

The Power of an Indestructible Life

Hebrews 7:1-25

As chapter 6 comes to a close, we are told that we have hope, a kind of hope that's a sure and steady anchor that will moor us in place. That hope is an eternal priest that's different from the kind of priests from the Old Testament, and a priest of an altogether different type.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God..."
— Hebrews 6:19–7:1a (ESV)

As we'll see, Melchizedek is an important character in the author's point. So, let's spend a few minutes to see who this person is and get a better picture for why this obscure Old Testament character appears in the book of Hebrews.

Introducing Melchizedek

Back in Hebrews chapter 5:10 the author first introduces Melchizedek, but the passages doesn't tell us much about him except that Jesus is a kind of high priest like Melchizedek was. So we're left wondering who this mysterious person is.

If you do a search in your bible for the name Melchizedek, you'll only see a few small references to him. He's first seen in Genesis 14, then referenced in Psalm 110:4. Then, here in the book of Hebrews our author spends an entire chapter talking about him. So, let's take a moment and go back to Genesis 14:17-20 and see who this obscure character is.

As you're making your way to Genesis 14, a little bit of context to this story is helpful. In the previous two chapters of Genesis we see that Abram is called by God to leave his country and go where God tells him to. As God is calling Abram, he makes a promise that he do something very special with Abram and make him into a great nation. So, Abram obeys, leaves his land and takes his wife and nephew, Lot with him. After some time, their cattle and livestock got to be so huge that they needed to spread out more. Lot chooses to go live in Sodom while Abram lived in Canaan. While Lot is living there, Sodom is invaded by a group of kings and Lot and his family are captured. Abram hears about it, gathers an army to go set Lot free. And with God's help, that's just what he does. Abram returns and this is where our story picks up and Genesis introduces Melchizedek.

*After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer 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,
Possessor 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.
Genesis 14:17–20 (ESV)*

Now, on the surface this story might seem insignificant. Abram is blessed by a priest, so what? Well, there's two key things about this passage we need to understand.

The Throne

First is about his kingship. We see here that Melchizedek was not only a priest, but a king! King of Salem. In Israel, God had given the privilege of being a king to David and David's descendants. So, if you're a Jew, you would have had to show your genealogy connects you back to David if you're going to be able to be king. But, here we have a man who both king and priest of the Most High before David was ever around.

The Priesthood

Second, we need to see this small comment *“He was priest of God Most High.”* The Old Testament is full of priests, so why this important? Well, because the Jewish listeners are very used to priests, but priests that we're established under the Mosaic Law which wouldn't happen until many years after Abraham is dead. The Mosaic Law says that you can only be a priest if you're a descendant of Aaron, a Levite. That makes Melchizedek a priest from a different kind of priesthood.

We are starting to get the picture of what the author of Hebrews is doing. Jesus cannot be a priest under the Mosaic Law. Since you have to be a Levite, which Jesus wasn't. The Jewish listeners would know that because it was such a prominent part of their culture. So, how could Jesus be a High Priest? And not just a high priest, but a great high priest? Because, Jesus is the kind of priest that Melchizedek was, he is a priest outside of the law, before the law, greater than the law.

And, this is the only time we see someone other than God be both a king and priest.

So, why does the author dig up this obscure Old Testament character who only has a few measly verses in the Bible? Because brothers and sisters, he's showing us that there's something very special about Melchizedek, and that makes Jesus so much more special.

The King-Priest Pattern

Let's pick up in Hebrews chapter 7 and see how the author shows us the importance of Melchizedek.

*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.
— Hebrews 7:1–3 (ESV)*

Verses 1 and 2 give us a brief overview of the story of Abram and Melchizedek. And our author notes two key things about Melchizedek in the opening of this chapter: his names and his lineage.

His Name

In verse 2, we see that the name “Melchizedek” apparently means “king of righteousness”. It’s a bold statement to say that someone is righteous, let alone being king of righteousness. But, that’s what we see here.

