

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 7, Verses 4-10
Notes From Class on November 10, 2009
Last Revised on (November 12, 2009)

Good evening everyone!

Welcome to our continuing study of the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

Before we begin please make sure that you have everything you need.

Tonight you will need a Bible and a song book.

If you are using an English translation of the Bible other than the English Standard Version ("ESV") then it may help you to have the handout I have prepared, which has the ESV text of Hebrews (in its entirety).

There is coffee and tea at the back.

Please get what you need and, then, let's get started....

Review

Last week we started reading Chapter 7.

We covered only the first three verses.

I appreciate all of your enthusiastic comments!

I apologize for having let the discussion become a little too confusing.

Please let me begin tonight by trying to clear up some of that confusion.

I think it will help to back up and begin with the last two verses of Chapter 6.

Chapter 6, Verses 19 - 20

Would someone please read the last two verses of Hebrews, Chapter 6 in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Now would someone please read those same two verses in English (ESV)

19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,

20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Thank you. The thing I most want us to notice here, is that the author is describing **Jesus**.

Several different **metaphors** are mixed together to form this description.

For example Jesus is described as a "**forerunner**" --- one who goes first, ahead of others.

Q. **Who** are the others on behalf of whom Jesus has gone ahead?

A. Those who will finally also go where he is --- i.e. **Christians**.

Q. **Where** does he go?

A. We find that in Verse 19: he goes "**into the inner place behind the curtain**"

Q. What does that mean?

A. This is (almost certainly) a reference to the holy of holies in the tabernacle, a place where only a **High Priest** may go, once per year, on the Day of Atonement.

Q. Does the author of Hebrews mean to say that Jesus is **literally** in an earthly tabernacle someplace?

A. No, of course not.

Q. So, what **does** he mean?

A. He means that Jesus is in **heaven** with God. Right!

We remember that Verse 1 of Psalm 110 speaks of Jesus **sitting at God's right hand**.

No ordinary High Priest has ever done **that** or ever could do that. Only the Son of God.

And he has gone there **forever**.

So then, **Jesus** is for us, in addition to so many other things, our **High Priest Forever**.

This thought is central to everything else we are talking about.

To which thought is joined (at the end of v. 20) still another metaphor "after the order of **Melchizedek**."

The author of Hebrews is **not** being original when he tacks this on.

He is borrowing almost the exact wording of **Psalm 110, Verse 4** as we have discussed extensively.

Remember: it was **God** in the mouth of David who said this of Jesus --- i.e. that Jesus is a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

So this metaphor warrants the attention that the author of Hebrews is giving it!

Q. So when God through David calls the Messiah (Jesus) "a high priest forever **after the order of Melchizedek**, what does he mean?"

A. **That** is what the author of Hebrews endeavors to explain next, in the first part of Chapter 7

Before we move on. let me once again state the obvious: all of this is highly **figurative** language, and not literal description.

We can **only** ever speak of God and heavenly things in figurative language!

There is nothing in our minds that lets us think of such things literally.

OK, then. let's read on.

Chapter 7, Verses 1-3

Will somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 7, Verses 1-3 in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Now will someone please read those same verses in English (ESV).

- 1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him,**
- 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace.**
- 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.**

Thank you.

Now please remember the larger literary **context** within which this passage appears.

The author is in the process of describing **Jesus** using a lot of highly **figurative** language,

including the very important **metaphor** he has borrowed from Psalm 110, Verse 4,

specifically that of Jesus being a **high priest, forever, after the order of Melchizedek.**

What he is doing now, at the beginning of Chapter 7, is **explaining** to us how we are supposed to **understand** this particular metaphor.

In other words, he is telling us what is it about Jesus (**the one being described**) that we are we supposed to understand better through the **figure** of Melchizedek.

I was thinking: this is sort of like reading a poem that suddenly stops in the middle to explain its own use of poetic language.

Which would ordinarily make for a pretty **poor** poem.

David certainly didn't do that in Psalm 110 (or in any of his other Psalms).

Q. Why do you suppose the author of Hebrews is doing that here? i.e. stopping to analyze one of the metaphors he is using to describe Jesus.

A. Well, for one thing, he is **not** writing poetry but preaching and teaching.

A. And for another thing, the metaphor he is stopping to explain is not his own metaphor, but a metaphor quoted from a Psalm of David that was (even then) about **1000 years old.**

A. For still another thing, his primary audience is "**dull of hearing**"... they are forgetting how to read their Bible ... that is our Old Testament ... and he has already told them this. (c.f. 5:11)

Their "dullness" is, I believe, why he begins Chapter 7 with a **review** of what is written in Genesis, Chapter 14, verses 18-20, followed by an **explanation** of why this is an apt metaphor for describing Jesus Christ.

