

Religion Versus Reality

Series: The Supremacy Of The Son

by Steve Zeisler

Last week I talked with a man in his mid--60's whose wife recently abandoned him after 40 years of marriage. He was overcome with grief and shock. A sense of loneliness, fear and devastation had overtaken him. As we talked, it was obvious to me that he needed a physician for his soul, someone who could minister to him in a time of sorrow and crisis. Our conversation reminded me that we all need the ministry of a priest, one who is capable of helping us in our inner man. In our Protestant tradition we frequently find ourselves forgetting, perhaps sometimes not even knowing, what is the function of a priest. Yet when we search the Scriptures we discover that mankind was meant to benefit from a priestly ministry in life.

I would like to suggest three functions that describe the responsibility and ministry of a priest. First, a priest is one who knows you exactly the way you are. You don't have to cover up your faults from him. He knows what it is like to be you. Secondly, a priest is someone who loves you. Although he knows you intimately, he loves you nonetheless. And thirdly, a priest is someone who can help you with the burdens you have to bear in life.

We all need this kind of ministry. Sadly, however, many of us seek it by appealing to human sources. Take marriage, for instance. Some people marry with the expectation that marriage will provide them with the things we have suggested are the functions of a priest. Now marriages do, in a sense, provide a form of priestly exchange. But we all have needs that are beyond the ability of any human being to meet. We cannot let ourselves be known as we really are. We cannot even know ourselves. While much of the world today strives after such things as physical fitness, financial security, or a sense of emotional and psychological wellbeing, the hunger of the human heart still remains: we need a priest, someone who knows us as we really are, loves us without reservation, and is committed to helping us in our need.

Where can we find such a physician for the soul? Today, in our studies in the book of Hebrews, we come to a passage that identifies Jesus Christ as the Priest we all need in our lives. He is the one who has the resources necessary for this intimate personal supply. In chapter 6 of the letter we saw that Jesus' ministry is such that "we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor for the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast . . ." "An anchor for the soul . . ." What a striking metaphor: an anchor that will hold fast in the midst of the storms and circumstances of life. Earlier we read the words, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." In Christ we have one who extends mercy to us. He graciously offers to supply us with all we need.

The author of Hebrews set out to write a treatise on Jesus Christ, a powerful expression of the greatness of our Lord. Increasingly he was drawn to the recognition that Jesus is a priest. God incarnate had all the qualifications required of a priest and acted in a way that profoundly fulfilled the ministry of a priest. We have already looked at the qualifications of a priest, in chapter 5. He should come from among men, he must know what it is to be frail and burdened with human limitations, he should be appointed by God, and, most importantly, he should be able to deal with sins. Jesus, of course, fulfilled each one of these qualifications to the letter. He fulfilled exactly what an Old Testament high priest was expected to do for his people. Jesus, then, is the one who meets the needs of human hearts. He is the great physician of the soul .

But then, because the Old Testament listed detailed instructions on the ancestry expected of a priest, the author realized there was a legal problem with his contention that Jesus was a priest. He illustrates this problem in 7:14 in the words, ". . . it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests." There is the problem. According to the Old Testament, only the

descendants of Levi qualified as priests, and Jesus, of course, was of the tribe of Judah.

Then in chapter 8 verse 4, we read, "Now if he were on earth. He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law . . ." If Jesus is a priest whose primary emphasis is this world and its religious order, he would not qualify. He came from the wrong tribe; he didn't legally measure up to the correct standard. And yet he is our High Priest. There is no one more effective in taking away our sins. He is our High Priest, although legally he does not qualify.

Having recognized this problem, the author searched the Scriptures until he came to a profound understanding of two hard to understand Old Testament references. If this were a mystery novel, at this point the "mysterious stranger" would make his entrance. The mysterious stranger, we know, is a great literary and cinematic device. He is the dark figure, silhouetted against the sky, who makes only occasional but always highly significant appearances in the plot. He never quite enters into the story, but prefers to remain on the periphery of things. And although he appears but for a moment, he dramatically affects the entire story. It is that kind of figure whom the writer of Hebrews discovered in the Old Testament when he sought to answer the question, how could Jesus legally be called a priest?

Melchizedek is this mysterious figure whom the author discovered. He has already made reference to him, in 5:11, "Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing." Clear-headed thinking was a requirement for work of this high priest. Now the author is going to share his discovery of the mysterious Melchizedek. There are two references to him in the Old Testament: eight verses in the book of Genesis, which tell the story of Abraham's encounter with him, and another reference in Psalm 110. That powerful Messianic psalm is one of the most important of the entire Psalter. The fact that Melchizedek is mentioned in it is extremely important.

