

A Better Priesthood

Hebrews 7:1-28

As C.S. Lewis's classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, comes to its climax, the White Witch thinks she has finally found the chink in Aslan's armor. If you're familiar with the story, you'll remember that the White Witch is the villain, who has enslaved all of Narnia under her spell, making it "always winter but never Christmas." And Aslan the lion is the hero, whose return to Narnia has already begun to break the Witch's spell.

But just as it looks like Aslan is winning, and the Witch's grip is slipping, she plays her most valuable card. She exposes the flaw in Aslan's plan—the fact that there has been a traitor among him: Edmund, one of the four children who found their way into the magical land through the wardrobe. And the Witch dares to remind Aslan and his followers: "Have you forgotten the Deep Magic? . . . You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and . . . for every treachery I have a right to a kill. . . . And so," continued the Witch, "that human creature is mine. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property." . . . "unless I have blood as the Law says, all Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water."¹ The Witch had found the fatal flaw in Aslan's rescue operation, and now sought to exploit it.

Again, if you know the story, you know that Aslan brokers a secret deal. He offers his life in place of Edmund's, as a willing substitute. But even in this, the Witch sees her victory. As she prepares to plunge the knife into Aslan on the Stone Table, she cries out, "And now, who has won? Fool, did you think that by all this you would save the human traitor? Now I will kill you instead of him as our pact was and so the Deep Magic will be appeased. But when you are dead what will prevent me from killing him as well? And who will take him out of my hand then? Understand that you have given me Narnia for ever, you have lost your own life and you have not saved his. In that knowledge despair and die." (181).

And he does. Aslan dies. Slain by the witch. And all hope seems lost. And as those who loved him weep and grieve and try to care for him, there was all of a sudden behind them a loud crack. And as they turned they saw the Table broken, and then Aslan, alive, larger than they had ever seen him before.

And so Susan (one of the children) asked, "'But what does it all mean?' . . . 'It means,' said Aslan, 'that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she . . . would have

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1950), 175-176.

known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.” (185)

As we come to Hebrews ch. 7 this morning, the church that this letter was written to finds itself in a similar climactic moment. As we've seen throughout the book, this early church was facing intense pressure to let go of the gospel and go back to Judaism—to the Old Covenant, *to the Law*—as though Christ hadn't come or Jesus wasn't really the Messiah. And now it's as though their persecutors had finally found the fatal flaw in the church's gospel: you say this Jesus is both king and priest, but according the Law, you know that the king must come from the tribe of Judah, and priests from the tribe of Levi (cf. Gen. 49:10; Lev. 8). It's as if they are daring to remind the Hebrews of the “Deep Magic from the dawn of time.” And on the basis of that Law, they have a point. They are absolutely right that the priest must come from Levi, and more specifically be a descendent of Moses' brother Aaron. Which means, *based on that Law*, Jesus, who was descended from Judah, cannot be priest, and is not Messiah. Your gospel is busted.

But what the author of Hebrews has been hinting at for several chapters, and now unfolds in its full glory, is that there is a “Deeper Magic from before the dawn of time,” if you will—a priesthood rooted in something far more ancient and abiding than the Levitical Priesthood. One not based on the Law—on family line or genealogical code—nor stunted by sin or subject to death. Rather it's anchored in the ancient order of Melchizedek—a man who was both king *and* priest. And because Jesus's priesthood comes from this more ancient and abiding order, he alone is qualified to complete God's work of salvation in us. Our gospel is not busted; it is our only hope.

This is the point the author wanted to delve into back in ch. 5 but felt he had to wait on (cf. 5:6, 10; 6:20). Now he finally gets to it. And he makes his case in two parts. In vv. 1-10 he rehearses the greatness of Melchizedek, taking us back into his story from the Old Testament. And then in vv. 11-28, he explains the greatness of the order of Melchizedek—how through it Jesus is not only our king, but our perfect priest, and the only one who can complete God's work of salvation and bring us all the way home. We'll start with his story, vv. 1-10.

