

Spoken with Blood: The Greatness Of His Priesthood - Part 2

November 20, 2016

Hebrews 7:1-28

The Priestly Order of Melchizedek

1 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.

4 See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! **5** And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. **6** But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. **7** It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. **8** In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. **9** One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, **10** for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Jesus Compared to Melchizedek

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? **12** For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. **13** For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. **14** For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

15 This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, **16** who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. **17** For it is witnessed of him,

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

18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness **19** (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

20 And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, **21** but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him:

"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever.'"

22 This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, **24** but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. **25** 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.

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. **27** He 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. **28** For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

7:1–28 The eternal high priesthood of Christ

Several indications have already been given that Jesus is ‘high priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek’ (cf. 5:6, 10; 6:20). That theme is now fully developed as the writer comes to the heart of his message and begins to feed his readers the ‘solid food’ that promotes spiritual maturity (cf. 5:11–14). The first part of this chapter deals with the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek in Gn. 14, focusing on the significance of Melchizedek’s priesthood in that context (1–10). The second part of the chapter takes up the specific promise of Ps. 110:4, about the Messiah being a priest like Melchizedek, and applies it to the Lord Jesus (11–28). *Perfection* was not possible under *the Levitical priesthood*, but Jesus’ high-priestly ministry replaces the whole OT system of approaching God and ‘perfects’ believers in a relationship with him (11–19). The significance of the *oath* confirming the Messiah’s priesthood is explored (20–22) and then the implications of the promise that he will be priest for ever are outlined (23–25). The chapter concludes by showing how *such a high priest*, in contrast with the high priests of the old covenant, *meets our need* as sinners (26–28). Ch. 7 is the third stage in the development of the idea that Jesus is the high priest of the new covenant (cf. 2:17–18; 4:14–5:10).

1–3 Ps. 110:4 is the key text in this chapter. To indicate what the psalm meant by *a priest for*

ever in the order of Melchizedek, Hebrews goes back to Gn. 14:18–20, highlighting only certain features of the Genesis narrative. Melchizedek’s name means *king of righteousness* and the fact that he was *king of Salem* (derived from Heb. *šālôm*, ‘peace’) means that he was *king of peace*. In name, at least, he anticipated the Messiah’s reign of righteousness and peace (e.g. Is. 9:6–7; Heb. 1:8–9). Most importantly, he is identified as *priest of God Most High*, who *blessed* Abraham and received a tithe (*a tenth of everything*) from Abraham, the great forefather or patriarch of Israel. Moreover, in the record of Scripture, Melchizedek is *without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life*. He appears from nowhere and disappears without trace. He has no predecessors and no successors. Since the legitimacy of a man’s priesthood in the ancient world depended on such things, the silence of Scripture at this point is unusual. Melchizedek is *like the Son of God* in the sense that he foreshadows his unique and never-ending priesthood. In technical terms, he is a ‘type’ or pattern of Christ. Ps. 110 envisaged the appearance of another king of Jerusalem (‘city of Salem’), exercising a priesthood like Melchizedek’s, not apparently based on physical descent from any known priesthood, but nevertheless divinely appointed. Hebrews proclaims Jesus Christ as the promised priest-king, who reigns *for ever* to bless his people (cf. 5:4–6; 7:13–17).

4–10 Taking up the matter of the tithe paid by Abraham to Melchizedek, Hebrews notes that the law of Moses required *the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people* (cf. Nu. 18:21–32). However, Melchizedek, who *did not trace his descent from Levi*, collected a tithe *from Abraham*, the forefather of Levi! Indeed, so great is Melchizedek that he *blessed* Abraham, the one to whom God had given *the promises* concerning his saving purposes (cf. Heb. 6:13–14). Since *the lesser person is blessed by the greater* (7), this puts Melchizedek in a very significant position. The tithes paid to the Levitical priesthood were collected *by men who die*, but Abraham paid a tithe to one who *is declared to be living* (8). That is, in the biblical record, Melchizedek is represented as one who had no *end of life* (3), and this suggests that his priesthood was superior. It could even be said that *Levi*, and therefore the Levitical priests, paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. This prepares us for the argument in vs 11–19 that the priesthood of Jesus is superior to and supersedes the Levitical priesthood and its ministry.

11–12 When Ps. 110:4 spoke about the need for *another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron*, the inference was that there was something lacking in the existing priesthood. In fact, the priesthood descended from Aaron and exercised by some of the Levites was unable to provide *perfection*. For the first time, the language of perfection (applied to Christ in 2:10; 5:9; 7:28) is applied to the situation of believers. The law of Moses *made nothing perfect*, but in Jesus Christ *a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God* (19). This last reference suggests that the perfecting of believers involves ‘qualifying’ them to draw near to God or enabling them to enjoy the certainty of a new covenant relationship with God. More will be said about this important concept later. In simple terms, Christ’s sacrifice deals with the problem of sin in a way that the Levitical priesthood and the law of Moses could not. Indeed, the law and the priesthood were so connected that *a change of the priesthood* meant that there had to be *a change of the law* as well (12). Here it should be noted that the writer of

Hebrews views the law essentially as a set of sacrificial and priestly regulations for the maintenance of Israel's relationship with God. The limitations of the system as a whole are outlined in chs. 9–10.

