

“ OUR HOPE: JESUS A PRIEST LIKE MEL WHO?”

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Hebrews 7

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. ³ Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually.

Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. ⁵ And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham.

Put the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham, and blessed the one who had the promises. ⁷ But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ And in this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. ⁹ And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.

¹¹ Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. ¹³ For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.

¹⁵ And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of Him, “Thou art a priest forever according to the

order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹(for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰And inasmuch as it was not without an oath ²¹(for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, ‘Thou art a priest forever’”); ²²so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. ²³And the former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴but He, on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵Hence also He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.

God’s purpose in sending His Son into the world was not solely to make saints out of sinners, but having accomplished that, to make servants out of saints. Once we have become Christians, our primary purpose for being here is to be to the world what Christ would be if He were where we are!

An attorney who properly understood his role and responsibility as a Christian was flying home from a legal convention. The only unoccupied seat on board was beside a young lady. They were barely airborne when he found a natural way to share his faith and to confront her with the person of Jesus Christ. It was a short flight. As he gathered his luggage at the baggage claim area, he met the young woman again, with her husband who had come to meet her. They exchanged pleasantries for a moment, said goodbye and parted. As the lawyer left, her husband said, “Who was that guy?” “Oh,” she explained, “just a man I met on the airplane. And guess what?” she

continued. “He asked me if I was a Christian.” “Did you tell him to mind his own business?” her husband asked. She replied softly, “You know, dear, it sounds strange, but the way he talked it was his business.”¹

The young lady perceived an important truth. When a person is genuinely born again, it is pointless to tell him to mind his own business. He is no longer in business for himself. From salvation on, like his Lord, he must be about his Father’s business. That involves being to the small sphere of his world what Christ would be if he were physically here Himself.

To equip us for this remarkable mission, the Holy Spirit has gone to great lengths to explain Who it is we represent. What His credentials are. How He is prepared to help us do our job. And, as usual, the author of Hebrews presents this necessary and supportive information in a most ingenious way.

To the modern mind, this reference to Meichizedek may not only seem mysterious, but actually superfluous. Some folk couldn’t care less about Melchizedek. However, the book of Hebrews was written to give saved sinners a reason to hope. It does so by declaring who Jesus was. What Jesus did. How Jesus affects life today and in eternity. Thus, there is more here than meets the eye. Beneath the surface are great and abiding truths placed here by the Holy Spirit for our enlightenment and encouragement.

The writer of Hebrews has already explained that the priesthood of Melchizedek is something about which he will have “*much to say*” and that it will be “*hard to explain*” (5:11). Therefore, we are not surprised to find chapter 7 both fascinating and difficult. It contains some of the “*solid food*” maturing Christians should be eating (5:12).

Few figures in scripture are more mysterious than Melchizedek. He appears briefly in the Biblical narrative and then nothing more is heard of him. Like Topsy who just grew, Melchizedek is suddenly flung on the stage of history without hint of ancestry. Genesis 14 (verse 18) introduces

him. Psalm 110 (verse 4) makes a brief prophetic statement about him. Add to these references the passages in Hebrews, and that's all we know about him. Because of the mystery surrounding Melchizedek, there has been a great deal of speculation about who he was. Some have said he was a Christophany; that is, a visible, physical, pre-Bethlehem appearance of Jesus Himself. Others say he was some sort of supernatural messenger, maybe a mighty angel. The Jewish Torah identifies him as Shem, the son of Noah.

For my part, except to say by his actions and attitude he was an excellent prototype of Christ, I don't think it's necessary to get terribly exercised over the man. As Harry Ironside, the famed former pastor of Moody Church, once said, "If anyone asks 'Who is Melchizedek?' the only proper answer is: 'Meichizedek!'"

Why, then, is he introduced at all? Genesis 14 provides a clue. Here is the story of a confederacy of kings which attacked Sodom and its sister cities. These kings succeeded in capturing the city-states, carried off a tremendous amount of loot and a large number of captives, including Lot, Abram's nephew. When Abram learned of Lot's disaster, he organized a small army of 318 well-trained, well-equipped servant-soldiers and set out in hot pursuit of the invaders. He overtook them near Damascus. Under cover of dark, using not-so-new guerrilla tactics, he launched a surprise attack. Routed the enemy. Recovered the captives and booty.

