

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 (Heb. 7.1-10).

Introduction

As we turn to Hebrews 7.1-10, we should notice something unusual. What is unusual is that fact that the author to the book states repeatedly that Jesus is a priest (Heb. 2.17; 3.1; 4.14; 4.15; 5.1; 5.5), but this stands in striking contrast to the Gospels where that designation never occurs. This calls out for comment. There are commentators that interpret the baptism of Jesus to be an anointing to priestly work (J Adams), but when they do this they go against the grain of the Gospels in a sense because in the Gospels He never identifies Himself as a priest, nor do others attribute that office to Him. As we shall see, there are reasons from the Law that bar Jesus from being a priest in the Jewish-Mosaic system; therefore, the idea of baptismal anointing to priesthood seems inappropriate. In contrast, the book of Hebrews is explicit regarding our Lord's office as a priest and that makes us think that the idea of baptismal anointing to priesthood is appropriate. Clearly, the ministry of Jesus as a priest needs fuller explanation.

Then, on top of the newness of this designation that is peculiar to Hebrews, we have the fact that the priestly ministry of Christ is based on a mysterious figure of the OT, Melchizedek. Moreover, the preacher to the Hebrews has referred to Melchizedek a number of times without any explanation (5.6; 5.10; 6.20). Practically speaking, he drops him into his text abruptly without context. This abruptness accords with the fact that the reference to Melchizedek in Psalm 110 is abrupt and without context. The only reference to him as a historical figure is in Genesis 14 and there he appears in the narrative suddenly and disappears suddenly as well.

Without question, the relation of Melchizedek *per* Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 to Jesus calls for explanation. Thankfully, by the Holy Spirit, the writer to the Hebrews gives this explanation beginning with the greatness of Melchizedek. Accordingly, the title for today's message is "The Greatness of Melchizedek Reveals the Greatness of Jesus" We have four main points about the greatness of Melchizedek: the event that shows his greatness, the description that indicates his greatness, the explanation that demonstrates his greatness, and the implication that points beyond his greatness.

1A. The event that shows his greatness

In 7.1-10, the focus is on Melchizedek. There is a bookend effect of 6.20 and 7.17 in which the preacher gives some explanation regarding what it means for Jesus to be a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. From 6.20, we know that Jesus is a forerunner on our behalf into the inner place: **where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.** He entered behind the curtain of the heavenly sanctuary in the capacity of high priest according to this enigmatic priestly order. In 7.17, the writer completes this unit of thought with a quote from Psalm 110: **For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."** So, in between 6.20 and 7.17, the preacher will tell us about Melchizedek in order to teach some things about Jesus.

Of particular interest is the greatness of this OT priest that stands out in the encounter between Melchizedek and Abraham. Thus, 7.1-10 gives information about Melchizedek based on

Genesis 14. An event in the life of Abraham in which he and Melchizedek crossed paths becomes the framework in which the greatness of Melchizedek is revealed: **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** (7.1-2a). According to the account in Genesis 14, Abraham's nephew, Lot, found himself caught in the cross fire between the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and their enemies (14.1-10). The enemies won the battle and took the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah. In doing so, they took Lot and went away (14.11-12). When Abraham got the news regarding Lot, he took over 300 of his trained men in pursuit of the kidnappers (14.13-14); at night he divided his forces and rescued Lot (14.15-16). The writer to the Hebrews refers to this rescue as **the slaughter of the kings** (7.1).

Upon the return of Abraham from this battle, a puzzling event occurred. Melchizedek emerges in the narrative "out of the blue." He sort of drops into the account from the sky in a record that is only three verses long: **Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)** ¹⁹ **And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;** ²⁰ **and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything** (14.18-20). Moses then drops him out of the narrative as suddenly as he dropped him into it. That is the entire record about Melchizedek who is not mentioned again until Psalm 110 refers to him. All the remaining references to Melchizedek are in the book of Hebrews; the last ones are here in chapter 7.

