

# The Great High Priest we need

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**St Andrew's - Sunday 28th July 2024 - Hebrews 7:1-28**

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A couple of years ago, I read the whole of The Lord of the Rings. I hope most of you are familiar with the rough outline of the plot and the world in which it is set. It's a very thought out world, with consistent languages that have been invented by Tolkein; there's a history to the world he's created, it all slots together in a consistent way, with a satisfying story that ties up all the loose ends.

You have throughout the books lots of neat parallels, there's characters that serve as opposites - Gandalf and Saruman both start as rather morally ambiguous wizards, but Gandalf becomes better, and Saruman far worse. Or Theoden and Denothor, who both start as fairly depressive and downtrodden kings when we meet them in the story, but they both take different paths - one good and one bad.

One of the other things we often quite like in literature and theatre and the like, is this idea of foreshadowing. When we see what's going to happen before it happens, we see hints at what's coming. People love the television detective shows where you get to the end and you can look back and see the clues that were planted all along and how if you were paying attention you might have worked it out yourself.

Lord of the Rings has this - at the beginning of the first book, Frodo acts with great alarm at the ring, which at the beginning of the trilogy he doesn't know is particularly special, being thrown in the fireplace by Gandalf. For someone who had no idea what the ring is, Frodo is more aghast at the potential loss of the ring than he should be, not that the fireplace in his Hobbit hole could hurt it. This of course foreshadows the end of the trilogy, as Frodo struggles to let go in a situation where the fire really would consume the ring.

Or around the same time, early in the story, when the two are talking about what happened to bring the ring to this point, how Frodo's uncle Bilbo got ahold of it:

*FRODO: It's a pity Bilbo didn't kill [Gollum] when he had the chance.*

*GANDALF: Pity? It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand. Many that die deserve life, and some that live deserve death. Can you give it to them, Frodo? Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. Even the very wise cannot see all ends. My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play, for good or ill, before this is over. The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.*

Now of course, if you know what happens, it's very good that Bilbo took pity on Gollum, because if Gollum hadn't turned up at the last moment, the ring wouldn't have been destroyed.

Or if you're not a fan of Lord of the Rings, maybe Shakespeare - in Romeo and Juliet, in the first act, after Juliet has met Romeo briefly she says:

*If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed.*

She means that if it turns out that Romeo is married, she'll rather die alone. But it also foreshadows the end of the play. In fact, throughout the first part of the play you find references to death and poison and love lost hidden in the speech of many of the characters. I'm sure you all know how the story ends, but if you don't, suffice to say, it's a tragedy.

Now a long book like Lord of the Rings, or a Shakespeare play, a work with internal consistency and sort of prophetic plotlines is nothing special, considering that it's written by a single author - Tolkein could draft and adjust until he was satisfied it could be published, Shakespeare likewise.

We see a similar internal consistency in the Bible. Things happen in the New Testament that turn out to have been prophesied in the Old. Stories in Genesis take on new meaning when we see parallels in the New Testament. The Bible of course has many human authors, which makes this quite the feat in human terms. But as Christians, we know that the Bible also has one author, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the words of those human writers. It should be no surprise to us that we see neat parallels throughout scripture, even in those places that are literal history. Because of course the whole creation has one author, God, so the true stories in the Bible are consistent, prophetic and parallel and complement each other in ways most authors could only hope to achieve.

This is exactly what the beginning of Hebrews chapter 7 is talking about - a seemingly unimportant event buried in Abraham's life story deep in Genesis. But nothing is written in scripture without a purpose.

## Where are we?

The last section of chapter 6, the author of Hebrews recounts the fact that God himself swore to Abraham, made an oath to him, that he would bless and multiply him - referencing what happened in Genesis chapters 15 and 22. If God swears by himself, God the unchanging one, the truth Himself, we can therefore have certainty. It's likened to us being brought in to the holy of holies - the inner place behind the curtain. The last sentence of chapter 6 tells us that we follow Jesus in this - we follow Him into communion with God, because, as we have heard also in chapter 5, Jesus is a high priest, and a special kind of high priest, a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

## Genesis 14:17-20

We've been teased by mention of Melchizedek in the last couple of chapters, but now chapter 7 tells us much more.

