

Hebrews Study Session 10 - Chapter 7:1-10

These verses kickoff the main teaching of the book of Hebrews. It is the author's grand revealing of Jesus Christ and His great high priesthood which was not only superior to all that came before it but also that nothing will come after it. In these verses, that start the ball rolling, the goal is to demonstrate the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood. The author makes his case using two points. 1) The superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood based on what he received from Abraham and 2) The superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood based upon the eternal nature of his priesthood. Our biggest issue in this section is to figure out who Melchizedek is and what is the nature of his priesthood. Keep in mind as we go through these first ten verses of chapter seven that all of this is ultimately pointing to the superior great high priest these believers had in Jesus, the Son of God.

We're going to start in Genesis with what the Biblical record tells us about this enigmatic figure, Melchizedek. As a background to the Genesis record, Four kings from the east invaded the area of Canaan where Abraham and his nephew, Lot, were dwelling. These four invading kings attacked the five kings of the area who were over this area. The four invading kings routed the five local kings in a major victory. As typical, the victors took all the losers food supplies, any possessions of value they wanted and any people they wanted for slaves. This battle was not really of any significance other than Lot was living in Sodom at the time of the battle and he was taken as a prize. When Abraham heard of his, he gathered his men and they chased down the four victorious kings and destroyed them and brought back all the plunder and people who had been captured, including Lot. When Abraham returned from the successful rescue operation to the area around Sodom, in the valley of the kings, he was met by the king of Sodom and Melchizedek. *[Some of the interesting points brought out in discussion were that Melchizedek was not mentioned as one of the five kings who lost terribly to the four invading kings. He somehow was either acquainted with Abram or at least knew of him to make this trip to bless him. Also, this event in Genesis happened before Abram even made it back to his own home. He was still in the process of returning with the spoils from the battle when this original event took place.]*

[Read Genesis 14:17-20]

Q: Where was Melchizedek king? *(Salem - we don't know definitively where Salem is. It could be a reference to Jerusalem (as in Psalm 76:2) or it could have been Shechem (Genesis 33:18. Both are referred to as Salem in Scripture and both lie along the path that Abram would have taken from Dan (north where he overtook the invading kings) and the south (where Sodom and the valley of the kings is located). In truth, the actual, physical place isn't what is stressed here - rather that it's name meant peace.)*

Q: What did Melchizedek bring out for Abram? *(bread and wine)*

Q: Who did Melchizedek serve as priest? *(God Most High - this is the same God Abram served)*

Q: What did Melchizedek do to Abram? (*He blessed him*)

Q: What did Abram give to Melchizedek? (*the tithe of the spoils*)

[Read Hebrews 7:1-3]

Q: According to Hebrews, who is Melchizedek? What are the descriptions the author of Hebrews uses? (*king of Salem, priest of God Most High, blesses Abram, receiver of Abram's tithes, king of righteousness, king of peace, without father or mother, without genealogy, having no beginning or end of life, made like the Son of God, abides as a priest forever*)

Q: What descriptions in Hebrews are the same as those given in Genesis? (*king of Salem, blessed Abram, priest of God Most High, receiver of Abram's tithes - his name is given thus it could be implied that king of righteousness and king of peace can be uncovered from the Genesis account*)

Q: What descriptions in Hebrews concerning Melchizedek are not found in Genesis? (*without father or mother or genealogy, having no beginning or end of life, made like the Son of God, abiding as a priest forever. Also, note that the king of Sodom is not mentioned in Hebrews. His part in the Genesis account is of no concern to the point about Melchizedek the author is making.*)

Q: Where do you think the author of Hebrews comes up with these other ideas concerning Melchizedek? (*give time for answers*)

In this section we are going to note the author's use of something called an "argument from silence". He uses this sort of argument concerning the lineage of Melchizedek. It basically states that since nothing is said of his birth, death or ancestry, it wasn't important enough or significant enough to mention. In fact, because there is no record of Melchizedek's birth, death or ancestry, the author is going to use it to make a point about him and the nature of his priesthood. He's going to use this to say Melchizedek is a "type" of Christ in certain ways. So, the author of Hebrews takes the silence of the Biblical record to mean that Melchizedek had no meaningful genealogy concerning any priesthood or concerning his reign. When we interpret the Bible, we are not at liberty to make arguments from silence. This leads to all sorts of fanciful and often heretical conclusions. However, the author of Hebrews was operating under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so in this case, He can do it as the Spirit is the One responsible for transmitting Scripture correctly to mankind. Only those who were inspired by the Spirit for the writing of Scripture can do this - not us.

