

“Melchizedek”

“[Messiah Yeshua] *doesn't need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this ONCE FOR ALL TIME when he offered himself*” (Hebrews 7:27).
Genesis 14:17-24; Psalm 110; Hebrews 5:1-10, 6:13-7:28 ¹

I suspect that the title of this sermon has at least a few of you scratching your heads. Some of you are probably wondering whether “Melchizedek” is a person, a place, an obscure theological word, or a word I made up to confuse you. Some of you remember having heard the word before, but that’s about it.

Melchizedek is one of the characters in the book of Genesis. At the other end of the Bible, we’ve now come to the wonderful book of Hebrews in our Journey through the Bible, and Jesus and Melchizedek are the main characters in Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews is a wonderful and amazing document that ties together the Old and the New Testaments in ways that are unique, intricate, and important. We don’t really know who wrote it, or to whom.

We know that the author was a second-generation Christian, because he wrote that his message had been confirmed to him by those who had heard Jesus themselves (2:3). This rules out Paul as its author, because he was adamant that he had received his understanding of the faith from Jesus Himself.²

It seems clear that the recipients of the letter had converted to Christian faith from Judaism, that they were being persecuted for their conversion, and that some were considering abandoning their faith in Jesus in order to escape this persecution. The thrust of Hebrews is to help these new believers see more clearly how Jesus is the fulfillment and completion of everything that they had known in Judaism, and that to abandon Him would be to lose everything.

And it seems clear that this letter was written before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, because such destruction would have considerably strengthened the author’s argument, and it’s inconceivable that the destruction of the Temple would have been omitted had it already taken place.

Melchizedek is an enigmatic character who only makes a cameo appearance in Genesis, but that appearance is a significant one. The author of Hebrews works hard to show how and why Melchizedek is an important—even crucial—figure for Jewish believers to get to know.

While the argument presented in Hebrews is important even for those of us who have not come to Jesus out of Judaism, drilling down into this argument can get a little tedious, and I’m going to do my best to help you understand the argument without losing you along the way.

Melchizedek is mentioned in four places in the Bible, and we’re going to look at each of them briefly this morning. You’ll probably find it helpful to follow along in your own Bible to track the development of his character through Scripture.

The only place where Melchizedek actually appears in the Bible is in Genesis 14:17-24. The background to this encounter is that in about 1800 B.C., five Canaanite cities rebelled

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on September 27, 2020.

² 1 Corinthians 15:8; Galatians 1:12. While the author of Hebrews was familiar with Timothy, he referred to Timothy as “our brother” (13:23), rather than as “my true son in the faith,” as Paul did (1 Timothy 1:2).

against their Mesopotamian overlords, and Abram’s nephew, Lot, and his family were taken captive in the ensuing conflict. When Abram—not yet Abraham—learned of their capture, he gathered several hundred warriors and gave chase for nearly 150 miles. Dividing his forces and attacking by night, Abram was able to defeat Lot’s captors and secure his kinsman’s release.

As Abram returned home, the king of Sodom, the city where Lot lived, went out to greet him at the King’s Valley, not far from the city of Salem—later known as Jerusalem. We’re told that *“Melchizedek, the king of Salem and a priest of God Most High, brought Abram some bread and wine. Melchizedek blessed Abram with this blessing: ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has defeated your enemies for you.’ Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods he had recovered”* (Genesis 14:18-20).

That’s really all we know about Melchizedek, who is one of the most mysterious characters in the biblical Story. His name is a combination of the words for “king” and “righteousness,” and the name of his city is a form of the word for “peace” (*shalom*).

There are several surprising things in this story. First of all, this is the only appearance of the city that would become Israel’s capital—Jerusalem—in the early parts of the Bible—in what we call the “Patriarchal Narratives.” Melchizedek is presented as a priest of “God Most High” using language almost identical to how Abram speaks of Yahweh, the God who called him out of Mesopotamia into Canaan and promised to bless all nations through him.

The text gives the strong impression that both Abram and Melchizedek are worshipping the same God. This places Melchizedek in the company of several other non-Hebrews whom the Bible presents as worshipping—or at least acknowledging the sovereignty of—the God of Israel. The most famous of these are Job, the prophet Balaam, and Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro.