Let us consider these references to Melchizedek in the Old Testament. In Genesis, Abraham won a great military victory, despite the tremendous odds against him, when he rescued his nephew Lot and returned with the spoils of battle. Then, just as he was savoring one of the high points of his life, Abraham was offered a choice. The king of Sodom, representing the world and the riches of the world, met Abraham and offered him great wealth. But another figure, the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem, met Abraham and offered him a simple meal of bread and wine. Each king made his pitch to Abraham, but Abraham chose to partake of Melchizedek's offer, and worshiped God by giving a tenth of the spoils of battle to Melchizedek. He did not accept the offer of the king of Sodom but instead gave of his riches to the representative of God.

That incident is also referred to in Psalm 110: "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Having considered these things, the author of Hebrews realized that when Jesus came to earth he did qualify as a priest, but not according to the law. Not as a Levitical priest. Jesus qualified on a different basis: the basis that God had introduced in Abraham's day and promised again in Psalm 110, that he would do something that would overturn the human priesthood of the line of Levi.

Hebrews 7:1-3:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually.

The writer of Hebrews makes certain observations on this account, some of which are based on what we are told in the text. Some of which are based on what information is left out. First, he says, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness: anti further. this king was also king of a region called Salem (Shalom, "peace, in Hebrew)--in other words. king of peace. Abraham realized this king was God's representative. Something about him clearly stamped him as an important servant of God. Then Abraham, in an act of worship to God gave to Melchizedek, tenth of everything he had won in battle

The writer does not even involve himself in other important details of the Genesis account--things which identify Melchizedek as a type of Christ--but he does make some observations about what is not in the text. First, he asserts, Melchizedek did not have a genealogy. He just showed up. Not only that, we don't know what happened to him later, where he went, when he died, anything. Melchizedek is a mysterious figure who is briefly injected into the Genesis story only to disappear again without trace. When those facts are set alongside Psalm 110 (where we see that Messiah to come would be a priest like Melchizedek, 'a priest forever'), we deduce that God ordained an eternal quality about this priesthood. Melchizedek was a man. He had a father and a mother and he certainly died, but since we are not told the details of his birth and death it is as if he were eternal.

We see a great detective at work here. The author of Hebrews has only a few clues to work with, but he is beginning to see something of the plan of God as the Spirit gave him insight about these things. Having made these observations, what follows are reasons for the deduction that because Jesus is a priest of the order of Melchizedek, he is far superior to the Levitical priests who served in the temple in Jerusalem.

Let me draw attention to two points of logic that are part of the argument for this superiority, beginning at verse 4 of chapter 7. First, the priesthood of Melchizedek was instituted prior to the Levitical priesthood: and secondly, it was subsequent to it. It came both before and after it, in other words. As a result, it is greater. In a peculiar (to us) argument, beginning in verse 4, Melchizedek is described as a great man because he came before the Levitical priesthood. Within Abraham's body at the time of his encounter with Melchizedek was contained the genetic material that would later become Isaac, Jacob and the twelve sons of Jacob--the tribe of Levi and all their descendants. So when Abraham worshiped God at the feet of Melchizedek, his descendants--Isaac, Jacob and the others--also participated in that act of worship. Thus Melchizedek was greater because he preceded the Levitical priesthood.

Secondly, consider the argument of verse 11:

Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?

What he is saying is not only was Melchizedek before Aaron and the others, now we have a long history. Levi and his sons became priests, the tabernacle was built, and eventually the temple countless animals slaughtered in sacrifice, but the problem was, that system did not work (it didn't result in perfection). God had to promise a Messiah to come, and his priesthood would be greater than that which had failed to work. So the priesthood of Christ symbolized by Melchizedek was greater because it came both before and after. He was the replacement for the failed, weak ministry of the priesthood of Jerusalem.

Another argument is advanced in verse 16 by contrasting awesome power of an indestructible life with the puny authority derived from human ancestry (the law that required physical descent from Levi).

That same discrepancy is often demonstrated in business. Certain people who have the correct degrees, the proper pedigree--they went to the right schools and were born into the right families-- assume these things qualify them for a certain type of work. Then, on the other hand, there are others whose only qualification is that they are good at what they do. Although they were not born into the right family, they have an ability that, while it never has been awarded with a university degree, is nevertheless extremely effective. The writer of Hebrews lays these two things side by side: a physical requirement, and then the challenge by some one who can actually do what he is said to be able to do. Which of those is the greater'?