Not only that, but we also see that he’s king of a place called Salem, which means “peace”. Melchizedek’s kingdom the kingdom of peace. In his time, we saw how wicked the earth was with Lot living in the horrifically wicked place of Sodom, and kings raiding and plundering each other.

So, a righteous king of peace would have stood out among the times, and been something the world would have needed.

His Lineage

There’s more significance than just the names though. The Old Testament authors don’t give us any information about his mother or father, or his birth or death. The author plays on this idea, showing how it appears that this man Melchizedek has no beginning or end. He doesn’t have a typical human lineage, but a kind of special, eternal one. That means his priesthood is of the same kind, an eternal one, which makes it possible for Jesus to legitimately be a priest forever.

So in our first few verses of chapter 7, we are seeing two key points about Melchizedek: 1) he is both a king and priest, and 2) one that has no beginning or end.

The Greater Kind of Priest

But, the author of Hebrews doesn’t stop there. It might be easy to dismiss Melchizedek because he’s merely a blip on the Old Testament radar. If you dismiss Melchizedek, then you may also be tempted to dismiss Jesus’ role as king-priest. Verse 4 continues...

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.
— Hebrews 7:4–10 (ESV)

Abraham was (and is) considered the patriarch of Israel. Through him, God promised to establish Israel. Through Abraham, God made a promise to bless the nations and bring the promised one that would come to save us from our sins. God personally established a covenant with Abraham, promising to do all of this for him and through his descendants. And later, through those descendants of Abraham, God would later establish the Mosaic law which gave Israel the priests they were familiar with for many generations. It’s easy to see why Abraham is considered the greatest patriarch.

But, if Abraham is the greatest patriarch, why does Abraham give tithe to Melchizedek? If the priests from the line of Levi are established through their father Abraham, shouldn’t Abraham be taking tithe from Melchizedek? And, shouldn’t Abraham be blessing Melchizedek instead of the other way around?

Well, that's just the point. Hebrews is arguing that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, because the kind of relationship we see here. Abraham is one being blessed, by "a greater" person, and in fact even gives a tithe or offering to Melchizedek. Because Melchizedek was a priest of the most high God.

The Jews who are listening to Hebrews being read may be tempted to go back to the Law of Moses to save them and leave the work of Christ. But Melchizedek shows us that the Levite priests are 'lesser' than Melchizedek.

A Change in the Law

Hebrews continues in verse 11 to show us more of how the Law given to Moses isn't better than Jesus, or required for salvation. In fact, it can't save.

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. 14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

— Hebrews 7:11–14 (ESV)

The Mosaic law and its priesthood demand perfection. But, it cannot make anyone perfect. Verse 11 makes it clear that no one can be perfect by attempting to follow a set of rules. And what does God demand to be saved? A perfect life. And no matter how hard you try to follow a set of rules...it doesn't make God happy, because it doesn't make your life perfect. In fact, attempting to follow a set of rules to save you only condemns you, because as soon as you break one, you've shown your imperfection. And there's only been one perfect person to walk this earth, and it's not you. It's Jesus.

So, God, being gracious sent a new, different kind of priest. One who brings us life and powerful grace. Because, that's what we needed. Jesus our new great high priest isn't a levite, and that's very important. If Jesus were a levite, then all of the Mosaic Law could have come with his priesthood. But, praise God that he is not that kind of priest. Thankfully, we do not live to the law of Moses, we live by the law of Christ¹. And this frees us from having to follow a law to be saved. And that's what the author desperately wants the Jews (and us) to see.

An Indestructible Priest

As the author continues in verses 15-17, the need for a better priesthood is reinforced.

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."*

— Hebrews 7:15–17 (ESV)

¹ See Galatians 6:2 and 1 Corinthians 9:21

This new priesthood that lays aside the old law, because Christ has appeared and become our new great high priest. As we've looked at the pattern of Melchizedek, we see that the genealogy of Jesus isn't what's important for his priesthood, it's his eternal nature. His never-ending life is what qualifies him to be a priest forever, as this quote from Psalm 110:4 shows us.

