

Better than Melchizedek

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of July 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Better Than Melchizedek and is based on Hebrews chapter 7 verses 1 to 28.

And you may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 974, Hebrews chapter 7.

And as I said at the beginning, we're resuming our sermon series from the letter to the Hebrews. So let's pray that God will teach us through these words. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have spoken to us in many and varied ways through history, in the words of the Old Testament, through the prophets, but not least through your Son, Jesus Christ.

And as we study these words that testify about him, we pray that you'll inform our minds with truth and reform our lives in love and obedience for Jesus' sake.

[1 : 0 8] Amen. The last few years have seen an abundance of polls about the greatest of the 20th century. Each of the AFL teams has had its team of the century, player of the century, the greatest actor of the century polls have been conducted, our newspapers and magazines at the beginning of this century had the most influential person of the 20th century, the greatest leader of the 20th century, etc.

To all intents and purposes, a fairly ridiculous exercise in the end. But consider who's the greatest person of the Old Testament. I suspect that most polls would probably have around the top four at least, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, maybe some others, but most polls would probably have them near the top.

Elijah, perhaps the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. David, the greatest king of Israel. Moses, the great leader who brought the people out from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to the verge of the promised land and through whom the laws came.

And Abraham, the great patriarch, the one to whom the promises of God were made, about 2000 BC. And certainly Abraham would rank in the top four at least, I would have thought, in most polls.

One of the great heroes of faith. The one who, in an act of obedience to God, almost sacrificed his son Isaac before God intervened at the last minute, allowing Isaac to remain alive.

[2 : 4 6] Abraham, the rescuer of his nephew Lot, when Lot and others from the town of Sodom were captured by an alliance of kings. Abraham gathered together an army and went after them and defeated them and brought Lot back.

Certainly Abraham would rate in the top group of our heroes of the Old Testament. One person probably who would scarcely rate a mention if we were to conduct polls, but nonetheless an intriguing figure and an important figure.

He makes just a brief cameo appearance, one of those walk-in, walk-off sort of slots in the great drama of the Old Testament. And if you blink, you might even miss his brief appearance that just covers two or three verses in the book of Genesis, chapter 14.

He's the first priest mentioned in the Bible. And he greeted Abraham when Abraham, the great hero, came back from battle, having rescued Lot and others from the town of Sodom, returning from victory.

His name is Melchizedek. He was the king of Salem, a place that many people think is probably the early name for Jerusalem. And that's about it.

[4 : 03] That's his only appearance, I should say, in the whole of the Old Testament. Genesis 14, he comes out, he greets Abraham, seems to come from nowhere, disappears again and that's it, by way of appearance.

And you could read through the whole of the Old Testament, carefully, trying to learn as you went and get to the whole of the end and if somebody mentions to you the name Melchizedek, you could well be excused for not having remembered either the name or who he is or what he did.

But the writer of the letter to the Hebrews makes quite a deal of this obscure person, this man whose brief appearance in Genesis 14 is also forgettable.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews deals with him at some length in chapter 7, having briefly mentioned him at the end of chapter 6. And the point he makes, we could sum up by saying he is great.

See how great he is, verse 4 says. A great man indeed, although his appearance is oh so brief. He was the one to whom the victorious Abraham, coming back from battle, gives a tenth of the battle's spoils.

[5 : 18] So this man just sort of walks out of nowhere and Abraham gives him a tenth of everything that he's won in battle. Clearly that's an acknowledgement of the greatness of this man. You don't give a tenth of the battle's spoils to any old person or stranger you bump into on the streets.

But a tenth of the battle's spoils, the tithes, if you like, were paid to this king Melchizedek, who's not been mentioned before and doesn't appear again. His name is important.

Melchizedek in Hebrew means king of righteousness. Zedek is righteousness. Melchizedek has to do with Malak the king. Amelech the king. And then he's the king of Salem, perhaps Jerusalem, but Salem is the word for peace, like the Hebrew word Shalom or Arabic Salam.

So he's the king of righteousness and the king of peace. And righteousness and peace are key attributes and virtues associated with God. Moreover, when Melchizedek comes out to greet Abraham coming back from battle in Genesis 14, Melchizedek blesses Abraham and it's a superior who blesses an inferior.

So clearly in what's going on, in Abraham offering tithes to this king and this king blessing Abraham, we are dealing with a person who is great, significant, greater even than Abraham.

[6 : 41] And though all our polls might suggest, well, Abraham would be one of the greatest figures of the Old Testament, here we're dealing with somebody whom Abraham acknowledges is even greater than he, King Melchizedek, king of Salem.

One of the odd things about him is that there's no genealogy for him. And most, but not all, of the important figures have some form of genealogy. We trace Abraham's line in Genesis all the way back to Adam.

