Sunday Class Notes

A Better Priest

Hebrews 7 · English Standard Version

Hebrews 7 opens with the word therefore, which means the chapter cannot be read on its own. It builds on what the writer has already said about rest, and about the danger of missing it. In Hebrews, rest is not a nap and not, first, heaven. It is rest from self-salvation, from the effort of working one's way to being saved. It is also the rest God himself enjoys, the rest of the seventh day, when he looked at what he had made and was satisfied. Ultimately and eternally, that rest is heaven. It is possible to miss it. The possibility is harder to realize than we sometimes make it, but it is real, which is why the writer has spent chapters warning his readers.

Having warned them, he assures them. They have a high priest who is going to get them there, a high priest who will give them all the help they need. Scripture does this regularly. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul reminds his readers of Israel in the wilderness, a people in relationship with God, baptized into Moses, drinking from a spiritual rock, who nevertheless rebelled and complained until God put a stop to them. Then he turns and says that no temptation has overtaken them except what is common, and that God will provide a way of escape. The warning comes first, and then the hope. That is what the writer of Hebrews is doing. He has rebuked them in chapters 5 and 6, told them they are not yet ready for the deeper conversation because they lack the spiritual depth for it, and then told them he knows they can do better, because he believes in God and because their salvation is secured by Jesus.

The conversation he is about to have requires a different kind of priest. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. Under the law of Moses, the high priest had to come from Levi, from the line of Aaron. Jesus cannot be high priest that way. He has to be a high priest of another order, the order of Melchizedek. That is what Hebrews 7 is about.

Why This Conversation

Hebrews 7 is a good example of why the rebuke in chapters 5 and 6 is often necessary. The conversation is two things at once. It is hard, difficult to understand in places, and it appears to be irrelevant, as though it had nothing to do with us. Those are two of the biggest reasons we do not reach the spiritual depth we ought to reach. Digging a hole an inch deep is not hard. Digging a hole six feet deep is. The deeper truths in the Bible are not on the surface, and they are not available to a surface reading or to surface thinking. Getting to them requires more study, harder work, and deeper digging, while depending on God's help. Hebrews 7 is challenging, and it can look irrelevant, which makes it something we might struggle to spend time on. That is exactly what it takes.

The chapter divides into two sections. Verses 1 through 10 ask who Melchizedek was. Verses 11 through 28 ask how the priesthoods of Melchizedek and Levi differ, and why the difference matters. Nobody puts priesthood, Levi, and Melchizedek on a screen and watches the room lean forward. It is hard. It is also the conversation the readers needed, and the one we need.

Who Melchizedek Was

The history is in Genesis 14. Someone important to Abraham has been kidnapped, his nephew Lot, and Abraham does not leave him there. He raises a force of about three hundred men from his own household and goes out against five kings, and he wins. Moses is writing this to Israel, a people about to go into battle against superior forces, and the story is there in part to tell them that they can do it if they believe. After the victory, as Abraham is returning, the king of Sodom comes out to meet him, and so does Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is king of Salem, which is Jerusalem, and he is priest of God Most High. He brings out bread and wine, which is worth noticing, because there is no Jewish priesthood at this point and barely a Jewish people. Abraham and his household are the people of God, and Judah, from whom the name Jew will come, has not yet been born. God is dealing with others besides Abraham. Balaam, in Numbers, is a prophet of God and a Gentile. The book of Job is about a man who is not an Israelite. When God was dealing with Abraham, he was also moving among other people, and Melchizedek is evidence of it. He blesses Abraham in the name of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, the God who delivered Abraham’s enemies into his hand. Abraham gives him a tenth of everything. If it were not for Psalm 110 and for Hebrews, we would read past that account and never think about it again. It is a tiny story about an otherwise unknown person, and everything about it is huge.

The writer of Hebrews does not argue the way we would argue, and learning to see that is part of learning to think biblically. He gathers the crucial facts into a sentence. Melchizedek is king of Salem and priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and to whom Abraham apportioned a tenth. Then he presses the name. Melchizedek means king of righteousness. He is also king of Salem, and Salem is the same word as shalom, so he is king of peace. The order matters. The Bible does not phrase it the way we phrase a title, name first and office after, as though the office were an afterthought. It gives the name, king of righteousness, and then the title, king of peace, because righteousness has to come before peace. There is no peace without righteousness. Even the word order is doing work, which is how carefully the Bible has to be read.

