

THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 7:1-10

17th Message

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We have made it through the most difficult and awkward part of the service. The offering used to be straightforward. After the Scripture reading the offering plate would be passed. At the same time a song was sung, usually chosen so as to transition from the reading to the sermon. But the Covid pandemic changed all that. We no longer pass the plate. Who carries cash or writes checks anymore? Most giving is done online and automatically with regular scheduled transfers. Does this make giving any less intentional? Yet we still talk about “ways to give.” Some refer to this giving as tithes and offerings, or as an act of worship. What to do with this now-brief moment in the service is a frequent topic of discussion at staff level.

Should we still refer to giving as tithing? Is this an appropriate word for Christians to use? Certain churches most certainly promote tithing and the blessings of tithing. Frequently they cite Malachi 3:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. (Mal 3:10 NIV)

“Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!” is the motto. But this sounds transactional, quid pro quo. And it is driven from the human side, as if our tithing prompts God to reciprocate with appropriate blessing. But this seems the wrong way round. It is God who takes the initiative with us. We respond out of gratitude to the favor that he has already shown to us. We are the ones who reciprocate to him. He is not in our debt.

Last week we saw that God took the initiative with Abram. He made him a promise that he would give him a son who would become a great people. He would turn the barrenness of aged Abram and Sarai into fruitfulness. He would restore blessing to a rebellious world. “And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised” (Heb 6:12).

The book of Hebrews is interested in the relationship between tithing and blessing. But this comes in a surprising context, that of priesthood.

The central topic of the book is the high-priesthood of Jesus. Three times already the preacher has quoted Psalm 110:4, with reference to Jesus: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” He stated this in 5:6, and again in 5:10 that he was so designated by God. But then he took a sidetrack to exhort his readers to pay attention. He has much to say about this topic of priesthood and it is hard to make it clear. Last week’s passage ended with these words: “He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (6:20). He has brought his readers back to this main topic.

Now, at last, we come to the central teaching of Hebrews, the high priesthood of Jesus in the order of Melchizedek (7:1–10:18). We will be in this material for a considerable time.

Who is Melchizedek and what is his priestly order? This is the topic of today’s passage (7:1-10), the first unit of the long exposition on priesthood. The passage has two sections. First Melchizedek is de-

scribed (1-3), then his priesthood is compared to the later priesthood of the Levites in Israel (4-10).

I. Melchizedek (7:1-3)

First the preacher describes Melchizedek and his order:

¹This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ²and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” ³Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Heb 7:1-3)

This is one long sentence in the original. The subject is given first, “this Melchizedek,” and the verb is given at the very end, “remains a priest forever.” This is the main thought: Melchizedek remains a priest forever. In between subject and verb is a long list of attributes of this mysterious person. Apart from Psalm 110, the only other place Melchizedek is mentioned in Israel’s Scriptures is three verses in Genesis 14, which were part of our Scripture reading (Gen 14:13-24). The preacher draws on these three verses, reading them in the light of Ps 110:4, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

The background to that passage in Gen 14 is that Abram and Lot were both so prosperous that the land of Canaan could not support them both with their households and their flocks and herds. Lot chose to move down to the lush Jordan Valley, to the city of Sodom. He took himself out of the land of promise. Abram stayed in the land of promise, in the hill country. But the five kings of the Jordan Valley were defeated by four kings from Mesopotamia, who took away all their possessions, along with Lot and his possessions. When news reached Abram he immediately took action: he mustered all his retainers—318 of them, indicating his prosperity. Though all 318 were born in his household, one had not yet been born into his house: the promised son. Abram and his men pursued a long way and defeated the four kings. He returned with all the looted possessions plus Lot and his possessions.

When Abram returned, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and also Melchizedek. The preacher, recounting this event, ignores the king of Sodom and pays attention only to the interaction between Melchizedek and Abram.

In 7:1-2a he gives an even briefer summary of the already brief record in Gen 14. He notes that Melchizedek was the king of Salem and the priest of God Most High. He was both king and priest. Both are roles of mediation but in different ways. The king represents the deity to the people. The priest represents the people in the cult and worship of the deity. A king-priest is a rarity in Scripture. In Israel these offices would be filled by different people from two different tribes.