And the same, in effect, with Moses and David and other of the key figures because genealogy meant so much in the Old Testament, where you came from and who was descended from you. But not so for Melchizedek.

No ancestry, no descendants are mentioned. He appears out of nowhere, disappears back into the nowhere again. And that's it. So that's this intriguing person, but a great figure.

So chapter 7 begins, this King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him.

[7 : 46] And to him, Abraham apportioned one-tenth of everything. His name in the first place means King of Righteousness, but next he's also King of Salem, that is King of Peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Now, the writer to the Hebrews is loading quite a bit onto Melchizedek, of whom little is said in the Old Testament. He's making a fairly big point here, that this is indeed a great figure.

But the real point that he's making is this. This is a great priest and he is a greater priest than the Old Testament priesthood.

Now, you see, in the Old Testament, one of the tribes of Israel was set apart to be the priestly tribe. It's the tribe of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob.

Levi, therefore, being a great-grandson of Abraham. So, when the people entered into the land under Joshua, each of the tribes had its tribal territory allocated to it, but not so for Levi.

[9 : 02] They didn't have an area of land associated with it, but rather the Levites lived in towns in the midst of each of the tribal territories because they were priests.

They had a priestly role, so they didn't have their own tribal territory. And it seems that some from the tribe of Levi were especially set aside as priests and some of those would be on some rotation roster whereby they would go to the central shrine to offer the sacrifices.

Later on, that was Jerusalem where they'd go to offer sacrifices and receive people's tithes and so on. So, through the Old Testament, the priesthood derived from the tribe of Levi.

And in the time that this writer to the Hebrews wrote his letter, just after Jesus' day, he writes to Jews who've become Christians. But they are struggling to understand, it seems, that the Old Testament priesthood of the tribe of Levi is now redundant.

And so, this writer is trying to show them how the priesthood of Jesus Christ supersedes the priesthood of the tribe of Levi of the Old Testament. And he does that by arguing from within the Old Testament itself.

[10 : 21] So, firstly, he's arguing that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham. And because the tribe of Levi is descended from Abraham, therefore Melchizedek is greater than the tribe of Levi and greater than the Levitical priesthood.

So, just as Abraham came back from battle and acknowledged Melchizedek to be greater than he by paying him tithes and receiving a blessing from Melchizedek, so in effect, the writer says, the tribe of Levi and all the Levitical priests in the Old Testament are not as great as Melchizedek and his priesthood.

So, verses 9 and 10 say that 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.

Now, we might think, oh, what's all this argument about? Is it really that important? But actually, in the end, this is a crucial argument. It's saying, firstly, that priesthood like Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of the Old Testament.

Now, the second step of the argument. There's only one other place in the Old Testament where Melchizedek is mentioned. He doesn't appear, he's just mentioned. It's a thousand years after Abraham and the events of Genesis 14 when Melchizedek appeared in person in the Old Testament.

[11 : 49] But a thousand years later, the people are in the land and David is the king, another of the greats of the Old Testament. Amongst many of David's achievements, he wrote many of the Psalms and one of the Psalms mentions Melchizedek.

So, in Psalm 110, David says, as he's prophesying about the Messiah to come, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

And so, there out of the blue, a thousand years later, the name Melchizedek recurs. And in that Psalm, David is looking forward to the Messiah who will not only be the king but will be also a priest as Melchizedek himself was a priest and king.

He's looking forward to a Messiah to come who will be both a king and a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Now, why does David prophesy that other than the fact that God inspired him to?

You see, what that prophecy is saying is that there is something deficient in the current priesthood, the priests of Levi who are ministering in the temple in Jerusalem after David had died and it was built by Solomon but in David's day ministering in the tabernacle and offering sacrifices and so on.

[13 : 14] The prophecy in the Old Testament itself is saying that the priests of the Levites are deficient. There is something more that is needed.

So, what's deficient about it? What's wrong with the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament? Well, the answer is that it cannot attain perfection. Verse 11 says, if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood, for the people received the law under this priesthood, what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek rather than according to the order of Aaron, that is, the first high priest from the tribe of Levi, the brother of Moses.

We see the Levitical priesthood had the Old Testament law and the Old Testament law pointed to what was perfect but it couldn't attain perfection.

It tells the people what is perfect and where their sins are but it doesn't make them perfect. That is, the Old Testament law and the Old Testament priesthood does nothing in the hearts of the people of God.

It tells us what is right and what is ideal and what is holy. It exposes our own failures and sinfulness but it is powerless to make us perfect or attain perfection.

[14 : 38] Sacrifices are offered and they do provide some temporary atonement but they don't change a person on the inside. And so in the end through the Old Testament, despite all the best efforts of the Levitical priesthood and the instrument of the Old Testament law, people don't become perfect.

So the Old Testament priesthood lacks power to attain perfection. In the end it's ineffectual or it's weak. It lacks power.

