

## Melchizedek

Last week, while preparing for a sermon, I encountered the name, Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a contemporary to Abraham, and we can find his story in Genesis 14. Melchizedek, as we learn there, was the king of a place named Salem. The Hebrew word for city is “Yir,” and if we put the two words together, we get the name, Yirsalem, or, as we know it, Jerusalem. Melchizedek was king of what eventually became the capital city of Israel, but it did not become the capital until the time of David, some 1000 years later. Salem is also a Hebrew word, meaning “peace.” And the name, Melchizedek means “king of righteousness.” So, Melchizedek is both the king of righteousness and the king of peace.

We know almost nothing about Melchizedek. He was not from the line of Abraham, so he has no claim to the covenant that God would eventually make with Abraham. At the same time, we know that he was a priest of God Most High, and Abraham understood that Melchizedek worshipped the same God as the God who called Abraham out of Ur to go to the Promised Land. We know, further, that Abraham gave to Melchizedek one tenth of the plunder from a recent battle, thus naming Melchizedek as a priest worthy of the tithe, a practice that was commanded by God for the Israelites and their priests years later.

Although he is somewhat of an enigmatic figure, Melchizedek appears a couple of other times in Scripture, particularly in Psalm 110 which is later quoted in the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is said to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. But what does the author of Hebrews mean?

To understand this, we need to think about the descendants of Abraham as they were travelling to the Promised Land. Jacob had 12 sons, and one of those sons was named Levi. Levi became the priestly tribe to whom the tithe was due and of whom it was required that they lead the people to God through sacrifices and teaching.

As the Israelites travelled toward the Promised Land, God chose Aaron, Moses’ brother, to be the High Priest, the one who had the most immediate access to God and who offered the more important sacrifices on the altar. Eliezer, Aaron’s son, would succeed him as high priest. Eliezer had a son named Phinehas, and Phinehas, in a display of loyalty to God, was blessed with becoming the head of a dynasty of high priests. His descendants would continue to operate as high priests forever, according to Numbers 25:10ff. By making this covenant, God committed himself to providing a high priest who would always stand between him and a sinful people, offering sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins.

After the Israelites entered the promised land, however, things became chaotic. In the time of the Judges, the people turned away from God repeatedly, and the good order that God had established disappeared. Each successive judge, in turn, was worse than the previous one until we get to Samson who seems to be the only one God has to work with, and Samson would never be identified as a godly man. While the nation of Israel descended into chaos, the high priestly calling also suffered. At some point, and we don’t know when, the high priest, although a descendant of Aaron, was no longer from the line of Phinehas through Eliezer. Instead, when we begin reading 1 Samuel, we encounter a high priest named Eli who was, most likely, a descendant of Aaron but not through Eliezer. Scholars are fairly certain that he was a

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descendant of Ithamar, Aaron's other son. Thus, while God continued to raise up a priest for his people, the priest was not the one who was according to God's covenantal promises. Eli was close, but not close enough.

As we know, Eli's sons were miserable people, engaging in all kinds of sin and completely unworthy of taking their father's place. So Samuel foretold that Eli's family would be removed from serving in the office of high priest. A few decades later, David who had become king, appointed a new high priest by the name of Zadok. Zadok was a descendant of Phinehas and was the fulfillment of God's promises made much earlier. Even the exile into Babylon did not thwart God's promises, and Ezra, after the exile, was a descendant of Zadok (and Phinehas, Eliezer, and Aaron), and he led the people in the ways of the Lord. As time passed, the family of Zadok continued to bear his name, and eventually, scholars believe, became known as the Sadducees. Annas and Caiaphas were Zadokians, or, as we better know them, Sadducees, and appropriately able to be high priests. The only problem was that Annas and Caiaphas his son-in-law, were appointed by the Roman government and were judged to be inappropriate high priests by many of the people who lived at that time. Still and all, they exercised their authority, and under their guidance, Jesus was crucified.

According to Scripture, Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice that was sufficient to atone for all sins for all time and no other sacrifice was needed. But who would be the high priest who would offer that sacrifice? Certainly the reigning high priests of his time were not worthy of such a task. The author of Hebrews tells us that not only was Jesus the sacrifice, but he was also the high priest.

And that creates a problem. According to Scripture, God would always provide a high priest for his people, but that high priest was to be from the line of Phinehas, a Zadokian, and a Sadducee. Jesus was none of those. The author of Hebrews gets around that problem by remembering Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a recognized priest of God, but he lived at the time of Abraham, long before the tribe of Levi came into existence and certainly before the time of Aaron and Eliezer and Phinehas. But his role was significant enough for the author of Hebrews, quoting from Psalm 110 to say that although Jesus did not have the right biological history, he could be the high priest because Melchizedek had set a precedent. One did not have to be from the line of Phinehas to take on that role. The author of Hebrews that Jesus is a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Although God did not use the family line of Phinehas, he still provided a high priest that was far better than the high priests of the OT. He provided one that offered himself as a sacrifice and that sacrifice was far better than the one offered on the altar in the temple in Jerusalem. Further, as the ultimate high priest, Jesus did not have to offer multiple sacrifices but, rather, offered one sacrifice that would always be sufficient.

God had promised that he would always provide a high priest so that the people of this world could have their sins atoned for, and he provided one in Jesus Christ. This high priest's sacrifice was offered once for all, and it was sufficient for all.

In this, we see that God eagerly desires to be in good relationship with us, and by his grace he makes it possible, providing a high priest in the order of Melchizedek and providing a sacrifice that would cover all sins.

*Pastor Gary*