Word of his successful incursion apparently got back to the defeated king of Sodom. He went out to greet Abram (Genesis 14:17), to tell him he could retain the plunder he had recaptured from the confederacy of kings. However, before they met and the king of Sodom could make this tempting offer, Abram passed the little village of Salem (later called Jerusalem) on his victory march to the south.

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ And

he [Abram] gave him a tenth of all” (Genesis 14:18-20).

Such are the scanty facts regarding this person about whom the writer of Hebrews makes so much. There is a second reference to this majestic figure, explaining the Messiah will be “*a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*”(Psalm 110:4), a prophecy the writer of Hebrews sees as being perfectly fulfilled by Christ and His ministry. Beyond what is written in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, there is nothing.

At this point it is absolutely imperative to note that in developing his argument our author is not talking about Melchizedek, but about Jesus. The book of Hebrews is about Jesus. Who Jesus was. What Jesus did. All Jesus means in time and eternity. Remember that, lest you focus on the wrong figure. Everything said about Melchizedek is, in reality, a statement about Jesus. Unless you move past Melchizedek to Jesus, you’ll miss the whole point.

As already suggested, Melchizedek is a prototype of Christ. He serves one and only one purpose; that is, to prove the existence of another order of priesthood that is older, superior, and, thus, transcendent over both the Levitical priesthood and the law which rests upon it.

Once our author has made his point, he drops Melchizedek and focuses on Jesus. As Charles R. Erdman explains, this majestic figure stands for one short scene on the pages of scripture to establish the validity, dignity and efficacy of Christ’s priesthood, then disappears forever into the mystery from which he emerged.

Now, the writer of Hebrews was a most ingenious preacher. Chapter 7 is really a sermon on Psalm 110:4, “*Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*” He starts his sermon by restating the facts recorded in Genesis 14. “*For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils*” (7:1,2). From this bare beginning and by means of etymology and typology, the writer of Hebrews

fashions a most fascinating rationale for the priesthood of Jesus.

A Lesson In Etymology

First, he gives a lesson in etymology, the study of words and their origins. He points out that Meichizedek means “*king of righteousness*.” And, being king of Salem, meaning “*peace*,” Melchizedek was also “*king of peace*.” With great care, the Holy Spirit has guarded even the apparently insignificant matter of the order of the names by which this prototype of Christ is called. First, king of righteousness. Second, king of peace.

This order is in perfect harmony with other scripture . For instance, “*The work of righteousness will be peace, and the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence (assurance) forever*” (Isaiah 32:17). Notice which comes first: Righteousness, then peace. Righteousness, then assurance.

Earlier in the book of Hebrews we are informed that, because Jesus loved righteousness, the heavenly Father “*anointed Him with the oil of gladness*” (1:9). The scripture makes it clear that the happiness, security, and peace we so feverishly seek in various and sundry ways are only possible through obedience. Righteousness and joy are wed. Righteousness and assurance are wed. So, too, are righteousness and peace. In each instance, righteousness comes first!

Is it possible that you, like many others, have put the cart before the horse? Is it possible you have pursued happiness, security, and peace, only to find your dreams lying like bits of broken rainbow about your feet? The solution is to put first things first. Pursue righteousness. Then the assurance, joy and peace you’re seeking will come as an automatic outcropping of obedience. The priesthood of this prototype of Christ was righteous, peaceful and, thus, royal in the highest and truest sense of that word.

A Lesson In Typology

Continuing his sermon, the writer of Hebrews moves from etymology, the study of words, to typology, the study of symbols. He gives us a most interesting lesson in one kind of Biblical interpretation. He argues both from what the Bible says and from what the Bible does not say. When studying God’s written word, remember: what is included and what is excluded are both significant.

From the silence of scripture, he points out the permanence of Melchizedek’s priesthood. From the statements of scripture, he emphasizes the preeminence of his priesthood. Both of these, permanence and preeminence, serve to illustrate the durability and dignity of Christ’s priesthood. First, he builds an argument around what the Bible doesn’t say about Melchizedek’s ancestry and progeny. He is “*without father, without mother, without genealogy*”“(7:3).