To summarize by means of a question: what happened in this puzzling event? Our writer to the Hebrews cites two things about the event: **Melchizedek... met Abraham...and blessed him,** ² **and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything** (7.1-2; he does not mention the bread and wine). These actions of blessing and tithing in the relationship between these two men give the framework for instruction on the greatness of Melchizedek.

2A. The description that indicates his greatness

In the framework of these actions, we can consider a description that indicates the greatness of Melchizedek: **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** (7.1-3). The fact that he is a king is repeated four times (king of Salem, v. 1; king of righteousness, v. 2; king of Salem, v. 2 and king of peace, v. 2). Notably, this king is a "priest of the Most high God" (v. 1), and he continues a priest forever. The latter reference comes from Psalm 110, *but not directly* because a) there is nothing along this line in Genesis 14, and b) in the Psalm the priest who is forever is the Lord to whom David's Lord speaks: **The LORD says to my Lord... "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek"** (Ps. 110.1-4).

Now we need to answer a question. How can the writer to the Hebrews refer to Melchizedek as a priest *forever*? The preacher gets his point from the brevity and mystery of the narrative in which there is no record of his father or mother, no mention of a genealogy, and neither beginning of days nor end of life (Heb. 7.3). It is striking that a person this important from the patriarchal period did not have a genealogy on the record; he is the only major figure without one. Moreover, as a priest it is even more striking because the right parentage and thus a genealogy of record was vital for all priests that come later under Moses. He is forever a priest in a figurative sense with regard to his role as a type or picture of the Son of God (7.3, *resembling*).

Of course, it is reasonable to assume that he did have these things literally and historically: a mother gave birth to him and he did die. But these things are left out of the account purposely in order to make him "resemble" the Son of God (7.3). The way that he drops in and out of the record gives a picture of a priestly ministry that has no beginning and no end; that is a picture of a servant who **continues a priest forever** (7.3). That picture (shaped by the Holy Spirit) makes Melchizedek a type of Christ; it makes him prefigure Christ. He is a prophetic-metaphor

in narration that God gave as a promise of the coming of Christ. Thus, in more ways than one, the description of this ancient priest indicates his greatness.

3A. The explanation that demonstrates his greatness

The explanation of the greatness of Melchizedek focuses on two things: the tithe and the blessing and this focus leads to some inferences. Let us consider the contrast here and then the inferences.

1) Contrast

In 7.5-6, we have the contrast in the facts about Melchizedek and the Levites: **⁵And 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. ⁶But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.** Contrary to the descendants of Levi who received tithes from the people per the law as descendants of Abraham, Melchizedek is not a descendent in the Levitical line of priests, and yet he received tithes from Abraham. There is another contrast buried here; it is a contrast of blessing: Abraham is to become a blessing to others (Abraham **had the promises, v. 6**), but the reverse took place, the priest Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

2) Inferences

In 7.7-10, we have the inferences the author draws from these contrasts. On the matter of blessing he makes the point in a compressed argument that Melchizedek is the superior and Abraham the inferior because **It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior** (v. 7) and this man (Melchizedek) blessed Abraham (v. 6, he **blessed him who had the promises**, which is Abraham). On the matter of the tithe, Melchizedek received tithes as one who metaphorically lives forever in contrast to the Levitical priests who received tithes as mortal men, men subject to dying and death (v. 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**). Moreover, the writer infers that even Levi, the father of all the Levitical priests, paid tithes to Melchizedek who does not stand in the succession of the Levitical priests and thus who has no legal right to receive the tithes of other Israelites (the brothers, v. 5). Therefore, he says, **One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him** (7.9-10). There is a principle of representative solidarity at work here; the place of Abraham in relation to his descendants is similar to that of Adam in relation to his descendants. The fact that the Levites (who paid no tithe but to whom tithes were paid) in effect (and in actuality per the solidarity principle), paid tithes to Melchizedek through their father Abraham *demonstrates* the superiority and greatness of Melchizedek.

