

A better priest

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[0 : 00] Let me pray and then we can read. Father in heaven, we thank you for your words. Your testimonies are my delight.

They are my counsellors. My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times. Father, we pray that that would be true of us today, that your word would be our delight and your words are counsellors.

And we pray therefore for the work of your Holy Spirit among us as your word is read and taught to us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, please turn up to Hebrews chapter 7, verses 1 to 28. For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.

And to him, Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is the first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness.

[1 : 11] And then he is also king of Salem. That is, king of peace. 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. See how great this man was, to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi, who received 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.

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

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

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

[2 : 37] Now, if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood, for under it the people received the law, what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?

For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.

For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe, Moses said nothing about priests.

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.

For it is witnessed of him, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law made nothing perfect.

[4 : 02] But on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath, for those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath.

But this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. You are a priest forever.

This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office.

But he holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever. However, consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

[5 : 21] He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a son who has been made perfect forever.

Well, good morning, everyone. If you haven't met, my name is Andy. I'm the assistant pastor here at Grace Church. Great to see you. Do keep that passage open. There's an outline that's going to come on the screen and on the back of the service sheets.

I read in one commentary this week that this is one of the most hardest chapters in the Bible. So do pray. My son's bike has a slow puncture.

It's been going on for about a month now. What I've been doing when it deflates is I pump it up again. It lasts for a few days, maybe a week or so, and I pump it up again.

[6 : 39] The system works, to be honest. The system works. It enables my son to ride his bike, which he loves, and ride his bike to school, which he loves. But really, it's temporary, isn't it?

What my son really needs is his dad to pull his finger out and fix the tyre itself. He needs, I need a lot of you nodding, he needs a permanent solution to the problem.

Well, Hebrews 7 is about a permanent solution. A permanent solution to the world's fundamental problem. How can sinful people like us have an ongoing relationship with a perfect God?

And how can I know that this relationship will last? These are questions that many believers have wrestled with at some point in their lives.

Perhaps you here this morning have wrestled with that question. Perhaps you're not a Christian here today, and you've thought about that. If God is there, how can I have a relationship with him, and how can I know that it will last?

[7 : 57] Surely we all want assurance of a secure standing with God. Because if we're sure of our ongoing salvation, our ongoing love of God, and his favour, well, we can draw near to him with confidence.

We can pray to him, confident that he loves us, confident that he will go on loving us and help us forever. Such assurance will help us keep going and drawing near to God throughout our lives.

And the flip side is true. If we're not sure of that, then we won't have the confidence to draw near to him. Well, the first readers of Hebrews knew that in the past, the way God gave assurance of his ongoing relationship with his people was through priests and sacrifices.

Just as a quick refresher, in the Old Testament, there was a system of priests called the Levites descended from the tribe of Levi, sons of Aaron, who served as go-between, between God and his people.

So if you wanted to draw near to God, you had to find a Levite. You found a Levite priest who would pray for you and would offer sacrifices on your behalf and draw near to God on your behalf.

[9 : 16] It was God's way of saying, on your own, you can't draw near to me. So I'm going to give you priests to sort you out with me so you can draw near to me and I can draw near to you.

I live with you. And so an Old Testament believer had full assurance of their ongoing relationship with God through the sacrifices offered by priests in the temple.

But it was all meant as a temporary solution. It was very much a pumping up a tyre with a slow puncture. A permanent solution to the problem is needed to give permanent assurance that we can go on drawing near to God, that we have his forgiveness, his love, and his favour.

Well, the great news of Hebrews chapter 7 is wonderfully now there is something better, a permanent solution in place.

Jesus, the permanent, perfect high priest through whom we can always draw near to God in assurance of his love, forgiveness, and salvation forever.

[10 : 31] Now this is a theme that started back in chapter 5 verse 9 and 10. Let me just read them. He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

And then just before our reading in chapter 6 verse 20, Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. and in chapter 7 verse 3 we see it resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever. Verse 16 Jesus described as indestructible.

Verse 17 you are priests forever. Verse 21 a priest forever. 24 continues forever. Verse 25 he always lives. Verse 28 made perfect forever.

Okay, you get the point. He's repeated it enough time and time again. Jesus is a priest forever. forever. He is risen from the dead.

