

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **From Pablum to Porterhouse**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 7:1-28

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Forty years ago I heard Howie Hendricks preach a sermon entitled, *From Pablum to Porterhouse*. I don't remember the sermon or even the text but I never forgot the title. I decided it fit my Scripture passage today perfectly, so I borrowed it.

Pablum is baby food. Porterhouse is steak. Baby food is easy to digest and therefore appropriate for babies. Steak takes a lot more effort, but it's so much more enjoyable and nutritious for those who can handle it. For two chapters now the author of Hebrews has been anxious to serve up some spiritual steak, that is, to teach about the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ. But the immaturity and laziness (yes, childishness!) of some in his audience prevents him from doing it.

So instead he delivers up a very severe warning to those exhibiting spiritual laziness and disobedience (my sermon two weeks ago from 6:4-8), and then he provides them some heart-felt encouragement to persevere in the faith (Josh's sermon last week from 6:9-20). Josh's passage focused on Jesus as an anchor of the soul, and concluded by mentioning for the third time in two chapters that "Jesus has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

I don't know what changes the author's mind—maybe he feels his warning has done its job—but he now decides to go ahead and serve up a rare and juicy 24-ounce Porterhouse. The entire seventh chapter of Hebrews concerns the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ, and we're going to try to cover the whole chapter today. So we'd better start chewing.

The essential message of this chapter is this: In the OT God set aside an entire tribe of Israel, the tribe of Levi, to serve as clergy, priests, bridge-builders to God for the rest of the nation. But the Levitical priesthood failed to do an adequate job of bridge-building. So God sent Jesus as a different kind of priest, to build a bridge which could serve perfectly and perpetually to bring sinful people into a personal and eternal relationship with almighty God.

The author, however, faces a difficult challenge in that he is writing to a thoroughly Jewish audience. They are well aware that Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi, and therefore, according to Jewish law, Jesus could not even serve as a priest, much less a high priest. He finds a solution, however, in that Jesus belonged to an order of priests that precedes and supercedes the Levitical priesthood, namely the Melchizedekian priesthood.

Who is this mysterious high priest named Melchizedek? (1-3)

Because of the difficult issues discussed in this chapter, we're going to read it in sections this morning, rather than all at once. First, verses 1-3:

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met

Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.

The key phrase here is, "like the Son of God." The author's purpose in referring to Melchizedek is to draw parallels to Jesus Christ, for Melchizedek is clearly a type or illustration of Christ.

1. What we know of him parallels Christ. Melchizedek, a contemporary of Abraham 2,000 years before Christ, was both a king and a priest. This would have been impossible among the Jewish people, for kings had to come from the tribe of Judah and priests had to come from the tribe of Levi. Whenever kings of Israel tried to act as priests, God judged them severely (for example, Uzzah in 2 Chron. 26, was struck by God with leprosy for this very thing). But Jesus, though a king of the tribe of Judah, is also able to serve as our high priest because His priesthood goes way back before Levi was even born, to this king-priest Melchizedek.

The fact of the matter is the OT predicted the dual role of king-priest for Messiah. Listen to Zechariah 6:13, which speaks prophetically of Christ: "It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a *priest on his throne*. And there will be harmony between the two."

Melchizedek's names also parallel the names of Christ. Melchizedek means "king of righteousness," according to Hebrews 7:2. Furthermore, he was the king of Salem (or Jerusalem) which means "peace" or *Shalom*. Righteousness and peace were also names frequently attached to Jesus. In Hebrews 1:8-9 we read God's evaluation of His Son: "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness." Ephesians 2:14 says of Jesus, "He is our peace."

2. What we *don't* know of Melchizedek also parallels Christ. Now let me warn you in advance that the kind of argument we find here in verse 3 sounds a little strange to our western ears, but it was not uncommon in Jewish literature. When the writer says of Melchizedek that he was . . . "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever," I do not believe he is claiming Melchizedek had no parents, no genealogy, and no birth or death, for Melchizedek was a real historical person. Rather the author is arguing that none of these facts is *recorded* for us. And the silences of Scripture are as much due to divine inspiration as are its affirmations.

The story of Melchizedek is found only in Gen. 14:18-20. He just appears in the text and is soon gone, with nothing said of his ancestry, his parents, his children, his birth, or his death. Jesus, he claims, is like Melchizedek when you think of His eternal Divine nature. The Son of God just appears without beginning, without end, without parentage, without genealogy. Now of course in his human nature he had a mother and He had a genealogy, but in regard to His divine nature, He existed before He was born into this world, and He continues after His death through the resurrection.