Genealogy, the study of family pedigrees, is not too important to us, but it was absolutely vital to the Old Testament priesthood. If a person could not prove an unbroken descent from Aaron, he could not qualify as a Levitical priest. To be part of the Old Testament priesthood, one had to be a particular strand of “true blue Jew.”

This is the point the writer of Hebrews makes when he speaks of those who were priests according to a “law of physical requirement” (7:16). The striking difference between the Levitical priesthood, and that of Melchizedek and therefore, Christ, is that the former rested solely upon heredity. A boy became a priest because his father was.

Just before Aaron died, Moses took him to the summit of Mount Hor, removed his priestly garments and put them on Eleazar, Aaron’s son (Numbers 20:28). Later, when Eleazar died, the mantle succeeded to his son, Phinehas. And so it went, generation after generation. From the time of Aaron to the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70, there were 83 high priests who functioned solely upon the basis of heredity.

Melchizedek could not claim priesthood by human succession (7:3). Neither could the Christian’s high priest, Jesus. Both were priests by divine fiat. The silence of scripture regarding the

genealogy of Melchizedek does not suggest he was some sort of biological anomaly who, like Topsy, just grew. Rather, the absence of any information about his ancestry or progeny, his life or death, is to emphasize the uniqueness of his priesthood. It was not based on who his father was, but upon the spiritual qualifications of the man himself. Thus, it was a priesthood of enduring nature.

Using Melchizedek as a prototype of Christ, the writer of Hebrews then argues his case for the permanence of Christ's priesthood. Like “Mel's,” the priesthood of Jesus is not based upon heredity. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. Thus, like that of his prototype, the priesthood of Jesus rested on the character and quality of the man Himself. Furthermore, because Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, He now reigns as Priest without end. Thus, His priesthood is absolutely permanent.

From this point made by the silence of scripture, the writer of Hebrews turns to the statements of scripture. Based upon what the Bible does say, he emphasized the preeminence of Melchizedek and, thus, the preeminence of Jesus. See how great he is! Abraham, the patriarch, gave him “a tenth part of the spoils” (7:5). And Melchizedek “*blessed [him] who had the promises*” (7:6).

This was not an effort to deprecate Abraham, but to elevate Melchizedek. Simply put, the argument runs as follows: Melchizedek is greater than Abraham because he (Melchizedek) blessed the patriarch and accepted his tithes, both acts implying superior standing and authority. Levi was the great-grandson of Abraham. As explained in beautiful Hebrew picture language, he was “*still in the loins*” (7:10) of Abraham at the time of this incident.

Therefore, Melchizedek is greater than Levi. Symbolically, he collected tithes from Levi through Abraham, again implying greater standing and authority. Since Christ's priesthood is “*according to the order of Melchizedek*,” who was superior to Levi, Christ's priestly ministry, too, is greater than that of the Levitical priests. Ipsa facto, Christ, the Christian's high priest, enjoys pre-eminence as well as permanence.

At this point, the argument becomes somewhat more sophisticated. If this line of reasoning seems a bit strained, remember that, to the devout Jew, the ceremonial law was everything with a capitol “E.” To assault the ceremonial law and those who practiced it, to suggest that the law was inadequate, was to attack the jugular vein of Judaism. Yet, this is precisely what the writer of Hebrews does.

“Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?” (7:11). The key word here is “*perfection.*” Had it been attainable through the Old Testament priests and practices, there would be no need for Jesus. But, as everyone knew, the ceremonial law and the Old Testament priests who performed it could not attain this goal. They could challenge people to perfection, but they could not in any way empower people to achieve perfection. They could not cause a man to stop sinning, for instance. They could not make a man perfect, in either God’s eyes or his own. That’s why the old order was useless, for “*the Law made nothing perfect*” (7: 19a). Therefore, it had to go.

God, who had given it and used it as a temporary measure of dealing with His people, now removed it. “*For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God*” (7:18,19).

A new day had come. The day of spiritual rebirth when, through Christ, a person became a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). When he was, in fact, perfect in the eyes of God. And, even greater, was given the very life of God Himself, whereby he had power to stop sinning. To live creatively, rather than destructively.