We can't fully understand what is being talked about here, without knowing what the Old Testament says about this figure. Let's read from Genesis chapter 14, where Melchizedek is mentioned. Genesis 14:17-20:

*17 After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).*

*18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, 19 and he blessed Abram, saying,*

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
Creator of heaven and earth.*

*20 And praise be to God Most High,  
who delivered your enemies into your hand."*

*Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

These few sentences, this strange little aside in the story of Abraham, contains a lot. For example, this is the first time we see mention of a priest in the Bible. The first time we see mention of a tithe, even the first time we see mention, though it's not as obvious, of Jerusalem. In these few verses, much is foreshadowed, both about the priesthood of the Old Testament, with Jerusalem and tithes, but also, as Hebrews 7 says, about Christ.

And that's about all we know about Melchizedek. There's another mention of the name in Psalm 110, which you might have noticed is quoted further along in chapter 7, but this is the only time we actually see Melchizedek himself in scripture, the only story actually about him.

## Summary of the text

Our reading today is a long chapter, we'll try and zip through it.

### v1-3

Some details about Melchizedek are teased out - a very brief recounting of the basic story - Abraham met this priest and gave a tithe. Melchizedek the name literally means 'king of righteousness' - that's a literal translation of his Hebrew name. He's also king of salem, king of the place 'salem' which would later be called 'Jeru-salem', salem meaning peace. Notice the similarities between Melchizedek and Christ - the king of peace compared to Him called the prince of peace. This royal priest that ministers with bread and wine, as Genesis tells us. And as Christ is eternal, Melchizedek sort of appears out of nowhere, with no record of his beginning or end, unlike most other important figures in Genesis. Thus, he resembles the Son of God, a priest forever. That word forever is important.

### v4-12

Now we see how Melchizedek was superior to the levitical priests. He receives the tithe from Abraham and issues the blessing. For the levites received the tithe and issued blessing in the form of their ministry they were given as priests, but it's as if they too gave to Melchizedek, and were blessed by Melchizedek. They were not yet born, but being effectively in Abraham at that point, were part of the transaction. So this Melchizedek was superior.

In verse 11, as throughout Hebrews, we see the idea that the Old Testament institutions and promises are pointing to something greater. Remember right back at the beginning of Hebrews (1v1-2):

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.*

The old things were lesser - but in these last days God has spoken to us by His own Son, God Himself, the creator of the universe.

## v13-16

Melchizedek was not from the tribe of Levi, not even a descendent of Abraham. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, a tribe from which no priests come, at least not in the mosaic law. But Judah is the tribe of David, the tribe of kings.

The differences between Christ and the Levites are quickly summarised - Christ is from Judah, not Levi. He lives eternally, He has the power of an indestructible life, unlike the Levitical priests. His resurrection is another the sign that He is greater than any other. And next, we see His priesthood is founded on more than just bodily descent, but on the very words of God.

## v17-21

Verse 17 quotes from Psalm 110: "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek".

Again, we see the old ways are put away, the new has come, a better hope by which to draw near to God. The old ways were weak and useless it says. But a better hope is introduced, that in contrast is perfect.

And again v21, it's because of what God says - another quote from Psalm 110. If the unchanging, faithful God says this, then Christ is a priest forever. "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind".

There's only three places in scripture we hear about Melchizedek. We've read about him in Hebrews, we've read the passage in Genesis, and we've this read this one mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, quoted here in Hebrews. We'll get back to Psalm 110 as well later on.

## v22-24

Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant - He upholds the new covenant far better than the former priests could uphold their covenant with God. This is the first time we hear about the covenant in Hebrews, but there's much more about the covenant in the next chapters.

Why? Because he holds his priesthood permanently - there's not going to be a time when the new covenant is without a priest, not going to be a time when there is not a representative for the covenant people before God. He lives forever, and thus is priest forever.

The former priests were many in number. As if to underscore their inadequacy, we see that they died off. They couldn't hold a priesthood any longer than they could hold onto their own lives - a priesthood that needs constant replacement. But Christ is a priest forever, never requiring replacement.

## v25

*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.*

This verse is key - this is the hinge on which the chapter turns - that word 'Consequently'. There are consequences to what we have heard about Christ's position as a priest after the order of Melchizedek - his eternal priesthood.

But let's finish off the chapter quickly and come back to this.