There is a difference between a human requirement and the power of an indestructible life. Jesus is the great High Priest because he is supremely capable of meeting our needs. He knows us, he loves us, and he can help us. Whereas the Levitical priesthood was weak, his is powerful.

Consider also the oath of God (7:20-22). Psalm 110 says: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, Thou art a Priest forever." God took an oath to establish his Son Jesus Christ as High Priest. That fact strikes the author as remarkable. Why should God have to take an oath'? Shouldn't his word be good enough'? Think

of the humility involved in God's swearing, as if before a magistrate, that he would tell the truth.

He does so, of course, because man is weak and deceitful. Because of this, we have developed an elaborate system designed to make people keep their word. Have you noticed how children try to escape the consequences of their promises to their peers by saying, "We didn't shake on it"? As adults we must sign contracts, and have them notarized, to ensure we will do what we have promised to do. We must lay one layer of safeguards on top of another testifying to the fact that we will perform what we have promised we will do. In a tremendous act of humility, God subjected himself to our standards and swore an oath to convince us he would do what he had promised. Jesus' priesthood comes by the oath of God. Its effectiveness, therefore, cannot be challenged.

In 7:23-24, another comparison made is that Jesus remains a priest forever in contrast with the great numbers of priests required in the Old Testament as one generation succeeded another. Some were godly, some wicked but they all passed on. The priest who could offer help one day was dead and gone the next. Yet Jesus remains a priest forever. His ability to minister to us never fails.

The various arguments in chapter 7 for the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood are summarized in verses 26-28.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.

Verse 12 of chapter 7 declares that once the new priesthood was ushered in, once Messiah is put in place as a Priest the old rules don't apply anymore; henceforth matters are on a different basis. Chapter 8 sets out the new rules of the new covenant, the new agreement in the relationship between God and man.

Chapter 8:1-5

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, "See," He says, "That you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain,"

When Moses was told to build the first tabernacle (which would eventually become the Jerusalem temple), he was given a vision of heaven in which worshippers have access to God. Based on what he saw he built something that was a shadow, a symbol of his vision.

Jesus' ministry takes place in God's presence in the heavenly places. That is where he ministers -- in the presence of God. We no longer have to deal with symbols but with the real thing. The realm of the spirit world is where God can be known by us. And it is in that realm that Jesus serves as Priest. A human organization, a clinic on earth to supply us with a priestly ministry is no longer necessary. We now have an Advocate in heaven itself. And not only in heaven but in our hearts also. Our High Priest ministers both in the heavens and in our hearts.

Chapter 8:6-13

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For

finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach every one his fellow-citizen, and every one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

Our Lord ministers in the very presence of God in the heavenly places. and he also ministers in the minds and hearts of those who love him We no longer have to approach him by means of religion We no longer have to deal with the shadow Our God will henceforth meet our needs by his Spirit within us (8:10)

We have a High Priest a physician t or the soul, who ministers to us in our deepest needs one who knows us intimately anti loves us anyway he is committed to helping us. to treeing us and supplying us with everything we need in life There is no more important bridge we can cross as Christians than the recognition that it is possible to be religious and yet leave God behind: to serve an old covenant that appeals to an obsolete priesthood for help. one that never worked anyway In Christ. God otters us an effective High Priest. one who pleads our case in the very presence of the living God

Let us draw near to God is the refrain that is sung over and over in this letter to the Hebrews Jesus is an effective High Priest. Let us draw near to him

A salesman friend recently attended a sales convention filled with razzle--dazzle and hype altogether a high energy event Afterwards the salesmen returned to their jobs brimming over with a new enthusiasm for their company and their product My friend compared the sales convention happening to the Christian fellowship he experiences weekly with a group of Christian brothers and sisters who meet to worship God and live to the praise and glory of Jesus Christ The sales convention was external, filled with hype and false energy It soon petered out, ant failed to deliver what it promised The second experience,. however, touches eternity God himself is present in their midst

When Christians meet in obedience to God in humility before him there is nothing to compare with that experience From him we receive true stimulus, energy and power from within to live as we ought to live That is the offer made here in this passage We all need a priest in our lives We all will at one time or another appeal to someone or something to meet that need Perhaps some will even seek in religious quarters the kind of help they need But the challenge of this passage is to not seek a priest from any other source--not even from among the religious-- but to believe that God has met our need for a priest in the person of Jesus Christ

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