

Hebrews 7:11-19

“Drawing Near to God Through Our Risen Priest”

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Ordinary Time

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

That’s how the exhortation to the Hebrews begins. And like any great piece of rhetoric - which Hebrews certainly is, the core theme of the writer’s argument is presented in the first words of the work.

And this is the great theme of Hebrews - we are those who live in Jesus time, and as those who live in Jesus time, everything is different, because God now has spoken to us not through merely human prophets, but through the God-Man, the divine Son, Jesus Christ.

And this, the writer to the Hebrews argues, quite literally changes everything. It changes our relationship to God. It changes our relationship to the world. It changes our relationship to one another.

I think you can make the argument that Hebrews is the most radically Jesus-focused of all the New Testament letters. It extols again and again the majesty and the power and the significance of the person of Christ, and how our life with God has been transformed through Jesus.

And the section of Hebrews that we are jumping back into this morning, chapters 7-10 focus especially, in a way that is completely unique in the New Testament, on the reality that Jesus is now our High Priest in heaven - that by the power of an indestructible life, Jesus has become the one through whom we now draw near to the Living God.

We've heard this morning already from Leviticus 9, Romans 4-5, and John 14 and 20. And I now I want to add several more readings to that list before we read our sermon text.

One of the reasons we have so many readings each week from the Scriptures is because we want to use this time each Sunday not only to meditate on one specific text, but to think deeply about how all of the Scriptures work together to tell the story of the Living God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

And so as you hear all these different readings - this Sunday and every Sunday, I encourage you to ponder deeply their connections and how they fit together and open up one another - because there is no way that I or Patrick can ever summarize that in half an hour of preaching.

Our order of worship each Sunday is not only a guide to what we do at 10:30am on the Lord's Day - it's also a Bible Study handout - take it home and ponder it all week, think about all these scriptural texts and their relationships to one another.

With that in mind, I'm going to read two brief passages, first from Genesis 14, and then from Psalm 110, which both describe the person and priesthood of Melchizedek, and then I'll read Hebrews 7:11-19, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word.

Gen 14:18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) 19 And he blessed him and said,

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;*

20 and blessed be God Most High,

who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Psalm 110:1: *The LORD says to my Lord:*

*“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”*

*2 The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.*

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

*3 Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;*

*from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.*

*4 The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,*

*“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”*

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? 12 For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. 13 For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

15 This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, 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. 17 For it is witnessed of him,

*“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”*

18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

What is Jesus doing right now, in heaven? Do you think about that? Do you consider that much when you meditate on the person of Christ?

Of course, we all confess that we believe that Jesus died, rose again, and is ascended now to the right hand of his Father in heaven, but I wonder how much we really think about what it is that Jesus is doing right now, in heaven, at his Father's right hand.

Too often, I think, we can default into a kind of perspective that says that Jesus did some really important things 2000 years ago in his earthly life and ministry, but now he's gone to heaven and left us, and now we're the ones left doing the work while Jesus is in heaven, sort of sitting and waiting for us to get the job done. But of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus, the Scriptures teach, is actually doing a lot of things right now in heaven for us, and for the world at large. He is actively united to his church by the power and presence of his Holy Spirit, and he is constantly serving us by his present activity in heaven.

Reflecting on Jesus' present ministry and work in heaven is actually one of the greatest unique theological contributions of the Reformed church, work that is rooted in the creative theological writings of John Calvin in his Institutes and Commentaries, and has continued throughout the Reformed tradition over the past 500 years as others have joined in to reflect on this rich theme.

The Reformed tradition has described the present work of Jesus in heaven by means of a tripartite description - that in his resurrection and ascension, Jesus functions presently as our King, Priest, and Prophet in heaven.

As our King, we believe that Jesus in heaven is doing Kingly things - he is actively subduing us to himself, converting us and giving us true faith in him, and that he is providing for us and defending his church from peril and harm, and ruling over all the world until it is brought into perfect submission to him.

As our Prophet, we believe that Jesus in heaven is doing Prophetic things - he is actively revealing to us the will of God for our salvation, through his word, especially as it is preached by his ordained ministers, and by his Spirit which he pours out on our hearts, and which enlivens the reading and preaching of the Scriptures so that they reveal to us the true God and lead us to salvation.

