

Jesus, Our High Priest

M. W. Bassford, 10-19-14

Ever have one of those moments in which you realize that even though you thought you were one way, you're actually completely the other? This sermon represents the results of one such epiphany that I had. For nearly 20 years now, I've been interested in the topic of Jesus as our High Priest. It has always seemed to me that of all the offices that Christ holds, prophet, priest, and king, that priest gets the least play.

For some time, I've been doing what I can to address this, particularly in the hymns I write. Just last week, I began work on another such hymn, so when the time came for me to decide on a sermon topic, the priesthood of Jesus was already in the forefront of my mind. However, I said to myself, "You can't preach a sermon on that; you preach on the intercessory work of Christ all the time!" Just to confirm that, I went back and checked, but so far as I can tell, I actually haven't addressed the subject from the pulpit in years. Obviously, the time has come to change that. Let's look this evening at Jesus, our High Priest.

Jesus and Melchizedek

The first part of our discussion of Jesus as our high priest contains an extended comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek. This begins with an introduction of **MELCHIZEDEK** himself. Read with me from Hebrews 7:1-3. In the beginning part of this latter context, the Hebrews writer introduces Melchizedek, who is such an obscure character in the Old Testament that he probably needs to be introduced. In terms of Old Testament history, he appears only in a few verses in Genesis 14, and the Hebrews writer summarizes the contents of those few verses so thoroughly that there's really little point for us to look at them. Abraham has just rescued his nephew Lot by defeating the four kings who had taken him into captivity, and on the way back home he encounters Melchizedek the king of Salem, whose name means "king of righteousness". Melchizedek is also a priest of God, so Abraham offers him a tithe, and Melchizedek blesses him in return.

Other than this, we don't know anything about Melchizedek. We don't know who his parents were, we don't know his ancestry, we don't know when he was born, and we don't know when he died. Of course, Melchizedek did have and do all of those things, just as any man does. However, they aren't recorded for us.

The Hebrews writer, though, takes that absence of biographical detail and uses it figuratively to make a point. Parentage and genealogy were critically important to the Aaronic priesthood. In Nehemiah 7, in fact, we see men excluded from the priesthood, even though they thought they were descended from Aaron, because they didn't have the records anymore to prove that they were. Likewise, the Levitical priests were limited in service by their births and deaths. As far as we know, not so for Melchizedek.

The Hebrews writer then draws upon one final detail to compare **MELCHIZEDEK AND ABRAHAM**. We find his argument on this subject in Hebrews 7:4-10. This is focused on that one little exchange back in Genesis 14: Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.

The writer then makes the point that both halves of that exchange show the superiority of Melchizedek. In the first place, he points out, it is always the greater who blesses the lesser, not the other way around. This is true, at least in the sense that Genesis 14 is using the word. After all, we do sing "Blessed Be the Lord Forever", and Jesus is certainly superior to us, but that is blessing in the sense of praise, of acknowledging the blessedness that Jesus already has. Not so with Abraham and Melchizedek. There, Melchizedek is conferring a spiritual benefit on Abraham, as God blesses us. With that kind of blessing, it is indeed the lesser who is blessed by the greater, so Melchizedek must be greater than Abraham.

Likewise, Melchizedek's importance is shown by the tithes that Abraham pays him. The rest of the nation of Israel honored the Levites by paying tithes to them. The Levites were, of course, all descended from Levi himself, who was in turn the great-grandson of Abraham. That made Abraham superior to Levi. So, then, if Abraham himself paid tithes to Melchizedek, Melchizedek is at the top of the totem pole. Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, who is superior to Levi, who is superior to all the priests and Levites ever to exist. In other words, Melchizedek ain't exactly chopped liver. He is more important than Abraham, one of the most major figures of the Old Testament, and than the entire Levitical priesthood.

Next, the Hebrews writer explores the connection between **A NEW LAW AND A NEW PRIESTHOOD**. Read with me from Hebrews 7:11-14. Remember, back in Hebrews 5, the Hebrews writer has already demonstrated on the basis of Psalm 110 that Jesus is indeed a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. We've already got Melchizedek Part 2 in the person of Jesus.

That raises the question, though, that the Hebrews writer next asks. Why? Why, if the Levitical priesthood is doing the job, do we need Jesus to show up as a representative of a completely different priestly order? As the writer points out, that entails all sorts of difficulties. Even though Jesus is obviously qualified to be a priest from the order of Melchizedek, he would not be qualified to serve as a priest under the Law of Moses. Jesus, after all, was a member of the tribe of Judah, like David, and members of the tribe of Judah never served as priests because Moses never commanded that men from that tribe should be priests. The Law of Moses thus barred Jesus from serving as priest, so for Jesus to serve, the whole Law had to go. Either Jesus is not a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, or the Law of Moses is no longer in effect.

There's one application that we need to make here before we move on. It concerns the style of argumentation that the Hebrews writer uses here. Let's pay very careful attention to his wording. He doesn't say that the Law of Moses explicitly forbade men from the tribe of Judah to be priests. He says that the Law said nothing about priests from the tribe of Judah, so men from that tribe could not serve. Members of Judah were barred from the priesthood by the silence of the Scripture.

Today, friends, we must acknowledge that the silence of the Scripture speaks with equal force. When we consider some activity in worship or some work that the church might do we must ask not if the Bible explicitly forbids it, but whether the Bible commands or allows it. As with priests from the tribe of Judah, God's silence does not allow us to act. It prohibits us from acting. If we cannot find book, chapter, and verse for some proposed form of worship or work of the church, we cannot lawfully do it.