So, what we know about Melchizedek parallels Christ, as well as what we don't know about him. Are you beginning to understand why this chapter is Porterhouse instead of Pablum?

Now the argument in this chapter hinges not only upon drawing a connection between Melchizedek and Christ but also upon demonstrating that the priesthood of Melchizedek (and of Christ) is greater than the Levitical priesthood.

Just how great was Melchizedek? (4-10)

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, their brothers—even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

1. He was greater than Abraham, the father of the faith. (4-7) Now you and I may have difficulty grasping the impact of this argument, but to first-century Jews Abraham was revered above all other men, as the father of the nation and the father of the faith. He would be like George Washington and Martin Luther wrapped up in one. He was viewed as a “prince of God” by his neighbors and was called “my friend” by God Himself. But Melchizedek was even greater. He was greater than Abraham for two reasons:

He accepted tithes from Abraham. If you go back to the 14th chapter of Genesis, you find that Abraham won a great military victory, despite tremendous odds against him, when he rescued his nephew Lot and returned with the spoils of battle. Then, just as he was savoring what was surely one of the high points of his life, Abraham was offered a choice. The king of Sodom, representing the world and the riches of the world, met Abraham and offered him great wealth. But Melchizedek, king of Salem, also met Abraham and offered him a simple meal of bread and wine. Each king made his pitch to Abraham, but Abraham chose Melchizedek's offer, and instead of accepting the worldly wealth of the King of Sodom, he worshiped God by giving a tenth of the spoils of battle to Melchizedek. The fact that Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek is taken as evidence that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham. You don't pay tithes to one inferior to you, but rather to one who is superior.

He bestowed blessings upon Abraham. Verse 6 tells us Melchizedek “blessed him who had the promises,” i.e. Abraham. The next verse explains the significance: “And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.”

But it's not enough to demonstrate that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, for his goal is to show that the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood, so he makes a

second affirmation about Melchizedek:

2. He was greater than Levi, the founder of the Levitical priesthood. (8-10) The Levitical priests all died (verse 8) and thus all lost their priestly office, from Aaron on down, one generation after another. There are multiple genealogies in the OT recording these deaths. (If you're reading through the Bible this year, you've come across many of these genealogies already). If you wonder why Scripture gives no much attention to genealogies, here is one reason—the record of deaths serves to press home the futility of relying on human mediation, human bridge-building between man and God. It's limited because the mediators are all mortal!

In contrast, however, nowhere is it *recorded* that Melchizedek lost his priestly office by death. And what is true of Melchizedek in this “literary” sense is true absolutely of Jesus Christ—He didn't lose His priesthood through death because God raised Him from the dead.

Furthermore, Melchizedek was greater than Levi because Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek. How is that possible, since Levi was Abraham's great grandson, and wasn't even born yet when Abraham met Melchizedek? Here's how: an ancestor is regarded in biblical thought as containing within himself all his descendants. So, when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, so did Abraham's descendants, including Levi. Therefore Melchizedek must be greater than Levi.

Not let me stop here and say once again that these arguments appear a bit strange to our ears, but remember that the Hebrews to whom this book is addressed, steeped as they were in Jewish thought, would have been familiar with this kind of reasoning and very much persuaded by it. They didn't think of themselves as individuals so much as part of a family, a race.

Having introduced us to Melchizedek, and having told us just how great he was, the author now begins to explain why another priest of the Melchizedekian order is now needed. It's because of the inadequacy of the Levitical priesthood.

What was wrong with the Levitical priesthood? (11-12, 18-19)

Read with me verses 11-12 and 18-19:

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. . .

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

The Levitical priesthood was inadequate (not bad; in fact, it was good because God established it, but inadequate). Why?

1. It could not produce perfection. (11) “Perfection” here needs to be understood not as moral perfection but as a right standing before God. About all the Levitical priesthood could

do is to hold off the wrath of God and achieve atonement, which, as we have noted several times, means “a covering” for the sins of the people. It could not actually accomplish the forgiveness of sins or provide a basis for entering God's presence.

2. It was part and parcel of an inadequate covenant, the Mosaic Law. (18-19) The Levitical priesthood was an integral part of the Mosaic Law. Thus the priesthood shared in the inadequacies of the Law. He calls the Law “weak and useless” in verse 18. That doesn’t mean totally useless, for the Law did show men their need of a Savior and served as a tutor to bring them to Christ. But it was inadequate in and of itself to procure a right standing before God and bring people near to God.

