

“The Priest We Need For The Pilgrimage We're On”

I saw a somewhat cynical cartoon one time. It showed a man standing in what looked a little like the back of a church, and suddenly, he got a concerned look on his face. He says: *"Uh Oh, there's Bob. I promised him I'd pray for him."* The next frame: *"He's coming this way!"* *"Dear God, please bless Bob."* Then, as Bob walks up, he says: *"Hey Bob! I've been praying for you!"* Listen, it's great when people pray for you. I want you to pray for me. If I tell you I am going to pray for you – I take that seriously. We need to pray for each other. But I have been encouraged this week to think about the reality that even if other people fail to pray for, care for, or think about us. There is one who always has us in his heart. Speaking about Christ's people, **Hebrews 7:25** says: *he always lives to make intercession for them.*

As you heard in our scripture reading, this passage comes in the context of a comparison between Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God, and Jesus. The English word *"priest"* appears for the first time in the Bible in **Genesis 14** in the story of Melchizedek. The essential idea of a priest is that of someone who has special access to and connection with God but also with humankind and, therefore, can serve as a mediator between the two. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, which means a bridge-builder. In **Genesis 14**, Melchizedek mysteriously appears as a priest of God most high, bringing the mercy and blessing of God. He blesses Abram and shows us that ***as we live a life of faith, we can count on God to know and care for us.***

The Scriptures tell us that ...

I. GOD PROVIDES US WITH THE PRIEST WE NEED FOR THE PILGRIMAGE WE ARE ON.

The flow of this message will be a little bit different. This is more of an exploration of the themes that surface around this character Melchizedek than an exposition of a passage in Genesis. There are two foundational truths to consider about Melchizedek. First,

A. As fascinating as the mysterious Melchizedek is, his true significance is that he prefigures Jesus.

1. When Melchizedek is first mentioned in Genesis 14 we're reminded that God often works in mysterious ways. There is nothing about his background, birth, life, or his death. He simply

arrives. In Genesis, all the important people have their genealogies filled out with a significant amount of detail, and then there is this king who shows up shrouded in mystery as a priest of the Most High God. He gives Abraham bread and wine, which to us, in light of what we know, seems so sacramental. He blesses Abraham; then he's gone.

2. Later, in Psalm 110, God prophesied, through King David, that the Messiah, the promised Lord and Savior of the world, would not only be a victorious king but a spiritual priest. Psalm 110:1 & 4 says: The LORD (God – Yahweh) says to my Lord (The messiah – the Christ): "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." There is a spiritual warfare being waged and the righteous king will come to crush the head of the serpent to win the ultimate victory over evil. Then, in **verse 4**, *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."* In **Matthew 26:64**, Jesus quotes this Psalm in his trial before his crucifixion. He says it is talking about Him! Then, in **Acts 2**, in the first Christian sermon, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preaches that this Psalm is fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Some people ask if Melchizedek *is* Jesus appearing mysteriously thousands of years before his incarnation. **Hebrews 7:3** says: *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. Notice verse 3 says he resembles the Son of God. That tells us he is not the Son of God. Dr. D. A. Carson puts it this way: He is not *literally* without father or mother or genealogy but *literarily* without father or mother or genealogy. It's like when we say, "This guy came out of nowhere." We don't mean the person literally came from "no place at all." In the Melchizedek story the mystery of his origin and identity serves God's purpose which is to give us an early image of someone kind of kind of like Jesus: a king *and* priest who blesses.*

The second foundational truth then follows - just a small step farther...

B. God wants you to see, in Melchizedek, a resemblance of what God provides for you in Jesus Christ.

You see that in **Hebrews 7:3** when it says, of Melchizedek that, *resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*

It think it is important to reflect and to stress that if you are tempted to think the Bible is a simplistic book believed by childish people, you've

misunderstood it. The controversial psychologist and popular author Jordan Peterson, who has *not* affirmed the divine inspiration of the Bible, has nevertheless said to see it as simplistic is to misunderstand it. He says it's stories reveal "*meta truth*," the distilled wisdom of patterns and truths about life passed down for thousands of years. Christians believe it is all of that but more than that! Jesus affirmed the whole of scripture as inspired by God. The historical evidence for the beautiful prophecy fulfilling life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of Jesus is compelling. He not only confirmed the scriptures as the word of God but revealed that he himself was and is its central theme. The God who made the world and made you in his image speaks to you in and through the stories in the Bible. But at the center of this deep mixture of lessons, songs, prophecies, poems, and personalities is the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus. Every story shows us something about our human nature that reveals our need for the grace that God offers us in Jesus. And every story shows us something about the nature of God that leads to the gift and the grace of Jesus.

Melchizedek is the king of Salem, which means peace. But Salem is also a place. It's a city that will later become Jerusalem.¹ Melchizedek blesses Abraham, and Abraham gives a 10th of everything he has to Melchizedek. In Hebrew culture, this would mean that Abraham, the father of the entire Hebrew nation and of all of us who believe to this day, is recognizing Melchizedek as greater than himself. So in this character, Melchizedek, you have a ministering priest who's also a righteous king whose names are rich in spiritual significance, who comes into the scene when Abraham is weary from the battle he has faced and wondering what the future will be like. This priest blesses him and provides bread and wine. He serves as a picture of the true priest we all need in the pilgrimage of life.

