

JESUS AND MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:11-28

Well, a few weeks ago Giles introduced us to the idea of Jesus as our High Priest back in Hebrews chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5 and this also introduced us to the connection between Jesus and Melchizedek. In our reading today, the writer to the Hebrews explores the idea of Jesus as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek in more detail. So as we study this passage together, you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Now Jesus the Messiah is not only our great High Priest he's also our king. This was foretold by the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 6:13). The book of Revelation tells us that confirmation of this kingly role will be written on Christ's robe and thigh when he returns (Revelation 19:16). As Christians we have only one Messiah who is both priest and king. To fulfil the promises of scripture about his kingly role Jesus was born in the kingly line of David and not in the priestly line of Aaron. So, in his priestly role, Jesus couldn't be a Levitical priest in the line of Aaron because he was born in the line of David and David belongs to the kingly tribe of Judah not to the priestly tribe of Levi.

At first sight that seems to be a problem, but scripture speaks of another priestly line and designates the Davidic king as a priest of that other order. Here we have to go right back to Genesis chapter 14 and verse 18:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High,” (Genesis 14:18 NIV)

Now Salem here is Jerusalem, so when king David established his capital in Jerusalem he became a successor to Melchizedek's kingship and also a successor to his priestly role as a priest of God most high – Yahweh. Thus Jesus was both priest and king, fulfilling the divine prophecy of Psalm 110:1-4:

The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The LORD will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth. The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." (Psalm 110:1-4 NIV) As far as we know, the writer to the Hebrews was the first to see Jesus as this king in the line of David and as this high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The first ten verses of chapter 7 tell us about the greatness of Melchizedek – how Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, deferred to him as priest and tithed a tenth of his plunder to him, which is an acknowledgement by Abraham of the superiority of Melchizedek over him. These verses also tell us that Melchizedek means 'king of righteousness' and that king of Salem means 'king of peace' (verse 3) – so Christ is a king of both righteousness and peace.

The writer to the Hebrews then turns to the imperfections of the Aaronic, Levitical, priesthood – look at verse 11:

“If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?” (verse 11)

Clearly we can't argue that the Aaronic Levitical priesthood superseded the priesthood of Melchizedek, because the oracle of Psalm 110 that we've already looked at came after the Aaronic priesthood was established and this oracle still speaks of a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

What Psalm 110 implies is that the Aaronic priesthood did not completely fulfil or exhaust the priestly role. If God had intended the Aaronic priesthood to bring in the age of perfection, the time when men and women would enjoy unimpeded access to him, why should he have conferred on the Messiah a priestly dignity of his own – different from Aaron's and by implication superior to Aaron's? In

fact the Aaronic priesthood was neither designed nor competent to inaugurate the age of fulfilment; that age must be marked by the rise of another priest, whose priesthood was of a different order and character from Aaron's. This verse makes it clear that the letter to the Hebrews was intended for Jewish recipients who needed to understand that there was something beyond the Levitical priesthood, something better than the Levitical priesthood. They're being told that God had foretold long ago that the Levitical priesthood would be superseded.

And it's not only the Levitical priesthood that's being superseded – look at verse 12:

“For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.” (verse 12)

A change of priesthood necessitates a change in the Law, so the installation of Jesus as a new high priest in the order of Melchizedek means that the Law of Moses is also superseded. The Law of Moses given under the Sinai covenant is superseded by the New Covenant in Christ's blood. Paul taught the same thing, he says: the law was a temporary provision, "our custodian until Christ came" (Galatians 3:24).

The Law of Moses had restricted the priesthood to the tribe of Levi – look at verses 13-14:

“He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no-one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.” (verses 13-14)

The priesthood of our Lord is completely different. His priesthood is different not only because he's not a Levite, but also because it is not exercised on this earth: it belongs to the eternal order, not to the material world – as we see from verses 15-17:

“And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek."” (verses 15-17)

The declaration of verse 17 is, of course, a quotation from Psalm 110 that we referred to earlier. This would have been completely impossible for a Levitical priest who could not be "a priest for ever", because each priest died in due course. Only Christ, the God man, now raised immortal could be a priest for ever.

Verses 18 and 19 speak again of the abrogation of Mosaic Law: "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." (verses 18-19)

It was inevitable that the Mosaic Law would be abrogated sooner or later because it did not adequately secure either the forgiveness of sins or direct access to the Father. It covered over sin but did not remove it. The New Covenant in Christ secures both the complete forgiveness of sin and direct access to God in a way that would have been completely impossible under the old Mosaic covenant.

