

“The Priest We Need”
Hebrews 7:1-28
August 1, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The theme of this chapter is stated in the last verse of the previous chapter, which announces that Jesus has *become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek* (6:20). The author has been trying to get to this important point for several chapters now but didn't think his readers were ready for it. It is one of the main points he wants to make because he believed that an appreciation of Jesus' high priestly work was exactly what they needed if they were to go on to maturity.

The whole idea of priests is a little foreign to us. In our Protestant circles, we tend to think of priests as those clerics in other denominations, and we struggle to see the relevance of Jesus as our great high priest. In order to appreciate this teaching, we need to understand and accept the Bible's description of our central problem—sin. That is the problem priests deal with, and no priest adequately dealt with it until Jesus. What's more, no priest will ever be needed again because Jesus dealt with it once for all.

If we are to benefit from what is taught in this chapter, we need to begin by evaluating whether we believe sin to be our main problem. It's a legitimate question to raise because our world offers many different diagnoses of our central problem. Many have been talking lately about critical theory, which teaches that the central problem is that the wrong people have power. Therefore, the solution is to remove them from power and give it to those who have been without power. Others see the main problem as economic and would address problems by some effort at economic empowerment. Still others see the main problem as personal dysfunction that is to be addressed by therapy. The belief here is that people have the answers within them, and a good therapist simply needs to help them discover that. I've been reading a book lately by Beckett Cook in which he describes his five years of therapy attempting to deal with the emptiness he felt at the core of his life. Every week for five years he spent fifty minutes with his counselor. Though he benefited by gaining some helpful insights about his life and some of his patterns of self-destruction, he reported that none of this helped him deal with that sense of emptiness. He said that he began to want some real answers to questions such as “Why am I actually here? Where am I actually going?” One day in his therapist's office, he was extremely frustrated by the lack of any answers and screamed, “What is this all for? What's the meaning of life?” His therapist paused, then responded in his typical way, “What do *you* think the meaning of life is?” Beckett snapped, “I quit! I'm done,” and walked out never to return again. I'm all for good counselors, but good counselors know that our central problem is sin, the solution for which lies outside us and not within us. The solution is the high priestly work of Jesus. Let's look at that now.

I. Jesus' Priestly Order

The author has been eager to explain to his readers that Jesus has become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. This rather mysterious figure is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament and only in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. As he explains in the first verses of our chapter, Melchizedek was the king of Salem who met Abraham when he was returning from his successful military campaign against the four kings who had captured his nephew, Lot, together with his whole city. The incident is recorded in Genesis 14. The author makes three points about this analogy of Jesus as a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

His first point is that Jesus, like Melchizedek, is both a priest and a king. Melchizedek was the king of a city called Salem, which may refer to an early name for Jerusalem. In any case, *salem* is a form of the word *shalom*, so this man was the king of peace. His name, Melchizedek, means "king of righteousness." So his city must have been quite unique in this godless era, since it was marked by both righteousness and peace. Those two are linked in the Bible. True and lasting peace comes from righteousness, both for a city and for an individual. Melchizedek was also a priest, identified here and in Genesis 14 as "**priest of the Most High God**" (7:1). It would seem that God was at work beyond the family of Abraham, since this man too had become a worshiper of Yahweh.

The fact that Melchizedek was both a priest and a king set him apart from the Levitical order of priests. In the Old Testament, the offices of priest and king were kept separate. No priest could ever become a king and vice versa. But Melchizedek was both, making him a perfect type of Christ, who is also both priest and king, as well as prophet. We'll consider in our next point the practical application of this.

The second point he makes concerns Melchizedek's lack of a genealogy. "**He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life**" (7:3). He doesn't mean that Melchizedek literally had no father or mother, but only that none are recorded of him in Genesis. The author considers him to be a type of Christ. When we say that something in the Old Testament is a type of Christ, we mean that it is a picture or illustration of some aspect of Jesus. What is highlighted about Jesus in Melchizedek's lack of a genealogy is the fact that Jesus came to earth without an earthly father because He is the Son of God.

His third point is that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and of the Levitical priesthood that would later emerge from Abraham. He saw this in the fact that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek from the spoils he collected after his conquest of the four kings. Since the lesser pays tithes to the greater, this shows the greatness of Melchizedek.

The point of all this isn't to talk about Melchizedek, but to talk about Jesus. That's what the psalmist does in Psalm 110, a messianic psalm attributed to King David. He had undoubtedly been meditating on Genesis 14 and pondering what God could have had in mind in including him in Abraham's story. After all, he doesn't advance the story line at all. He just appears and then disappears, never to be mentioned again. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, King David came to see that God had a very good reason for including Melchizedek in his sacred Scriptures. He states his conclusion in Psalm 110:4. **"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'"** This all comes into sharper focus as we apply it.

II. Jesus' Priestly Work

The primary application of Jesus as our great high priest after the order of Melchizedek is stated in verse 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."** But before getting to that application, the author makes two preliminary points in the verses just preceding verse 25. His first preliminary point is that Jesus became such a priest not by birth but by an oath from God. Levitical priests were appointed based on the fact that they were descendants of Levi. Jesus was descended from the royal tribe of Judah rather than the priestly tribe of Levi. He was unqualified to be a Levitical priest. His qualification, rather, came from an oath sworn by God, an oath to make him a priest from a different order.

