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WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:1-10

By

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Hebrews Lesson 20

Why You Need to Know About Melchizedek Hebrews 7:1-10

Most of you would probably admit that you're not highly motivated to learn about Melchizedek. You've got marriage problems, problems with your kids, financial problems, personal problems, and other practical needs. Why in the world would you be interested in learning about some obscure figure from many centuries ago named Melchizedek? "For crying out loud, Steve, it's Mother's Day! Give us a message that relates to mothers!" I believe that learning about Melchizedek will help you to be a better mother, father, child, or whatever role you are in. My aim is to convince you that you *do* need to know about this man.

To understand this, we need to put the chapter in its context. The Jewish Christians to whom this letter was addressed were tempted to abandon their Christian faith and return to Judaism under the threat of persecution. Some of them had lost their property and had suffered public reproach on account of their faith (10:32-34). They were thinking, "Hey, we didn't have it so bad as Jews! The Jewish religion was a good system. It spelled out how we should live. The rituals were familiar and satisfying. It was the faith of our forefathers for many centuries. Maybe we should just go back to the way things were."

To understand the pull of the past, we need to realize that religious traditions die hard! For over 20 years, Marla and I have read and prayed along with *The Global Prayer Digest* (published by the U.S. Center for World Mission). One thing that has repeatedly struck me as I've read it is how strongly entrenched religious traditions are. It will mention a people group where, many centuries ago, Islam took root and the culture is totally Islamic. For hundreds of years, generations have lived and died without questioning the religious traditions. These false religious views dominate their whole way of life. When missionaries try to penetrate these cultures with the gospel, they meet with strong resistance, because to accept the gospel would mean abandoning centuries of religious tradition.

The author of Hebrews was trying to convince people that a religious system of sacrifices, rituals, and rules that had been in place for over 1,400 years had now been replaced by a better way. He focuses on the supremacy of Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all that was written by Moses and the Jewish prophets. He introduces a theme that is only treated in the Book of Hebrews, that Jesus Christ is our high priest.

We will only appreciate our need for a high priest to the degree that we realize how holy and unapproachable God is and how sinful and defiled we are. When Isaiah saw the Lord, sitting on His throne, lofty and exalted, surrounded by the seraphim who called out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts," the prophet was undone (Isa. 6:1-5). It devastated him because immediately he became aware of how utterly sinful he was, in contrast to God in His awesome holiness.

Israel in the wilderness had seen Moses go up on the mountain into the cloud, with lightning and thunder and a loud trumpet sound, and they were terrified. If the people got too close to the mountain, God warned that He would break forth upon them with a deadly plague (Exod. 19:10-25). The Jews knew that they could not saunter into the Holy of Holies to chat with God! Only the high priest could enter there, and only once a year, with blood. The Jewish people knew how desperately they needed a high priest if they were to approach God.

The author of Hebrews is making the point that Jesus is our high priest. But He is not just the fulfillment of the Levitical priesthood. He is something more, a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. To view Him on a par with the Levitical priests would be to make a spiritually fatal mistake. That entire old system was designed to point ahead to Jesus Christ, who superseded and fulfilled it. To go back to the old way would be to abandon God's only way of entrance into His holy presence. It would be to turn from the only One who can save us from our sins and go back to an inferior system. So the author here is saying,

You need to know about Melchizedek because he is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you desperately need to know about Christ.

The author is picking up where he left off in 5:10, before his exhortation from 5:11-6:20. He wanted to discuss the significance of Melchizedek, but he could not do so because these people had become dull of hearing. He wants them to understand Melchizedek so that they can gain a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ. But Christ does not reveal Himself to those who are spiritually lazy or apathetic. Have you ever considered why Jesus did not do the Transfiguration in front of the multitudes? In fact, He didn't even do it in front of the Twelve. He only took with Him Peter, James, and John to witness this astounding scene!