And as our Priest, we believe that Jesus in heaven is doing priestly things - that he is actively serving as our mediator, effecting the forgiveness of our sins, sharing the blessings of God's grace with us, drawing us near into the presence of the Living God Lord's day by Lord's day as we assemble as his people, and constantly interceding and praying for us.

Herman Bavinck describes Jesus' priestly ministry in this glorious way:

"At present, in heaven, Christ is the perfectly groomed high priest, the high-priest king who possesses all that he acquired, who is indescribably rich in spiritual and eternal goods, and who, from his position in heaven, administers them to us. To be truly a priest, he had to be a priest in heaven, not on earth, not in a manmade temple, but in heaven, on the throne of the universe...thus Christ is our only priest, who, according to the order of Melchizedek, remains forever, continually covers our sins with his sacrifice, always acts as our Paraclete with the Father, pleads our cause against all the accusations of Satan, the world, and our own heart, makes our prayers and thanksgivings pleasing to the Father, consistently assures us of free and confident access to the throne of grace, and out of his fullness sends to us all the blessings of grace."

Beloved, know this. Jesus is not distant from you. He has not left you alone and on your own to figure out what it means to follow him.

What I am saying is that Jesus did not simply accomplish his work 2000 years ago and then sit back to see what you would do in response to what he has done.

No, Jesus is your servant in heaven, just as he was servant to his friends during his earthly ministry — he is serving you and bringing about your salvation - he is watching over your body and your soul, he is with you always, and he is actively protecting you, preserving you, speaking to you, forgiving you, and giving you his very own body and blood for your salvation.

And indeed, this present ministry of Jesus Christ, and especially his ministry as our High Priest is the primary theme of Hebrews chapters 7-10, these chapters that we will spend the next several weeks together studying.

Our passage this morning is a powerful introduction to these themes of Jesus, as the Apostle here argues for essentially two things.

First, that Jesus is an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek because he has made a priest by the power of an indestructible life.

And second, that with Jesus as our eternal high priest, he is our better hope, through which we draw near to God.

I want to start with the second point this morning, and then we'll move to the first.

In verse 19, the Apostle sums up his argument in this section of chapter 7. He says, because of the ongoing priestly work of Jesus, "*A better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.*"

Beloved, do you know that you are a person who draws near to God through Jesus Christ? This is so essential to understand in order to have an appropriate picture of who you are as a person.

Our catechism describes the reason for your existence as a human being to be two-fold - to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

To enjoy communion with God is one of the primary reasons for which you were made. And the way in which you enjoy communion with God is by drawing near to him - by coming into God's holy presence and being welcomed, being nourished and embraced and fed and served.

This is what it means to enjoy God forever - to draw near to him.

And it's important to point out that this drawing near to God that the writer to the Hebrews describes is a corporate action, not an individual one.

The Apostle does not say that Christ is a better hope through which you (singular) draw near to God. No - he says Christ is a better hope through which *we* draw near to God.

This means that what the Apostle is talking about is how we draw near to God when the church is assembled together in worship on the Lord's Day - and indeed, our Worship each Sunday morning is sacred time, during which we *together* enter God's presence and draw near to him in a special way, in a way that is utterly unique compared to the rest of our lives.

And this, of course, is the whole structure of our worship service.

We are called into God's presence - this time is formally set apart as sacred time by our call to worship.

And then we confess our sins, which is exactly what we should do when we draw near to God, and then having had the forgiveness of our sins declared to us again, we relax in God's holy presence - we sit down and listen to his word read and preached, and then we do this phenomenal thing - we eat bread and drink wine while seated in the holy presence of God - just like Moses and the elders in Exodus 24, we behold God and we eat and drink before him.

It's important for you to realize how different and how much better this for you now as those who live in these last days, in Jesus time, than it was before, in the old Covenant.

We heard already this morning a reading from Leviticus 9, which describes the way in which Israel drew near to God in those days.

It was only through the continual shedding of blood - the death of animals that Israel could come into God's presence, and of course, all the people could not go into God's presence - only the priest, and only for a short time.

How much better is this hope that we have today, friends!