However, this explains the birth, death and ancestry but what about his priesthood enduring forever?

Q: Where does the author get this notion that Melchizedek's priesthood is eternal? I'll give you a hint. It's from a Scripture we've read several times already in this study. (*Psalm 110:4*)

[Read Psalm 110:4]

The word translated (NAS) for “perpetually” or “forever” (NIV) is actually an old phrase used only in Hebrews in the New Testament that describes “duration through the circumstances indicated in the particular case”. Since no limit is expressed or implied, Melchizedek’s priesthood (the particular case), it goes on without cessation.

Q: One more question before we dig deep, was Melchizedek the Son of God? *(no - v.3, he is merely like the Son of God in some respects)*

Now let’s break some of this down so we can get to the bottom of who Melchizedek really was and in what ways he and his priesthood is like Christ and His priesthood.

Salem is a form of the Hebrew word for peace (shalom). In the Old Testament, the word peace, means wholeness or blessing. The name Melchizedek actually is literally translated “my king is righteous” but it has the same implication of a righteous king. Both of these terms are important when it comes to knowing Christ. In Isaiah 9:6 he is called the Prince of Peace. In Jeremiah 23:5 the Messiah is called the Righteous Branch.

Q: There is an exchange between Melchizedek and Abram. Who gives what to whom? *(Melchizedek gives Abram a blessing. Abram gives Melchizedek the tithe)*

The author uses a similar strategy he used in chapter 3 when using Moses as an example of faithfulness to God. The author elevated Moses and held him in high regard, never putting Moses down. He does the same with Abram. While Abram is portrayed as a great man, he just destroyed four strong invading kings; Melchizedek is portrayed as greater than Abram as he receives the tithes and then offers a blessing over Abram. In the ancient world, the act of offering a tithe suggested some form of subjection to the one being given the tithe.

The phrases in v.3 - “without father, without mother, without genealogy” were an ancient idiom for a person of unknown lineage. It was used in situations like this and also to describe illegitimate children or people who came from unimportant families. His parents had no recorded significance to his role as priest. (Spoiler Alert: what is true for Melchizedek is also true about Christ.) These phrases do NOT mean that Melchizedek is some super-human being from heaven or pre-incarnate form of Christ. It is just a way to say that his lineage was unknown and not a factor in his being a priest. The phrase “made like the Son of God” is literally “having been made (by God) to resemble the Son of God”. It is called a divine passive phrase (perfect passive participle) meaning that while God is not directly mentioned, He is the One who is attributed with doing the action mentioned.

Q: Why do you think the author went to these lengths to show that Melchizedek’s lineage didn’t factor into his priesthood? *(because it was like Christ’s. The Levitical priesthood depended upon a man’s lineage. He is starting to make the contrast between the two priesthoods. His priesthood doesn’t depend upon lineage.)*

To be a Levitical priest a man had to be of the tribe of Levi. Furthermore, one needed to

be of the line of Aaron to be the high priest. Genealogy was **everything** in the Levitical priesthood. In Nehemiah the priesthood had become questionable due to the leaders not being able to determine the correct lineage of several men who were serving as priests. These men were immediately excluded from serving as priests. Melchizedek, on the other hand, didn't have a lineage of note yet he served the God Most High as priest and he did it before the Levitical priesthood was even established. Yet it is important to keep in mind that Melchizedek is not a redeemer or a person who performed any saving acts. His is merely a historical figure who serves as a precedent for priesthood not based upon lineage or law. In other words, there is a radical difference between the priesthood this early congregation was familiar with and the priesthood that belongs to Christ. What is interesting is that the priesthood of Melchizedek anticipates the appearance of a high priest who does not have a successor because this new priesthood does not require or need one as it lasts forever.

[Read Hebrews 7:4-10]

In v.4 Abraham was called “the patriarch” which is a title of honor. He symbolizes and represents the whole group of people who are later called Israelites or Jews. While the author elevates Abram as a great man worthy of honor, he elevates Melchizedek even more.

