

Jesus the Better Priest-King

GENESIS 14:17-20; HEBREWS 7:1-28

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Congregation of Christ: What are the most popular baby names today? For those who want Biblical names, the most popular for girls are Ava, Isabella, Abigail, Amelia. For boys, Noah, Elijah, Michael, Jacob, Ethan and Matthew are the most popular.

Some people are surprised when they learn that “Nollie” is just my nickname, and my birth name is “Napoleon.” How does “Napoleon” rank in popularity for boys' names? It's 7,557th! Talking about unpopular boys' names, what about Ichabod? 12,065th. This is not a surprise because Ichabod is not a good-sounding name, plus we all know the gullible character Ichabod Crane who fled from the headless horseman. And the meaning of his name is “no glory.” Who would want to name their son “No Glory”?

Another unpopular name is the name of our subject this morning: “Melchizedek,” also ranked 7,557th, like my own name. But if parents knew what this name means and how significant it is to the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, they might consider it.

We first encounter this person named Melchizedek in Genesis 14 when he visited Abram, who was later renamed Abraham by God. Then we read about him in Psalm 110 as the founder of the priestly order of Melchizedek. In the Book of Hebrews, he is first introduced in 5:6, then mentioned again in 6:20, where he is mentioned again in light of Jesus as our Great High Priest. So who is this mysterious Melchizedek?

Melchizedek the Forerunner Priest-King

First, let us go back to Genesis 14, where there is an account of a tribal war in the ancient Near East in verses 1-16. After Abram and his nephew Lot parted ways, Lot settled in Sodom and Abram in Hebron. But during this tribal war, Lot was taken captive by an alliance led by Chedorlaomer. When Abram learns of Lot's capture, he gathers a small force of 318 men. He pursued his nephew's captors to the north, rescuing him, and in the process, he captured a big plunder of goods and prisoners.

So in verses 17-18, we read about Abram returning from his victory over Chedorlaomer. The king of Sodom went out to meet him. But from out of nowhere, a man named Melchizedek visited him. This man is the “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High.” His name is of Canaanite origin, and it means “king of righteousness,” as we read in Hebrews 7:2. Salem is probably the name of a Canaanite city that was later called Jerusalem. Salem means “peace,” so Melchizedek is literally the “king of peace.”

This is all that's written about Melchizedek, nothing else. But in writing to Christian Jews suffering persecution, this Melchizedek, “king of peace” and “king of righteousness,” must have been a great comfort to them. Jesus, the Great High Priest forever in the order of

Melchizedek gives them peace because of his righteousness. This is also Paul's comfort to us, *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Rom 5:1).

And what does Melchizedek do? He offers Abram a fellowship meal of bread and wine. At the same time, he blesses Abram and offers this meal in the name of *"God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth."* He also blesses God because, as he says to Abram, God has *"delivered your enemies into your hand!"*

How one of the Canaanites, who were pagan idolaters, became a worshiper of the God of Israel is unknown. But God saves whomever he wills, whether he or she is good or wicked (by worldly standards), Buddhist or Muslim, atheist or regular churchgoer, filthy rich or homeless, black or white or in-between. Abram's family were idol-worshippers in Mesopotamia before God revealed himself to them (Jos 24:2). Even the pagan wise men from Babylon were saved by God and so they traveled to Israel to worship the infant Jesus.

And what was Abram's response to Melchizedek's graciousness toward him? He *"gave him a tenth of everything"* (verse 20). Abram gave him a tithe! This small detail would not escape the notice of the writer of Hebrews. Also, the king of Sodom offered Abram a share of the spoils of war: he takes the prisoners (to make them slaves), and Abram takes the loot. Unlike Melchizedek, the king of Sodom did not trust and acknowledge God Most High for giving them victory.

So Abram refused his offer, because he trusted God Most High to provide for him and his men, and not on the gifts of kings. He knew that Melchizedek was right in blessing God who delivered his enemies into his hand. His tithe to Melchizedek then was in effect a tithe to God.

There is another reason why the Preacher explains to his readers that Melchizedek is a real historical figure in the Old Testament. Many Jews believed that Melchizedek's story was merely an allegory, not a real story. Even Christians have different interpretations of who Melchizedek really was. Some have said he was an angel. Others have argued that he was actually Christ appearing as a human being in the Old Testament, before Christ became incarnate when he was born in Bethlehem. They cite verse 3 which says, *"He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life."* And the writer also says that he is "a priest forever" like the Son of God. However, in almost all the pre-incarnate appearances of the Son of God, he is called the *"Angel of the Lord,"* the angel of Yahweh (Gen 16:13; 18:1; Jdgs 6:22; 13:18). Melchizedek was never called this name.

But all that the writer is pointing out is—unlike many Old Testament figures—that nothing is known about the origin or end of Melchizedek. Who were his parents? What happened to him after he visited Abram? Genealogies were important to Jews, but the whole Bible says nothing about these things concerning this mysterious man.

Jesus the Priest-King Forever

The bulk of the writer's explanation about the role of this mysterious king-priest Melchizedek in God's plan of salvation for his people is in verses 4-24. In these verses, he compares and contrasts Melchizedek with Jesus. So he offers five arguments to prove that Jesus is the better and Great High Priest.