In the normal order of human affairs, blessings are pronounced by superiors to subordinates, and tithes are given by subordinates to superiors. By both of these indications, Melchizedek is surprisingly shown to be greater than Abram, the revered Patriarch of God’s Chosen People. Finally, rather than bringing a celebratory feast of choice meat, which was the custom in those days, Melchizedek brought out bread and wine, the very elements Jesus would later use as symbols of His sacrifice for us, and that we use to this very day.

As we consider Melchizedek’s portrayal in the book of Hebrews, we’ll see that the author of Hebrews saw Melchizedek as a “place holder” for God’s future Anointed One—God’s Messiah (which *means* “anointed one”). The key thing to notice in Genesis is that Abraham is blessed by the precursor to the line of kings that would later descend from David, the line from which God’s Messiah would come.

The next place we encounter Melchizedek is in Psalm 110. On one level, Psalm 110 is a psalm of blessing for King David and those kings who inherited kingship after him; but at a deeper level, Jesus applied the psalm to Himself as both the Source and the Heir of David. You may remember the conversation:

Then, surrounded by the Pharisees, Jesus asked them a question: “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

They replied, “He is the son of David.”

*Jesus responded, “Then why does David, speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, call the Messiah ‘my Lord’? For David said, ‘**The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit in the place of***

honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies beneath your feet.” Since David called the Messiah ‘my Lord,’ how can the Messiah be his son?”

No one could answer him. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions (Matthew 22:41-46).

The Scripture Jesus was quoting—*“The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies beneath your feet.”*—was Psalm 110:1. Since Jesus applied this psalm to Himself, Psalm 110:4 takes on a new meaning when Melchizedek shows up again: *“The Lord has taken an oath and will not break his vow: ‘You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.’”* **By applying this psalm to Himself, Jesus told us that He himself is this “priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.”**

Now as you probably know, the short descriptions³ that appear before many of the psalms are not actually Scripture. They’re attributions of authorship and circumstance that describe how the leaders of Israel understood these psalms. And so, since this psalm is ascribed to David, it shows that Judaism understood Psalm 110 as referring to God’s Messiah, whom it recognized as the “Lord” to whom David spoke in the first verse.

Later, Jesus interpreted Psalm 110’s statement about “*sitting at the right hand of God*” as a reference to His own divine status and authority.⁴ The Jewish religious leaders knew what Jesus was saying about Himself with that reference, and that was one of the charges they brought against Him in the mockery of a trial that came later.

But here’s the catch: God’s “*priest forever in the order of Melchizedek,*” who would come from the line of David, would be from the tribe of Judah, David’s tribe, not from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, as the Jewish priesthood was. That’s going to be a key point in the book of Hebrews, to which we now turn.

The book of Hebrews is the only other place where Melchizedek appears in the Bible. And indeed, other than Jesus Himself, Melchizedek is the central figure in Hebrews. We turn first to Hebrews 5:1-10, the text that Pastor Andrew read earlier. I’m going to read those verses again, and I expect that you’ll hear them differently than you did a few minutes ago:

- 1 *For every high priest taken from among men is appointed in matters pertaining to God for the people, to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.*
- 2 *He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he is also clothed with weakness.*
- 3 *Because of this, he must make an offering for his own sins as well as for the people.*
- 4 *No one takes this honor on himself; instead, a person is called by God, just as Aaron was.*
- 5 *In the same way, Christ did not exalt himself to become a high priest, but God who said to him, You are my Son; today I have become your Father,*
- 6 *also says in another place, **You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.***

³ Called “superscriptions”

⁴ Matthew 26:64 (cp. Daniel 7:13). Psalm 110:1 is the first of twenty instances in Scripture in which the Messiah/Jesus is pictured “at God’s right hand”: Psalm 110:1; Matthew 22:44, 26:64; Mark 12:36, 14:62, 16:19; Luke 20:42, 22:69; Acts 2:33, 34, 7:55, 56; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22.

- 7 *During his earthly life, he offered prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*
- 8 *Although he was the Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*
- 9 *After he was perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,*
- 10 *and **he was declared by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.***

This is a most interesting passage. The author begins by describing two criteria that the high priest must fulfill:

The first criterion Hebrews identifies for the high priest is that he must be “**able to deal gently** with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he is also clothed with weakness. Because of this, he must make an offering for his own sins as well as for the people” (5:2-3). The second criterion is that “**No one takes this honor on himself**; instead, a person is called by God, just as Aaron was” (5:4).