And do you see the word used to describe the kind of life that Jesus has? It's "indestructible". The Pharisees and religious leaders tried to end the life of Jesus, and while they did kill him, they didn't destroy him. God the Father raised him back to life showing us that his life is indestructible, it cannot be destroyed. Which, makes it possible for him to be our priest forever. He's one that will never die, or go away.

A Priesthood of Hope

What's exciting is that this never-ending priest that we have doesn't hold us to the weight of the law, but brings hope and life. The author continues in verses 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.
— Hebrews 7:18–19 (ESV)*

This new priest and his office of priesthood brings two amazing effects. First, The former commandment (law given at Mt Sinai) is set aside! Praise God. That law (or really any law) cannot make us perfect. It's useless to make us clean or pure or perfect. *It does not make us righteous.* This is a repeated point of warning through Hebrews: the Jews had to understand that righteousness does not come through the law, but only through Jesus. Any other attempt to use a list of rules is drift (Hebrews 2:1). It's falling away (Hebrews 3:12)! And it's the message that we need to hear even today. There aren't any rules we can follow that will make us righteous in God's eyes.

Second, we have hope and the ability to draw near to God. Not like the old covenant where you would die if you went into the presence of God in the holy of holies, but a kind of covenant where we can draw near! We can draw near to a throne of grace, not judgement (4:16). That judgement was nailed to the cross, making a way to draw near to a powerful throne filled with grace towards us (See also Colossians 2:13-14).

Sealed with an Oath

But, it's not just that Jesus is our great high priest in a supreme kind of priesthood, it's also that he brings a new covenant along with his priesthood.

*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.
— Hebrews 7:20–22 (ESV)*

Our author returns again to Psalm 110:4, this time to highlight that Jesus is installed as our supreme high priest by the very oath of God. This is a priesthood sealed with an oath by the almighty, all-powerful Yahweh God. God himself installs Jesus into this new kind of priesthood with his very own words, words of promise. And this stands in contrast to the Levite priests, who weren't installed by an oath. But now, by the grace of God through this oath, Jesus is our high priest of this new and better covenant that makes us viewed as righteous and brings peace with God.

This is the first time we hear of a covenant mentioned in Hebrews. Because along with a better priesthood, we also see a better covenant. The author will talk more about it in the next chapter, but it's important for us to note that along with the priesthood, we are also under a better kind of covenant.

Now, we might hear the word "better" and think some kind of minor improvement. In our consumer-driven world we are bombarded by TV ads promising a new and better kind of dish soap, or a better, safer kind of car, or even a breakthrough technology that's faster and better than before. That's not the kind of difference in this covenant. Remember back a few verses where our author showed us that this new priesthood had existed before the Mosaic or Levitical priesthood? It's not a minor improvement, it's radically different and of different kind. It's permanent, completely dependent upon God, and mediated through Jesus, who is God himself!

Complete Salvation, Forever

Verses 23-25 close our section out with the hope that's based on all of chapter 7 so far. Jesus isn't just a new kind of priest and king of peace and righteousness. He is those things, with a powerful effect.

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.

— Hebrews 7:23–25 (ESV)

In the old covenant priesthood, started at Mt. Sinai with Moses, priests were qualified based on the family they belonged to. Fathers and mothers had children, and those children had children, over and over again. Because of the curse of death from Genesis 3, priests would die off year after year after year. This means over the years as you went to visit the temple to offer sacrifices and be in the place where God dwelt, your priest may be different because of death. But this isn't so with Jesus. The power of death has no hold on our great high priest, Jesus. Jesus breaks the death-curse that plagued the former priesthood. He continues forever!