“Now observe” (NAS) - literally means “How great!” The author is making the case that Melchizedek is greater than Abram. This is another startling statement for the original audience. Someone greater than Abraham, the father of our faith?!

Q: In this section, there are two ways in which Melchizedek is presented as greater than Abram. What are they? (*He received the tithe (v. 4). He blessed Abram (v.7)*)

Look at v.7. It is clearly stated that the lesser is blessed by the greater. Though this isn't always the case (We bless God, etc.), it is in this case as it is spelled out directly. This is the second method we are told of the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek to the Levitical priesthood.

The phrase “tenth of the choicest spoils” literally means “top of the heap”. It is the choicest parts of the loot were given to Melchizedek by Abram. Abram in doing this was thanking God for his victory over the four invading kings and receiving Lot back safely.

Q: Under what authority do the Levitical priests collect tithes from their brothers? (*the law - the law gave them the right/obligation to collect the tithe, not any superiority to their kin.*)

Q: Why do you think the phrase “their brothers” is included in v.5? (*it signifies that the priests, Levites, are equals to those giving the tithes, not superior in any way to them. In the same way, the Levites and the other tribes giving the tithes, are all Abraham's offspring. They are of the same lineage and share the same family background. Especially, in that just as they will eventually die, the priests will die too.*)

Q: What does vv. 9-10 mean? (*Levi was still in the body of Abram, his ancestor, at the time when Abram gave the tithe to Melchizedek. The author is making the point that this proves that*

all of Israel, but specifically the Levites and priests, are also not as great as Melchizedek. Thus, the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the Levitical priesthood. They offered Melchizedek the tithe through Abram.)

Q: Look to v.8. In what sense does Melchizedek live on? (He lives on through his testimony. Scriptures do not record his death (*again an argument based on silence*) so it isn't that he lives forever but that since his death is not recorded, his testimony of his priesthood is still active. It is important to note that Melchizedek died, like all humans do. The wording the author is using is merely a tool to get his point across from Ps. 110:4 that since Scripture doesn't record his death, it is like he is eternal, in the way that Christ is truly eternal.)

Here' the big deal of the author's argument that we will build upon next week. The priesthood of Melchizedek is actually the first priesthood mentioned in Scripture. It is also the pattern for the priesthood that God intended to bring about for His purposes and eternity. The Law was fulfilled in Christ so there was going to need to be another priesthood in time to replaced the Levitical one set up by the Law. Thus, the priesthood of Melchizedek was the pattern or type of priesthood that was to come.

The argument of the original audience would have been something like this: *"You show us this priesthood of Christ and expect us to live in it. You (the preacher/author) need to go back and look at the Levitical priesthood set up by God Himself for those who are His people."* To this the preacher/author responds, *"Sure, let's go back. The problem is you are not going back far enough. You are stopping at the Levitical priesthood yet there is an earlier priesthood mentioned in Scripture - the priesthood of Melchizedek - and this priesthood foreshadows the priesthood of Christ."* As we'll see in later chapters, when it comes to chronology, the author will state that presently (at the original time but is still true today) that Christ's priesthood is the only priesthood in effect. The Levitical priesthood ended with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and was proved as the only true priesthood by the Holy Spirit's arrival.

[Read I Peter 2:9-10]

Q: What two offices are mentioned in these verses that all believers hold now? (*priest and royalty - king/queen*)

Q: What two offices did Melchizedek hold? (*priest and king*)

It was always God's plan to bring about a new priesthood based upon the example of Melchizedek - one that is eternal and not based upon physical lineage or the law but rather upon one's relationship to the great high priest, the Son of God.

Q: Based upon what you know about the book of Hebrews thus far and the original audience, why do you think the author focuses so much attention upon the priesthood of Melchizedek? (*give time for multiple responses - if they were considering a return to Judaism, they needed to know that they were leaving behind the superior priesthood or way of getting into God's presence and that the old ways were old and inferior.*)

Q: What are some of the implications of this passage for us today? *(If the priesthood of Melchizedek is perpetual and is a shadow of the priesthood of Christ - then there will never be another priesthood or way to relate to God except through His Son, Jesus Christ. There were a lot of good/valid answers and discussion that arose on this issue. Other answers possible.)*

Q: Are there any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?