13–17 Only certain people were authorized to serve at the altar, according to the Mosaic law (e.g. Lv. 8–9; Nu. 1:47–54). Jesus *our Lord* belonged to the tribe of *Judah*, and in connection with that tribe *Moses said nothing about priests*. So, if Jesus is a priest, he must belong to another order. In dealing with this objection, the writer notes again the prediction of Ps. 110:4 that the Messianic priesthood would be *in the order of Melchizedek*. A descendant of Levi became a priest *on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry*. Jesus became *a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek*, on the basis of *the power of an indestructible life*. This last expression is best understood as a reference to Jesus' resurrection and his heavenly exaltation. He clearly functioned as high priest of the new covenant on earth, when he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. But he had to be brought to life again to function as *a priest for ever*, serving in the heavenly sanctuary, at the right hand of God (*cf.* 8:1–2).

18–19 *The former regulation* is the law establishing the OT priesthood on the basis of proper ancestry and physical purity. It *was weak and useless* because death prevented those priests from *continuing in office* (23) and their own weakness made it continually necessary for them to sacrifice for their *own sins* as well as for the sins of the people (27). Indeed, *the law made nothing perfect* (see note on 7:11–12), because it was only 'a shadow of the good things to come' (10:1). The regulation establishing the OT priesthood was *set aside* when God inaugurated a new priesthood and provided a sacrifice to end all sacrifices (*cf.* 10:5–10). *A better hope is introduced* with the high-priestly ministry of Jesus, *by which we draw near to God*. The certainty of a once-for-all cleansing from sin and of the possibility of continuing in an eternal relationship with God is at the heart of this *better hope*.

20–22 The promise establishing the priest-hood of the Messiah was confirmed with an oath: *the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind* (Ps. 110:4). An oath attached to a promise makes 'the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear' (6:17). So the eternity of Jesus' priesthood is established. *Because of this oath* it can also be affirmed that *Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant*. When the writer takes up the theme of this *better covenant* in later passages, he describes Jesus as the 'mediator' of a new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). This means that he inaugurates the covenant blessings predicted in Je. 31:31–34 (quoted in 8:8–12). The word *guarantee* (22) suggests even more: Jesus' priestly ministry continues to vouch for the fact that those blessings are readily available. The *better covenant* is the basis for the Christian's *better hope*.

23–25 The uniqueness and eternity of Christ's priesthood has really been the heart of the argument in this complicated chapter. There were many priests under the old covenant, because *death prevented them from continuing in office*. However, since the resurrected and ascended Jesus *lives for ever*, he has *a permanent priesthood*. He remains the same (*cf.* 1:8–12; 13:8) and his priestly office and work are absolute and unchangeable. The word *therefore* at the beginning

of v 25 introduces the logical consequence to all this. Here is the practical application of the writer's teaching about Jesus as priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus is *able to save completely those who come to God through him*. The idea of 'approaching', 'drawing near', or 'coming' to God is prominent in Hebrews (*cf.* 4:16; 7:19; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). Fundamentally, it expresses the idea of a relationship with God. The OT priesthood and sacrificial system only imperfectly provided for such a relationship, but Jesus is able to *save completely* those who relate to God through him. The language of salvation here implies deliverance from the alternative, which is the judgment of God (*cf.* 2:1–4; 9:27–28; 10:26–31). In fact, Christians can look to Jesus for help at every stage in their earthly pilgrimage, *because he always lives to intercede for them* (*cf.* Rom. 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1–2). The image of the heavenly intercessor is used to emphasize Christ's willingness and ability to go on applying to us the benefits of his once-for-all sacrifice (*cf.* 2:18; 4:14–16; 10:19–22). However, the image should not be pushed too far. Jesus sits at the right hand of God, claiming the fulfilment of the covenant promises for his children, not begging for their acceptance before the Father's throne!

26–28 Jesus meets our need as high priest firstly because he is *holy, blameless, pure*. These three adjectives recall the teaching about his sinlessness (4:15) and explain why his sacrifice was so perfect, needing no repetition. He remained obedient to God through a lifetime of testing. As a faultless high priest, he sacrificed for the sins of God's people *once for all, when he offered himself* (27; *cf.* 9:14). This is a new thought, explaining exactly how he made 'purification' (1:3) or 'atonement for the sins of the people' (2:17). Note the emphasis on the *once for all* nature of his sacrifice here and in 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10. Unlike the high priests of Judasim, *he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people*. The perfection of his sacrifice is associated with the perfection of the victim. Jesus also meets our need as high priest because he is now *set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens*. His heavenly exaltation means that he *always lives* to apply the benefits of his saving work to us (25). The law of Moses appointed *men who are weak* as high priests, but the oath of Ps. 110:4 appointed the Son to be high priest of a different order. He was qualified to fulfil this role or *made perfect for ever* (28; *cf.* notes on 2:10; 5:9) by means of his obedient life, his sacrificial death and his entrance into the heavenly presence of God (as vs 26–27 suggest).¹

¹ Peterson, D. G. (1994). Hebrews. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1336–1338). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.