

Jesus Christ: The Best Priest of all...

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[0 : 00] The Bible reading today is taken from Hebrews chapter 7 verse 1 to chapter 8 verse 2 and that is on page 1205 of the Pew Bibles, 1205.

Hebrews chapter 7 verse 1. 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 the name of Melchizedek 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, resembling the son of God, he remains a priest forever.

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 from their fellow Israelites, even though they also are descended from Abraham.

[1 : 21] This man, however, did not trace his descendants to Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. But without doubt, the lesser is blessed by the greater.

In the one case, the tenth is collected by people 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.

If perfection could have been attained through Levitical priesthood, and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood, why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek and not in the order of Aaron?

For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. 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 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.

[2 : 51] For it is declared, you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. 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.

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 you will not change his mind, you are a priest forever.

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. 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.

Such a high priest truly meets our need. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

[4 : 05] 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.

For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness. But the oath which came after the law appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Now the main point of what we are saying is this. We do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you so much for reading our passage. And thank you also for the invitation to be with you today.

It's a real joy to be back here. And there is an opportunity for me to thank you all for your prayerful support of the work of UCCF, the Christian Union Movement, which is seeking month after month after month to reach many, many thousands of non-Christian students in the United Kingdom.

[5 : 27] We have 19 Christian unions across Scotland. And in term time, week after week, the Christians in those organizations are seeking to encourage each other to share the good news of the Lord Jesus with their friends.

It's a daunting task, but it's a strategic opportunity. Thank you, too, for your prayerful support of Simon Atwood and the team here in Glasgow, your prayers for the CEUs in Glasgow.

I was saddened, like many of you, when I heard of this recent fire in the Art College. We do have a small Christian union in the Glasgow School of Arts, so do pray for those students as they seek to make Christ known in the terms that come ahead, whatever that looks like for the poor folks who have to organize things in the light of this tragedy.

But thank you for all your support. There are prayer letters available on our website, and we're so grateful to you for standing with us and helping us and partnering with us as a church and as individuals as we try to make disciples of Christ in the student world.

Let's pray for a moment, shall we? And then we'll turn to this chapter. Heavenly Father, we want to place ourselves right alongside these Hebrew believers, although their world and context was so different from ours, yet they were tempted in ways that we are tempted.

[7 : 08] They wrestled to hold on to the Lord Jesus by faith as we wrestle to do that. And as you spoke to them through this letter, so we know that by your Spirit you will also speak powerfully to us.

And we need to hear your voice as a church, as families, as individuals. We need not only to hear, but to listen.

And we need, Heavenly Father, not only to listen, but to reflect and to think through the implications of what you say. And then we need to obey and put into practice in the ordinary daily lives that you've called us to live what you say to us.

So help us, we pray, for Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Amen. Well, it is an extraordinary chapter, and we are plunged not only into an unusual chapter in Hebrews, but I guess for most of you, plunged back into the letter of Hebrews, because I think there's been a break in the series in Hebrews, and so we come back to it this morning here at St. Silas.

And for those of you perhaps who've forgotten or who are new to St. Silas, let me just say a very brief sentence or two about Hebrews, the letter of Hebrews, as we find it in the New Testament.

- [8 : 42] The believers who had been Israelites, the Old Testament people of God who have now become Christians, these believers who this author is writing to were being tempted to drift away from their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, that's a temptation that we all face. But they were being tempted to drift away from Jesus in a particular direction, and it was the direction of their old Jewish religion, the life that they had cherished and known in the temple at Jerusalem, the life of a community which was a nation with its own law and priesthood and religious rituals.

They were being tempted away from Jesus, back into that world of temple religion, and they were being tempted in that direction because, of course, what they had known then seemed and indeed was much more tangible and visible and probably more exciting than faith in a Savior who they cannot see.

For those of you who have been to Jerusalem, you'll know that the vastness of that Jerusalem temple, if you've seen the enormous measurements of just even one stone that made up that temple, it would have made this lovely church seem like something of a corrugated tin shack by way of comparison.

They had lost something, deliberately so in the gospel, they had lost something that was immense, that towered over their community, their lives that had provided them with their access to Almighty God.

- [10 : 43] And, of course, in the coming of the Lord Jesus and in His death and His resurrection, that temple had become obsolete and all that happened within it had been fulfilled by Jesus.

