

Hebrews 7

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As the Bible itself says in 1 Peter 1, the word of God abides forever. It is God's message to all people from all places and all times, telling them that as different as they are, all of them can come to the same Savior and find eternal life in Him. This message is just as relevant to the men and women who live in early 21st-century Joliet as it was to the devout Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God's will has not changed.

However, even though the message of the word is equally valid to everyone, that doesn't mean that we can detach it from its context and think that somehow we're going to get it right. As universal as the gospel was, it was still originally preached to specific groups of people in a specific setting, and if we want to capture every nuance of meaning, we must listen to the word not just with our own ears, but with the ears of that original audience. Otherwise, we'll miss things.

At times, failure to do this will cost us more than just nuance. Just like I work to preach sermons that address the problems and challenges of Christians today, the books of the New Testament were meant to address the needs of Christians from the first century. Some of those specific challenges continue to this very day, but others have fallen by the wayside of history. If we fail to return to that original perspective, some portions of Scripture will leave us baffled.

In this category of bafflement, we would definitely have to put Hebrews 7. I daresay that most people in the city of Joliet have never heard of Melchizedek, and when they think of priests, the image that comes to mind is probably some dude in black with his collar on backwards. However, when we understand these concepts in a first-century way, they shed a great deal of light on God's plan of salvation. Let's see how this works as we consider Hebrews 7.

Melchizedek.

The chapter begins, in fact, with a description of this unknown figure of Melchizedek. The Hebrews writer summarizes everything we know about him in Hebrews 7:1-3. All of this information is taken from a brief encounter described in the middle of the story of Abraham, in Genesis 14. There's really no detail there that's not repeated in this chapter: Abraham is returning victorious from a battle, he meets Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is described as a priest of God. Melchizedek blesses him, and in return, Abraham gives Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils of victory. Other than that three-verse snippet, Melchizedek doesn't appear anywhere else in the book of Genesis. We don't know who his parents were, we don't know when he was born, we don't know how long he lived, and we don't know when he died.

To this very minor character, though, the Hebrews writer assigns a great deal of significance. We understand, of course, that Melchizedek was mortal, that he was born sometime and that he died sometime. The Hebrews writer's point, though, is that for all we know about him, he continued on as priest perpetually. In that way, then, this shadowy, obscure figure becomes a type of Christ, who literally does serve as priest forever. Also like Christ, Melchizedek was both king and priest. His name declared him the king of righteousness, and his city declared him the king of peace. However, that's not all that the short three-verse section tells us about Melchizedek. The Hebrews writer continues his explanation in Hebrews 7:4-10. When Melchizedek met Abraham, there was an exchange. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek. This tithe-paying prefigured a relationship that would arise under the law of Moses. Under that Old Law, the priestly tribe was the tribe of Levi. The members of the other eleven tribes, even though they were descended from Abraham, were commanded to pay tithes to Levi to support the Levites in their holy work. The significance and importance of the Levites was shown by the fact that they received these tithes.

The ancestor of all of these Levitical priests, though, was Levi himself, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, which made Levi the great-grandson of Abraham. According to Jewish custom, ancestors were very important. In fact, in Matthew 22, Jesus proves that the Messiah is going to be divine by pointing to the fact that David calls the Messiah, who would be one of his descendants, "Lord." No ancestor would ever honor a normal, mortal descendant in that way. So, then, because Levi was descended from Abraham, Abraham was more important than Levi. If Abraham, who was superior to his great-grandson, showed himself to be inferior to Melchizedek by paying tithes to him, then it logically follows that Melchizedek was way, way superior to Levi, and the priesthood of Melchizedek was way, way superior to the priesthood of Levi. All of the priests of Levi were mortal, but for all we know, Melchizedek was immortal.

It's just as significant, though, that before the tithe was paid over, Melchizedek blessed Abraham. This wasn't the same kind of blessing as when we sing, "Blessed be the Lord". This was a benediction, as when we ask for a blessing from God in our prayers. As the Hebrews writer observes, the more important and powerful blesses the less important and powerful, not the reverse. We can't make God's life better, but He can sure make our lives better! Abraham is an important guy. After all, by this point in time, God had already promised that Jesus would be born through his lineage. However, Abraham isn't the one who blesses Melchizedek. Instead, Melchizedek blesses Abraham. As important as Abraham was, in his dual role as king and priest, Melchizedek, the type of Christ, was more important.

Christ.

Now that he has emphasized how significant Melchizedek was, and by extension how important his priesthood was, the Hebrews writer turns his attention to the One who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek—Jesus Himself. The very fact that Jesus became a priest has some important implications, as the writer explains in Hebrews 7:11-14. The train of logic here begins with an observation: that the Law of Moses says nothing about priests coming from the tribe of Judah. Because the Law said nothing, men from the tribe of Judah were not allowed to officiate at the altar.