The whole apparatus of worship associated with the Law and the Levitical priesthood was calculated to keep men at a distance from God rather than to bring them near. We will learn better in chapter 10 how the Gospel accomplishes the very thing the Law could not do, but for now it is sufficient for us to realize that the Levitical priesthood was tied to a covenant that could not bring people into an intimate relationship with God.

Having touched upon the inadequacy of the Levitical priesthood, our author turns his attention to the superiority of Christ's priesthood.

What is better about Christ’s priesthood? (13-19)

1. The order of his priesthood is superior. (13-14) There are two priestly orders—the Levitical and the Melchizedekian. If Jesus were of the Levitical priesthood, he would partake of the inadequacies of that priesthood. But He was not. Verse 13-14 say of Jesus:

He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

But far from creating a problem, this actually turns out to be a blessing, for the order of Jesus’ priesthood, the Melchizedekian, is much superior.

2. The basis of His priesthood is superior. (15-17)

And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared, ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”

When it came to the Levitical priesthood, genealogy was everything, personal qualification meant almost nothing. If you were a descendant of Levi you could serve; if you were not, you couldn’t. If you were a Levite and a descendant of Aaron, you could serve as high priest; if you were not, you couldn’t. Consequently, the priests were often more concerned about their pedigrees than their holiness.

But what is actually more important, character or credentials? When I was a teenager I attended a church in Kansas City pastored by a man I greatly admired named Wendell Grout. Years later he served a church in Minneapolis and eventually a large Christian and Missionary Alliance

Church in Calgary in western Canada. Pastor Grout never went to Seminary, had no doctorate or even a master's degree. Many churches wouldn't consider him as a pastor because he didn't have the right credentials. But he was without doubt one of the finest pastors in evangelicalism in the last half of the 20th century, because he had the power of God on his life.

Jesus didn't have the ancestral credentials to be a priest in Israel, but He certainly had the character. He had the awesome power of an indestructible life, and that is far superior to the puny authority derived from human ancestry.

3. The guarantee of Christ's priesthood is superior. (20-22) Verse 20 continues, *“And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.”*

We will not delve into the new covenant today, for that is the principal theme of Josh's message on chapter 8 next week. However, I do want us to think about this oath God gives to guarantee that better covenant. An oath is always made on something greater or more sacred than the person making the oath. That's why in court we swear on a Bible, not on the Wichita Eagle. In Josh's passage last week it says, “When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself.” But isn't the bare word of God assurance enough? Of course it is, but at several critical points in the history of salvation God chose to condescend to our level, a level where a man's word is deemed insufficient without an oath.

Just think of the humility involved in God's swearing, as if before a civil magistrate, that He would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Did you know that it's considered a major constitutional question whether the President of the United States can be subpoenaed and placed under oath by a court. But God Himself submitted to just such a humiliation to guarantee that Jesus Christ was introducing a superior covenant and priesthood.

4. His priestly work of intercession is superior. (23-25)

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Turnover was a constant problem for the OT priesthood. The historian Josephus counted 83 high priests from Aaron to the fall of the Temple in A.D. 70. When a high priest died or finished his term in office there was no guarantee that the one who took his place would be as caring or as effective as his predecessor. But no such misgivings ever have to be entertained with regard to the intercession of Christ, because His priesthood is permanent; therefore, his intercession is constant.¹

You know, I think Hebrews 7:25 may actually be the greatest Gospel verse in the Bible apart from John 3:16: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him,

because he always lives to intercede for them.” It describes for us
 the basis of salvation,
 the power of salvation,
 the extent of salvation,
 the objects of salvation,
 and the security of salvation.

The **basis** is indicated by the word “therefore,” which looks back at the previous verse which speaks of the permanent priesthood of a living Lord.

The **power** is indicated by the words, “He is able.” Not only willing, but able. There are many whom I am willing to help, but cannot because of my own inadequacies and limited resources, but He is able.

The **extent** of salvation is indicated by the word “completely,” or “forever,” or “uttermost.” One rescue mission worker liked to translate it “He is able to save to the guttermost.”

The **objects** of salvation are “those who come to God through Christ.” There are no restrictions and no other qualifications than faith in God's Son.

And finally we are told of the **security** of salvation, namely, “He always lives to intercede for them.”