But they had lost it and they were tempted back to that. So this letter is written to people facing that temptation and it is written to encourage them not to go back, not to drift off into that world of religion, but to press on, to fix their eyes on Jesus and to go forwards with Him.

So there, maybe in a nutshell, if you're needing a reminder or an introduction to Hebrews, is something of what the letter is about. And as the writer goes through his encouragement to them to press on with Jesus, what he keeps saying to them is that what we have in the risen Lord Jesus Christ is far, far better than anything that they ever had in that temple.

Although they could see the priest in the temple, although they could see the sacrifices and the blood and they could see the people thronging into that place and they could smell and touch all that was there to remind them of who God is, although it was exciting and visible and tangible, what they have in Jesus is so much more better.

And the writer goes through that layer upon layer upon layer, showing them the beauty and the glory and the wonder of what we have in Jesus.

- [12 : 29] And in this chapter, what he's saying to them in chapter 7 is, we have in Jesus a priest who is far superior to those Levitical priests who you used to see in the temple.

So that's what chapter 7 is about. Chapter 8, verses 1 and 2 is the kind of little passage that is a gift to any preacher because if you don't understand what chapter 7 is about, the writer kindly says in chapter 8, verse 1 what he has been saying.

And if you have read through chapter 7 and felt it difficult to understand, chapter 8, verse 1 is such a joy to come to because he says, the point of what we're saying is this.

And the preacher and the Bible reader sits up and takes notice and says, oh good, I'm glad you're here because I haven't understood what you're saying. I don't know what the point of it is. If you've read all that stuff about Melchizedek, to come to chapter 8, verse 1 and read the point is this.

Well, what is the point? Here it is. We do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven and who serves in the sanctuary the true tabernacle set up by the Lord not by man.

[13 : 50] That is what chapter 7 is saying. That's the point. That's the main idea that the writer is trying to communicate.

He's pointing them away from that vast Jerusalem temple that was, after all, just temporary. Your brothers and sisters in Gafcon in Jerusalem will see that it is now just rubble and dust.

It was temporary. For all its wonder and detail and God-given splendor in its day, it was just temporary.

But, says the writer in chapter 8, verse 2, Jesus serves in the true tabernacle, in the presence of God, in the heavens where he sits at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

It's an amazing picture. And that picture of Jesus sat at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven. That picture of the true tabernacle, the eternal tabernacle where Jesus sits, makes the Jerusalem temple seem like a corrugated tin shack by way of comparison.

[15 : 08] If you think that temple in Jerusalem was mighty and beautiful and glorious, well, just think of where Jesus is now.

Well, of course, we find it very difficult to think of where he is now, don't we? Because we can't see it. But the writer is helping us. He's saying, that is the true one.

where Jesus is now that presence of God, that tabernacle is the one that counts.

C.S. Lewis, I think it was, helpfully said, you know when you read in the Gospels and I think at the beginning of Acts of the Lord Jesus appearing in his resurrection body and he's able to just appear in rooms without opening the door.

He just kind of arrives in the room in his resurrection body and we tend to think that he kind of came through the wall because, you know, the wall is real and Jesus, the risen Lord, was somehow kind of ethereal and less real.

[16 : 21] And I think it was C.S. Lewis who says, no, no, it's the other way around. Jesus could come through and appear in the room because this world is less real.

He has entered the real world, the eternal world. His resurrection body is eternal and glorious and this shadowy world is more ethereal.

And as we think of Jesus being our high priest in the order of Melchizedek, we'll come back to what that means we need to think of him as being our real, actual, risen, bodily high priest who sits today at the right hand of God in heaven in the permanent and glorious presence of God and one day in a new creation we will understand and see and know the fullness and beauty of his reign.

What then is all this about? Why do we need this shadowy figure of Melchizedek to help us understand that Jesus is the real priest?

Melchizedek appeared in the story of Abraham way back in Genesis chapter 14. He kind of appears and disappears and Abraham gave him a tenth of all he had and he was a priestly figure and what the writer is saying to the Hebrew believers is that Jesus is far better than the priests in the temple in Jerusalem because he was not like them, these Levitical priests from the tribe of Levi.