[11 : 33] Alive today and because of that he is the permanent solution of how we can draw near to God. So we are secure when we trust in him and through him we can be assured of our salvation not just today at church but tomorrow and the next day and the next day and forever.

forever. Well, to convince us of this fundamental change in drawing near to God the writer of Hebrews uses comparisons. Firstly to a great guy called Melchizedek who has been trailing through these chapters now he's going to tackle who is great and then to the Levite priests who are weak and we can't cover every verse but the aim this morning is to grasp the central thrust in this chapter. The outlines on the handout we can always draw near to God through Jesus because firstly he is a priest forever like Melchizedek in his greatness.

In Melchizedek right from the start God has had a permanent solution in mind of how his people can draw near to God. and to show us how he dropped a marker in history this marker of Melchizedek. You'll be forgiven if you've never heard of him he only pops up three times in the Bible here in Hebrews once in Psalm 110 and then once in Genesis chapter 14 and verses 1 and 2 tell us most of what there is to know about him in Hebrews chapter 7 Genesis 14 Abraham won a big battle rescuing his nephew Lot and on the way home he met Melchizedek this priest of the most high God and Melchizedek blessed Abraham and Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder and it's in Melchizedek that we see the blueprint of what's to come.

[13 : 41] At first we learn he's a royal priest as his name indicates if you look halfway through verse 2 he is first by translation of his name king of righteousness and then he is also king of Salem that is king of peace my Hebrew is rusty at the best of times Melch in Hebrew means king Zedek in Hebrew means righteousness he is king of righteousness put them together and Salem is close to the word shalom meaning peace and so verse 2 makes the point he is king of peace king of righteousness again the bells are starting to ring to us of how this guy is the blueprint of what's to come secondly and crucially Melchizedek is a forever priest now this is a bit puzzling is he some sort of time lord like Doctor Who probably not is the answer because in Genesis is a book where family trees are really important where it's very detailed that

X is the father of Y and the second cousin of Zed but there's no mention at all of Melchizedek's family if you look at verse 3 he is without father or mother or genealogy having neither beginning of days nor the end of life but resembling the son of God he continues a priest forever he's making the point that Melchizedek is a forever priest in a literary sense because his story has no recorded beginning and no recorded end it's like a forever priesthood and in that sense he foreshadows Jesus he resembles the son of God he continues a priest forever thirdly verses 4 10 spell out how Melchizedek is a superior priest than the Levite priest they had in the Old Testament have a look at verse 4 see how great this man was to whom

Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe a tenth of his plunder and Melchizedek blessed Abraham and that made Melchizedek superior to Abraham as verse 7 says the inferior is blessed by the superior now I cut most material for this little point which is a shame I had a great joke about Abraham having Levi genes but the point being made here is that if Melchizedek is greater than Abraham he is also greater than the Levite priests in the Old Testament who are descended from Abraham and so in Melchizedek God gives a preview of how he's going to bring people to him permanently through a priest of the most high gods a king priest a forever priest a superior priest well the objection might come well that's all a bit speculative that hangs a lot of a few verses in

Genesis about this mysterious figure well thankfully God confirms this is the ultimate plan at Psalm 110 that is quoted in verse 17 and 21 if you look over the page verse 17 you are a priest forever after your order of Melchizedek verse 21 the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind you are a priest forever Psalm 110 written by King David is a conversation between God and his Messiah to come it's already been quoted in Hebrews chapter 1 about the Messiah being a king whose

enemies will be a footstool and now added to that he's going to be a priest he's going to draw people to God he's going to represent people to God and so putting all this together in Melchizedek God gives a preview right from the beginning of his unfolding plan of how he's going to put the world right and how sinful people are going to draw near to him well it's through a king priest a forever priest a superior priest it's a bit like the architect's model you know an architect designs a grand skyscraper before the construction begins they he creates a small scale model to show the final version the model is not the final building it's a shadow of what is to come and once the actual skyscraper is built the model is no longer the focus is it it's probably put in some museum or on one level within the skyscraper well Melchizedek is like the architect's model that points towards the real structure he is a preview of