Finally in this section, the Hebrews writer explains how we have **A BETTER HOPE** through Jesus. Look at Hebrews 7:15-19. Because Jesus actually is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, that must mean that the Law of Moses has been abolished. God wouldn't have blown up the Law for no reason, so that implies that the Law itself wasn't doing its job. It couldn't perfect God's people, so God annulled it and replaced it with a system that could: a system based on Jesus as priest, through whom we can draw near.

The idea that the Law of Moses has been abolished, then, is central to the message of the gospel. Jesus could not carry out His work of interceding for us if the Law were still in effect. If the Law is gone, then, we have to treat it as gone, from the Ten Commandments on down. Many churches today still lean on the Law to authorize various practices, but that's simply not something that the logic of the Scripture permits. Because Christ has come, we can't point to instrumental music in the Old Testament as justification for our use of the instrument today. We can't point to tithing in the Old Testament as justification for the practice of tithing in our churches today. Instead, those Old-Testament practices have been superseded by the use of congregational singing in worship and the commandment to give as we have been prospered.

Now, there are commandments in the Law of Moses that are repeated in the law of Christ. Moses told us not to murder, but so too did Jesus. Those are commandments that bind us, just as we are bound by all the other words of our Lord. The authority there, though, is not Moses, but Christ.

The Priesthood of Jesus

Now that we've journeyed through all of these comparisons, the Hebrews writer deems us ready to consider the priesthood of Jesus itself. He begins by pointing out that Jesus was **APPOINTED BY AN OATH**. This idea appears in Hebrews 7:20-22. The comparison is between two different possible sources of priestly legitimacy. The Levitical priests, on the one hand, drew their legitimacy from their ancestry. Because they had the right father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, stretching all the way back to Aaron himself, they were permitted to serve as priests. God never spoke to Abiathar or Eliashib or Jehoiada or any of the other high priests in the Old Testament to say to them, "I'm appointing you as priest." Because they had the right bloodlines, their priesthood was automatic.

On the other hand, Jesus has to draw His legitimacy from somewhere else. As we've seen, the Lord didn't have the right bloodlines to be a priest under the Law of Moses. A lot of Jews 2000 years ago would probably want to argue at this point that Jesus therefore couldn't serve as priest at all, and it is to rebut that argument that the Hebrews writer inserted that biographical sketch of Melchizedek at the beginning of the

chapter. Melchizedek was a priest of the Most High God, but we don't know the details of his genealogy, and he lived hundreds of years before Aaron anyway. He would never have qualified as a priest under the Law, but he was a priest regardless—presumably because God said he was one. This establishes a precedent. If Melchizedek can be a priest without genealogical justification, then Jesus can be a priest of the same order.

The writer then argues that the origin of Jesus' priesthood is a strength, not a weakness. After all, nobody ever made Abiathar or Eliashib or Jehoiada priests with an oath. They just kind of became priests. Jesus, on the other hand, was appointed a priest by the oath of God the Father Himself. This is unusual. After all, when God says something is true, you can bank on it. When God not only affirms something but swears to it, you'd better sit up and take notice. Heaven and earth will pass away before God's oath can fail, so the priesthood of Jesus, to which God has sworn, is as certain as it can possibly be.

In addition, the priesthood that Jesus possesses is **UNCHANGABLE**. The Hebrews writer explains in Hebrews 7:23-25. God didn't merely swear that Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He swore that Jesus would be a priest *forever*. The other priests were not eternal. They were born, they served, and they died. Jesus, however, is revealed here as the antitype of Melchizedek. The Bible never says that Melchizedek dies, so there's a sense in which he continues on, but Jesus is certain to abide as priest forever because God has sworn to it. This is no figure of speech. It's literal fact.

This, friends, is extraordinarily important, and it leads us to the so-what behind everything that the Hebrews writer has said so far. I know some of you are abstract thinkers and have really enjoyed working your way through the writer's logic, but some of you are more concrete in your thinking, and you've been wondering what the point of all of this is. Well, here's the point. Want to know how you can be sure that when you ask God to forgive you, that you are actually forgiven? Want to know how you can be sure that when you pray, the prayer doesn't just hit the ceiling and bounce? This is how.

Because Jesus lives forever and serves as our High Priest forever, He will continually make intercession for His people. 2000 years ago, He interceded for first-century Christians. Today, He intercedes for us. 2000 years from now, if the universe exists and there are still Christians in it, He will intercede for them. This is the foundation of our faith, and it is secured with nothing less than the oath of God.

The Hebrews writer concludes his discussion by explaining what makes Jesus **A FITTING PRIEST**. Let's look at Hebrews 7:26-28. Let's read this text as a bookend to the context we read at the end of Hebrews 4. There, we saw that we can trust in Jesus because He sympathizes with us. He experienced our temptations and, even though He never sinned, He understands why we do. He's on our side.

However, even though Jesus is *on* our side, He is *by* God's side. He is everything that we are not, and His perfection allows Him to approach God's perfect holiness in a way that we never could on our own. Jesus has to be holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners in order to represent those same sinners.

However, Jesus intercedes for us not on the basis of continual sacrifices like the Levitical priests offered daily, year in and year out. Instead, His appeals are based on the one perfect sacrifice that He made for all time—the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. Those high priests were imperfect, but Jesus is perfect.