Hebrews 7:2

> *"He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace."*

He was also a priest, and that combination is strange under the law. King and priest were separate offices. A king had to come from Judah. A priest had to come from Levi. The two did not meet. When a king from Judah wanted to act as a priest, Uzziah went into the temple and burned incense, and God struck him with leprosy. Under the priesthood of Melchizedek, Jesus can be both king and priest. Melchizedek met Abraham, blessed him, and received a tithe from him. He also brought bread and wine, which looks forward to Jesus, the bread of life, and to the Lord's Supper. None of it is accidental.

Made Like the Son of God

Verse 3 is where the argument starts to sound strange, and the strangeness is the point. The writer says Melchizedek was without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. He does not mean that Melchizedek had no parents, that he appeared out of nowhere beside Abraham and vanished when the meeting was over. He means according to the record. Genesis gives no family tree, no birth, no death. There is no "Mr. and Mrs. Melchizedek begat Melchizedek," and no "Melchizedek lived so many years and died." According to the record, he has always been and will always be, and so he remains a priest perpetually. The Bible argues in ways we would not choose, and a reader has to be attuned to it.

> **Hebrews 7:3**
> *"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."*

The point is Jesus. Melchizedek was made to resemble the Son of God. He was not the Son of God. He was described in the Scripture in a way that looks like him, so that the priesthood of Jesus, like the priesthood the record gives to Melchizedek, will always last.

Greater Than Levi

Verses 4 through 10 tell us why the man was great, and the writer states his point before he argues it. Observe how great this man was. Two facts carry the greatness. He received a tenth from Abraham, and he blessed Abraham. In that culture, the person who receives tribute is greater than the person who gives it, the way a king who receives tribute is greater than the subject who brings it.

The person who bestows a blessing is greater than the person who receives it, because you cannot give a blessing unless you are the greater. On those terms, Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, and the Levitical priesthood, which descends from Abraham, is not the equal of this one.

The application to the readers is direct. You do not want to go back, because what you would be going back to is inferior to what you have. Nobody trades down on purpose. You do not go from a good thing to a poor imitation of it and call it an improvement. The priesthood they were tempted to return to was not sufficient, which is why another priest was needed. It is worth noticing, as an aside that helps date the letter, that the temple is still standing. If the temple had already been destroyed, the writer would at some point have said so, as proof that God had ended the old system. He does not, because it has not happened yet.

Two Problems with the Old Priesthood

The Levitical priesthood fails in two ways: the process is flawed, and the priests themselves are flawed.

The process is flawed because a change of priesthood requires a change of law. If God has changed the priesthood under Jesus, the Mosaic law cannot still be in effect, and God has changed the law. The qualifications are also different. Jesus did not become a priest on the basis of a physical requirement, the way a man lucked into the office by being born into the right family. A monarchy works that way, and it has always been a strange way to work. When a king dies, the next person up is the son or the daughter, and it does not matter whether they are qualified, or competent, or have any idea what they are doing. The only thing that matters is that they were born into it. That was the priesthood under the law, and it is not a good way to function. Jesus is a priest by the power of an indestructible life, which is better than simply being born into the office.

Hebrews 7:16
“Who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”

The whole system was inadequate. The writer calls it a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law made nothing perfect. The only thing the law can do is condemn. It cannot save. That is why his system is better. Jesus was also made priest with an oath, which the priests of the old covenant were not.

The priests themselves were the other problem. There were many of them, which sounds like an advantage until the reason is given. There were many because they kept dying, and a priesthood that depends on men who die is a priesthood that keeps starting over. Jesus lives. The final problem is

the one verse 26 names. It was fitting that we should have a high priest who is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens, who does not need to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for the people's. That was the biggest problem with the old priests. They had to deal with their own sin before they could deal with anyone else's. Jesus does not. These are the problems his priesthood overcomes.

Hebrews 7:26
"For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens."

Concluding Thoughts

The warning of the earlier chapters was real. Rest can be missed, and a people in relationship with God can rebel their way out of it. The answer the writer gives is not a lighter warning. It is a priest. The readers have a high priest who is going to get them there, and who will give them all the help they need, and Hebrews 7 is the explanation of why that priest is able to do it. He is not a priest because he was born into Levi. He is a priest like Melchizedek, king of righteousness and king of peace, king and priest in one, a priest forever because he lives forever. The old system could only condemn, and its priests had to answer for their own sins before they could answer for anyone else's. Jesus does not. He is able to save completely those who draw near to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Hebrews 7:25
"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."