Jesus' eternal priesthood he appears suddenly in Genesis 14 with no recorded beginning and no recorded end foreshadowing Jesus' eternal and superior priesthood he is king of righteousness king of peace who will deal with our sin permanently and bring us to God forever and Jesus won't be a priest because he's from the tribe of Levi we haven't got time to really go through all that but because he's from a different order a superior order a forever order by virtue of his resurrection from the dead as verse 16 says by the power of an indestructible life Melchizedek points to Jesus and in Jesus in his resurrection we see the full picture by being raised from the dead and Jesus gives us full assurance of our ongoing relationship with God because he is shown to have that indestructible life he lives forever forever and all that is to show that now here today 2025 we have a better hope than they did in the

[20 : 00] Old Testament that's pretty extraordinary when you think about it they had a big temple lots of sacrifices lots of priests fancy clothes they had God symbolically dwelling in the temple but now we have Jesus the king priest the forever priest the superior priest and so we can always draw near to God through Jesus because he is priest forever like Melchizedek in his greatness well now the writer makes another comparison this time between the temporary weak Levite priesthood and the permanent perfect priesthood of Jesus and so secondly we can always draw near to God through Jesus because he is priest forever unlike the Levite priests in their weakness verses 11 and 28 are bracketed by what the the old

Levitical priesthood couldn't achieve in the Old Testament and what Jesus does achieve perfection look down at verse 11 with me now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood for under it the people received the law what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek rather than one named after the order of Aaron you see his point if the old system was the permanent system why would need something different well the problem was not so much that individual priests let the side down some did but some served faithfully most of them in fact the real problem was that they were part of a system that couldn't really solve the problem they couldn't really solve the problem of sin couldn't really solve the problem of how a holy God and perfect God can dwell with his people it couldn't bring perfection and so we need a better and permanent system and that is what we get in

Jesus look how the writer puts it in verse 18 and 19 verse 18 from the one hand a former commandment is set aside because of his weakness and uselessness for the law made nothing perfect but on the other hand a better hope is introduced through which we draw near to God the old system of priests and sacrifices in the Old Testament was weak and useless now that is strong language and none of that is down to a failure on God's part he's not saying God had a plan A but that didn't work so he had to jump to a plan B the point is that in God's own design the old way of coming to him through the priests in the temple in Jerusalem was never meant to be a whole solution it was always meant to be a pumping up the tires type solution of a slow puncture pointing to the true solution the better way yet to come the writer spells out this weakness of the system in two ways first the priests never lasted they were mortal the fact that we're talking about priests plural proves the point they kept having to be replaced look at verse 23 the former priests were many in number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office just imagine what it would have been like you're there with your family you get to know one of the priests a lovely young chap just out of priest college age 30

John Levi he does the sacrifices for you at the temple he enables you and your family to draw near to God you as time goes on you get to know John Levi quite well he sympathises with your weaknesses you establish a relationship with him that's great news for your relationship with God he prays for you you go to him with your issues he is the one who then prays to God on your behalf

and sacrifices on your behalf and assures you of God's favour of his forgiveness but then one day you turn up at the temple and you find out that John Levi has died or he's retired age 50 as they did and you have to start all over again with someone else their priests were weak because they were mortal but verse 24 Jesus holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever Jesus will never retire he will never leave office he will be forced out of office he will stay where he is now in heaven forever actually the problem with the Levites is worse than they just die because if they just die then there's always replacement to step in there's always this steady chain of John Levi's coming through the system and whilst that's a bit of a pain you have to get to know someone again eventually you can get to know them and you can do the sacrifice and you're okay the problem is because they died they showed they were sinful as verse 27 states the priests had to first sacrifice for their own sins before they offered sacrifice on behalf of the people that is really a bit of a giveaway isn't it it shows that they're as needy for forgiveness as we are they're as weak as we are and prone to sin as we are now sorry to remind you but we are around five years on from the!

[25 : 59] pandemic since it started picking up steam in the UK and I do blame half February half term for a lot of that a lot of hope was placed in the NHS wasn't it and whilst the medical professionals worked really hard you remembered that well they themselves got sick they themselves had to isolate maybe you're a medic here today and you remember having to do just that and sadly some medical professionals even died from COVID themselves the point being they were there to help us but they were weak like us and the same problem was there with the human weakness that plagued the Levitical priests their job was to represent us on our behalf to God but they themselves were compromised as sick with the disease of sin they needed their own cleansing but Jesus is great news for us that he is so unlike them read with me from verse 26 for it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest holy innocent unstained!