This explanation also helps us (who come far later in history and are also dull of hearing!) by, for example, making it clear that the author of Hebrews is **NOT** interested in the fact that Melchizedek served bread and wine to Abraham,

And by telling us precisely what it is about Melchizedek that **does** interest **him.**

and not just him (i.e. the author of Hebrews) but **David also.**

What we sort of have here, I think, is the author of Hebrews' **commentary** on Psalm 110, Verse 4

Q. So what similarities between Melchizedek and Jesus **do** David and the author of Hebrews wish to draw to our attention?

A. In the first three verses of Chapter 7 there are at least **three** points of comparison as we discussed last week.

Here is a quick review:

(1) First, the **name** "Melchizedek" must be understood as not just a name in the modern sense but also as a description of intrinsically who this man was and what he represented. The author of Hebrews reminds us that "Melchizedek" means "King of Righteousness." Thus in addition to being a "priest of God most high" this figure is also a righteous king. All of which is very unusual and surprising within the context of the unrighteous and ungodly world in which Abraham found himself in the history described in Genesis, Chapter 14. In these ways, then, Melchizedek, really is an apt figure to represent Christ. Do you see Him?

(2)OK, Second, the author of Hebrews reminds us that Melchizedek was described in Genesis 14 as "King of Salem" and that "Salem" means "peace." So in addition to being a righteous priest-king, we understand that the kingdom ruled by Melchizedek was a **peaceful** kingdom. Last week we talked a little bit about the possible range of meaning of the word "peace" but that really doesn't matter too much, because however broadly the term may be used in connection with Melchizedek it cannot exhaust the sense in which Jesus Christ is the King of Peace.

The thing to notice is that Melchizedek was an **anomaly** in his environment: Everyone else, including Abraham, was very violent, but Melchizedek was peaceful and yet still seemingly ruled over all of them, even Abraham, in God's name. That is exactly the case with Jesus Christ too: many were expecting the Messiah to be a souped-up version of Abraham or David (both warrior kings) but what they got instead was Jesus: a righteous, peaceful, priest-king after the order of Melchizedek --- one to whom the warrior kings all automatically defer!

(3) Now, the Third point of comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek has something to do with the word **forever** and this is where our discussion become a little too confusing last week. Let's revisit that carefully.

The **latter** half of Verse 3 tells us that Melchizedek, resembling the Son of God, continues a priest forever.

The sense in which this is so, is explained to some extent by the **first** half of Verse 3, which says that Melchizedek is "without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life."

Clearly we are examining the resemblance between Melchizedek and the **eternal** Son of God and not the incarnate Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus of Nazareth **did** have a beginning of days and an end of life: he was a 100% natural man.

It is therefore reasonable and I believe correct to assume that Melchizedek, "resembling the Son of God," also was born and lived and died as a **natural** man, with ordinary parents, and etc.

Certainly Genesis 14 says **nothing** about Melchizedek being inhuman or superhuman or immortal.

Likewise Psalm 110 says nothing of the sort and does not even say that **Melchizedek** is a priest forever.

It says that the **Messiah (Jesus)** is a priest forever....after the **order** of Melchizedek.

Within the total context of the description of Jesus being developed here, by the author of Hebrews, the most important thing about **this** priestly order, is that it has **nothing** to do with the **Levitical** priesthood.

The Levitical priesthood begins and ends **within** the Biblical narrative.

It **begins** with the **Law** promulgated by Moses.

It ends with the death of Christ on **Calvary**.

This was underscored some years later when the **temple** itself was destroyed.

No Levitical priest could **possibly** be a priest forever, because the Levitical priesthood, itself, did not last very long: only about 1,000 years, which is pretty short compared to "forever"

By **contrast** the **priesthood** of the order of **Melchizedek** continues "**forever**."

The Son of God is, after all, described as belonging to this priestly order. **He** is definitely forever!

And all of us who believe in the Son of God also live forever, **including** Melchizedek!

In **that** sense you could say that Melchizedek continues a priest forever.

And perhaps in that sense, too, you could say that **all** Christians continue priests forever.

But while everything we have said to this point is probably true, and may make we modern readers more comfortable that we have everything (ontologically) sorted out.

we have probably **still** not grasped what the author of Hebrews meant to say here, in Verse 3 of Chapter 7.

