

Hebrews 7

“The Priesthood of Melchizedek as the Anchor of the Soul”

Introduction:

In chapter 5 the author contrasted “every high priest” of the Levitical system with Christ, the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The author returned to this topic in 6:20 after preparing the readers to hear his words in 5:11-6:19. The author has already established that the Christians confess a “high priest who has passed through the heavens” (4:14) after the “days of his flesh” (5:7), when he experienced the same sufferings that now face the readers. The author now develops the theme of the heavenly high priesthood in 7:1-10:18. The discussion of Melchizedek in chapter 7 prepares the way for his main point in 8:1 of the high priest who serves in the heavenly sanctuary.

Chapter 7 is framed by the author's pastoral concerns. We see this in 6:18-19 and 7:25. These “refugees” (6:18) can find their anchor (6:19; cf. 4:14; 10:23) in the fact that the Christ who shared their temptations has now become the “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” at the exaltation. The author explores this theme and then returns to the pastoral significance in the assurance that “He is able to save forever those who draw near to him, always living to intercede for them” (7:25). Thus the larger purpose of the argument is to provide certainty for a people on the way who have abandoned the security of home and country.

The author said in chapter 5 that the listeners were “dull of hearing” and need to learn the alphabet and be nourished on milk, he now moves to the solid food which will nourish them in the midst of their temptations. Only this “solid food” will provide the assurance that will equip the community with the patience endurance to inherit the promises (cf. 6:15).

Melchizedek and Abraham (7:1-10)

In 6:20 the author referred to Psalm 110:4 “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek”. “**For this Melchizedek**” - in 7:1 indicate that the author will now elaborate on this. He will do this by referring to Gen 14:17-20, the only other place Melchizedek is referred to in the OT. You could call chapter 7 a Midrash (Jewish exposition) on these two portions of scripture.

He abides a priest forever (7:1-3)

1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 3 He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

Here the author lays the foundation of the argument that he develops in the remainder of the chapter, shifting the focus from Abraham as the model of patient endurance (6:13-15) to **this Melchizedek... who met Abraham (7:1)**. The author frames his comparison with references to Melchizedek who “**met**” Abraham in 7:1,10.

- He recalls in **7:1-2a** that Melchizedek **blessed** Abraham and that Abraham gave a **tithe**, but doesn't elaborate on the significance of this until 7:4-10.
- In **7:2b-3**, the author moves away from describing the encounter of Melchizedek with Abraham by shifting the focus to the identity of Melchizedek. He finds Melchizedek's identity in his name and location. **King of Justice** (7:2b) reflects that ancient royal ideology of the king's role in preserving justice. To be **King of Salem** is to be **King of Peace** (7:2c). In describing Melchizedek with the terms **King of Justice** and **King of Peace** he is associating Melchizedek with the messianic age in Jewish literature. (Isa 9:5-7; Jer 23:5-6; Dan 9:24; Mic 5:4).
- The author argues from the silence of scripture in **7:3**, to say that Melchizedek was **without father, without mother**. These terms were commonly associated with deity, as also the description of him **without beginning of days or end of life (7:3b)** and **abides forever (7:3d)**.
- The author says that He is also **without genealogy (7:3a)**, this recalls the demand that Levitical Priests have the proper genealogical origin from Aaron. The author places it here not as a sign on inferiority, but of greatness. At the same time the author preparing the readers for the argument that Jesus, who was without Levitical genealogy, belongs to a greater order of priesthood (7:12-16).
- The author says that Melchizedek is **being like the Son of God**. Notice that Jesus does not resemble Melchizedek, but Melchizedek resembles Jesus. Melchizedek is a shadow of Jesus in the OT.
- **Abides a priest forever** shows us author's focus on how Melchizedek is like Jesus. The eternity of this priesthood will become the controlling theme of 7:4-28.

Q. Who is Melchizedek? Simple answer, we don't know. Rabbinic interpreters identified Melchizedek with Shem, son of Noah. Gen 11:10 states that Shem lived for 500years after the birth of his son, thus outliving Abraham by 35years. One tradition claimed that Melchizedek transferred the priesthood to Abraham, creating a line of descent from Israel's patriarch to Aaron. Josephus said that Melchizedek inaugurated temple worship in Jerusalem. Is Melchizedek Jesus? The author says here that Melchizedek *resembles* Jesus, not *is* Jesus.