Let us never minimize the importance of Jesus' intercessory work on our behalf. Paul put it this way in the great 8th chapter of Romans:

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us (8:33-34).

So, what was often interrupted in the Levitical system (i.e. intercession) is continual in the priesthood of Christ. And what was continual in the Levitical priesthood (sacrifice) is interrupted in the priesthood of Christ, because it is done only once.

5. His priestly work of sacrifice is superior. (27) Look at verses 27: “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins *once for all* when he offered himself.” A high priest's work was never done. There were no chairs in the Holy Place, because there was no time to sit down. My friend Pastor Colin Smith writes,

Some jobs involve a lot of repetition and can become extremely boring, but the work of the priest must have been about as repetitive as they come. Imagine a priest at end of a hard day's work offering prayers and sacrifices. It's three minutes to five, and he is just about to go home when John Doe turns up with his scrawny goat and announces that he has sinned unintentionally. Not again!

The priest asks John what he has done this time. It is a familiar routine. The

*priest offers the sacrifice, and John goes back to his tent, but the priest knows that it won't be long before John is back again with another goat.*ⁱⁱ

But after making his once-for-all sacrifice for sins, after His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven (1:3), because His work of offering the sacrifice for sin was completed. No other sacrifice for sin would ever be needed. The hymn writer says it so well in the hymn we sang this morning:

*My sin—O, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

When I spoke on chapter 4 a month ago I talked about this once-for-all sacrifice; in fact, I read at least six other passages that use those three words, “once for all,” to describe the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Those three words constitute one word in Greek, the word *hapax*.

I have shared this story before, but I'm getting old, so I have an excuse for repeating myself. Shortly after we moved to St. Louis I spotted a blue Chevy with a personalized license plate that simply read, HAPAX. I recognized it as a Greek word and wondered what kind of a Greek freak was running loose in St. Louis County and why he put that on his license plate. Some time later I learned that the car belonged to an evangelical Episcopalian rector, who had studied Greek at Covenant Seminary. When I met him and had a chance to ask him why he had that license plate, he said it was so people would ask the same question I asked. Then he could tell them that Jesus died once for all time and once for all mankind. We built a delightful friendship that continued for 20 years; in fact, he and his family eventually left the Episcopal Church and became part of our Free Church in St. Louis. Later I learned that he was Faye Netherton's pastor as she was growing up in St. Louis.

Hapax—a magnificent word signifying how much superior Christ's priestly work of sacrifice is to that of the OT priest—once-for-all.

6. His character is superior. (26, 28) Our text concludes with a beautiful description of the character of our high priest: “Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.” Verse 28: “For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made *perfect forever*.” The new priesthood is better because the new high priest is better—better by far than any merely human priest.

Jesus proved that character is more important than credentials and power is more important than pedigree. May we trust Him as the only One who is trustworthy as a bridge-builder between us and a Holy God.

Conclusion: In conclusion this morning the truth that I want to focus upon more than any of the other marvelous truths in this passage is the continuing intercession of Christ for us in heaven.

Many Christians have a pretty good understanding of what Christ has done for us in the past through His death on the cross, and also of what He will do for us in the future when He comes again in power and great glory. But they are not so clear about what He is doing for us today.

Christ died to save you, but He also lives to keep you. It is because of His continuing work of intercession that we are sustained through every pressure, kept through every temptation, encouraged through every persecution, and will eventually be brought triumphantly into glory.

Do you have a prayer warrior who remembers you daily? I do. It's an amazing comfort and encouragement! But my mom is 91 and one of these days her work of intercession will be over. But the intercession of Christ will never end. Nor does He pray for you the way some people pray. He doesn't pray, "Father, bless all the Christians in Kansas or Father, comfort all the afflicted." He knows you by name and He prays for you by name.

The prophet Isaiah paints a beautiful word picture for us when he asks, "Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were *possible*, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15-16, NLT). These words were written centuries before the death of Jesus, but His crucifixion explains the full significance of their meaning. Nails pierced His hands when He died to save you. How could He ever forget you?ⁱⁱⁱ

Prayer: Father, thank you that we have a praying, interceding Savior, who not only gave His life for us, but also lives to intercede for us. His sacrifice is utterly acceptable to you, his contact with you in immediate and unbroken, His priestly ministry on our behalf is never-ending, therefore, the salvation which He secures for us is absolute. Amen.

i. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 153.

ii. Colin Smith, *Unlocking the Bible Story*, Vol. 4, 201.

iii. Smith, 207.