Before we go any further, we need to make a brief digression here. This statement does more than help illuminate the priesthood of Christ. It establishes a general principle of Scriptural interpretation. The Law of Moses didn't have to specifically forbid priests from the tribe of Judah in order to exclude them from the priesthood. Instead, it was enough for the Law to remain silent. God specifically mentioned the men He did want to serve as priests—the descendants of Aaron—and the fact that He only mentioned those men excluded everyone else from serving.

In the New Testament, God often speaks in the same way with the same intent. For example, nowhere in Scripture does God ever forbid us to use musical instruments in worship. To put that point in Hebrews language, the law of Christ says nothing about the instrument. Instead, just like the law of Moses specifically commanded that priests be appointed from the line of Aaron, the law of Christ specifically commands us to sing. Both positive commands have an exclusionary effect. No one from Judah could serve as priest, and we cannot use the instrument in worship.

Returning to the subject of the priesthood, though, if Christ came from Judah, and descendants of Judah couldn't serve as priests, then in order for Christ to serve as a priest, which Psalm 110 says He was meant to do, there had to be a change of law. If the Law of Moses had continued in effect, and Christ served as priest under that law, he would have been breaking it. The very fact that Christ does serve as priest, then, shows that the Law of Moses cannot be in effect. The Hebrews writer wants us to ask why God would do that. Why would God take a law that His people had been following for 1500 years and do away with it? The implication is plain. The Law was imperfect and needed replacement.

The writer expands on this theme in Hebrews 7:15-19. The inferiority of the Law was further emphasized by the inferiority of its priesthood. What made the Levitical priesthood priestly was the fact that they were descended from Aaron. They were born into it. What made Christ priestly, though, was that as evidenced by His resurrection from the dead, He had an indestructible life. When Psalm 110 said He was a priest forever, it meant *forever*. One might say that Christ was re-born into His priesthood. The greater priesthood, then, superseded the lesser, and as the Levitical priesthood went, so went the entire Old Law. The priesthood of Christ set aside the Law of Moses, which, weak and useless as it was, was no great loss, and through His resurrection, it also gives us hope of our resurrection.

The Hebrews writer describes the basis of this hope in Hebrews 7:20-22. Back in Hebrews 6, the Hebrews writer made a big deal about how if God both promised something and swore to it, that thing was a double lead-pipe cinch. It was certain. This is the reason why the writer emphasized that point. The thing that God has both promised and sworn to is that Christ is our high priest forever. The Levitical priesthood didn't have any divine oaths associated with it, but Christ's priesthood does. Our covenant with God is guaranteed by His oath to Christ. The thought that God might change His mind shouldn't even cross our minds. Our salvation is secure beyond the end of time.

This has a number of important implications, which the Hebrews writer lays out in Hebrews 7:23-25. He begins this section of his argument by pointing out another way in which Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood, even though this one wasn't their fault. Simply because they were human beings, they died and had to leave their priestly office to another. Christ, on the other hand, needs no replacement because He is immortal. An earthly priest might not be able to finish the job, simply because he may well die before its end, but Christ won't have that problem. Whenever we need Him to intercede with God for us, He's always going to be there, and He is able to save us to the uttermost.

We find the climax of this description of Christ as our high priest in Hebrews 7:26-28. Christ is holy. He is dedicated only to God's purposes. He is innocent. An evil thought has never entered His mind. He is unstained, free from the guilt of even one sin. He is separated from sinners, preserved in perfect purity. Finally, He is exalted above the heavens. It's impossible for us to even conceive of a more spectacularly impressive high priest than Christ is.

The high priests of the Law of Moses didn't have the same measure of ability or holiness as Christ did. They had to offer sacrifices daily, both for the sin that they continued to commit and for the sin that the people continued to commit. In other words, the Mosaic sacrifices were just spiritual Band-aids. They didn't even really stop the bleeding. Christ, on the other hand, because of His sinlessness and because He offered a better sacrifice, only had to make that sacrifice once for all. That sacrifice heals our spiritual wounds so completely that no one can tell we were injured.

Finally, the Hebrews writer returns one last time to his argument from Psalm 110. The high priests under the Law of Moses were merely appointed by one of the many regulations of that law. In a sense, they were little more than spiritual bureaucrats, and even though the righteous ones served as best they could, they could never be more than imperfect. Christ, on the other hand, was appointed by God's unshakable oath and promise, and He is a perfect high priest in every way that a high priest could be perfect. He supersedes the priests of the Law and intercedes for us forever.