[18 : 18] He is a better priest than they were. He is a different priest. He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek who predated all those Levitical priests.

He goes way back to Abraham. The people you see are being tempted to the religious world of Moses and the law and the temple and Aaron and the Levitical priests and the writer says well, Jesus is far better than all that and indeed he predates all of that in his priesthood.

And there are four things about his priesthood that I want us just to focus on as we think about Jesus being the best priest who we could ever have.

And I take no credit for the four alliterative titles primary, permanent, personal and perfect. I don't know who came up with them. They're written in the margin of my Bible and I can't remember who I copied them from but they're helpful pointers.

Jesus Christ is the best priest of all first of all because he was primary, he was first, he was before the Levitical priests.

[19 : 31] This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God the writer says. He met Abraham before a Levite and Moses had ever been thought of.

He was there first, Melchizedek. And you are being tempted to a religious world of Levitical priesthood but let me tell you that Jesus was primary to all of that.

Jesus' priesthood then, like Melchizedek, is a given. It was not established by man, it was just a given by God.

Melchizedek kind of appears with no beginning and end in the story of Abraham and disappears again. He was just there, a priest sent from God without beginning.

Now, I would be very surprised if there was anyone in this room today who was tempted into a world of Judaism.

[20 : 50] I'd be very surprised if anyone in this room today is wrestling with the temptation of becoming a Jewish believer and looking for a Levitical priest figure.

but our equivalent temptation is to be tempted towards visible religion, tangible expressions of priesthood and religion, symbols rather than savior.

That's our temptation and that's what the Hebrews were being tempted to. In their instance, it was to the temple in Jerusalem. But for us, it's just when we can't see Jesus and when we struggle through this life and things seem like a battle constantly, we are tempted towards a priestly figure who we can see and touch and speak to and hear.

a religious life which promises more quick fix answers than a risen savior who asks us to trust him.

So, a primary priest, Jesus, who was there from the beginning, to bring to why would we be tempted to, if you like, appoint our own priest?

[22 : 29] Why would we as human beings be tempted to find a priest figure to forgive us, who we can see? The world is a very religious place.

as we range through those nations playing football in the World Cup, much of the opposition to the Christian faith comes from religious people.

You go through the streets and the cities of the world and you will see displayed everywhere in the architecture and in the lives and the culture of this world, the human desire to appoint a priest.

Our desire to set the agenda for the person who will forgive us. It's, as sinful fallen human beings, we are hard-wired to seek forgiveness because we are carrying around with us the guilt and shame of our sin and we go looking for someone to tell us it's okay, you're forgiven.

it's part of religious human nature and then if we appoint the priest, we set the agenda. Do you see?

[23 : 51] And what Jesus is, is a priest who was primary, like Melchizedek, a given from God from the beginning of time. God's god-given because the God-given example of a priest is our parents, for good or ill.

They are the person who teaches us, say sorry and you'll be forgiven. They are the person appointed by God to teach us and to train us that we need forgiveness.

And when parents make a decent job of it, and we all who are parents try our best and get it wrong a lot, but when we try and make a decent job of it, we don't just teach children to say sorry so that they can be forgiven.

We teach them to say sorry, and then we say to them, now, that's that done with. We don't need to ever mention that again. It's gone. Let's go and do something else. So that the issue is in the past.

You do that with your kids, don't you? You don't want them saying sorry to you 16 times over the next week for something that they did a week ago. No, it's sorry, forgiven, dealt with, and forgotten.

[25 : 15] And God has given parents into the world to represent His kind of priestliness, His kind of forgiveness.

But in our sinfulness, like little children, we want to set the agenda of what we will be forgiven for, how we will be forgiven, and how we can leverage that forgiveness out of God.

And this writer, almost with tears in his eyes, is saying, don't look to the temple. That was just shadow land.

That was just a reminder. What you have in Jesus is one who, from before the dawn of time until eternity, will forgive you fully and freely, he's the primary model of a priest.

Number two, he is a permanent priest. A permanent priest. It kind of relates to primary. But just look at the language of the chapter.

[26 : 33] In verse 3, the writer says, He is without father or mother. This is Melchizedek, but like Jesus. Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning or days or end of life, like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Permanent. Now look at the rest of the chapter. In verse 16, the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

Permanent. Also verse 17, You are a priest forever. Look at verse 21. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever.