Next the preacher summarizes the meeting between Melchizedek

and Abram. But he skips over the first detail, that Melchizedek brought out bread and wine. This does not serve the preacher's purpose. But this detail would be significant in subsequent theology and liturgy. From the early church through until today, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, together with Abel's offering of a lamb, and Abraham's offering of Isaac, have been seen as types prefiguring Jesus's offering of himself. Furthermore, the Orthodox icon of Righteous Melchizedek depicts him with a bowl or basket of bread.

When Melchizedek met Abram they exchanged gifts. Melchizedek took the initiative and gave Abram the gift of blessing. The preacher does not quote the actual blessing, as it does not serve his immediate purpose. But, for our purpose, it is worth reading:

he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And praise [blessed] be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

(Gen 14:19-20)

Melchizedek's blessing was in two directions. First he blessed Abram, then he blessed God. The nature of the two blessings is different. His blessing on Abram was, as it were, a conferring of divine blessing. Melchizedek was priest of God Most High. In that capacity he was pronouncing the blessing of God Most High on Abram. Turning around, he blessed God Most High, whom he served as priest. Blessing in this direction takes the form of praise, as NIV translates. In this particular instance, God had blessed Abram by delivering the four kings into his hands, and by enabling him to retrieve Lot and all the possessions.

Abram responded to this blessing by giving Melchizedek a tenth of everything, presumably of all the captured booty that he has retrieved. This is the first tithe in Scripture.

Next, the preacher interprets the meanings of Melchizedek's name and title (7:2b). His name means *king of righteousness*. His title *king of Salem* means *king of peace (shalom)*. Righteousness and peace. Messianic expectation included that the coming Prince of Peace would rule with righteousness and justice (Isa 9:6-7). Righteousness and justice will be exemplified by the Lord Jesus.

Thirdly, the preacher “quotes” what Scripture does not say; he reasons from silence (7:3). From the silence of Genesis he derives four statements about Melchizedek.

First, he is without father, mother, or genealogy. This lack of genealogical information is very surprising for the whole book of Genesis is full of genealogies.

Second, he is without beginning of days or end of life. Again we have this pairing of *beginning* and *end* that featured in the prior exhortation. Melchizedek suddenly appears, then just as suddenly disappears after just three verses.

Third, Melchizedek resembles, or, better, was *made like* the Son of God. This likeness consists in having no genealogy and neither beginning nor end.

Fourth, the preacher draws the conclusion in the final clause, which at last contains the main verb: he remains a priest forever. In reaching this conclusion he has no doubt also drawn on Psalm 110: “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” Throughout his reading of Melchizedek in Gen 14, the preacher has his eye on Ps 110:4, and on Jesus, who is now high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

We must be careful not to reverse the direction of conformity. Jesus was not made like Melchizedek. Melchizedek was made like the Son of God in having no beginning or end. The Son of God became incarnate as Jesus. This Jesus, now exalted at God's right hand, is now priest according to the *order* of Melchizedek, an order of eternal priesthood.

2. Greater than Levi (7:4-10)

In 7:4-10 the preacher invites us to consider how great this Melchizedek was. He is greater than the Levitical priesthood:

⁴Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! ⁵Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. ⁶This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. ⁹One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. (Heb 7:4-10)

How great was Melchizedek? He was so great that Abram gave him a tenth (6:4). Earlier the preacher said Abram gave him a tenth of everything (6:2), accurately quoting Genesis. Here he says Abram gave him a tenth of the plunder, that is of the recovered possessions. The word, used only here in the NT, means the best portion, “the choicest spoils” (NASB). It is the first-fruits that are usually reserved for the deity. In giving this to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, Abram was tithing to God.

Immediately after Abram had given a tenth to God, the king of Sodom said to him, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself” (Gen 14:21). These were the people and possessions that the four kings from Mesopotamia had captured and taken away, and which Abram had retrieved. Abram could have become even more prosperous. He could have interpreted this offer as God's blessing. He could have interpreted it as fulfillment of the blessing Melchizedek had just pronounced on him. “Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!”