## v26-28

Verse 26 tells us about how Christ is different than the old priests, in that He is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Remember in chapter 5, we heard about how the priests had to offer sacrifice for themselves first and only then could offer sacrifice for the people? Not so with Christ - He has no need to purify Himself first, no need to fear coming into the presence of God on our behalf.

He has no need to sacrifice continually - for when He offered up Himself, once for all (I'm reliably informed that in the Greek this is much more clearly 'once for all time', and it's less ambiguous than our English translation). The former priests would sacrifice and then worry that they might have sinned after that and need to sacrifice again - but with Christ, that one sacrifice covers all - past, present and future sin, no more is required.

Remember how the high priests of old would have a rope around their waist to tug them back out from behind the curtain, when they went yearly into the most holy place? They were relying on the sacrifices they made for themselves first, and they weren't completely confident in them. But Christ has passed not just through the curtain, but gone beyond.

## **Psalm 110**

I did say we'd read Psalm 110, so now's a good opportunity:

### *A Psalm of David.*

*The Lord says to my Lord:*

*“Sit at my right hand,  
until I make your enemies your footstool.”*

*2 The Lord sends forth from Zion  
your mighty scepter.*

*Rule in the midst of your enemies!*

*3 Your people will offer themselves freely  
on the day of your power,  
in holy garments;  
from the womb of the morning,  
the dew of your youth will be yours.*

*4 The Lord has sworn  
and will not change his mind,  
“You are a priest forever*

*after the order of Melchizedek.”*

*5 The Lord is at your right hand;  
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.*

*6 He will execute judgment among the nations,  
filling them with corpses;  
he will shatter chiefs  
over the wide earth.*

*7 He will drink from the brook by the way;  
therefore he will lift up his head.*

Hebrews especially does a lot of quoting the Old Testament, and the New Testament generally quotes the old a lot. Some verses from the Old Testament get quoted in the new maybe twice if they're lucky, but one verse is quoted more than any other - Psalm 110 verse 1. We've even already had it quoted in Hebrews, back in chapter 1 verse 13:

*And to which of the angels has he ever said,*

*“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?*

Sit at my right hand - no angel gets that position, let alone any earthly priest.

Think back to Hebrews 4:14:

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*

He has entered not merely the earthly most holy place, still some distance from God, but into the heavens - direct to God. And not just briefly once a year, but He has gone there until all is accomplished. Not with the rope around his waist, worried and trying not to linger any longer than necessary, ready to leave. No, He sits, makes Himself comfortable, because being perfect he has no need to fear. He sits at the right hand of the Father, until his enemies are a footstool for his feet, at which point he will return. He is priest and King forever.

The ascension of Christ doesn't often feature very much in our thinking - few of us here celebrate ascension day, it's often an afterthought following the great events of Easter. But the ascension is in one sense Christ going through the curtain, beyond the curtain, beyond the clouds, into the presence of the Father, to take up His place as the priestly King of all. The ascension is Christ's coronation as King, to reign at the right hand of the Father, and His duty as the Great High Priest, to bring the needs of His people to God.

Since His ascension, Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, but what's he doing there? Our impression could be that Jesus has done the hard work, now He sits, possibly with His feet up, no more work to be done. Not quite.

Verse 25 again:

*since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

He is interceding for his people. He is praying for us, He is bringing our case to the Father. He is acting as a perfect priest, forever. The salvation Christ grants is in one respect finished and finalised - no more sacrifice is required, because He has done it fully once for all. But in another sense, Christ upholds and works on this salvation ongoingly - Christ doesn't do the sacrifice bit and then leave us to it. He does the work always and forever.

The former priests went to the holy place, and then after the work was done, they went back home again. They clock off. But not Christ. The holy place is his home.

## **To the uttermost**

*he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him*

This salvation that Christ provides is not just any salvation, it is complete, full, perfect, forever salvation.

Some versions say fully or completely. I like this rendering 'to the uttermost'. The word in greek is παντελής (pantelēs), which comes from two other words. *pas* meaning all or every and *telos* meaning an end or purpose or fulfilment. When this says 'to the uttermost' it's saying to the very end, the most complete fulfilment. Perfect, complete, and especially in light of what else we have read, forever.

## Other ways?

Remember that a main point of Hebrews is to encourage the Jewish believers to not go back to the old ways - they are being enticed by the old priesthood, but the new priesthood is far superior. And as we've seen with this Melchizedek character, the new way is ironically older than the old way too.