So King David prophesied a new priesthood, a priesthood in the order of Melchizedek that would last forever. But through the rest of the Old Testament, the next thousand years, no such person comes.

And through the continuing ups and downs of the history of Israel from a thousand BC when David was king through to the time of Jesus in the rest of the Old Testament, no priest according to the order of Melchizedek arises.

The prophecy of David in the psalm stands unfulfilled. But now, says the writer to the Hebrews, just after the time of Jesus, he says that person has come.

[15 : 51] And he comes not from the tribe of Levi, but from the tribe of Judah, of whom there was no prediction or speech about priests in the Old Testament.

And so verses 13 and 14 say, now the one of whom these things are spoken belong 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.

Moreover, this priesthood in the order of Melchizedek, this priest who's now come, says the writer to the Hebrews, exercises a powerful priesthood, not a weak and ineffectual one, one that is unable to attain perfection.

But rather as verse 16 says, he is one who's become a priest not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, that is from Levi, but through the power of an indestructible life.

Now he's speaking here of a priest not whose life is indestructible in the sense that he cannot die, but rather an indestructible life that endures death and lives forever because he's talking here about the resurrection.

[17 : 07] You see, this priest of course is Jesus Christ. And he's not saying that he couldn't die, he did, but the death could not hold him down, he rose and so lives forever.

And that's the indestructible life. And so the power of the priesthood of Jesus Christ comes because he conquered death by rising from the dead and he still lives and he lives forever.

That's the power of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And as a result of that power of the resurrection and Jesus' ascension to heaven to the right hand of God to his throne, he says in verse 19, this brings an introduction of a better hope through which we approach God.

Now in the Old Testament system of priests and sacrifices and in the temple building, there was within the centre of the temple the most holy place. That was where the throne of God was regarded to be, above the Ark of the Covenant.

That room, that three walled room with a curtain across the fourth wall, allowed no entry to anybody other than the high priest. Once a year on the Day of Atonement carrying with him the blood of the Atonement sacrifice.

[18 : 25] That was the only entry into the most holy place that was permitted in the Old Testament. And the high priest alone with that blood could enter. That was as close in effect as you could get to God.

And on the Day of Atonement the people of God would be gathered but not even around the curtain, not even in the courtyard in front of the curtain where only priests could go but beyond that again in the court of the people looking on from a distance, looking to see the great high priest going behind the curtain with the blood and no doubt breathing a sigh of relief when he comes back out safe from behind the curtain.

The writer now says that there is a better approach to God, a better hope through which we approach God, verse 19 says.

He's referring back to the end of chapter 6 in effect where he speaks about Jesus who is our hope, who's gone behind the curtain into the very throne of God in heaven.

That is the better approach. A few years ago I was in Canberra and visited the new Parliament House building. And if you're a tourist in Parliament House there are certain areas that on the tour you're allowed to go.

[19 : 38] The general courts, the bookshop of course. If Parliament's, you know, it's OK you might be able to go into the Parliamentary Chamber. That's about it. Now when I was in Canberra that year my sister was living and working in Canberra and worked in Parliament House.

And so she took me on a better tour. I could get behind where the tourists could go and so I was able to walk down some of the corridors where some of the offices were, see the gym where the parliamentarians would go and that sort of thing.

But even though she told me that down that corridor and around the corners the Prime Minister's office she wasn't allowed to take me down there. She couldn't go beyond. You see I actually needed somebody even more important than my sister if I wanted to sort of lounge around in John Howard's office and drink tea with him for the afternoon.

Well the Old Testament priesthood could only get you so close to God. The people couldn't enter behind the curtain. Only the high priest could, only once a year.

But what the writer is saying here is that because Jesus' priesthood is more powerful, we have a closer approach to God through Jesus Christ who takes us into the very throne room of heaven because that is where he is and he opens the way for us to join him there.

[21 : 05] Jesus Christ is it. He is the great high priest of the order of Melchizedek that lasts forever. He takes his office as a priest by an oath, verse 20 says.

This was confirmed with an oath. For others who became priests took their office without an oath, that is just because they happened to be descended from Levi, but this one became a priest with an oath because the one who said to him and then quoting David's Psalm 110, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you're a priest forever.

But not only an oath, he's a powerful priest because of his indestructible life, as verse 16 said, not thwarted by death. So then verse 23 and 24 says, 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. Death doesn't stop his priesthood. You don't need the next priest. When Jesus died, he lives forever.

So as a result of all that, verse 25, a verse that's well worth trying to remember. Consequently, Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

[22 : 27] You see, we won't outlive Jesus. He is our priest and our priest forever. He won't abandon us at death, but he'll take our hand through death to everlasting life.

There are no sins of ours that he cannot deal with. When we go to approach him, he won't let us down by dying on us. He won't let us down by having to offer his own sacrifices either because he is sinless.