‘Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time’: The Greatness of Melchizedek (7:1-10)

The author brings us back to Genesis 14, the story of Abraham and what's known as the “slaughter of the kings.” This is when the kings of four nations joined together against the kings of five nations, and Abraham's nephew Lot and his family ended up being captured, along with the people of Sodom (where he was living, before it was turned to toast). And so Abraham led his men (just 318 of them) and defeated the kings and rescued the people of Sodom, including his family. And after that, we read this:

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. (Gen. 14:18-20)

He shows up in the story out of nowhere, blesses Abraham, receives a tithe from Abraham (a tenth of everything), and then just like that, he's gone. We don't meet him again until you get to Psalm 110 and the promise of another priest to arise in his likeness.

So who is Melchizedek, why is he so great, and what does that have to do with Jesus? Back to Hebrews 7, middle of v. 2. He starts with the significance of his name: “He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace.” So this Melchizedek is a king, both by his name and his office. The King of Salem, which most people understand to be the early name of Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 76:2). But this king is at the very same time a priest—priest of God Most High—which is a reference to the one true God, possessor of heaven and earth. And his priesthood is not based on familial descent, nor does it need to be passed on, because it endures forever. Verse 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.” Now scholars debate whether v. 3 tells us that this Melchizedek was actually a pre-incarnate Christ, or whether he was a mere mortal whose story sets a pattern for Christ. I’m not sure. What is clear is that there’s something unique and mysterious about Melchizedek—something great. A “deeper magic,” to use Lewis’s term, that predates the Law.

And in vv. 4-10 the author elaborates on his greatness—specifically by comparing Melchizedek to Levi (on whom Israel’s covenant priesthood was based), and showing how Melchizedek is better.

First, v. 5, while both priests receive a tithe (an offering of a tenth of one’s possessions from God’s people given to the Lord through the priest), Melchizedek has a superior basis for receiving his tithe. The Levites received a tithe from their brothers—fellow descendants of Abraham—not because they were above them, but because the law demanded it. But Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe, not because he was commanded to, but because Melchizedek *was* above him, and he was worthy. As he says in vv. 6-7, “But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.” Abraham is the patriarch, the fountainhead of God’s blessing for Israel and all nations, and Melchizedek is *superior* to Abraham.

Second, v. 8, Melchizedek’s superiority is also reflected in his enduring life. “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” (v. 8). Again, Melchizedek seems to have an immortal quality here.

And then third, vv. 9-10, he makes a rather creative but profound point that Melchizedek’s superiority over Levi is implicit in the fact that Abraham, Levi’s ancestor, gave a tithe to Melchizedek. Which means that Levi, who rightfully receives tithes under the Law, actually gave tithes to the priest that comes before the Law, since “he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.” That too makes Melchizedek greater than Levi. The author leaves no doubt as to the superiority of Melchizedek over that of Aaron and the Levitical priests.

But this isn’t just about winning an argument. Nor is it a petty ‘My dad can beat up your dad’ kind of debate. Understanding and acknowledging the true and greater priest is a matter of infinite importance and eternal salvation. Because think about what a priest’s job is. To mediate a relationship between sinful humans and a holy God. As the author of Hebrews explained back in ch. 5, “For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed *to act on behalf of men in relation to God*, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (5:1). That’s what the Levitical priests were set apart to do—to bring offerings to God on behalf of the people to cleanse them and atone for

their sin. It's the priest who brokers the relationship with God, who advocates for the people and intercedes for them in their needs and their sins. And so if you go to or depend on the wrong priest, you don't just lose an argument, you risk missing out on God and salvation. And that matters not just for the early church and the temptation to look back to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Covenant; it matters for us today in our temptation to look sideways to all sorts of other kinds of priests.

Religious priests who claim special access to God on earth, even within some Christian traditions, where you're required to go through them and their rituals if you want to get to God in heaven. Or pop-culture priests like Oprah, who offer a generic spirituality and self-driven moralism that can be adjusted to fit whatever suits your personal taste. Or prosperity gospel priests, who peddle the promises of all heaven's riches right here and right now on earth, if you'll make a donation, plant your seed, and unlock the floodgates of God's blessings. It's so easy to look everywhere else for our advocacy before God *except* up to heaven where Christ sits as our great and *final* high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (6:20).