Like David before him, the author of Hebrews is probably not at all **interested** (as we tend to be) in looking behind the Biblical figure, Melchizedek, to discover his natural history.

Again, when he says that Melchizedek is without father, mother, genealogy, birth, childhood, and death but, he almost certainly does **not** mean this **literally**.

What he almost certainly **does** means is that none of these things are **written** in the Bible.

For him this is just the same as if none of these things existed or had ever happened.

And this grants us an important **insight** into the way in which the author of Hebrews, King David, and the Jews and godly gentiles of that era **read** their Bible, which is our Old Testament.

From their **exegetical** viewpoint --- i.e. the way they mainly understood the Bible --- whatever is **not** written in the Bible, is of little or no importance in comparison to what is written there.

Melchizedek exists and is important **only** because he is written in the Bible and meets Abraham and etc.

We are not invited to start with the story of Melchizedek and speculate about his parents, his birth, his death, and etc. because none of these things are written in the Bible! And so none of them are important.

Neither David nor the author of Hebrews has any interest in Melchizedek as a **private person**

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He is of interest to them only as a **type of Christ**, a Biblical figure representing the Son of God.

It is therefore actually **dangerous** for us to speculate about Melchizedek.

Because we risk **misunderstanding** Christ! And that is the most dangerous misunderstanding of all!

Do you see it? In case of both the Son of God and Melchizedek, in whom the Son of God is prefigured in the Bible, we are dealing with an eternal reality that **touches** briefly but also eternally **transcends** human history, and which can only be known correctly within the confines of what is written in the Bible.

All we can safely know about such things, is what the **Bible** tells us.

We need to stay inside the Bible and try to avoid being overly curious about things the Bible does not teach.

I know this is a hard idea and I am still not explaining well enough, but hopefully this explanation is a little clearer than last week.

Please continue to ponder all of this, as I will.

Comments?

Questions?

OK. Let's read on.

Chapter 7, Verses 4-10

Would someone please read Hebrews, Chapter 7, Verses 4-10, in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Now would someone please read those same verses in English (ESV)

4 See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!

5 And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham.

6 But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

7 It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.

8 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.

9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham,

10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Thank you.

OK, now. Once again let's remember the larger **context** of what is happening here.

The author of Hebrews is describing **Jesus** in **highly figurative language**,

including the idea of Jesus as our **great high priest**,

employing an important **allusion to the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek**.

an allusion with which we have struggled a bit,

and we are not, by the way, the first people in history to have struggled with his allusion!!

But we understand that **Jesus** (not Melchizedek) is the one being exalted here, and throughout Hebrews.

We understand that Melchizedek is important **only** insofar as he helps us to understand Jesus.

But in that particular respect (as a type of Christ) Melchizedek **is** very important.

We therefore need to be careful, to understand what the **Bible** teaches regarding Melchizedek,

without adding any figments of our own imagination!

That is what the author of Hebrews is helping his original listeners (and us) with now.

Verse 4

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!

*"See how great **this man was...**"*

Q. **Which** man is he talking about?

A. **Melchizedek.**

So far (in verses 1-3) we have seen in Melchizedek the figure of a **priest** and a **king** who is **righteous, peaceful, and eternal.**

Now the author looks at an additional aspect of Melchizedek's (and therefore preeminently Christ's) greatness: namely, that he is **greater than Abraham!**

And this seems almost **impossible** to believe, because Abraham was himself the greatest: **the** patriarch, the father of **all** of the faithful, first among God's chosen people...the very one to whom God's promises were first given!, the original counter-party to the "Abrahamic Covenant" etc.

Yet this Abraham, paid a **tithe** to Melchizedek. Go figure!

I presume (and most commentators agree) that we are talking about a tenth part of the **booty** from the recently concluded battle with the confederation of kings who had abducted Lot.

Q. **Why** would Abraham have paid this tithe?

A. Well, we can be fairly certain that Abraham was **not** paying a tribute or making an offering to any **strange** god; he was pretty **faithful** to Yahweh in such matters;

A. And it was immediately after Melchizedek **blessed** Abraham in the **name of God** most High, that Abraham paid the tithe to Melchizedek.

So it is probably best to understand this tithe as an offering which Abraham made to **God**, and which Melchizedek accepted (as it were) on God's behalf, in his official capacity as a **priest** of God.

In other words this was not a tribute paid to Melchizedek as a private individual, but to God through the priestly (and Christological) figure of Melchizedek.