At this point, the writer of Hebrews draws his conclusion: Jesus is our hope. Jesus is “*a priest*

according to the order of Melchizedek” (7:17). Instead of belonging to that old order described as having many priests who died (7:23), who bequeathed their mantle to another without ever having helped one man know with finality he was right with God, the Lord Jesus belongs to a new priesthood, operating under a new covenant, in which there is one Priest who lives forever, whose authority and mantle are non-transferable (7:24). A Priest who, by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice, makes it possible for those who put their trust in Him to be perfect in God’s sight, and Who gives them the privilege of drawing near to God with confidence and joy (7:25).

“For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (7:26-28). What a grand Amen to this tremendous statement regarding the permanence and preeminence of Jesus!

Let’s look at the marvelous statement regarding the peerless and impeccable character of Jesus Christ (7:26). In His relationship toward God, He was holy. In His relationship toward men, He was harmless. In His relationship toward Himself, He was undefiled. Jesus was “separated from sinners;” that is, different from the rest of us. Often, when tempted, we fall. But Jesus, tempted in all ways, remained unsullied by sin.

As a result, He’s “*exalted above the heavens*” (7:26). What a wonderful example of Hebrew picture speech and hyperbole! Today we might say, “He’s outa sight!” “He’s the greatest!” “He’s out of this world!” Our first-century penman said, He’s “*exalted above the heavens.*”

And He was. He is. Jesus is completely and forever “*able to save*” (7:25) all who respond to His gentle invitation. “*Come to Me*”(Matthew 11:28a). “*(He) who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out*” (John 6:37).

What does all this mean to you? Why should you care that Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek? The implications, as I see them, are four. Jesus wants to save you. Free you. Satisfy you. So He can use you.

Jesus Wants To Save You

When Melchizedek met Abram coming home on his victory march, he met a man who, by most human standards, had every right to enjoy the sweet taste of victory. The temptation was to do so by watering down his witness for God. The lesson God wanted Abram to learn was this: he didn't have to go to war to improve his Dun and Bradstreet rating. Nor did he need to enrich himself through the misery of others.

“God is your provider and protector,” Melchizedek seems to say. “It is He who has helped you gain the victory in this recent fracas. You are not a self-made man, Abram; you never will be. You are a man blessed by God to be a blessing. Everything you are, everything you hope to be, everything you become, will be the result of His action in your life. So now, in this moment of small victory, remember to Whom the glory is due.”

To his credit, Abram, who later became famous for his spiritual sensitivity, immediately recognized the import of Melchizedek's words. And he gave a tithe of the treasures he had recovered from the kings. This may seem a strange thing for Abram to do. But it was the tithing decision which kept Abram's purpose clear and his priorities straight. By tithing, he fixed in his mind the truth about ownership and stewardship. For, to give a tenth is to acknowledge God owns the whole. It is to admit one is only a temporary user of that which belongs to God.

Through the act of tithing, which God has been using for a long, long time as a means of molding men, the Lord was able, in a most profound and intensely personal way, to “*save*” Abram. In this manner, God helped Abram to win the greatest of all victories: the victory over Abram! Abram

was, in effect, saved from glorification of self. Fortified spiritually through this internal conquest, and physically through the bread and wine Melchizedek gave him, Abram was able to turn his back on the blandishments of the king of Sodom. As a result, no man would ever be able to say, “*I have made Abram rich*” (Genesis 14:23b). If the patriarch were to become an economic success, as in later life he did, the glory would always go to God.

Through His minister, Melchizedek, God met Abram at a crucial spiritual crossroad. Because of Abram’s response, God was able to give him the greatest of all victories, the victory over self. And, what God did for Abraham through Melchizedek, He wants to do for you through Jesus. He wants to save you from yourself. He wants to give you the greatest of all victories, the victory over self. He wants to help you, as a Christian, keep your purpose clear and your priorities straight.

Until you gain the victory over self, learn to trust God, and acknowledge Him as your patron and provider, you will be looking for an angle. You will be searching for an edge. An advantage which gives you a little extra leverage in the game of dog-eat-dog. But God says, “No! Trust Me. Remember, it is I who gives you the physical strength and the mental acumen, the time and talent, to win in this warfare against the confederacy of world, flesh and devil. Therefore, play it straight. By My rules. Even though it may seem costly. In the long run, the personal, spiritual, and perhaps material rewards will be great. Remember, as it was with Abraham, so it is with you. Tithing is not My way of getting your money. It is My way of getting you. It is My method of shaping you into someone I can trust and use, because you are someone to whom Jesus has given the greatest of all victories: the victory over self!”