Permanently. Look at verse 23. 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.

The end of verse 25. He always lives to intercede. And down in verse 27, He sacrificed for their sins once for all.

[27 : 49] And at the end of the chapter, he has been made perfect forever. Levitical priests in the temple came and went. They lived and died.

And generation followed generation. And they were permanently having to be reappointed. But Jesus, you have the same priest. You have one person who will forgive you for all your sins, and that person will never change.

Whatever you've done, whatever you do to disappoint him, whatever we repeatedly get wrong, there is one person who we go to.

Why would we look for a new priest? Why would we rather have a temporary priest than a permanent one?

Well, I guess in part, because a temporary priest doesn't know our past.

[29 : 05] If we construct for ourselves, and we do this in all kinds of subtle ways, it can be through a friendship with a very close friend, subconsciously we can make that close friend in our hearts the priest of our lives.

The one whom we go to with all our struggles, and who will tell us it's okay. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not stamping down the glories of Christian friendship.

But in our hearts and minds, we can make anyone into a priest. Very commonly, we can make a church leader into our priest. Or a worship leader.

Or a religious person who we listen to online. Or a favorite preacher. Or whoever it is. An author. And we go to this priest, and then that priest, and then this priest, and then that priest, rather than to our permanent priest.

Because these people don't know our past. They don't know the whole of our hearts and minds. They don't know our struggles and sins. And so, it's back to what I was saying before.

[30 : 23] We set the agenda with what they know. Whereas the permanent priest, the Lord Jesus, he knows the lot from beginning to end about me and about you.

And that is both wonderful, but it is also awful in the sense that it fills us with awe and trembling.

A primary priest, a permanent priest. Number three, a personal priest. A personal priest.

Look down at verses 26 following. Such a high priest meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

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 personally.

[31 : 41] He gave himself fully to the last in his work to be our high priest.

He was both the priest and the sacrifice. So fully invested in this priestly work was he. All the man-made priests are in it for themselves ultimately.

You see the people going to the shrine and putting down the coins and the fruit and the vegetables in this religion. You see the people becoming followers in another religion and the priestly figure becomes the ruler, the dictator, the power broker.

In our evangelical culture, if we promote people to the level of priesthood in our hearts and minds, they become the ones with a platform.

They become the ones whose words actually become elevated above God's words. Priestly figures are in it for themselves.

[33 : 13] It is an impersonal contractual relationship unless Jesus is the priest who is a personal priest who gave all of himself fully for you and for me.

And we need never doubt for even a moment that he is not for us. It's a wonderful thing.

Although we can't see him, although we can't touch him, he is in the real tabernacle, seated at the right hand of the majesty of heaven, and he is for us.

A high priest, the best priest of all. And finally, perfect, perfect. Why would we want to keep making sacrifices to new priests when he has made the sacrifice that is perfect and lasting?

He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. 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.

[34 : 37] He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. Such a high priest meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.

Why would we choose an imperfect priest when we have a perfect priest? Why would we be attracted like these Hebrews were back to an ongoing religious system of sacrifice?

sacrifice? Why would we be attracted to religious life of duties and rituals which are reassuring us that we are okay with God when we have a perfect high priest who is sacrificed once for all?

Why do we carry this desire to give and give something extra that might somehow have leverage with almighty God?

It's because we find grace unbelievable. It's because we struggle daily to take in that everything Jesus gives us is free.

[36 : 09] We feel we have to buy it. We're driven to try to prove to him that we are grateful or that we're acceptable or that we're improving or that we're dutiful.

And he says, don't bring me your sacrificial offerings. I have sacrificed myself and the sacrifice was perfect and I have won you fully for the family of God forever.

Enjoy my gift of grace and live in the freedom of a relationship with me. How tempted you and I are to reconstruct a religious world with a priestly figure.

We do it in all kinds of subtle ways. How tempted we are to think that this system will somehow help us and will somehow enhance our relationship with Almighty God when in the real tabernacle set up by God, Jesus is already there and the relationship is full and can't be enhanced.

priest, the best priest of all. We can't see him, we can't touch him, but the writer says to these people, but serve him and do not replace him with any other human priest, a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

[37 : 53] what a wonderful thing as you re-enter this letter to remind ourselves of.