Last week we saw that God's oath to Abraham was eternal (Hebrews 6:13), now we see that this is equally true of His promise of an eternal priesthood – look at verses 20-21:

"And it was not without an oath! 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 for ever.'"" (verses 20-21)

again referring back to Psalm 110. The establishment of the Aaronic priesthood was by divine command, but there is no record of a divine oath there. Again this suggests that the Melchizedek priesthood is superior to the old Aaronic priesthood.

Since Jesus is confirmed as the high priest in the order of Melchizedek it is his superiority which is confirmed. Look at verse 22:

"Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." (verse 22)

Here we are introduced to a new aspect of the priesthood of Jesus that will be developed in the following chapters of Hebrews – Jesus's role as guarantor and mediator of a new and better covenant which is as

superior to the old Mosaic covenant as Jesus's priesthood is superior to that of Aaron. This is the first time the word 'covenant' is used in Hebrews, but it is about to become central and indeed the book of Hebrews has been called "The Epistle of the Covenant".

Verses 23-25 tell us that Jesus's priesthood is superior because of its permanence:

“Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives for ever, 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.” (verses 23-25)

There were indeed many high priests of the old Levitical line as verse 23 says. Jewish historian Josephus tells us that there were 83 high priests appointed between Aaron and the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD. But Jesus lives forever so his priesthood will never end as it says in verse 24. Christ is eternally engaged to bless and protect those who approach God through him. The way to God is always open through him. He is the unique mediator between God and man because he is uniquely both God and man – the God-man. In verse 25 Jesus's high priestly function is summed up in terms of intercession – he always lives to intercede for us. Paul says much the same in his letter to the Romans:

“Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (Romans 8:34 NIV)

But, it's important that we understand the nature of Christ's intercession correctly. As H W Sweete says in his book *The Ascended Christ*:

Christ is not to be thought of as "*standing* ever before the Father with outstretched arms, like the figures in the mosaics of the catacombs, and with strong crying and tears pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God; but as a *throned* Priest-King, asking what he will from a Father who always hears and grants his request. Our Lord's life in heaven is his prayer."

The appearance in God's presence of Christ crucified *is* Christ's perpetual intercession for us.

In verses 26-28 we are told that the priesthood of Jesus is superior because of his character:

“Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.” (verses 26-28)

The new priesthood is better because the new high priest is Jesus. Jesus, who endured severe temptations on earth; Jesus, who poured out his heart in earnest prayer to God; Jesus, who learned by suffering how hard the way of obedience could be; Jesus, who interceded for his disciples that their faith might not fail when the hour of testing came; Jesus, who offered up his life to God as a sin offering on our behalf – this same Jesus is the unchanging high priest and helper of all who come to God through him. The high priesthood of Jesus has been deliberately distanced from the Levitical priesthood and shown to be superior to it as a warning to the Hebrew Christians to whom the letter was written not to turn back to Judaism. Equally, it's a warning to us not to turn away from Jesus our high priest and saviour either.

Christians have as their high priest one who does not remain in the realm of ideas but is the incarnate Word, one who preserved his purity while treading the common ways of this world and sharing our human lot. Although he came to earth “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” lived among sinners, received sinners, ate with sinners, was known as the friend of sinners, yet he is set apart from sinners, “in a different class from sinful men”; and is now exalted above all the heavens to share the throne of God.

Jesus is not weak. He does not need to offer any sacrifices for his own sins. No, rather he sacrificed himself on the cross so that by his blood, by his perfect sacrifice offered once for all once and for all, the sins of the whole world for all time past present and future could be forgiven and we can be made righteous in God's sight and reconciled to him. We saw earlier that Jesus was the 'king of righteousness' and he bestows that righteousness upon us through his sacrifice of himself as Paul says in his letter to the Romans (Romans 3:21-22). We also saw that Christ was 'king of peace' and the forgiveness and righteousness he brings us gives us peace with God, so righteousness and peace kiss as Psalm 85 tells us (Psalm 85:10).

Jesus is a high priest who is sufficient for all our needs (verse 26) all we need to do is to turn to him. All we need to do to be forgiven our sins is to appropriate Christ's sacrifice to ourselves by turning to him in faith and acknowledging him as our Lord and Master. Then we will be washed clean by Christ's blood, all our sins will be forgiven and we'll be made righteous in God's sight and reconciled to Him through Christ our great high priest. But you do need to turn to Christ in faith for his forgiveness to work in your life and if you've never done that I urge you, no I implore you, to do that right now today. Your salvation is far too important to put off for another minute.