Jesus Wants To Free You

Our Lord not only wants to save you from yourself; He wants to free you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past. Several years ago, I stood facing the ark with the members of a Hebrew congregation. When the Rabbi took the Torah, the Jewish Law, out of the ark and held it on his shoulder for a moment, I felt as if I were standing on holy ground. I remember thinking to myself,

“The world needs that law right now. It needs to know and obey that law. It needs to heed the warning of that law.”

But, as the Rabbi tenderly put the Torah back in the ark, it suddenly hit me! The law is not what the world really needs. The law can do no more for folk today than it did for folk in Old Testament times. It may raise man’s standards, but it cannot impart power to the people to achieve those standards. It may clarify one’s duties, but it cannot awaken the love to do those duties.

The law may threaten, but it cannot change. It cannot turn despair into hope. The more one reads the law, the more he is aware of what he hasn’t done. The law may widen the gap between a man and God, but the law can do nothing to bridge that gap. The law never made anyone perfect (7:19). It has only served to accentuate the fact of one’s imperfection.

Jesus does the opposite. He not only points out your imperfections, He gives you power to do something about them. He not only saves you from yourself, He frees you from the preoccupying power of unresolved guilt so, as a saved-sinner, you are free to be the blessing you were blessed to be.

When you come to Jesus and, in an attitude of genuine repentance say, “This is sin. I don’t want to want to go on sinning anymore,” the Lord Jesus gives you His righteousness. At that moment, you inherit His past. His past is perfect! You stand before God as if you had never sinned. Whiter than snow (Isaiah 1:18).

If, after that moment of initial commitment to Christ, you sin again, as we all do, you need only come to Christ in a fresh act of repentance. Each time you do so, the field of your past, which is now whiter than snow, expands. Day by day. Week by week. As long as life lasts.

Jesus Wants To Satisfy You

The Master not only saves you and frees you, He also satisfies you. Because He makes you perfect in God's sight and frees you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past, you can now draw near to God with confidence and joy, knowing you'll be received.

The Old Testament priesthood and law suffered from a vexing weakness. They could arouse within folk a longing for access to God. They could stimulate, inspire, even express, this deepest hunger of the human heart. But, they could do absolutely nothing to satisfy this hunger. Jesus can. He saves you. Frees you. Even more, He satisfies you. His priesthood, like that of Melchizedek, is not temporary but eternal. It is not earthly but heavenly. It is not based upon human succession, but is sealed by an oath of God. Therefore, there will never come a time when His ministry on your behalf becomes ineffective.

You will never turn to Jesus for help or hope and fail to find Him alive and active. He saves “*to the uttermost*” (7:25, KJV). Which means more than saving you from every kind of sin, though that's true. Even more wonderful, it means saving you forevermore! The ministry of Christ on your behalf will never cease. The door to God's presence is ever open. You will never find a “vacancy” or “job open” sign hung over the place of His employment.

Jesus Wants To Use You

Why does He do all this? Why does Jesus save you from yourself? Free you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past? Why does He go to such lengths to satisfy you by being exactly what you need, when and where you need it? Because He wants to use you. He wants you to be about your Father's business. Not butting in where you're unwanted and unwelcome. But being awake and sensitive to the opportunities all around you for witness and service in Jesus' name.

God's purpose in sending His Son into the world was not solely to make saints out of sinners, but having done so, to make servants out of saints. That's what He ever so much wants to make of you, a servant! A person who knows Whom he represents and, understanding Christ's

qualifications and capacity to help, will be to his contemporary world everything Jesus would be if He were physically here Himself!

A big order? You bet it is. But all it requires are the dual ingredients of genuine humility and sheer obedience. As one girl put it:

They tell me an angel
couldn't fit
the job description
on this assignment, so why did You hand it to me?

And --
when do You want me to start?³

Notes

1. Nastari, Questions Christ Asked, p. 41.
2. Harry A. Ironside, Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1932) p. 85.
3. Nancy Spiegelberg (Minneapolis, MN: Decision Magazine, 1971).