The greatness of Melchizedek (7:4-10)

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.

here the author develops the themes introduced in 7:1-3. He shows us the significance of the fact that Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils and that Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

- The author sets the stage for the comparison with the phrase **see how great he is in 7:4a**. The comparison is not, however, between Melchizedek and the Son of God. Nor is it merely a contrast between Melchizedek and Aaron. The author is rather making a contrast between **two priesthoods**. When he reads Genesis 14:17-20, the author doesn't simply see 2 people, but 2 priesthood. He shows us how he sees this in **7:9-10**, where he comments that Levi was **in the loins of the father**.
- **How is His Priesthood Different? (4-6)**
 - Genealogy ==> to qualify as a priest you had to be a descendant of Levi, Melchizedek lack of genealogy does not disqualify him.
 - Here it is actually a sign of greatness.
 - Authority ==> Levitical authority is based on the Mosaic law (like a police officer's or judges authority is), but Melchizedek's authority is linked to blessing and promise. God had promised Abraham a blessing and Melchizedek blessed Abraham.
 - Implication of the people who also have promises will receive a blessing from their priest Jesus.
 - Tithes ==> Levitical priest received their tithes from their brothers, while Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham.
- **How is it Superior? (7-9)**
 - He received a tithe from Abraham ...Levi. The lesser figure, who paid the tithe, is blessed by the superior figure, who received the tithe.
 - His priesthood is held by one who lives forever. The Levitical priesthood is held by mortal men (they die). A sign of difference and superiority.
 - Vs10 shows us that the author is comparing priesthoods.

The author has established the difference and superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood. He will use these points about Melchizedek to apply them to Jesus.

A new order of priesthood (7:11-28)

In these verses the author switches from talking about Genesis and instead talks about Psalm 110:4. These verses are framed by references to "perfection", "if there were perfection through the Levitical priesthood" (7:11) and "for the Law made nothing perfect" (7:19). The author is going to talk about the adequacy of the priestly system and the need for a new priesthood. For the author issue can not be separated from the status of the Law. He links them together in vs11 with his comment "**for under it** (the priesthood) **the people received the Law**". And in vs19 concludes that "**the law made nothing perfect**". The author is going to say later that the gifts and sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood were unable to "*perfect the conscience of the worshipper*" (9:9 cf. 10:1). In Hebrews "perfection" involves purification and access to God. We remember that Jesus was made perfect and was perfected forever at the exaltation, opening up the way for others to draw near to God. The author is using this comparison to show the greatness of their confession and provide an anchor of hope for Christian refugees (6:18-19). The focus for the comparison in 7:11-19 is the reference in the Psalm to "the order of Melchizedek", which he compares to the order of Aaron.

A change of priesthood (7:11-13)

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? **12** For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. **13** For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.

Vs11 is a rhetorical question. He's done this before in 4:8 "*If Joshua had given them rest, he would not have spoken of another day*". In 8:7 he will say "*if the first covenant were blameless, there would have been no need of a second one*". In each one of these statements the author is showing precedence of a later passage over an earlier one. For the author, the reference in Ps110:4, which came after the institution of the Levitical system, indicates a change to a new order of priesthood. Since the Psalm announces the ultimate high priesthood that brings access to God, any alternative is "weak and useless".

- The question (vs11) ==> why did Jesus have to rise from the dead as a high priest like Melchizedek if the Levitical priesthood was able to bring perfection? The implication is that it was not able to bring perfection.
 - The completion of God's purposes ==> bringing many sons to glory, Hebrews 2:9-10.

Vs12-13 highlight the change of the priesthood. The Law was received through the Levitical priesthood, since there is now a new priesthood, there must also be a new Law. The author explains this in vs13 with "for". Jesus was not a Levite, but now he

has been declared a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. If the Law had not changed, how could this be? The implication is that both the Priesthood and the Law have now changed.

According to the likeness of Melchizedek (7:14-17)

14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. **15** This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, **16** who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. **17** For it is witnessed of him, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

The author shows in these verses that Jesus is the high priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. And also is showing that a change has taken place.

- Vs14** he points again to the fact that Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. Jesus is a priest not in the Levitical order, thus also like Melchizedek.
- Vs15-17** Secondly the author points to the difference basis for this priesthood. Not Levitical Law, but an indestructible Life, thus also like Melchizedek. The fact that God declared Jesus a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek at his resurrection also shows that things have changed.

Former commandment vs. better hope (7:18-19)

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

Here we see the author summarise his argument and show his pastoral concern. He shows us the qualitative distinction between the priesthoods.

On the one hand	On the other hand
Annulment of the previous argument	Introduction of a better hope
Weak and useless command/made nothing perfect	We draw near to God

The annulment of the one system means the introduction of the other. Instead of the **former commandment** we now have a **better hope**. An order that was **weak and useless** and **made nothing perfect** is replaced by a new order in which **we draw near to God**. Thus we see the effects of this change of priesthood.

