

# 71

## The Two Melchizedeks

### Genesis 14:18-20

*Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,*

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
And blessed be God Most High,  
who delivered your enemies into your hand."*

*Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

**I**t would be hard enough in our study of Genesis 14 if we had only Melchizedek to understand. Where did he come from? What is he doing in Canaan? How did he learn about Jehovah? Was Melchizedek's a recognized priesthood? If so, by whom was it recognized? How did Abram know that Melchizedek was a servant of the true God? Who was Melchizedek? These questions are probably unanswerable, as we indicated in the last study. But now, as if this were not enough, we find in the Bible's

treatment of this man that one must consider not only Melchizedek but also the Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to the Book of Hebrews, is a priest in Melchizedek's order.

In considering what Hebrews says on this subject, we find that no sooner has the author introduced Melchizedek (in 5:6 and 10) than he interrupts himself to complain, "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. . . . Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again" (Heb. 5:11-12). A one-chapter digression follows, and it is not until the last verse of Hebrews 6 that the author gets back to his subject: "He [Jesus] has become a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (v. 20). As we read these chapters, we sense that the writer wants to tell his readers deep and important things about Melchizedek's relationship to Jesus Christ but that he is having difficulty because of his readers' ignorance. Yet they were Jews. If they found it difficult—they who read the Old Testament in Hebrew and who knew all about the sacrificial system, through both reading and practice—how much more must most of us (who hardly know what a priest is).

### Priest of God Most High

Protestants and contemporary Jews have no priest. Jews should have priests, for priests perform sacrifices and sacrifices are at the heart of the Old Testament religion. Yet, as we know, the Jews today have no priests publicly recognized and functioning as the priests of Bible times. Even the Day of Atonement, the day on which the Old Testament priest made a sacrifice for Israel, is no longer characterized by sacrifice. Instead, it has become a time for repentance, for being sorry for one's sins. Protestants have the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, of course. But this does not mean much to most of them; and, if pressed to define what a priest is or to state what a priest does, most would be tongue-tied.

Roman Catholics have an advantage here. They know what priests do. For one thing, they know that they make the sacrifice of the mass—what Roman Catholic theology calls a "bloodless" sacrifice. Priests also hear confessions and give absolutions. That is, they declare the sins that are confessed to be forgiven. This means that priests stand as mediators—they act for human beings in things pertaining to God, and they speak for God to men and women.

I think that it is the presence of priests in the Roman Catholic Church that is responsible, in large measure, for its world-wide appeal. I mean by this that because sin has alienated men and women from God, they sense a need for mediation. If it were not for sin, we could all come to God boldly and know that we are received. But we have sinned and thus know intuitively that we cannot come. Consequently, we look for someone to intercede for us, to represent us, to stand before God in our place. We hope that such an individual, by whatever means, will be able to make things right between us and

God. Catholics look to their priests to meet this need. Of course, Protestants will argue that the sacrifice of the mass is ineffectual; it is an insult to Christ, whose truly sufficient sacrifice is thus made inadequate. They will maintain that the priest has no special authority to grant absolution of sin. But the need for a priest-mediator is universal—that is my point—and it explains, in part, the great appeal of Catholicism.

It also explains the popularity of the pope. On the surface, nothing should be less appealing. He is a man who dresses in the most lavish and costly of costumes. He represents untold and unreported wealth. He claims to be able to speak for God in matters of faith and morals, thus infallibly. These things alone should make him an object of scorn by most of our contemporaries. Yet, when he is shot by a crazed Turkish murderer and terrorist, the world mourns as it does for almost no one else. A worldly-minded Jewish neighbor said, "Isn't it terrible what happened to the pope?" Why is this? It is because the pope represents what we sense we need, though—in the opinion of Protestants—he is not actually the answer to that need. He represents mediation with God. He stands for atonement.

This is what Melchizedek stood for, and it is what Jesus Christ accomplished. That is why Jesus is the true Melchizedek and why he is praised to such an extent in Hebrews. At best, the Old Testament priests, like Melchizedek, pointed to the way God said he was going to forgive sin: through sacrifice. But their sacrifices were not real atonements for sin, since the death of animals is an inadequate substitute. It took the death of the Son of God to make a true atonement.

### Priest and King

The author of Hebrews stresses that Jesus is a priest forever in Melchizedek's order, as opposed to any other kind of priesthood. So we ask, What is it about Melchizedek that points to the superiority of Jesus' priesthood? Why is it important that Jesus be a priest in Melchizedek's order rather than in the order of Aaron (Heb. 7:11)?

One answer comes from the first thing the author of Hebrews says about Melchizedek: "This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High" (7:1). The important word in that sentence is "and," for in Old Testament times the royal and priestly offices were kept apart, and it is only in Melchizedek and Christ that these two important functions are combined. Apparently there was something like a system of checks and balances in Israel, just as we have it in America in the mutual restrictions that exist between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of our government. We keep these branches apart, and each has powers the others do not have. So also in Israel. No king could be a priest. No priest could be a king. In fact, when Uzziah, the king of Judah, attempted to offer incense to the Lord by entering into the temple, where only the priests were to go, God judged him by afflicting him with leprosy. It is said of him: "King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died.

He lived in a separate house—leprous, and excluded from the temple of the Lord. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land" (2 Chron. 26:21).

The reason for this balance of power both in Israel and America is obvious: mere human beings cannot be trusted with excessive power. As Lord Acton put it, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." But of course, Jesus is no mere human being. He is the God-man, as perfect in his divine as in his human attributes. He alone is able to be both priest and king.