Verses 5 and 6

And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. 6 But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

The author wishes to draw the sharpest possible distinction between the tithe which Abraham paid through **Melchizedek** and the tithes that would later be paid by Abraham's descendants to Levitical priests under the Law.

Under the Laws promulgated through Moses, priests descended from Levi are **commanded** to take tithes from the other tribes of Israel, for several reasons. (Compensation for religious services rendered and in lieu of a share of the land in Canaan, etc.)

But Melchizedek and Abraham met long **before** there were any such laws or priests in Israel and, indeed, before there **was** any Israel.

And Melchizedek was **not** descended from Aaron or Levi or (even) Abraham.

Therefore in **no** possible sense can the tithe which Abraham paid to Melchizedek be said to arise from or be related to the Law or the Levitical priesthood or anything other than Abraham's relationship with God.

It is noted in verse 6, that Abraham was the one who "**had the promises**" from God.

He nevertheless makes his offering to God not directly but through Melchizedek, thus acknowledging that there was somehow and somehow forever is a **mediator** between even Abraham and God!

And this without any reference **at all** to the Law or the Levitical priesthood.

Verse 7

It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.

We recall that Melchizedek actually **blesed** Abraham before Abraham paid the tithe which we have been discussing, a tithe which can only be understood as an offering from Abraham to God through the eternal, high-priestly mediation of Melchizedek, apart from Law or Levitical Priesthood.

There are **several** senses in which that word **bleess/bleessing** is used in the Bible.

Most often we read of **God bleessing man** and all good things are such bleessings.

We sometimes read of a **men"bleessing" God**, which is a synonym for "praising" Him.

We read of **ordinary men bleessing one another**, which is what happens when we pray for one another, lift up our brothers and sisters and asking God to bleess them.

Finally we sometimes read of **men acting in an official capacity** bleessing those over whom they have some sort of authority before God.

Examples of this latter type of bleessing include the bleessing by **Jacob** of his sons, the bleessings by **Moses** of the nation of Israel, the bleessings by **Jesus** of his disciples, and so forth.

It is this **latter** category of bleessing that the author of Hebrews has in mind here

Melchizedek is **willing** and **able** to bleess Abraham in this sense, and Abraham is willing and able to accept such a bleessing, because they both recognize the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham in the economy of God.

Or said differently, both Abraham and Melchizedek **recognize** and acknowledge that Melchizedek has been **appointed by God** as God's agent and representative in his dealing with Abraham.

Verses 8 - 10

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. 9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

In what has been said so far, we understand that Jesus is **superior to** Melchizedek, that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, that Abraham is superior to Levi, and so forth.

This **vertical** ranking is pretty clear.

But no matter how high we stretch that, it would be a distortion if we thought Jesus was **just** higher.

There is a question here not just of **degree** but of **kind**.

The tithes paid under the Law to the Levitical priests are only **temporal**, **earthly** things...paid in impermanent currency...by and to men who **die**.

Indeed the whole **institution** of the Levitical priesthood is transitory.

It died when **Jesus** died on the cross.

But when Jesus arose from the dead, as we are here being taught, by David and the author of Hebrews, Jesus became a priest **forever**, after the order of Melchizedek.

So when Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, it was in some sense an **eternal** payment to God.

unaffected by the **laws** and the **priests** that would later rise and fall in Israel.

Not only that, there is a sense in which this payment was made not just by Abraham but by his **descendants** also,

including **Levi** and, therefore, by all of the **Levitical priests** who would ever live and die in Israel.

The sense in which this is true, is that these unborn generations were **still in Abraham's loins**.

Which is to say that **all** that ever comes from Abraham is inferior and subordinate to Melchizedek.

And therefore inferior to **Christ**, in manner and extent, to a degree that is almost indescribable.

Notice that in these last few verses (8-10) the author of Hebrews pushes this figure of Melchizedek nearly to its limits and becomes, it seems, even a little bit **playful**.

Verse 9 begins "**one might even say that**" indicating that the author is aware, and wants his listeners to be aware of this fact --- i.e. that we are playing with figurative language right up to the limit of what it can bear, with a straight face.

This playfulness, too, it seems to me, is **helpful**, because it reminds us, once again, that we are dealing throughout these difficult passages with highly figurative language that is struggling to describe the indescribable...the excellence...the holiness... of God in Christ.

What is important to walk away with here, is an understanding that the supremacy of Christ implies an **inferiority** of the Levitical Priesthood and, therefore, as **imperfection** of the Law promulgated by Moses.

That is where the argument goes next.

Questions?

Comments?