The author of Hebrews then applies these two criteria to Jesus in reverse order. With respect to being called by God, Hebrews 5 says, ⁵ *That is why Christ did not honor himself by assuming he could become High Priest. No, he was chosen by God, who said to him, “You are my Son. Today I have become your Father.”*⁵ ⁶ *And in another passage God said to him, “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.”*⁶

With respect to being “subject to the same weaknesses,” Hebrews 5 tells us that *Although [Jesus] was the Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. After he was perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, and he was declared by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

There’s a lot going on here. Let’s work backward.

The first thing we encounter as we work backward through this text is the author’s agreement with Jesus that He—and only He—has been designated by the God of Israel to be “a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” And as this unique High Priest, Jesus is the “**Source of Eternal Salvation** for all those who obey Him.”

This is the only place in the Bible where “eternal salvation” appears, with just one similar expression, “everlasting salvation,” appearing in Isaiah 45:17. “*Eternal salvation*” sounds like Good News, but what’s up with Jesus “*learning obedience*” and “*being perfected*”?

In order to get at this, we have to back up a bit, to the very first verses of Hebrews. This is how Hebrews begins:

- 1 *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways.*
- 2 *In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him.*
- 3 *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

⁵ Psalm 2:7

⁶ Psalm 110:4

- 4 *So he became superior to the angels, just as the name he inherited is more excellent than theirs.*
- 5 *For to which of the angels did he ever say, You are my Son; today I have become your Father, or again, I will be his Father, and he will be my Son? (Hebrews 1:1-5).*

The Gospel of John reminds us that before *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,*⁷ *the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created.*⁸ This awesome Word of God is the same Jesus of Nazareth who “learned obedience” and “was perfected.”

When He lived among us, Jesus was certainly never “disobedient” or “imperfect”; but there are some things that not even God can experience without becoming fully human. Jesus “learned obedience” by actually obeying the will of the Father, by obeying when obedience was difficult and costly, by obeying when such obedience could have been avoided.

Aspiration is not the same thing as courage. Innocence is not the same thing as virtue. Willingness to obey only becomes obedience when the challenge has been met and conquered. And so, when Jesus got up from the agony of His prayer in Gethsemane, when He said a final “YES” to the Father’s will, then, *although He was the Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. After he was perfected, **he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him**, and he was declared by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

A few chapters later, Hebrews emphasizes that while the recipients of this letter were experiencing severe persecution, they have a Savior who understands their pain. In the conclusion of the letter, the author exhorts the readers: *Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won’t grow weary and give up* (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Well, I’m getting ahead of myself. The book of Hebrews “will preach,” and many scholars think it may actually be a sermon manuscript, though a pretty long one. Let’s return to Melchizedek as he appears in chapter 7.

Hebrews 7 is the central and focal chapter of this sermon, with six chapters preceding it and six chapters following it, and in Hebrews 7, Melchizedek is on center stage. I’m going to try to show you what the author of Hebrews was saying and why Melchizedek is crucial to the teaching of the book.

Back in Psalm 110:4, God had promised to set up a priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. Now the author of Hebrews asks, ¹¹ *So if the priesthood of Levi, on which the law was based, could have achieved the perfection God intended, why did God need to establish a different priesthood, with a priest in the order of Melchizedek instead of the order of Levi and Aaron?* (7:11).

Arguing from silence, which was an acceptable strategy in those days, our preacher notes that ³ *There is no record of [Melchizedek’s] father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the Son of God* (7:3).

⁷ John 1:14

⁸ John 1:1-3; cp. Colossians 1:15-20

According to this reasoning, because “Melchizedek had no recorded ancestry and no privileged line of descendants. He represented a . . . universal priesthood.”⁹

Writing to Jewish Christians who were considering abandoning following Jesus and returning to Judaism under the pressure of persecution, the author of Hebrews uses these Hebraic images and this Hebraic logic to demonstrate that:

1. Melchizedek is superior to Abraham because Abraham gives the gift of the tithe to Melchizedek, not vice versa;
2. The Levites, who make up the Levitical priesthood, are of the same stature as Abraham since they are descendants of Abraham;
3. Melchizedek, therefore, is superior to the Levitical priesthood as well as to Abraham;
4. Jesus the Christ is, like Melchizedek, ‘a priest forever’; and finally, therefore, that
5. Jesus the Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood and it would result in eternal loss to abandon Jesus for their previous faith.”¹⁰