But that's who he is, and that's where he sits, the perfection of the priestly office, the only one qualified to complete God's work of salvation in us. And this is what the author now focuses on in vv. 11-28, as he turns from the greatness of Melchizedek the person to the greatness of the priestly order that arises from him, which Jesus takes up and fulfills.

'Deeper Magic' in the Priesthood of Christ: The Greatness of the Order of Melchizedek (7:11-28)

And here the author now takes us back to Psalm 110, the only other place where Melchizedek is mentioned in the Old Testament. It's a psalm he's already quoted several times in Hebrews, with reference to both Christ's *royal* identity (as king, 1:13; cf. Ps. 110:1), and his *priestly* identity (5:6, 10; 6:20; cf. Ps. 110:4). And it's this Psalm that ties Jesus to the "Deeper Magic from before the dawn of time" with God's promise to raise up a priest from a different order than Aaron or Levi: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek'" (Ps. 110:4).

The very Law that the persecutors thought they could use to trap the church and expose the gospel has given way to a new and more perfect kind of priest. And this was always the design. As he says in v. 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?" Why would God have made that promise in Psalm 110 if the Levitical law was able to produce a perfect priesthood? He wouldn't, and it wasn't. Moreover, that imperfect Law was therefore subject to change when the perfect priest finally arrives. Verse 12: "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well." Because the Law can't contain what God is doing through Christ. It doesn't have a category for a King from Judah who is also a priest. "For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests" (7:13-14). Jesus breaks the categories of the Law. *Which doesn't mean that the gospel is therefore wrong*, as the persecutors thought. It means you're not looking far enough back.

And when you look far enough back, you see the superiority of Christ who has arisen as a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek (7:15-16). A priest whose office is not based on the Law, or family descent, but on “the power of an indestructible life.” Which doesn’t mean that he never died. As Kent Hughes explains, “It means that our priest died a death that could not hold him—a death that was followed by resurrection.”² Therefore God is able to do through this priesthood what the Law would never allow—bring about *perfection*, completion of his saving work, introducing a better hope through which we draw near to God (vv. 18-19).

When you look far enough back, you see in the priesthood of Christ a deeper certainty of God’s promises (7:20-22). His priesthood is sealed with an oath. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, if you want to convince someone that they can take your word, one way you do that (especially in the ancient world) is by swearing an oath (cf. 6:13-20). Making a guarantee. God does that with the priesthood of Christ—he seals it with an oath. But that’s not something he did for the Levitical priests. Jesus’ priestly office is more secure, more trustworthy, such that we can have much more confidence in him than in the ancient Levitical priests or any modern knockoff today, because “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever.” This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (7:21-22).

When you look far enough back, you see the superiority of Christ’s priesthood as the only one able to complete our salvation, vv. 23-28. And this is where the author has been aiming, to convince us and encourage us to hope in Christ alone for the completion of our salvation, for there is no other priest qualified to bring us all the way home.

When you compare the priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek, to the priesthood of the Levites, you see that the Levitical priests were simply unable to finish their job. First, they too were sinners, just like the people they served. So when they offered sacrifices, they had to offer them for their own sin first, as well as the sin of the people (7:27; cf. 5:3; 9:7). Second, the sacrifices they offered were ultimately insufficient to deal with the sin of God’s people. We’re going to see this more clearly when we get to chs. 9-10, but as ch. 10:4 summarizes, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (cf. 10:11). And third, because of their sin, the priests were also subject to death. They weren’t around long enough to finish their job. Chapter 7:23: “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office . . .”

Now compare all of that to Jesus. “The former priests were . . . prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever” (7:23-24). His is our risen king and eternal priest, whose office is not subject to death but secured by the power of his indestructible life.

Unlike Israel’s priests, Jesus never sinned. 7:26: “For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” And unlike Israel’s priests, his sacrifice is sufficient to cover the sins of all people for all time. Verse 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*” (cf. 10:12-14). Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was enough; there’s nothing we need to add to it to gain favor from God. And nothing any other priest can or should add to his work. We

² R. K. Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 200.

need only to trust him. He is the priest we needed but that the Law could never give us. “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” (7:28).

And because Jesus alone is perfect, holy, and sinless, and Jesus alone lives as the king who has conquered death, Jesus alone is able to qualified to complete God’s work of salvation in us, as the representative of a more ancient and abiding priesthood. And this is the hope we see in v. 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.”