His second preliminary point is that Jesus' priesthood, unlike the Levitical priesthood, is permanent. Levitical priests could not serve continually because they would all eventually die. But Jesus does serve as priest forever, and he serves as the **"guarantor of a better covenant"** (7:22). The word for "guarantor" is used only here in the New Testament. It is sometimes translated "surety," as when our closing hymn says, "Before the throne my Surety stands." It refers to one who offers his goods and himself as security for what was promised. It is not unlike one today who cosigns on a loan. The next chapter will explore this more fully, but for now it basically means that Jesus, in his priestly office, is the one who secures the blessings of the covenant for us.

Let's turn now to the two applications of verse 25: complete salvation and ongoing intercession. First, as our priest, Jesus **"is able to save to the uttermost."** We can understand better the extent of our salvation by understanding better the extent of sin in our lives. As Evangelicals, we are most familiar with the fact that sin makes us guilty before God, unable to be in his presence and therefore deserving of eternal separation and judgment. Jesus delivers us from that guilt. Guilt is both subjective and objective. Subjective guilt is what we feel. We feel guilty, and such a guilty conscience eats away at us

spiritually, physically and emotionally. But sin is also objective. A person can be guilty even if no guilt is ever felt. Jesus delivers from both.

But sin does more than make us guilty; it also makes us miserable. So Jesus also delivers us from the power of sin that keeps us in bondage through a sinful lifestyle. Jesus saves to the uttermost by giving us a new heart that begins to want to love God and others.

Donald Grey Barnhouse illustrates this from that promise in Isaiah 11:6-7 where we are told that the lion's nature will be changed from carnivore to herbivore: **“and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”** Barnhouse imagines going to a zoo today and reading that to the lion and telling him, “The Bible says that you will stop eating other animals and start eating plants.” The lion will roar and say that he doesn't want to eat grass; he prefers raw, fresh meat. In the same way, our hearts must be changed from our proud, selfish hearts to loving hearts. The salvation promised to us here includes that as well. It's in process now, a process known as sanctification, and won't conclude until we see Jesus face to face.

This uttermost salvation extends to the decay of the physical body, assuring us that our bodies will one day be raised to be just like the resurrected body of Jesus. It extends to our disordered internal lives because sin brings disorder to our mind, affections, will and body. It extends to our relationships, both with God and with others. It extends to our relationship to ourselves, restoring to us a proper sense of self-confidence and self-respect. It extends to our relationship with creation and our work lives. This salvation is not fully present yet, but many parts of it are.

I've just finished reading the book *Becoming Whole*, by Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic, in which they describe the goal of God's story of change. “People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.” That's a description of the salvation brought to us by our great high priest, Jesus. Is there some part of that salvation that resonates most deeply with you right now?

It comes to all **“who draw near to God through him.”** Salvation doesn't come from within, but from without. It comes simply by drawing near to God, which is as simple as saying sincerely, “God, I need help.” And it comes by doing so through the mediation of the right priest. Jesus alone is that priest.

Not only does Jesus save to the uttermost, he also lives forever to make intercession for us. To intercede is to bring all his influence to bear on our behalf. Like many of you, I pray every day for my family and my church. But I am keenly aware of the fact that my prayers are weak in many ways. For one thing, I don't always know what to pray for. Even with my wife, who I know better than anyone

else on the planet, I'm not always sure what she most needs. I pray for my children and grandchildren, but they all live in other cities and I don't have sufficient knowledge to pray more than general prayers much of the time. My prayers are also weakened by my own sin and my own struggles in trusting God. And then there are the distractions and interruptions that often cause my prayers to wander. Jesus is not hindered by any of those things. He has perfect knowledge of us all the time. What's more, he's not just our priest but our king too. He rules all.

People make two mistakes in this area of intercession. One is to undervalue Jesus' intercession and think that others can have better influence with God. Some pray to saints or to particularly pious family members who have already passed away. Others think that Jesus' intercession means that the Father is hostile to his requests and must be persuaded to act on our behalf. But that is not the case. The Father and the Son are completely united. After all, the Bible teaches that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." The intercession of the Son means that the Father and the Son are in the control room of the universe, the place of influence. And their position there is used for our good, since Jesus has both lived for us and died for us. The way is made clear for God's good purposes to be achieved in our lives, and these purposes are certain of fulfillment because of Jesus' intercession.

CONCLUSION:

Let's conclude where we started. In order to appreciate Jesus as our great high priest, we must come to the place of seeing sin as our main problem. When you think of changes you would like to see in your life, do you think primarily of your sin, or does your mind go elsewhere? You must come to see that your primary problem is not that you're a failure or a screwup. It's not a lack of opportunity or any deficiency in your intelligence, ability or appearance. It's not bad parenting, an inferior education, a troubled marriage, or a difficult job. Your basic problem is the same one we all have, the problem addressed by Jesus' priesthood. You're a sinner, and defining your problem in that way is actually very good news because of what is declared in this chapter. Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. There is a solution for the sin problem, and it is a complete solution. So speak to yourself the words of the hymnwriter as he meditated on this passage. "Arise, my soul, arise, shake off your guilty fears; the bleeding Sacrifice in my behalf appears: before the throne my Surety stands, before the throne my Surety stands, my name is written on his hands."