But Abram declined:

“With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’” (Gen 14:22-23)

He had not pursued the four kings in order to enrich himself. He had gone to rescue his nephew Lot, even though Lot had voluntarily removed himself from the land of promise.

It is immediately after refusing to enrich himself that the Lord appeared to him, and said,

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.” (Gen 15:1)

Abram's mind was firmly set not on riches but on the promise. He reminded God that the promise had not yet been fulfilled. God repeated the promise, Abram believed the Lord, who reckoned to him

this response of faith as righteousness, as the right response within the relationship. Right relationship with the Lord was his very great reward. The Lord gave himself to Abram, a gift far better than the world's riches.

Abram had the right priorities, including in his interaction with Melchizedek. How great was this Melchizedek? So great that Abram acknowledged him as priest of God Most High, and gave him the tithe designated for God. He did not do this to get a blessing. The blessing came first. Abram responded with the tithe.

In v. 4 the preacher has referred to Abram as an individual in this encounter with Melchizedek. But in the last word of v. 4 he refers to him as the patriarch, as the progenitor of a great clan. The promise had not yet been fulfilled when Abram met Melchizedek. But for the rest of this paragraph, the preacher treats Abram as already the patriarch. Though even Isaac had not yet been born, he considers all Israel to be present in Abram's body when he met Melchizedek. This is a case of corporate identity, of corporate solidarity, that is hard for Western individualists to understand. We don't think this way.

From Abraham would come Isaac, then Jacob and his twelve sons, from whom would come the tribes of Israel. Of these, one tribe in Israel would be chosen for priesthood, the tribe of Levi. Levi was given no inheritance in the Land. It had no territory; they grew no crops; they herded no sheep or goats. Instead, they looked after the tabernacle. Within the Levites, the Lord set aside Aaron and his descendants to be priests within the tabernacle. The twelve tribes gave their tithe to support the one tribe of Levi. Within this tribe the Levites tithed their tithe to support the priests, Aaron and his line.

In the rest of the paragraph the preacher compares these Levitical priests to Melchizedek, who remains priest forever. The preacher presents two contrasts between these Levitical priests and Melchizedek.

The first contrast is in vv. 5-6. The Levitical priests (5) collected the tithe from their fellow Israelites, their brothers and sisters. They all shared common descent from Abraham. They were all part of the same family. On the other hand, Melchizedek (6) was not a Levite, yet he collected a tithe from Abraham, the head of the line, the patriarch. And he blessed him who had the promise, the promise of that line into which the Levites would be born. The promise that would make Abraham a patriarch. Again we have tithing and blessing.

From this blessing the preacher draws a principle (7): clearly, the lesser is blessed by the greater. Clearly, Melchizedek is superior to Abraham. When, as priest of God Most High, he pronounced Abram blessed by God Most High, he was superior. But when he turned around and declared, "Blessed be God Most High," he was praising God as an inferior to a superior. Abram was great in that he had the promise. But Melchizedek was greater still: he received the tithe, and he gave the blessing.

In v. 8 the preacher draws a second contrast between the Levitical priests and Melchizedek. The former received the tithe, but they did so as people who were in the process of dying. The Levitical priests were mortal, mere humans, who died, to be replaced by the next generation, which also died. Death after death after death. Generation after generation after generation. Priests who were dying. They were not priests who remained forever. But of Melchizedek the Scriptures testify that he is living. Genesis 14 testifies, albeit by silence, that he is living. He has neither beginning of days nor end of life.

In vv. 9-10 the preacher adds another implication drawn from

Abraham's status as patriarch. This is a daring one, so he prefaces it with "one might even say." Abraham was the patriarch, at the head of the line of promise. Therefore, using the principle of corporate solidarity, all the promised line was present in Abram's body, or in his loins to use the old term. Levi was present in Abram's loins when Melchizedek met Abram. Therefore Levi participated in the gift of the tithe to Melchizedek. By extension, so did all the priests who came from the line of Levi. With this the preacher has returned to his starting point: when "he met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings" (1).