But to the multitudes, Jesus concealed His glory and spoke in parables, because they were spiritually dull (see Matt. 13:12-15). He only reveals His glory to those with whom He is intimate, and He is only intimate with those whose hearts are humbled before Him. And so as we approach these truths about Melchizedek as a type of Christ, we must make sure that our hearts are right before God.

Also, we must give some effort and attention to the matter of seeking to know Him. The only command in our text is, "observe how great this man [Melchizedek] was" (7:4). The Greek word means to gaze at or discern through careful observation. We get the word "theater" from it. We are to observe Melchizedek because he is a type of Jesus Christ, and we desire to see the beauty and glory of Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). To see Him as He is, is a transforming experience (1 John 3:2). The solution to every problem that you face is to know Jesus Christ more accurately and intimately.

The flow of thought runs like this: In 7:1-3, the author identifies Melchizedek as both king and priest, without genealogy or end of days. In these ways, he is "made like the Son of God," and remains a priest perpetually. The Son of God is not made like him, but he is made like the Son of God, presented in Scripture in such a way that he points to the truth about the Son of God.

Then, in 7:4-7, the author shows that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, the father of the Jews and of all believers, in that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek and he blessed Abraham. In 7:8-10, the author shows that Melchizedek was also greater than the Levitical priests (and the system they represented), in two ways: First, the Levitical priests were mortal, but Melchizedek "lives on"

(7:8). Second, Levi, who received tithes, actually paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham, his forefather, when he paid tithes to Melchizedek (7:9-10). We can sum up these points under four headings that show how Melchizedek was a type of Jesus Christ:

1. Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the dignity of his person.

Everything we know about Melchizedek comes from Genesis 14:18-20, Psalm 110:4, and Hebrews 7. The first text is historical, the second is prophetic, and the third is theological. Melchizedek was the king of Salem (probably Jerusalem [Ps. 76:2]) and priest of the Most High God. Abraham had gone after four kings that had taken his nephew Lot and his family captive when they raided Sodom, where Lot was living. Abraham defeated these kings, recovered all of the goods, and brought back Lot and his family. As Abraham returned from this battle, Melchizedek came out to meet him. He blessed Abraham and Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of his spoils.

Out of what that short account says and does not say, the author of Hebrews draws some amazing parallels between Melchizedek and Christ. It is interesting that he omits what seems to be an obvious parallel, that Melchizedek met Abraham with bread and wine! You would think, "That's clearly a type of Christ giving bread and wine to the disciples!" In the original story, Melchizedek was bringing refreshment to Abraham and his weary men. But for some reason, the author of Hebrews passes over the easy parallel and focuses on some things that most of us would have missed.

The first thing to note is that Melchizedek was both a king and a priest in the same person (7:1), which was not allowed in Israel. You may be a king or you may be a priest, but you could not be both at once. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Hebrews, p. 155) points out that it is remarkable that Melchizedek lived with Sodom on one side and the Canaanites on the other, and yet he was a righteous king and priest. This shows that God can raise up a godly witness for Himself when and where He pleases. Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both king and priest in one person.

The author makes the point (7:2) that Melchizedek "was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and

then also king of Salem, which is king of peace." In Hebrew, *Melchi* means "my king," and *zedek* means "righteousness." *Salem* is related to *shalom*, which means peace. The order is significant: righteousness comes before peace. A king cannot have true peace in his kingdom unless both he and his kingdom are righteous. Sin brings discord and strife. Righteousness is the foundation for peace.

Jesus is called "Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). He not only imputes and imparts righteousness to others; He is righteous in His very being. He never sinned, nor could any guilt be found in Him. He is the Lamb of God, unblemished and spotless (1 Pet. 1:19). He is "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). He did "no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth" (Isa. 53:9).

When He comes again to reign, "in righteousness" He will wage war against the wicked (Rev. 19:11). "With righteousness He will judge the poor.... And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist" (Isa. 11:4-5). "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7).