You see, in the Old Testament, the priests needed to offer sacrifices for themselves before they offer a sacrifice for the people. And so imagine, with an urgency, rushing to the priest saying, please offer a sacrifice for me for this.

Oh, sorry, I can't quite do it at the moment. I've got to go and do my own sacrifices first. And so you're sort of put on hold. Not so with Jesus, our great high priest.

He's able to save for all time, verse 25 says. Not only time forever, though that's true, but the word actually means to save absolutely, totally.

[23 : 33] Nothing else is left. There's no sort of deficiency in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And his power comes also because he is sinless, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens, verse 26 says.

Unlike the other high priests, he's no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people. But this he did once for all, when he offered himself.

No more sacrifices needed. That sacrifice of Jesus was once for all time, for all people, in all places, for all sins. So great was that sacrifice of himself.

You see, the Old Testament priesthood has a shortness of spiritual breath. It runs out of puff in the end. It's good. It points to the ideal. It points to perfection.

It offers temporary relief from sin and atonement by its recurring sacrifices. But in the end, it runs out of spiritual breath and puff. It needs a spiritual bypass surgery.

- [24 : 43] And Jesus, in effect, is it. The great high priest. The powerful high priest. Now, what is astonishing, I think, about how we think about Jesus, our great high priest, is how ready Christians are to retreat from this glorious truth.

You see, the readers of this letter were in danger of taking a step back and reverting to Old Testament priesthood. They were shying away from the great truth that Jesus is the great high priest and salvation is absolutely and totally won for them by him.

And that's why the writer is dealing with these issues at length, because the people were wanting to retreat back into having an Old Testament priesthood. But not only the recipients of this letter.

Church history is pockmarked by the church retreating to an Old Testament style of priesthood. See, consider how frequently Christians want or ask somebody else, a minister often, but maybe somebody else, to in effect stand in for them and intercede or pray for them.

Oh, it's good to have people pray for us, but how often we retreat from praying ourselves and want somebody else to stand in and pray for us, the minister.

- [26 : 18] Or it may be seen in the fact that some church buildings have confessional boxes, so that we go to confess our sins to somebody else who then might stand in for us and do the business with God.

Or consider that so often in church history Christians or churches seem fearful to pray directly to God the Father because of Jesus Christ.

And so they set up other intermediaries to pray to. Let's pray to Mary to pray to Jesus, to pray to God the Father, or let's have a saint who might intercede for us.

And of course there's a whole range of saints we can choose from, various saints for different occasions. So we retreat back to an Old Testament priesthood sort of idea and pray to a saint who might pray to Mary, who might pray to Jesus, who might...

imagine the Chinese whispers and what the prayer will be like when it gets to the end. Or consider church architecture. How often church buildings are built not dissimilar to the Old Testament temple.

- [27 : 22] So you might have a curtained off or screened off or elevated, revered, holy place somewhere in the church that the people as a whole may not go to, but the priests alone might go there and do business on behalf of the people.

Or consider how the church has so often retreated back into a sort of form of Old Testament Levitical priesthood with priestly vestments that somehow legitimate the gathering of God's people around the throne of God.

And so that some priest wearing all sorts of regalia might somehow legitimate going up into the holy place in the screened off or elevated area of a church building, not dissimilar to Old Testament priesthood.

Or maybe it's just our doubts about Jesus' ability to save us. And so our need to add things to what Jesus has done for us, to add our religious rituals or to add some form of penance or fasting or something, as though somehow Jesus is not able to save for all time totally and absolutely us, as though something else is needed in addition.

You see, this is an important argument in this letter. It might look obscure, but it makes a very significant point. Jesus is able to save us totally and absolutely.

- [28 : 51] And we need no other priesthood at all. And this good news is not too good to be true. It is true.

And don't shrink back from it. Don't shy away from it. Don't revert back into some other sort of priestly code or priestly way or mediatorial way of relating to God. But Jesus is it.

We need no one else to pray for us to God. We can pray direct to God the Father through Jesus Christ. And we need no other sort of pseudo-Levitical priesthood as part of our religious ritual at all.

Jesus' death is totally sufficient for our sins. His indestructible life leads us to attain perfection in God's glorious heaven where Jesus now is exalted.

And he is the guarantee that we will be there perfect in the sight of God one day. Don't forget verse 25. Consequently, Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

[30 : 02] We need a priest. We need a great high priest. And God has provided exactly whom we need.

Jesus Christ. We need no other priest. No other high priest. No other sacrifice. Nothing else for our salvation. Jesus totally, fully and absolutely does the job for us.

So don't shrink back from the glorious truth of the great high priesthood of Jesus Christ. Don't shy away from it and don't look for some other priesthood which will only ever be deficient.

But rather, as this writer goes on to say, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.

And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

[31 : 15] Amen.