Melchizedek, this mysterious figure, met Abraham the patriarch, the recipient of the promise. Who was greater in the encounter? Great though Abraham was, Melchizedek was greater. See how great this one was. We are to ponder this. Again, the preacher's interest is not so much Melchizedek himself, but the *order* of Melchizedek. He is the first one in that order. But God has now designated another, greater than Melchizedek, to be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. So ultimately the preacher wants us to ponder Jesus.

Jesus is now our great high priest. He serves not in an earthly sanctuary, but in the true sanctuary, in heavenly space. He serves in the very presence of God. His service was prefigured by the service of the Levitical priests in the earthly sanctuary. But the shadow has passed; the reality has come. His eternal service was prefigured by Melchizedek, but now Jesus serves as "high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (6:10).

His service is two-fold. His first service is a one-time action. In ancient Israel the annual climax of the ministry of the Levitical high priest was his entrance within the veil. He entered the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. He entered with the blood of a sacrificial bull and a sacrificial goat. He sprinkled this blood on the gold lid which covered the ark of the covenant, the atonement cover or mercy seat. This blood made atonement for that space, and purified from the defilement caused by the impurity and sins of the people. The high priest had to repeat this every year until he died. His replacement repeated this until he died. And on and on, generation after generation of high priests who died.

Jesus entered within the veil, into the heavenly Holy of Holies, of which the earthly one was a copy. He entered with his own blood, which *once and for all* purifies from sin. This act never needs repeating.

The second aspect of Jesus's ministry as high priest is ongoing. The eternal Son became incarnate as Jesus, human like us:

fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:17-18)

He is able to help those who are being tempted or tested. We are being tempted or tested all the time. He is there to help us in our time of need, which is all the time. So the preacher invites us to draw near to our merciful and faithful high priest. His central teaching on the high-priesthood of Jesus is bracketed either side by these invitations to draw near:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. *Let us*

then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:14-16)

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings. (10:19-22)*

The preacher has invited us to consider just how great Melchizedek was. But what he is really doing is urging us to consider just how great and so much better is Jesus, our merciful and faithful high priest, who serves in the eternal order of Melchizedek.

Our passage is centered on tithes and blessings. What do we do with these concepts today? Is "Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!" a suitable motto for today?

Paul writes to the Ephesians:

Praise [blessed] be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Eph 1:3)

God has blessed us in Christ through his Spirit. We have been incorporated into his family, into his people. Jew or Gentile, we have been incorporated into God's promise to Abraham to create a great people, and to restore blessing to the world. We have been incorporated into God's purposes. God has given himself to us in Christ and through his Spirit. He is our very great reward. Do we value this gift? Do we even recognize it as a gift? Is God himself enough of a gift for us?

God has shown favor to us. We reciprocate with blessing as praise. We reciprocate with gratitude, with hearts full of joy and gladness.

What about the tithe? God's people no longer contain a tribe that is set apart to the service of God and is dependent on the tithes of

their brothers and sisters. But the NT mentions three categories of people who lacked provision, and should be provided for by the saints. The first category were the widows. In a patriarchal society they were in a vulnerable position. The Twelve apostles set aside the Seven for this ministry (Acts 6). This is usually understood as the beginning of the ministry of deacons. Later Paul instructed Timothy about the care of widows in Ephesus (1 Tim 5).

A second group were the poor, those in material need. A major feature of Paul's ministry was taking up a collection from the Gentiles for the poor Jewish Christians in need in Jerusalem and Judea. He called this a *charis*, a grace or favor; and a *koinonia*, a participation or fellowship in one another, those with resources with those in need.

A third group were those who were preaching and teaching. Jesus sent out the seventy-two without provision. They were to benefit from the provision of whomever welcomed them into their house, "for the laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:1-12). Paul labored free of charge, sometimes working as a tentmaker to support himself. But he was grateful for those churches which supported him, notably the church in Philippi.

What we don't do is give so as to put God in obligation to bless by rewarding us with material riches. "Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!" is not a suitable motto. It is backwards. We give out of gratitude, because God has first blessed us. His greatest blessing is to give us the gift of himself in Christ Jesus. Because in the end it really is all about Jesus. Even this text is not really about Melchizedek. It is about the order of Melchizedek. Ultimately it is about Jesus who fills that order. Just think how great Melchizedek was. Just think how much greater is Jesus, our great high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

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