But, why is it important? Why has the author gone through all this trouble to identify and show us Melchizedek and explain the importance of this better kind of priesthood that Jesus belongs to? Why spend most of this chapter moving us from the Old Covenant to the New? Because of verse 25.

Jesus, our great high priest of a different kind of priesthood is able to save to the "uttermost". This word 'uttermost' has two aspects. First is the completeness of the saving. The Jews who are hearing this message are being lured back into a works-based approach to salvation. They are slipping back to the old priesthood, the old covenant, feeling compelled to keep a set of rules to qualify themselves to be saved by Jesus. Isn't that kind of like us today? We may believe when Jesus died and rose again, that it did something great, or kicked off a process, but the subtle lies from the garden seep back into our lives,

saying, “But did God really...?”. Then we begin to track our works, keeping a record of our sin, and trying to make up for it, to balance the scales. I will balance my sin in this area with perfect law keeping in this area, and in that way keep God happy. NO! That is not the way of Christ! Jesus is able to save to the uttermost! Fully and completely! He saves you one time, never needing to be crucified again. His work is full and complete. End of the story. We’ve seen many warning passages throughout Hebrews and this is one of the answers we must remind ourselves of. Jesus is the one who has worked to save you. Not you.

The second aspect of the word ‘uttermost’ is in time and space. It’s forever. Jesus saves completely not just one moment in time, but it continues forever with no boundaries. Salvation through Jesus goes for the rest of your life into eternity, and it’s not bounded by space or time. Jesus salvation is in some sense, limitless. It’s forever.

This opens the door for us to draw near to God, seek forgiveness for our sin and our sin nature, and trust that Jesus’ work is enough to save us. Any one of us. And not just one way of salvation, but the *only* way of salvation. Because Jesus is the one who’s always present between us and the father, who’s done the work on our behalf, and stands as the sacrifice that was slain for us. He stand before the father and says, that one is mine. He does this eternally, every moment, on our behalf, through our sin, our failures, and our lack of faith...he is faithful. Completely faithful, always.

Reflect and Respond

There’s a lot we’ve covered this morning, but I want to try and boil it down to a short statement with two points to reflect on.

Jesus is our powerful king-priest, not like the priests of the Old Covenant. He is of a different, a better kind of priesthood full of grace and hope bringing a better, new covenant. God the Father himself installed Jesus by his oath, permanently, forever. And this means that our salvation is not up to us, because Jesus is constantly working on our behalf to be our mediator before God the Father.

Trust in Christ

For those who are new to the Bible, new to church, or new to Jesus, you may be a bit confused about why we spent an entire morning talking about covenants, priests, and some obscure guy named Melchizedek. That’s ok. We’re glad you’re here to listen. The important point is that Jesus doesn’t bring us a list of rules that we have to follow to save us or make God happy with us. He has done that work, and all you need to do is believe in his death and resurrection is enough to save you.

For those who know, and have known about Jesus for a long time, but haven’t drawn near to him for salvation, do it now. The message from Hebrews is full of invitations to draw near. It’s also full of warnings that Jesus is the only way, there is no other. You are not too bad, too sinful, or beyond Jesus’ ability to save you. Ask God to forgive your sins on the basis of Jesus’ death, and submit to him as your King.

For those believers who have already drawn near and have faith in Jesus to save them, but wrestle with whether they are good enough to be saved, have faith...he can save...he does save...he has saved. Jesus is able to save the uttermost. Don’t think of yourself, think of Christ and his position as your priest forever.

For those believers who are running the race well, keep on going! Be on guard and cling tightly to Jesus. The warnings in Hebrews are for all of us. Any one of us could drift from this wonderful hope we have. Work hard to remain faithful to him, and encourage others to do the same.

A Forever Hope

One final thought. As believers, it would be easy to sit back and think that we have 'arrived'. But, dear brothers and sisters, we have not. This is *only the beginning* of our hope in Christ and the fulfillment of the promises and this better covenant. The best is yet to come.