Separate from sinners and exalted above the heavens! And as a result verse 27 he has no need like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people since he did this once for all when he offered up himself for the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests but the word of the oath which came later than the law appoints a son who has been made perfect forever weak and temporary priests have been replaced by a permanent and perfect priest and so where does this leave us what's the cash value of this well the big implication is in verse 25 if you look down with me consequently he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them that big implication that

Jesus is able to save forever those who draw near to him the old way is gone the new way has come a better permanent way of drawing near to God perhaps there's some of us here this morning conscious that you are a long way from God at the moment if you're honest well Hebrew says to us don't let your sin stop you coming to God whether that's the first time as a new Christian or the thousandth time as a struggling Christian because Hebrews encourages us to draw near to God through Jesus and we can only do that today because Jesus is alive today able to save me today able to save me in 40 years time when I'm an old man and still struggling to keep going as a Christian because Jesus will still be alive then he will still be in heaven then at the right hand side of the father then interceding for us praying for us!

Jesus and turning back to concrete tangible buildings and priests and ceremonies for assurance of God's love and forgiveness and the implication of Hebrews 7 is that it would be a ridiculous thing to do that because verse 18 that system is weak it is useless and chapter 8 next week will say how that is the old way of drawing near to God it is now obsolete it is vanished away whereas now there is a better hope the real deal permanent assurance and forgiveness through Jesus thinking of us here today then perhaps one of the reasons we might struggle with assurance now is because of the invisibility of the Christian faith if I can put it like that I can't see Jesus I can't see that he rose from the dead

I can't hear him physically stand in front of me and tell me I am forgiven and so the temptation is then because I need that to put my assurance in concrete tangible places people and practices to draw near to God we see that today in church buildings really old ones of how they were built with architecture that suggests a progression towards part of the building that is more holy where only the church professionals can go as if they're the ones who are like the priests who go behind the screen on our behalf that is like going back to the old way perhaps the youngsters amongst us will

remember going to a church building as part of a school trip I used to work in a church before I moved to London in Derbyshire with a lovely church building nothing against church buildings built in the 12th century and we used to have local schools come to us and at the door just before they go in the teacher would say something like be quiet we're now entering

[32 : 17] God's house now I don't know if that was meant to be a subtle threat for the children to behave but when they said be quiet we're entering God's house I would whisper to the children I was standing nearby no you're not you can make as much noise as you want perhaps for some here today coming to a church without a traditional church building is a bit unsettling perhaps when you go on holiday and you visit a local church that has a lovely church building there's a little niggle inside us that we are missing out here at Grace Church because we meet in a not so beautiful building with a leaky roof and plastic chairs even though some of them are new but actually we have Jesus that's what Hebrews 7 is saying to us well it's not just in buildings we place our assurance but people and the language of priests has seeped its way back into church vocabulary in different denominations parish priest priest in charge it's all deeply unhelpful it is a pick and mix religion of old and new but the

Bible is clear that church pastors are not priests it's why we're clear here at Grace Church that our church pastors aren't priests because whilst Phil Martin our lead pastor is a great Bible teacher and I'm very thankful he's joined us he is a hopeless priest just as Simon Dowdy was before him just as I am just as any church leader is today because we are weak we are mortal and sinful we don't enable anyone to draw near to God and even if Phil could it won't last because he won't be around forever and so Hebrews 7 says well don't go to human priests don't go to Mary or the saints they're sinful and dead but we have a perfect priest who lives forever Jesus the king of righteousness king of peace our perfect permanent priest who entered

God's presence on our behalf when he rose from the dead and ascended to God on high with his perfect sacrifice once for all who is there right now enabling us to draw near to God through him he lives he helps he intercedes and he saves and so however weak or strong we feel in the Christian faith we can have assurance total assurance that we can always draw near to God through him because verse 25 will stand he is able to save to the uttermost completely forever those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them let's pause for a moment and reflect and then I'll lead us in prayer heavenly father we thank you for the Lord Jesus who lives forever who intercedes for us forever who enables us to draw near to you forever please give us assurance that even though we cannot see him he is there now please help us not to put our assurance in anything else other than him and his finished work on the cross for us amen