Jesus is also the king of peace (Eph. 2:14-18). He brings peace between sinners and God, and peace among all that live under His lordship. Paul wrote, "Therefore, having been justified ["declared righteous"] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). God did not lay aside His righteousness to make peace with sinners. Rather, He laid our penalty on His righteous substitute, "so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

If you know Jesus Christ as your King of righteousness and peace, you will be growing in righteous behavior and you will be pursuing peace with others (Rom. 14:17, 19). I am *not* talking about *perfection*, but rather, *direction*. You will be growing in conformity to your King.

2. Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the derivation and duration of his priesthood.

Being a priest in Israel was totally dependent on your family lineage. All priests came from the tribe of Levi. No one else need apply. If you could not establish your family heritage, you were excluded from the priesthood (Neh. 7:61-64). But Melchizedek was "without father, without mother, without genealogy" (Heb. 7:3). Yet he was "priest of the Most High God" (7:1).

A few have interpreted Melchizedek's lack of genealogy and the next phrase, that he had "neither beginning of days nor end of life," to mean that he was superhuman, either an angel or a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. But the vast majority of commentators reject that interpretation and agree that Melchizedek was simply a great man who lived at the same time as Abraham.

The author of Hebrews is building an argument from the strange silence of Genesis. That book emphasizes genealogies and the number of years that the patriarchs lived. In the midst of this emphasis, seemingly out of nowhere, comes this man Melchizedek. His family lineage is never mentioned, nor does Genesis say anything about the length of his life or his death. The author is saying that the Holy Spirit deliberately omitted these facts from a book that emphasizes such, in order to make Melchizedek an appropriate type of Jesus Christ. That's why he says that Melchizedek was "made like the Son of God" (7:3), rather than "Jesus was made like Melchizedek." It is not that Melchizedek never died, but rather in what Genesis omits, that he "remains a priest perpetually."

Jesus' human lineage is given in Scripture, but He did not come from the priestly tribe of Levi, but from Judah (7:14). To be our high priest forever, Jesus had to be of a different priestly order, namely, that of Melchizedek. As the Son of God (that title is used deliberately in 7:3 to focus on Jesus' deity; see also, 1:8), Jesus has no human lineage, and thus fulfills the type of Melchizedek as reported in Genesis. Also, the Levitical priests died and had to be replaced, but Jesus lives on in His high priesthood (7:23-24). So both in the derivation and in the duration of his priesthood, Melchizedek is a type of Jesus Christ.

3. Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the dimension of his priesthood.

Melchizedek was greater than both Abraham and Levi, since he received tithes from both of these great men. Abraham spontaneously recognized that this man represented God Most High, and so he gave him a tenth of his choicest spoils as an act of worship and gratitude toward God for granting him victory over the four kings. Levi, who was Abraham's great-grandson, gave tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham's tithes, in that he was still in Abraham's loins when this took place. In Hebrew thought, an ancestor contained in him all of his descendants. Thus Paul argues that when Adam sinned, the entire human race sinned (Rom. 5:12). So here, the author says, "so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes."

Some (*e.g.*, A. W. Pink) use this to argue that the principle of the tithe, giving God ten percent, transcends the Law of Moses. But Abraham only did this on one recorded occasion (as did Jacob, Gen. 28:22). The New Testament epistles never command believers to tithe, even when addressed to Gentile congregations that would have needed such instruction. Rather, the New Testament principle is that God owns everything that we are and have, and that we are to give as He has prospered us (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8 & 9). We are stewards of His resources, and we will give an account of how we have used them to further His kingdom (Matt. 6:19-33; 25:14-30; Luke 16:1-13; 1 Tim. 6:17-19).

But the point of the typology between Melchizedek and the Son of God is that since Melchizedek, in receiving tithes from Abraham and Levi, was greater than these great men, Jesus is greater still. As our High Priest, He is worthy not just of a tithe, but of all that we are and have, because He bought us with His blood. No gifts that we give can compare with His matchless worth!

Thus Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the dignity of his person; in the derivation and duration of his priesthood; and, in the dimension of his priesthood. Finally,

4. Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the dispensing of his priesthood.

