

The Superiority of Our Great High Priest

Hebrews 7

Introduction

Teaching Scripture in public schools. Teaching Scripture in public schools has become a controversial topic of conversation over the last few years. It's a wonderful privilege that we currently enjoy and we should fight hard to keep it. It improves the biblical literacy of the entire state. Often, later in life when people are considering religion it's the Christian religion to which they turn. But most importantly, it's the opportunity to reach out to children with the life-giving message about Jesus. But it has been a battleground.

A few years ago now, I was teaching Scripture in our local public school. We had a group who wanted to offer ethics at the school because they didn't want their children in Scripture. They were allowed in and they taught their lessons.

After just two years, we spoke to the lady in charge of the programme about plans for next year. She was pulling out, which was a surprise to us. How do you keep coming up with lessons, she asked? Don't you eventually run out of stuff to teach?

I thought to myself 'have you even read (like bread) the Bible'? But thankfully the woman I was sharing with answered first. 'Nope, we just keep teaching them about Jesus and there's always more to say.'

There's always something more to say about Jesus.
(Diamond illustration)

Today, we're going to hear why it is so crucial to Christians that Jesus is a priest but it all starts with the most mysterious man in the whole Bible, Melchizedek.

The Mysterious Melchizedek

Last week we saw how the author of the Letter to the Hebrews started this part of his argument only to hold the rest of it over while he dealt with other matters.

v10

(Jesus was) "...designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek."

So, first question: Who is Melchizedek?

I'm going to start by reading **everything** we know about him from the Old Testament.

Firstly, Genesis 14:17-20:

After his return from the defeat of Chedor-lao-mer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
 maker of heaven and earth;
 and blessed be God Most High,
 who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”
 And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

The two of them talk briefly and that's the end of the interaction. After that he disappears from the narrative and is never heard from again.

There is another mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, one of the more famous psalms.

A Psalm of David

The LORD says to my lord:

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

The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter.

Rule in the midst of your foes! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day you lead your host upon the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you.

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,

“You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

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

(Pause)

Friends, apart from what we're about to read in Hebrews, this is everything Bible tells us about Melchizedek. That's it. He just shows up, Abraham, the man from whom the Jewish nation came, acknowledges him as the superior and that's about it.

There's a strange mention of him in the psalms and that's really all we get.

Now, he's evidently a man of some importance because the father of the nation of God gives him a tenth of all he had. This man is the key to understanding one of the most important parts of who Jesus is. But that's all we know. That is, until the Letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 7:1-3

For this Melchizedek, **king** of Salem, **priest** of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him; 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. He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues as priest forever.

Notice how Melchizedek is both a king and priest. (pause) And he has a priesthood that continues forever. We'll come back to that point in a little while.

But let's keep reading.

Hebrews 7:4-10

See how great he is! Abraham the patriarch gave him a tithe of the spoils. 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 brethren, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who has not their genealogy received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. Here tithes are received by mortal men; there, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Friends, what the author is trying to show us here is that this Melchizedek fellow, a priest and a king, is superior to Abraham and is therefore superior to Levi. Who is Levi? Levi was one of Abraham's great grandsons and one of the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. More importantly, his tribe, known as Levites, served the nation as priests. Throughout Israel's history, the Levitical priesthood served God and the nation as priests. You couldn't be a priest in Israel unless you were a Levite.

The author says that the superior blesses the inferior. Melchizedek blesses Abraham and Abraham receives that blessing. And because Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, he's also greater than Levi, Abraham's descendant.

My generation is known for many things. We've been called the Simpsons generation, the Harry Potter generation, Gen Y, Millennials and much else. One of the things that supposedly marks us as a group is that we don't show as much deference to our elders as past generations did. Maybe they're right, maybe it just looks different.

But leaving that to the side, no *Israelite* would have dared to suggest anything other than Abraham was superior to his descendant Levi. The whole nation would have shown appropriate respect and honour to Abraham. He was before them all.

So for all we *don't* know about Melchizedek, we know this for certain. His priesthood is far above that of any of the Old Testament priests.

Why We Need Another High Priest

But even though Melchizedek was the supreme priest but he doesn't hang around for long. And if we had Levitical priests doing their job, why did we need another one? Why did Jesus need to become a High Priest?

The Problem

Let's pick it up from verse 11.

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), that 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?

He's asked the question better than I did! If perfection was possible through the old system of priests why did we need a priest of the order of Melchizedek rather than of Levi or Aaron? Clearly it *wasn't* possible.

And to show us the passage sets up a comparison. To start with it gives us three reasons why the old system was only ever temporary.

Firstly verse 18 says,

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect). (Pause).

The Law, under which the Levitical priests served, the Law of the Old Testament is described here as unable to make anything perfect. It was weak because it could not give life and it was useless, I take it, because it was an ineffective means of approaching God. It didn't properly fix the problem between God and us; it couldn't bridge the chasm we'd made.

Why else did we need a new kind of priest?

Verse 23

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office...

These priests, these human finite, *mortal* priests couldn't continue to mediate between God and the people forever because they would die. There were many of them because of this. And this is seen as a weakness of the Levitical system.