The important point that is built on this in the New Testament is that ...

II. WHAT GOD HAS PROVIDED FOR US, IN JESUS CHRIST, IS AN ETERNAL PRIEST OF SUPERLATIVE VALUE.

Hebrews 7:22 says Jesus is *the guarantor of a better covenant*. Let's consider four truths Scripture reveals about the supremacy of Jesus.

A. First, The superiority of Jesus as our true high priest is offered to us with a surprising simplicity.

The Hebrews, to whom the Book of Hebrews was written, had lived for a thousand years with an impressive religious system. I remember our

friend Doctor Bruce Walke pointing out that the worship in the temple would have been an elaborate, immersive, moving, and even sensual experience. You would have heard the singing of Psalms, trumpets, drums, and cymbals. You would have seen the priests coming down the steps of the temple with their white linen robes swishing back and forth as they ministered the sacrifices. You would have smelled the sweet smell of the sacrificial animals, like smelling someone barbecuing in the neighborhood. As you heard, smelled, felt, and saw all of this, it would have been communicating *this is how you draw near to God*. Then Jesus comes and fulfills all of the imagery that was at the heart of all of that ritual and all of that religion, and now he just says *if anybody is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, he that believes on me has everlasting life.*² *What must I do to be saved?* The jailer asked Paul in Philippi, and he said *believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, you and your household.*³ And, of course, Jesus called those who came to him to follow him, and the New Testament epistles flesh out what that means in holiness, spirituality, and relationships in all kinds of ways, but there's very little concern about ceremony. And it just seems like some thought - couldn't we have more structure? More ceremony? And God in scripture doesn't forbid us from developing some traditions and ceremonies, but he never commands it or commends it either! The principle that emerges in the New Testament is that the more we think those things are what really matters, the more misguided we're likely to be.

Sometimes what is simple is superior. Sometimes, what could seem like less than is actually superior spiritually. I was talking about this with Connie one afternoon this week, and she brought up that place in the gospels where Jesus tells his disciples that while he has been with them, it's going to be better for them if he leaves and sends the Holy Spirit to be within them. We are living in a spiritual season in which God wants us to recognize the superiority of the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the new covenant and full assurance of peace with God and access to God through faith in Jesus. In a sermon on this passage, John Piper said, "*What this means in essence is the entire worship life of the Old Testament has been radically refocused on to Jesus himself and has become a radically spiritual thing, as opposed to an external thing.*"⁴

B. Second, The superiority of Jesus as our true high priest is revealed in his power to make the unrighteous right with God.

When **Hebrews 7:2** describes Melchizedek, it says: ... his name

means "*king of righteousness*"; then he is also, "king of Salem," which means "*king of peace*." In the Bible, righteousness always comes first, followed by peace. That's our problem. In ourselves, we can't be at peace with God because we are not righteous. C.S. Lewis was surprised at what he found when he took an honest look at his own heart. He wrote: *For the first time, I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And what I found there appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatred.*"

⁵ If we compare ourselves to other people we might come to the conclusion that we are pretty good. But when we honestly and humbly with clarity compare ourselves to God's standards expressed in his word and his Son Jesus Christ, we fall short.

The way to be at peace with and live in relationship with God is *not* through a religious system or any other human endeavors. It's not through avoiding sin or achieving goodness. There's a place in the Bible that says if we could do all those things, we would not need Christ, and surely that would have been the way to be right with God, but we can't do those things! ⁶ Our human nature is fallen, rebellious, bent towards self, and sinful. You cannot build the bridge back to God. Christ came into our world to do that for us. He lived a righteous life for us and then offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to secure your peace with God. He rose again from the dead to be our priest forever.

Romans 5:1 says, *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

C. Third, The superiority of Jesus Christ is experienced in his unending power to save us to the *uttermost*.

Hebrews 7:24-25 moves from the mystery and imagery of Melchizedek to speak so powerfully about the priest we have in Jesus. **1st**, It says *that he holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever.* **2nd** *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.* **3rd**, He can do this *since he always lives to make intercession for them.* Look at the incredible affirmations in those verses: His priesthood (his bridge-building, forgiving, reconciling ministry for his people) is permanent. He is able to save completely those who come to God through him. If you belong to Christ, you can count on the fact that you have in him a perfect, permanent King-priest who not only did something awesome for you long ago on the cross but who lives forever to intercede, to advocate, to continually uphold and sustain and bless you with an unending flow of amazing grace.