First, he explains how Abram's tithe to Melchizedek, a very short detail in Genesis 14, is more significant than at first glance. He notes that in the Old Testament, the Levitical priests receive tithes from the people, their own kinsmen (Num 18:21). The tribe of Levi had no land inheritance, but they were entitled to the people's tithes for their livelihood and for their service to God as priests in the tabernacle.

The writer of Hebrews then affirms that **the one who receives tithes is greater than the one who gives them**. In the ancient days, conquered kings or the lesser kings paid tributes to the greater kings. Abram took a tenth of the spoils of war, and gave it to Melchizedek because he was a priest of the God Most high. The Preacher uses this action to persuade the Hebrews that Melchizedek is superior even to Abraham, their greatest forefather. Since Levi descended from Abraham, and all priests are from Levi's tribe, Melchizedek was also greater than all the Levitical priests.

Second, not only did Melchizedek receive tithes from Abram. He also blessed Abram in the name of God. Of this, the writer says, *"It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior"* (verse 7). God blessed the priests, and priests blessed the people. God blesses his people when pastors pronounce the benediction on the people at the end of the worship service. **The superior blesses the inferior.**

The third argument by the writer that Jesus is better than the Levitical priests is found in verses 11-14. He argues that the old priesthood is an imperfect priesthood because it operates under the Law of Moses. And the Law cannot make anyone or anything perfect (verse 11). This doesn't mean that God demanded sinlessness among Israelites through their own works, because this is impossible. Rather, the preacher is pointing out that there is a need for another—and better—priesthood, which would arise from Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High. The old Levitical priesthood has been replaced by a new priesthood.

So the Preacher further explains in verse 12 that since the priesthood was changed, it was necessary to change the law as well. **Because a better law under a better covenant is needed to give perfection to God's people, a new priesthood is required, the priesthood of Melchizedek.**

But since Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, and not from the tribe of Levi, how did he qualify as a High Priest? This is the fourth argument of the Preacher: **The priesthood of Jesus is not based on "bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life."** Jesus has the "power of an indestructible life" because he died and rose again, and he will never

die again. Since he lives forever, and the tenure of a high priest is for life, he is a High Priest forever! Think of our Supreme Court justices whose serves for the rest of their lives. If a justice never dies, he will serve forever, obviously an impossibility. This is why the Most High God declared Christ as priest forever in Psalm 110:4.

Therefore, says the writer in verse 19, *“a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.”* What is this better hope? It is that Jesus is now the Great High Priest, better than the old priesthood. Because with his priesthood, we are assured of a better covenant, a new covenant, in which being right with God does not depend on obedience to the law. It is grounded on the perfect obedience of Christ to God's law. And we become right with God when we put our faith and trust in him as the High Priest who offered himself, not bulls and goats, as the Substitutionary Sacrifice for all our sins.

Fifthly and finally, the writer argues in verse 20 that **the high priesthood of Jesus was made with an oath by the God himself.** All the former priests became priests based only on their descent from Aaron, but *“without an oath.”* So the writer again uses Psalm 110:4 to prove that Christ is the High Priest forever because God has made an oath to his priesthood. And God is unchangeable—his Word, his oath, and his promises never change.

Because of all these reasons, “Jesus is *“the guarantor of a better covenant.”* Not only is he the better High Priest, he is the High Priest of a new and better covenant. Under the old covenant, sins are atoned for every year with repeated animal sacrifices. In the new and better covenant, Jesus offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for all sins.

The Priest-King is Savior and Mediator

Finally, because he is the better and eternal High Priest, the writer says in verse 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.”* His work consists of two things.

First, he saves us “to the uttermost.” In contrast with the former high priests, Jesus is perfectly righteous, *“holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.”* They were also sinners who died, so they were unable to save anyone. Unlike those high priests, Jesus has no need 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 (verses 26-27).

Therefore, the salvation he has accomplished for us is complete, full and perfect, since he is perfect. Because there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, he left nothing to us in bringing about our salvation. He has taken care of our election from eternity past all the way to our glorification in eternity future in heaven.

Second, he intercedes or mediates for us before his Father in heaven. His work of mediation reaches into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of his Father. He always pleads our case with God: to give us strength to resist temptations; to have mercy

on us when we give in to temptations; to sanctify us in our daily lives; and to preserve us in the faith in this world of sin and suffering.

With this powerful presentation to Jewish Christians of Jesus as the superior High Priest, the question for them is: Why would you want to return to the old and inferior old covenant temple, priesthood and sacrifices? These are but foreshadows of the greater reality that Jesus Christ is the greater Temple, the Great High Priest, and the once-for-all Substitutionary Sacrifice for all sins.

Dear friends: Jesus as our High Priest-King is a great comfort to us. He saves us completely and fully. He intercedes for us in all our prayers to our Father in heaven. He never forgets us. He never sleeps nor slumbers. He never ceases working for us.

Since he has saved us completely, we are able to draw near to our merciful God through him. Our former status as enemies of God is now turned around, so that we are now friends, even children, of God. Jesus as our High Priest has reconciled us to God. Now we are at peace with God, and we have no fear of God's judgment and wrath against sinners.

Another great comfort is this: Jesus saves us "completely," which literally means "at all times" and "forever." We know this to be true because he lives forever. And his Father made an unchangeable oath that he would be our High Priest forever. Now he makes intercession for us before his Father.

But when Jesus returns from heaven, we will see him face to face, and we will enjoy perfect, sweet communion with God for all eternity. On that day, he will not only be a High Priest to us, but our King forever, and we will also reign with him over all creation.