same way, Jesus is and was and will always be our priest/king because of God’s choosing, not because Jesus was born of the line of Aaron or somehow inherited that title through human succession.

OK, next, the author emphasizes that Melchizedek was greater than Abram, just as Jesus is greater than all. In vs. 7 he writes: “It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.” Melchizedek blessed Abram...not the other way around. Abram tithed to Melchizedek, long before the priests of Aaron’s line required tithes from the children of Abram. So, Melchizedek is greater than Abram, making any “priest after the order of Melchizedek” greater than the priests of Aaron’s lineage, and even greater than Moses himself (see Hebrews 3:3). Now, you think about that for a moment, and then remember with me the conversation that Jesus had with some skeptical Jews in John 8. If you recall, Jesus had offended the Jews when He said in vss. 56-58, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

Do you see how Jesus associates Himself as the priest after the order of Melchizedek? Before Abram, as one greater than Abram, was the priest/king of Salem, the one who blessed Abram...the one whom Abram tithed to...this one called Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a type that pointed to Jesus, who was before Abram and greater than Abram...this is exactly what Jesus just said of Himself. Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both king and priest...no one else could bear that title, and serving as both a king and priest was strictly forbidden in ancient Judaism. Such is why the Anointed One of God in Psalm 110 is so unique: He is to sit at the right hand of God, and He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Returning to Hebrews 7, the author then begins to argue that the priests from the line of Aaron were stewards of an imperfect covenant that could not accomplish our salvation, and thus a new

covenant was needed. In vss. 11-19 we read: Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than the one named after the order of Aaron? For the one of whom these things are spoken (the priest like Melchizedek) belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

I hope you are catching this point. The argument is simple: The priests of Aaron=the covenant of Law. The priest after the order of Melchizedek=something other than that covenant of law! Since Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, He is something “other than” the covenant of law—such is why He is rightfully considered “a priest after the order of Melchizedek.” God anointed Jesus to steward a new arrangement that is greater than the covenant of law. The writer of Hebrews literally says as much in vss. 18-19: For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

This better hope will be brought to us by a better priest, and a better kind of priest! The priests of Aaron were many because they were mortal men who died; but our High Priest, Jesus of Nazareth, holds His priesthood permanently...His priesthood is forever. Listen to the qualitative difference in the priests of Aaron as compared to Jesus in vss. 23-25: The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but [Christ] holds his priesthood permanently because He continues forever. Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Finally, the superiority of Christ as our ultimate High Priest (who is after the order of Melchizedek) comes in the nature of His offering. Look at vss. 26-27: ²⁶For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

The offering of Christ's own blood as the sacrificial intercession for sinners is the entire point of the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews will double down on this final point eloquently in Hebrews 9: But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this this creation) He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant...as it is, Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

And there you have it...the Argument for why Jesus of Nazareth is the promised priest of the order of Melchizedek, and a beautiful summary of the Gospel! Jesus put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Church: Jesus is greater. Jesus is perfect. Jesus is eternal. Jesus intercedes once and for all, and His sacrifice is sufficient to accomplish our salvation through the forgiveness of sin. And that leads to...

III. The Conclusion

My time is up, so let me sum up the conclusion by simply pointing to the cross. The cross is where Jesus, the Lamb of God, our great High Priest, entered into the Holy Place not fashioned by hands and made intercession for this sinful world. Because of His deep love for broken people, because He understood our sufferings and our temptations, because of His sympathy for our lost condition, Jesus willingly presented His perfect, unblemished life as an atoning sacrifice that would satisfy God's justice and reconcile us to God once and for all.

The cross is why we no longer make blood sacrifices to God in an attempt to atone for our sins. As the writer of Hebrews concludes in 10:14, 17: For by a single offering He has perfected for all times those who are being sanctified...where there is forgiveness, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Church, God is no longer waiting for your sacrifice to somehow make up for all the evil that you have done. That offering has already been made and accepted. Jesus of Nazareth, our great High Priest, offered Himself, and that offering has been received by God and rendered sufficient! In Christ, and in Christ alone, our sins are forgiven! This is why Jesus alone is the only way to the Father—there is no other sacrifice, there is no other savior, there is no other High Priest who makes intercession forever—there is only Jesus.

So don't lose hope. No matter what comes in the days ahead, cling to this truth with confidence: in Christ, we are forgiven, and because we are forgiven, we have been reconciled to God! That is a truth that can never be taken away from us.

Let us conclude our time together now by reading aloud the author's conclusion in Hebrews 10:19-25:

¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Let us close in prayer.