Early last week I watched an interviewer on YouTube speak with young men in their 20s and 30s. The question was, *Who do you call when you're at your lowest?* The first young man said, *Nobody, I'm a man. No one cares.* The next one said, *Not a single soul.* A third one said, *I think I speak for a lot of people when I say I don't call anyone.* I hope you have people you can call on when you're at your lowest. But God wants you to know that if you belong to Jesus you have in him a king and priest who is your friend and Savior who cares and intercedes for you! **Hebrews 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.* He meets our every need because of who he is! He meets us with the wine and bread of God's grace, just as Melchizedek met Abraham and embodied the blessing of God. Like Abram we will stumble and offer partial obedience, and fail and rebel. In Christ we have the priest we need for the Pilgrimage we are on.

Hebrews 10:12-14 adds this: *But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. 13 Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, 14 because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.* An atheist author named Marghanita Laski was debating a Christian on television. She made a surprising confession. She said: *"What I envy most about you, Christians, is your forgiveness; I have no one to forgive me."*⁷ Do you have someone to forgive you? Do you know that in Christ, God not only gives you forgiveness, but he gives you perfection in His eyes through the ministry of Jesus Christ? You have in Christ a perfect, permanent priest who gave himself as a sacrifice for you, who continually cares for you. His indestructible risen life exists as an unending embodied intercession for you. He reveals this because he wants you to know and believe it.

D. Fourth, the superiority of Jesus as our high priest brings us the blessing of God.

God wants you to know and believe you have his blessing. That's what's at the heart of the story of Melchizedek and Abraham. Melchizedek brings bread and wine and the blessing of God. *If you belong to Christ, you are blessed by God.* **Galatians 3:9** says: *those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*

1. Maybe you say: "If I'm blessed by God, why don't I have more than I have, and why don't I have it easier than I do?" The blessing of God is not a promise that all your wishes will be fulfilled. It's the

promise that all God's purposes can be achieved in your life. Abraham might have wished that he didn't have to fight so hard for his nephew's freedom. God's blessing doesn't mean that you won't have battles to fight. What it means is that God will strengthen you and sustain you.

2. Maybe you say: "I don't feel blessed." It seems likely Abraham probably didn't always feel blessed, either. A big part of preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to yourself is believing God's blessing rests on you and that you are empowered for God's purposes, even when you do not feel it. Sometimes, you have to believe it until you feel it. Sometimes, you have to speak to yourself and to God in prayer and praise and stir up your faith until the truth of God's empowerment for fruitfulness and fulfillment becomes a conviction, and that conviction becomes a catalyst that changes your feelings from disappointment, fear, and discouragement to courage, contentment and confidence in God. Believing that you are blessed by God is a very practical thing. It provides the strength you need for the pilgrimage you are on. God wants you to believe the ultimate and final priest of God Most High, who bridges every divide between you and God, who is king of righteousness and king of peace, becomes your priest the moment you receive him and rely on him. And he brings the blessing of grace.

CONCLUSION

A man was in church, and the pastor suggested that as they passed the bread and cup during communion, they whisper, "*The body of Christ, broken for you.*" "*The blood of Christ, shed for you.*" He concentrated on remembering the pastor's words so that he would get them right when he passed them on. Between Him and the aisle was an older woman. Apparently, she wasn't paying attention to the pastor's exact words, but she got their basic meaning. As she passed the bread to him, she said softly, "*Take it. It's for unworthy sinners.*" It shocked him, but it also got the point home. God freely gives his richest gifts to unworthy people like us through faith in Jesus Christ. If you've never resolved to turn to and rely on Christ as your Lord and Savior, come to him and receive the blessing of God's grace. If you believe in Christ, do not give in to disbelief regarding the blessing of God, which rests on you by his grace. God meets our greatest needs through the grace he shows us in Jesus. In him, you have the priest you need for the pilgrimage you're on.

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Most High God, Your Holy Spirit awakens in me a longing for the peace I can only find in your grace offered through Jesus Christ. I acknowledge that my ways are not your ways. I need forgiveness for my sinfulness. I turn from sin and self-will to receive Jesus as my Lord and trust in him as my Savior. My place my faith in his sacrificial death, his resurrection and his priestly intercession for me. Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, May I grow to increasingly realize and reverence the ongoing unending outpouring of your grace. May I learn to be attentive, receptive, and submissive to your Holy Spirit as he works within me to make Jesus known to me and me more like him. I confess that no matter how strong I feel I am in fact weaker than I know unless I live in the assurance of Christ sustaining grace and the strength of your Holy Spirit. For this I pray and give thanks, in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Psalm 76:1-2 This is also attested in Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.10.2 *Classical* - So Abram, when he had saved the captive Sodomites, who had been taken by the Assyrians, and Lot also, his kinsman, returned home in peace. Now the King of Sodom met him at a certain place, which they called The King's dale, where Melchisedeck, King of the city Salem, received him. That name signifies, The righteous King: and such he was without dispute; insomuch that, on this account, he was made the Priest of God. However, they afterward called Salem Jerusalem.

² John 6:37-38

³ Acts 16:30-31

⁴ John Piper, *Our High Priest, is the Son of God - Perfect Forever*.

⁵ Quoted by Nicky Gumble in *Questions Of Life*, p. 19

⁶ This is how I understand the implications of Galatians 2:21

⁷ Quoted by Nicky Gumble in *Questions Of Life*, p. 19.