Even though Abraham was God's chosen man and God promised to bless the nations through him, Melchizedek "blessed the one who had the promises. But without any dispute the lesser is

blessed by the greater" (7:6-7). Scripture uses the term "blessing" in different ways. In one sense, we bless God (Ps. 103:1), which does not imply that we are greater than He! We bless others by praying for them or rendering kind words or service (Luke 6:28; 1 Pet. 3:9), which is mutual. But here the sense is that of the priestly (Num. 6:22-27) or fatherly (Gen. 27:27; 48:15) blessing, which was not mutual. The one imparting the blessing is conveying God's blessing through His authority onto the one being blessed. Since Melchizedek pronounced God's blessing on Abraham, he is greater than this great man who had God's promises!

But Melchizedek is only a type of the one who is greater still, the Lord Jesus Christ. Herveus (a 12th century writer, cited by Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 251) applies the truth here to Christ by saying,

If Melchizedek, who was a sign and shadow, is preferred to Abraham and to all the levitical priests, how much more Christ, who is the truth and the substance! ... If a type of Christ is greater than he who has the promises, how much more so is Christ himself!

If Melchizedek could bless Abraham, how much more is the Son of God ready and able to bless those who draw near to God through Him! If we want God's blessings, we should seek them in Christ, because "as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes" (2 Cor. 1:20). What do you need from God? Eternal life? Yes! Forgiveness of sins? Yes! Inner peace? Yes! Hope? Yes! Joy in the midst of trials? Yes! Grace to endure? Yes! Victory over sin? Yes! Healing from past wounds? Yes! Jesus is the perfect high priest who dispenses God's blessings to those who have His promises. Draw near to Him!

Conclusion

Two concluding applications: First, *what you believe about Jesus Christ makes a huge difference!* The Hebrews were in danger of falling away from the faith because they did not grasp how great Melchizedek is and therefore they did not grasp how much greater the One whom Melchizedek prefigured is.

As I have pointed out many times, the most important question in the world is Jesus' question to the Twelve, "Who do you say

that I am?" (See my sermons, "The Most Important Question in the World," from Mark 8:27-33; and, "The Crucial Question," from Luke 9:18-22.) That question has an objectively true answer. Your eternal destiny hinges on your response to that question. If you correctly say from your heart by faith, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God who gave Himself on the cross as the only sacrifice for my sins," you have eternal life! If you diminish Jesus to a lesser role, such as, "He is a great moral example or teacher," then you do not have the high priest that you need when you stand before God for judgment. Any teaching that diminishes the supremacy of Jesus Christ is false teaching!

Second, *seek God continually and fervently in His Word to give you a greater knowledge of the beauty and glory of Jesus Christ.* Paul's lifelong quest as a believer was to "count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). Samuel Ridout wrote,

As we see the glories of Christ contrasted with the shadows of the law and everything that was connected with an earthly priesthood, well might we say that if faith had apprehended the reality of what Christ was, they would gladly take not only the spoiling of their goods, but also the spoiling of all their earthly hopes, things that they had clung to as so dear before. Once let Christ be apprehended, once let the beauty of His character as our Priest and the blessedness of the place into which He had introduced us be laid hold of by the soul, and the things of earth which would hold us fast, a carnal religion and all else, will lose their hold, even as the leaves drop off the trees in autumn.

So why do you need to know about Melchizedek? Because he is one gateway that God has provided to tell you about Christ. If you want to endure hardship and even persecution, if you want God's blessing on your family and in your personal life, if you want to resist temptation and live a righteous life, seek God for a clearer vision of the glory of Christ. When we are enthralled with Him, "the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace" (Helen Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus").

Discussion Questions

1. "The solution to every problem that you face is to know Jesus Christ more accurately and intimately." Is this overly simplistic? (Be honest!) Why/why not?
2. Why did Jesus conceal Himself from the multitudes and reveal Himself only to a limited group (see Matt. 13:10-17)?
3. Are there things that we can do to know Christ more deeply, or is this "predetermined"? If we can do something, what?
4. How can we know if something in the O.T. is a type? Can we take this too far? What principles of interpretation apply?

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