[Now you might be wondering how anyone in the old testament was possibly saved, if the methods then were so weak and useless. Well, that question is answered later on in Hebrews, when we get to chapter 11, and you'll just have to take this as a foreshadowing...]

At the time Hebrews was written, prior to AD 70, there was still a temple in Jerusalem, with a priesthood. Sacrifices were still being offered. These people grew up with this - for many it was a familiar sight, sound and smell, the religion of their friends and relatives as well as their ancestors. The temptation to turn back must have been great.

But then how is this relevant to us today? I imagine nobody in this room is wondering if offering animal sacrifices might be a good thing to do. I don't imagine we all think that we need to build a temple or find ourselves a genuine Levite to access atonement for our sin. No, today's temptations are different.

We're not typically tempted by the old systems of our Fathers (or there would be more Christians in Britain surely).

We're not typically today interested in a system that makes life more difficult, that requires more of us, more sacrifices to make.

We're not typically tempted to pick a bad option necessarily, but rather to not pick any particular option at all. Our culture often says it values relativism, universalism. Any way will do, God won't mind.

We're not typically tempted to think we need a particular class of person to access God, that we don't need a priest. Often people think they can find God anywhere, through any number of things, and definitely don't think they need an intermediary, how insulting.

We're not typically tempted to offer sacrifice, certainly not animal sacrifice - we're tempted to think sacrifice is not even necessary, that God will just forgo justice. Oh, He'll forgive anything, don't worry. Something about love and the like.

## The need for priest and sacrifice

These ideas are most pernicious. The idea that we don't need a priest, and that we don't need sacrifice. They are tricky, because of course there's truth there - we really don't need to offer sacrifices ourselves, or have earthly priests.

Let's take a step back - the whole discussion in Hebrews about the priesthood and sacrifice is based on assumptions, that don't get said explicitly in the text. The big assumption is that priests or a priest is necessary. The assumption behind that is that there is something that separates God and man. There is some barrier that needs to be broken, like a veil that needs to be passed through, for man to access God. The need for a priesthood is a need for someone to break through the barrier, to pass through into places we can't.

And we know that this barrier is summed up in the word 'sin'. Sin separates us from God - in several ways. It separates us in that it is a disposition in us to avoid and ignore God, to turn to other things. It separates us, in that it clashes with God's holiness - the two can't endure each other. And it separates us, in that the consequences are severe. God cannot abide sin - He is just, and His wrath is poured out against sin.

The high priest was fearful to go into the holy place because of his sin, and God's holiness and justice. I mentioned the rope around his waist. This was not just to rescue him if he felt a bit faint. It was to drag out an unworthy dead body, if God's wrath against sin was not satisfied in the sacrifices presented. The stakes were high.

It's not just that sin prevents us from approaching God, leaving us with no relationship. No, we are at enmity with God, that's the problem. All have a relationship with their creator - either a relationship through Christ as a son, a child of God, or through Adam, as a rebel condemned.

The assumptions behind this discussion of priesthood and sacrifice are that sin is real and dangerous. It requires that we have a priest and a sacrifice for that sin. The work of a priest is reconciliation - making peace between God and those people that he represents.

Back at the end of chapter 5, we saw how the writer says that his readers, the Hebrews, should know a lot of this stuff already, right after quoting Psalm 110 and talking about Christ's priesthood. Maybe you thought, well how are you supposed to put two and two together about Melchizedek and these things, it's a bit obscure isn't it? And they didn't have the advantage of the New Testament yet, it's being written at that point. But maybe

what they really didn't understand is the gravity of the situation, which they should have if they were raised in the Jewish system. The argument throughout these chapters about priesthood is focussed on how Christ can actually atone for the sins of the people perfectly, but the others can't. This is life and death stuff.

Romans 5 puts it like this:

*6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

## **Conclusion**

The point of this whole chapter is that there is only one way. There's only one person that can perfectly save. There's only one that is a priest, a mediator between God and man, perfectly and forever. No other priesthood, no other way of approach to God, can save to the uttermost. Only 'those who draw near to God through Him' are saved to the uttermost.

If you are not relying on that one way to God, then you're on shaky ground. Whatever other method you pick is not going to do it. No other way deals with the reality of our sin, no other way offers salvation to the uttermost, that is perfectly and forever. Only through our great high priest, Jesus Christ, can we have peace with God.