F. B. Meyer writes, "How marvellously [these] blended in the earthly life of Jesus! As Priest, He pitied, and helped, and fed men; as King, He ruled the waves. As Priest, He uttered his sublime intercessory prayer; as King, He spoke the 'I will' of royal prerogative. As Priest, He touched the ear of Malchus; as the disowned King, to whom even Caesar was preferred, He was bound to the death. As Priest, He pleaded for His murderers and spake of Paradise to the dying thief; whilst His Kingship was attested by the proclamation affixed to His cross. As Priest, He breathed peace on His disciples; as King, He ascended to sit down upon His throne."<sup>1</sup>

The kingship of Melchizedek is particularly significant in regard to Jesus' kingship, for it points to his superlative kingly qualities. "Melchizedek" may be just a name, but it does mean "king of righteousness." The Salem of which Melchizedek was king may only have been the early and earthly Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 76:2), but Salem does mean "peace." Jesus is preeminently the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace. Moreover, he is both, and in that order. "He was first 'King of Righteousness' and after that also King of Salem, which is King of Peace (Heb. 7:2). Not peace at any price or at the cost of righteousness, but righteousness first—the righteousness of his personal character—the righteous meeting, on our behalf, of the just demands of a divine and holy law. And then founded on and arising from this solid and indestructible basis, there sprang the Temple of Peace in which the souls of men may shelter from the shocks of time. 'The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places' (Isa. 32:17, 18)."<sup>2</sup>

The trouble with so many people is that they want peace without righteousness. That is, they want their sin, but they do not want to be troubled by its consequences. They want to go their own way, assuming that everything will somehow turn out all right. But then they are dismayed and frustrated when it does not. God says that we must have righteousness first, because the root problem is sin, and sin must be dealt with before peace can be experienced.

Where are we to find this righteousness? We have no righteousness in ourselves. In place of the righteousness which we ought to have, but do not, we have every possible form of unrighteousness. The Bible says, in Romans 3:12-18 (quoting from Ps. 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isa. 59:7-8; Ps. 36:1):

There is no one who does good,  
not even one.  
Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.  
The poison of vipers is on their lips.  
Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.  
Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
ruin and misery mark their ways,  
and the way of peace they do not know.  
There is no fear of God before their eyes.

The Bible says that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart is "only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). We cannot find the righteousness we need in our society, for society is only the product of the sinful men and women who make it up. Righteousness is not found on earth.

What can we do? Well, if righteousness is available and it does not originate on earth, then it must come from heaven. Paul states it this way: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (Rom. 3:21). This righteousness is brought by Jesus, the King of Righteousness. It is received by faith in his death as an atonement for our sins.

We also need peace. Where is this to be found? It too is not in ourselves. Paul said, "The way of peace they do not know" (Rom. 3:17). Society knows no peace. The world knows no peace; it is in turmoil. We look to the psychiatrists, but they are unable to give us peace. We look to the United Nations. It is unable to make peace. We look to our governments and their armies. They are unable to maintain peace. Where can peace be found? It is found in Jesus. Jesus is the King of Peace, which is why Paul can say, as he does later on in Romans, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

Through Jesus, people can experience three aspects of peace: first, peace with God; second, peace within; third, peace with one another. Moreover, we look forward to the day when Jesus himself shall rule in righteousness and bring a true and lasting peace to this world.

### Our Priest Forever

There is a second reason why Jesus is compared to Melchizedek, being declared a priest after his order rather than after the order of Aaron. It is because the priesthood of Melchizedek is eternal. Notice what the author of Hebrews says: "Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever" (Heb. 7:3).

What does this mean: "without father or mother, without genealogy, with-

out beginning of days or end of life"? Does it mean that Melchizedek literally was without a beginning, that he was eternal as God is eternal? Does it mean that he literally had no father or mother? That he had no end of days, so that he may be supposed to be living still? A number have suggested this, some implying that Melchizedek was therefore probably a preincarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity, but I do not think so. I think this is reading too much into Scripture.

I think the author, in fact, indicates (by adding "without genealogy") how his words should be taken. A genealogy is a record of ancestors and descendants; so the author is saying that Melchizedek has no such record, not that he had no ancestors or descendants. In this sense, Melchizedek is a type of Christ. Only Christ truly has no beginning or end, so he is the perfect, all-sufficient priest, "able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25).

We live in a world where things change, where nothing is stable. If we look to people to be our saviors, we find that they change. They move away. They abandon us. They die. If we look to the institutions of this world to be our saviors, we find that these also change and they are inadequate. If we look to society, government, education, wealth, each in its turn fails us.

What we need is an eternal mediator, one who is able to save, not merely for today and tomorrow, but for the day after that and the day after that and so on forever. We need one who, when life is ended, will still be there, a priest forever after Melchizedek's order. We need Jesus.

Do we have him? Yes, he is there; and he is for you, if you will receive him by faith. There is a priesthood among men, as men put themselves forward as mediators between God and other men—without God's warrant. But they are only men: they are sinners, and they die. I invite you to Jesus, who is more than man. He is man in all man's attributes as well, including the fact that he lives forever. He is the one you need. He died for you. He rose again and now lives as the King of Righteousness and Peace. Come to him. Give him your life. Allow him to provide precisely what you need and thus equip you to move about in this life as a blessing to other people and a messenger of God's grace.