Just listen to this litany from Hebrews 7 extolling the superiority of Jesus over the Levitical priesthood:

- ¹⁶ *Jesus became a priest, not by meeting the physical requirement of belonging to the tribe of Levi, but by the power of an indestructible life. . . .*
- ²⁶ *He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has been set apart from sinners and has been given the highest place of honor in heaven.*
- ²⁷ *Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people’s sins. . . .*
- ²⁵ *Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. i*

Jesus stated clearly and repeatedly that He was offering Himself as our Perfect Sacrifice for Sin. On His way to the Cross, Jesus told His disciples that “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and **to give his life as a ransom for many***” (Mark 10:45). And on the night of His betrayal, Jesus told His disciples, “*This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. **It is poured out as a sacrifice for many***” (Mark 14:24).

My friends, Jesus, our Forerunner, “the Source and Perfecter of our faith,”¹¹ sits, even at this very moment, at the right hand of the Father. *We have this Hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*¹²

“Therefore,” Hebrews tells us, “*since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold firmly to what we believe. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted*

⁹ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 123.

¹⁰ Edgar McKnight in Edgar McKnight & Christopher Church, “Hebrews-James,” *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), pp. 159-160.

¹¹ Hebrews 12:2

¹² Hebrews 6:19

in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

My friends, Jesus of Nazareth, very God of very God *while also* as human as you or I, is the **prophet** promised by Moses.¹³ He is the only High **Priest** who could have sacrificed Himself for us, once for all time, and He did that on April 3rd of the year 33.¹⁴ And He is the **King** of the Universe who will return on the clouds of heaven, bringing a New Heaven and a New Earth with Him.¹⁵

Put your hand in the hand of the One who stilled the water. Put your hand in the hand of the One who calmed the sea. He is able, my friends. He is able to take your hand and lead you home. Will you follow Him who is our Prophet, Priest, and King?

Let's roll, my friends. Let's roll.

ⁱ Jesus, the Great High Priest, is greater than the Levitical priesthood in seven ways:

1. “He is greater because of his divine appointment (7:14-15). The Levitical priesthood rested on the authority of the law. This priesthood failed, so God appointed a priest out of Judah.
2. “He is greater because of his indestructible life (7:16-19). He was nailed to a cross and then lay silent in the tomb; but not for long, for God reversed the verdict that accounted him worthy of death, raised him up to life, and exalted him to his own right hand.
3. “He is greater because of the oath of God (7:20-21). The oath of God established the priesthood of Christ. In Psalm 110:4 it is written: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” This made the priesthood of Christ superior to the Levitical priesthood because no such oath supported it. God’s solemn pledge was that the priesthood of Christ would be permanent. It would never pass away as other priesthoods had.
4. “He is greater because his work is based on a better covenant (7:22). . . . The old covenant was based on obedience to the law. Because man could not keep the law, priests were required to make sacrifices for every breach of the law, so that the way of access to God might be kept open.
 “But the writer of Hebrews said that Jesus was the guarantor of a better covenant, a new kind of agreement between God and man. This new agreement was not based on law and obedience, as was the old. Instead, it was based on love and the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. The new covenant was not based on man’s righteousness, but on God’s love.
5. “He is greater because his priesthood is perpetual (7:23-24). The Levites were temporary priests because they were subject to death and had to be replaced. Their work was very brief. But since Jesus lives forever, he is able to be a permanent priest.
6. “He is greater because he offers absolute salvation (7:25). He is able to save the worst of sinners and to save them completely. . . . He becomes our representative in heaven, lifting up arms of endless intercession. He will not let them down until the last redeemed soul comes home to God. . . .
7. “He is greater because of his personal qualifications (7:26-28). Clear, vibrant words mark the character of Jesus. He was priest by virtue of his character, not by his lineage. He was one in whom even God could see nothing but purity.”

¹³ Deuteronomy 18:14-22

¹⁴ Psalm 110:1-4

¹⁵ Psalm 2; Daniel 7:13; Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Revelation 19:11-16. In theological terms, Jesus as **Prophet, Priest, and King** is called “The Threefold Office,” or *munus triplex*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Threefold_office

<https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/how-is-jesus-our-prophet-priest-and-king/>