- The author here uses stronger language, not “change of the Law” (7:12), but “**annulment of the previous commandment**”. This is a legal term for the cancelling of an agreement.
- The commandment was annulled because it was **weak and useless**. He mentioned in 7:16 that the commandment concerned the body, and he will speak later in chapter 9 (9:9-14; 10:1-4) that the commandment could cleanse only the flesh but not the conscience. The Levitical system is weak and useless because it could not open the way of access to God. It made **nothing perfect**. It could not provide access to God and entry into the heavenly world.
- The new priesthood offers a **better hope**. Here we see the author's pastoral concerns. Hopelessness is a major temptation to a community that now experiences suffering, social alienation, and the inability to see the ultimate victory. The author offered Abraham in chapter 6 as an example of patient endurance for inheriting the promise. This better hope is the anchor of the soul (6:19) that gives the wavering community a reason to persevere, knowing the future awaits them.
- The author says **in which we draw near to God**. Jesus has gone before them as their forerunner, now the way is open for them to follow. To **draw near** is used to speak of priests drawing near to the altar in the sanctuary. Thus while the people are waiting for God to fulfil his promises, they draw near to Him through hope. Hope is what is going to keep them going as they wait for God to fulfil His promise.

Q. How do we draw near to God?

A: through faith, through hoping in His promises. A man who has a close walk with the Lord is a man who is confident, and hopes in God.

Oath vs. no oath (7:20-22)

20 And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, **21** but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” **22** This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

Here the author focuses on the word “swore” found in Psalm 110:4, the “oath”. He firsts shows that the Levitical priests did not have an oath, and then quotes the Psalm again to show that Jesus was given an oath. The result is that Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant.

The author told us of the oath God gave to Abraham that he would bless him, giving Abraham the assurance that enabled him to persevere (6:12-15). It was God's oath which confirmed that the wilderness Generation would not enter his rest. It was God's oath that confirmed to Abraham the certainty that God would bless him. Like Abraham these people have received an oath and a promise which allows them to grasp the hope set before them. This oath was given to Jesus. This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

- The **guarantor** took the responsibility for another's debt. God made a promise, if God fails, Jesus will make sure the promise happens... The author is trying to show them the certainty of God's promises which they have in Jesus. They can persevere because Jesus guarantees their future.
- The **better covenant** will become a major theme in chapter 8 to 10. It refers to the priestly work of Christ.
 - The author is emphasising the irrevocability of God's promise.

The many vs. the one unchangeable forever (7:23-25)

23 *The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25* Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

The author here focuses upon the “**forever**” in the psalm quotation. He is making a contrast between the many which become priests but can't remain priests since they die, and the One who has the priesthood **because he remains forever**.

- His pastoral concern is seen in the word **consequently**. This is a result of the fact that Jesus abides forever.
- **He is able to save to forever those who draw near... since he always lives to make intercession for them.** He is showing them what **Priest forever** means for them.
- **Intercedes** normally refers to someone who makes a petition on behalf of another, within the context of Hebrews it refers to the one who has been tempted and “is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18).
 - these people who now suffer temptation do not only wait for future deliverance; in the present time they may draw near to God and find strength to continue through hope, because of Christ.

The greatness of the high priest (7:26)

26 *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.*

The author begins his conclusion of chapter 7. His focus now is on the greatness of the high priest. He is showing the exalted status of the high priest.

- To say **it was fitting that we have such a high priest**, the author again shows his pastoral concern by placing the readers in the story “we”.
- **Holy, innocent, unstained** shows his purity.
- **Separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens** shows how he is able to help them since he is at the right hand of God.

The two priesthoods (7:27-28)

27 *He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28* For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Here the author returns to the comparison of the 2 priesthoods. **Vs27** could be outlined like this, the parentheses shows what is not explicitly stated but inferred from the context:

Levitical Priests	Christ the exalted high priest
Daily sacrifices	Once-for-all sacrifice
For his own sins	(sinless)
(offered animal sacrifices))	Offered Himself

- The contrast between the many and the one sacrifice shows the finality of Jesus' sacrifice. This is the first time that the author shows Jesus to be both Priest and Sacrifice.

In **vs28** the author summarises the argument from 5:1-7:28, contrasting the effects of the Law and the word of the oath.

The Law establishes	The word of the oath establishes
High priests	A son

Who have weaknesses	Who is perfected forever
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- To be weak shows the inability of the priests to open access to God for the people. Jesus is the Son who is perfected forever. He has opened the way, and is able to help.

Q. How can you be confident that God will save you?

A. He has made an oath! Jesus guarantees it! Look at Jesus! His work is complete!