4A. The implication that points beyond his greatness

There is something latent here, something buried in the flow of thought, but present like the air we breathe; unseen but always meaningfully present. In a manner of speaking, the implication that points beyond Melchizedek's greatness is the elephant in the room, namely, the unspoken but powerful fact that all this attention on Melchizedek points to the greatness of Jesus. By implication, the one who is greater than Abraham (greater than the Levitical priests that descend from Abraham and greater than all Abraham's descendants) has another even greater than him: our Lord Jesus. Now we are ready for some concluding remarks.

Conclusion

1) First, what we have here is a snapshot of the greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ. This material about Melchizedek gives us the lyrics for a hymn of praise to our Lord, or a psalm to our Lord (cf. Hughes, Hebrews, 254-55) with the fourfold refrain: "He is King."

Our Lord Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Thus, He is a royal priest, a king-priest. As king, He is king of righteousness: "The Lord hath sworn and will not change; thou king of righteousness; Jehovah sware and made decree, a royal priest is He; Thou king of Righteousness, shalt be and called Melchizedek; the Lord is now at your right hand, in all His

majesty.” Our risen Lord Jesus Christ is also the king of peace. He brings “shalom” to His enemies by the gospel He procured with His own body and blood. His royal, righteous, and peace promoting priesthood is forever. Therefore, He is the source of our eternal salvation: **being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek** (Heb. 5.9-10). If you trust and obey the Lord Jesus, then you have the gift of His righteousness credited to your account before the bar of God’s judgment *forever!*

We can express the major point in two ways. 1) Since Melchizedek prefigures Christ, then he is inferior to Christ in the strong way that shadows are inferior to the realities of which they are shadows. For example, the shadow of bread is markedly inferior to the actual bread of which it is a shadow. The distance that exists between shadow and reality comes home with a punch when we note how superior real bread is for starving people in comparison with its shadow or promise. Thus, as the reality prefigured by Melchizedek, Jesus is not only superior to him, He is exponentially superior to him. It is great to have promises, but that is no match for fulfillment. 2) There is an “a fortiori” argument (a much more argument) lurking here in the shadows of this puzzling narrative. If Abraham is superior to the Jewish nation, and if Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, then how much more must Christ be superior in His priestly ministry to all the priests of the OT. Everything is superior and better when the new wine of fulfillment comes in Christ replacing the old wine of promise.

2) Second, there is a lesson here about communion

Genesis mentions wine and bread to refresh Abraham; surely, it is reasonable to conclude that an aspect of this veiled anticipation of Christ is the refreshing of Abraham and his children by faith through the wine and bread of the Lord’s Table. The table is thus the table of the Most High God; it is for refreshing; it is a way that our Lord, *the Son of God ministers to us* as we return from battle. He spreads the table in the sanctuary for us. He is there on our behalf to nourish us on our travels as we look for the city that Abraham looked for, the city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God, the heavenly city.

Thus, we now enter into the heavenly sanctuary by faith when we gather in His presence at the communion table to receive refreshing provisions and the bread of life from His hand. This is an amazing underscoring of the importance and blessing of the Lord’s Table on the Lord’s Day.

3) Third, there is a lesson here about tithing

In the tithing of Abraham to Melchizedek, do we not have the fundamental lesson that tithes and gifts to God’s servants are ultimately offerings to our great high priest? This account supplements the principle that we are not to muzzle oxen that tread out the corn. Furthermore, it helps us see why giving is an element of worship because on the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, the people of God enter the presence of God for new temple worship, and among other things, when they enter the sanctuary by gathering in Christ’s name and presence, they place their tithes and offerings at His feet, at the feet of His Majesty their loving Lord.

If Abraham our forefather in the faith and if all the priests of the OT paid tithes to Melchizedek who prefigures Christ, then how much more ought the descendents of Abraham by faith pay tithes to Christ. Thus, we have confirmation regarding some elements of worship (Communion and giving).

Per Melchizedek in relation to Abraham, to Levi and to the Levitical order, we are catapulted in thought to the superiority of Jesus, the Son of God. We hear the Father say of Him: **...of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."** ¹⁰ And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, ¹² like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end" (Heb. 1.8-12).