All of us are equally welcome in the presence of God now that we live in Jesus time - and no animals are killed for our sins, for his blood has been spilled once and for all. And the quality of our enjoyment of God's presence as we draw near is phenomenally different.

Did you know that in the Old Testament, the priests are specifically prohibited from drinking wine during the time when they're on the job, serving the people of God? You can read about it Leviticus 10.

The idea was that the priest had such an important function that they couldn't relax, not even for a second, because of the holiness of God's presence and the importance of their scrupulous following of the rules about drawing near to God.

Brothers and sisters - consider how different it is for us now, in this new and better hope, with Jesus Christ as our high priest, through which we draw near to God.

For now, you are invited to sit down, relax, and drink wine in the holy presence of God. You can drink wine, because someone else is on the job. Jesus is serving you, actively working as your high priest so that you can be at peace and rest in God's presence and enjoy even the fruit of the vine.

That's how close you are able to draw near to God. That's how intimate your fellowship is with him. That is the glory of life as one who lives in the New Covenant, in these last days, in Jesus time.

But how are we able to do these things? How are we able to enter the presence of God in this way?

The answer of course, is through our High Priest, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

The person of Melchizedek is a fascinating one in the Scriptures. He appears only once in the narrative of the Bible, in Genesis 14, centuries and centuries before the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood.

There are some Christian theologians who even, and I would put myself in this number, who believe Melchizedek may have been a theophonic appearance of the Son of God prior to his incarnation. I can't prove that, but I do think it's possible.

In any case, Melchizedek appears out of nowhere, as Abraham is returning from battle, having rescued his nephew Lot from captivity and carrying off the spoil from the enemy kings.

Melchizedek, who is identified as a priest of the Most High God (and also the king of Salem - Jerusalem) meets Abraham and feeds him with bread and wine and then gives him a priestly blessing.

Fascinatingly, Melchizedek is a very different kind of priest from the Aaronic priesthood which would be erected later - he does not seem to need to sacrifice an animal and spill blood - that's not part of his priestly work, he invites Abraham to eat bread and drink wine with him, and he is not only a priest, but also a king - I'm sure the parallels to our Lord Jesus' priesthood are not lost on you here.

And in return, Abraham himself, the greatest of the Patriarchs of the Old Covenant, pays Melchizedek homage, offering him a tenth of all the spoils that God had given him.

Melchizedek's name is of course, a pointer to Jesus' identity - for his name means King of Righteousness, and he is also the King of Salem - the Hebrew word for Peace - he is the priest-king of Righteousness and Peace, and as the writer to the Hebrews points out, as far as we know he has no beginning or end - Melchizedek has no genealogy, no explanation for his origin, no record of his death.

And so, the writer to the Hebrews wrestles with this question - the priesthood of Levi and Aaron was unable to perfect the people of Israel.

The Levitical priesthood was good, in a sense, for its time, but ultimately it could not bring about the kind of peace with God and intimacy of fellowship for which we were created.

And so, the Apostle says, God raised up a new priesthood, a priesthood rooted in the order of Melchizedek - an eternal priesthood, a better priesthood, a priest who would also be a king, a king of Righteousness and Peace who would feed his people with bread and wine and give them his blessing as they gave him their homage and their tithe.

And how do we know that God has done this? The answer, the Apostle gives, is in verse 16. It is that God has raised his Son from the dead and given him the power of an indestructible life.

In fact, it is in his resurrection, that God has publicly vindicated his Son as Righteous and Innocent. As Paul tells us in Romans, Jesus was delivered up to death for our sins, and raised by God from the dead for our justification.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God is not just an apologetic for his divine identity. No, it is intrinsically linked to his Father's judgement of his Son as Righteous and Holy, and his entrance into heaven as our perfect high priest.

Indeed, it is because of his resurrection from the dead that the words of Psalm 110 become true for our Lord Jesus.

As the writer says: “[He] has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. 17 For it is witnessed of him,

*“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”*

Friends, over these next weeks, we will continue to meditate together on the glory of Jesus’ ministry to us as our high priest. It is worthy of your time and your study and your attention.

And my prayer is that meditating on these chapters in Hebrews and Jesus’ priestly ministry for you will cause you to love him more, and to be even more thankful than you are now for the way in which, through Christ, you are invited to draw near to God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.