By its very nature it was temporary. None of the Levitical priests could do the job sufficiently because they would eventually die. But that wasn't even their biggest problem. (Advance to blank slide)

The third part of the problem comes in verse 27. Verse 27 repeats the concern we first heard last week in Chapter 5. The old priests could never truly go between God and man properly for one key reason. There was one thing that presented the biggest problem of all. And it's something that we all share. They needed a sacrifice for their own sin.

You see, our God is
so holy,
so utterly different to us,
so magnificent and pure

that no sinner can be in his presence and live.

It's as though he's a furnace and only the purest metal can survive being anywhere near him. People such as ourselves could not hope to approach him as we are, full of impurities and sin. And our sin, our autonomy from God has so infiltrated us, has so affected every part of us that if we were to approach God by

ourselves it would be like a rusted out Holden against a mighty bushfire. There would be nothing left. None of us could stand.

This is *our* problem, and this is the *priests'* problem. They needed a sacrifice so that they could approach God in order to offer sacrifices for the rest of the nation.

Surely this system was only ever temporary! There could never be perfection through the Levitical priesthood, the Law couldn't fix it and the priests who worked under it would die and were just as sinful.

The people needed a different priesthood. Friends, we need a different priest. Because we, too, are too corrupt to stand before the Most High God and live. We need someone to go between us, to mediate for us. To be a priest for us. (pause) But no one realised that we needed it until it was there.

It's a bit like me and air conditioning in my car. My first few cars didn't have air conditioning. I thought everything was fine. But I was getting married and someone had a quiet word in my ear saying I should probably have it fixed if I was going to take her on a honeymoon.

Once it was fixed, I realised how much I needed air conditioning. It's wonderful! I would no longer be sweaty getting out of the car! I thought that was just part of summer!

Our need for a new priest is kinda like that.

The Solution

Let me show you what I mean from verse 15

This becomes *even more* evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

Once the priest rose in the likeness of Melchizedek it was evident that we needed him. How is he a priest? Not by a legal requirement, you have to be in the line of Levi, but by the power of an indestructible life, which I think is talking about his resurrection. This priest is Jesus, who like Melchizedek, is a superior priest. But it doesn't stop there.

Now we see the other side of the comparison.

Verse 18 again

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

The law was weak and useless. It couldn't help us approach the Most High God

but Jesus is the hope through which we draw near to God. He has opened up a way to get to God.

Because he gave himself to be the sacrifice we need, we can now approach God and even relate to him as we were made to do. A man died,
he. died.
so that we can be restored to God. He made it possible.

We'll hear more about the sacrifice that Jesus made as we continue to listen to what God has to say in Hebrews so I don't want to spoil it too much here.

But our text today has a little more to say about the nature of Jesus' sacrifice and what kind of high priest he is.

From verse 26

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered himself up.

How was Jesus a superior high priest? He was pure, without sin and so didn't need to sacrifice for himself. In fact, because he was without sin, he was able to BE the acceptable sacrifice.

But as if all that weren't enough, there is one last way that Jesus is the superior high priest. Remember how the old priesthood could never really do the job because they kept dying?

Well, let's look at that verse again and see how Jesus compares.

From verse 23 again

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.

This, I think, is the most important part of the Melchizedek parallel. The Levitical priests were temporary; they died. The priest after the order of Melchizedek continues as priest forever. Jesus is the priest that continues forever. He will be there, for you, forever.

The comparison is over. There is a clear winner. Jesus' priesthood is based on the power of an indestructible life and not legal requirements.

He draws us near to God which the Law could never do.

The old priests were full of sin and needed to offer sacrifices for themselves before they could offer sacrifices to God. Jesus not only didn't need to offer sacrifice for his sin, but gave himself for our sin.

And because he has been raised from the dead, no more to die, his priesthood will last forever.

What a privilege it is to have such a wonderful high priest who will never retire, get ill, leave or forfeit his ministry. What a magnificent high priest Jesus is. How thankful we ought to be to have him.

What the High Priest Jesus is Able to Do

Lastly, what the High Priest Jesus is able to do.

Before I began training for the ministry I was at Uni training to be a high school teacher. I had a lecturer who told us that it was his habit to write two tiny words at the top of his blackboard so that he and not the class could see. He said that these two words made all the difference in his teaching and that they were a constant reminder for him to teach properly.

What were the words? Who cares?

Why? Because, he said, knowledge without context is next to useless. You must teach children *why* they are learning what they are. Actually he went further and said if you can't, don't bother teaching it to them.

We've spent a good amount of time this morning understanding a part of who Jesus is that we don't think about much, his high priesthood. His priesthood is far superior to what preceded it but well may we ask, 'who cares?'

The Bible tells us the answer. It's because of what he can do as our high priest.

Verse 25

Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. If I got to choose the one thing you could take away from my sermon it would be this:

it is because Jesus is the High Priest that he can save you, since he always lives to mediate between us and God.

Jesus is the great high priest who can save. He is the one through whom we can draw near to God.

And he is the only way to God. How do we draw near to God? Through him. Approaching God can happen no other way but by Jesus the ultimate high priest.

He is able to save us for all time. This high priest gave his life as a sacrifice to make the way possible.

Jesus, the high priest always lives, and so is a priest forever.

This great high priest, serves the Most High God and invites you to do the same.

And Pete is going to help us think about one of the ways we can do that together as God's people at St Mark's.