This is what Jesus did while we walked on this earth. He interceded for us as our priest. He prayed in John 17: “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. . . keep them from the evil one. . . Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (17:11, 15, 17). It’s what he did from the cross, praying as he hung there, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:24). It’s what he’s doing *right now* on our behalf at the right hand of his Father in heaven—interceding for us.

His very presence in heaven is itself an intercession, a reminder that those who trust in him are forgiven and accepted by God. As we sang earlier, “Five bleeding wounds he bears, Received on Calvary; They pour effectual prayers, They strongly speak for me: ‘Forgive him, O forgive,’ they cry, ‘Nor let that ransomed sinner die!’”³

Yet more than his presence, he also continues to pray for us as we face other trials and accusations in our life. As Romans 8:34 says, “Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” I know when I make a promise to my kids, they are constantly reminding me of what I said until I keep it. Imagine if they were literally at my side, 24/7, *forever*—do you think I would be allowed to forget my promise? But we shouldn’t think of Jesus’ intercession as begging or groveling before a reluctant Father. Jesus and the Father are one; “his intercession is always, and can only be, at one with the good pleasure of the Father.”⁴ And so, as our intercessor, one author writes of Jesus, “His once-completed self-offering is utterly acceptable and efficacious; his contact with the Father is immediate and unbroken; his priestly ministry on his people’s behalf is never ending, and therefore the salvation which he secures to them is absolute.”⁵ Our living Savior is our perfect priest, who alone can complete God’s work of salvation in us.

Which means we need no other priest, and no other priest will do. No pop-culture icons or prosperity gospel hucksters. And no religious priests either. You know there’s a reason that among the offices of church leadership in the New Testament, there is no office of priest. You have deacons, who are set apart to serve. And elders (also called overseers), who are set apart to shepherd (that’s where we get the office of “pastor”—pastor means shepherd, but it’s simply a vocational elder). But there is no office of priest in the New Testament church. Some church traditions will call their clergy priests or even treat them like priests, but that’s a mistake that totally ignores or mishandles the book of Hebrews (and other books as well). And it’s not just because of the “priesthood of all believers”—that great Reformation doctrine that reminds us that

³ Charles Wesley (1742).

⁴ P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 270.

⁵ F.F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. Ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 175.

all Christians have access to God in prayer and confession. We see that in 1 Peter 2 (how we are a “royal priesthood”, 2:9). But that was based on Exodus 19—ancient Israel was also described as a royal priesthood (Exod. 19:6), and they had an office of priest.

There reason there is no office of priest in the church is because that office has been *permanently* and *perfectly* filled by Jesus. And he’s never going to vacate it. And you don’t need a priest to get to the priest. Jesus is the final great high priest, who holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever. And as our high priest he invites us to draw near to God through him. We see it twice in our passage (vv. 19, 25), and we hear it reiterated beautifully in ch. 10:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (10:19-23)

Because he comes from a more ancient and abiding priesthood, Jesus alone is qualified to complete God’s work of salvation in us. And so may we hope in Christ alone for the completion of our salvation, for there is no other priest qualified to bring us all the way home.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. When you hear the word “priest,” what image comes to mind?
2. How would you describe the function of a priest?

Questions for Study and Understanding

3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
4. In terms of context, what has the author talked about in previous passages that help us understand what he’s talking about now?
5. Why do you think he is so focused on this subject? What’s at stake in whether Jesus’ priesthood is anchored in the order of Aaron vs. the order of Melchizedek?
6. How would you summarize the greatness of Melchizedek according to vv. 1-10?
7. How would you describe the greatness of the priestly order of Melchizedek according to vv. 11-28?
8. What is the unique impact of Jesus’ priesthood? What is he alone able to do as the final office holder of the order of Melchizedek? (hint: see v. 25)

Questions for Reflection and Application

9. When it comes to understanding or securing the status of your own relationship with God, what rival priests are you tempted to turn to personally?
10. What difference should it make that Jesus is our final and forever high priest? Spend some time listing and then praising God for the difference Christ's priesthood makes for your personal life, your relationships, your witness and ministry, and our church life.