

July 27, 2014

Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110; Matt. 22:41-46; Acts 2:29-36; Heb. 7:1-28

“You Are a Priest Forever”

Today’s sermon is going to be a theology lesson. If that troubles you you will have to take it up with Doug Griffith because he is the one who picked this one for me to preach on. I think he was trying to make my life difficult by picking this Psalm.

None the less, this sermon can’t be anything other than a theological lesson because the psalm we are looking at today is a Messianic Psalm, meaning it is one that points us to the Savior; and since it does so it is our job to try and understand how it does that, especially in light of the line, “**You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.**”

There is an irony to this Psalm in that it is the *most* quoted and alluded to Psalm in all the NT. That is saying a lot because the NT is full of quotations from the Psalms. This is an irony because this Psalm is probably the one psalm we are least familiar with and least likely to think of when we think of the Psalms. How can that be? How can this be the quoted Psalm in the NT yet it is the one we understand the least?

The fact that it is the most quoted *does* say something to us about its importance; therefore we ought to make an effort to understand it. So try not to let your eyes gloss over this morning and let’s pay attention and try to understand what the Lord would have us to understand this morning.

This psalm is understood by the apostles in two major ways as it concerns the Messiah. Before I give you those two ways first let me first say that the apostles (the first followers of Jesus) were not acting out of the ordinary in understanding this Psalm to be pointing to the coming of a Savior. Their Jewish contemporaries believed the same thing about the psalm as well; the only difference was that the apostles believed Jesus was the fulfillment of the text and their contemporaries did not; but *everybody* agreed that the Psalm pointed to the coming of a Savior. Now let’s look at the two major ways the apostles understood this psalm in light of Jesus.

First, the apostles saw this psalm pointing to the idea that the Messiah who would come would be God himself. This is evidenced by their recording the words that Jesus himself spoke about the Psalm. We looked at one of those texts in Matthew 22. That conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees is also recorded in Luke and Mark’s gospel. So three of the four gospels have it. That’s 75 %. That’s a landslide victory in politics. This is important.

In that conversation Jesus asks the Pharisees, “Whose son is the Messiah?” “David of course” the Pharisees answered. In one sense they were right, Jesus is the son of David in that he did come from David’s lineage, humanly speaking. In fact, Matthew’s gospel begins by saying, “**This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**” (Matt. 1:1)

But this was not the point Jesus was making so he said, “If the Messiah is the son of David then how come David says, ‘**The LORD says to my Lord: sit at my right hand.**’ Fathers don’t call their sons Lord! That’s backward. If anything it goes the other way around.” This was Jesus’ way of saying to the Pharisees that he came not just from David’s lineage but also from God and of God because he was God’s eternally begotten Son.

The Pharisees were stunned into silence by Jesus' answer because he just made a claim to divinity on the scriptural basis of Psalm 110. Remember, the Pharisees believed in the coming of a Messiah but no Jew, for the most part, ever believed the Messiah would actually be God incarnate coming down to us in human flesh. This was a major point of division between Jesus and those Jews who did not accept him to be the Messiah (his claim to be God).

The apostle Peter uses Psalm 110 text in a similar way in the book of Acts in a sermon he preached.

In that sermon Peter basically said that David's dead body was in the ground (waiting to be resurrected on the last day at the end of human history) so there was no way that Psalm 110 could be about him or any of his lineage conceived by normal human means. The dead bodies of all human beings are in the ground waiting to be resurrected on the last day, including the decayed body of David, so the psalm must be referring to someone else if in fact that person is at the right hand of Yahweh ruling and reigning over all creation. That someone is Jesus Christ, fully human but also fully God; the crucified one whom the Father bodily raised from the dead and seated at His right hand to rule and reign as both Lord and Messiah.

From the way this text was used by Jesus himself and the apostles such as Peter, it is clear that it was understood to support the titanic idea that Jesus Christ, though fully human, was far more than a mere human being; he *was* and *is* God in human flesh.

Well that's the easy part. The second way this text was understood by the NT writers will make your head spin. In order to get it you have to be able to think abstractly. You also have to work at it, it's not easy. Then (even more) the Holy Spirit has to give you the "eyes to see," but if you don't want to see it he will not give you the eyes.

The second way the apostles understood Psalm 110 as it concerned the Messiah can be seen in their belief that this psalm shows us that the Great and True High Priest who was to come would be superior to the Levitical priesthood in the OT. In order to grasp the weight of this point permit me to do a quick review on who the Levites were and what they did as priests.

First, the Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel, coming from one of Jacob's twelve sons Levi. The purpose of this particular clan of people in the life of Israel was to work in the Temple as priests. They were the Lord's ministers who led his people in worship. They were responsible for making all of the animal sacrifices on the Day of Atonement and on Passover and they were the only ones who could go into the Holy of Holies in the temple, the place where it was said that God dwelled, and they could only do that one time a year on the Day of Atonement. .

The purpose of the animal sacrifices as to atone for sin and reconcile the sinner back to God. The idea here is that sin deserves to be punished and that God is just to punish it but in his mercy he provides a substitute in the place of his people in order to bear God's punishment on their sin.

This is important for us to understand because the Bible teaches us that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin. God does not arbitrarily forgive sin. God always gives sin its just wage- death. **"The wages of sins is death." (Rom. 3:23)** But God is also a God of

mercy and he makes a way for sinners to be forgiven by sending a substitute in our place to shed his blood.

If you don't get this then you don't understand the power and depth of what God did for you when Christ was crucified. No wonder Paul says, **"We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles but to those who are being saved Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."** (I Cor. 1:22)

None the less this is what the priests did; they led the people in worship and they made the animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. But what does this got do with Melchizedek and the superiority of Jesus as the Great High Priest?

The writer of Hebrews helps us with this because this was one of the main questions he sought to answer in his letter. Here is where it gets a little tricky, quite tricky. Everything I am going to say is deduced from Hebrews 7, which we read.

First, the Levitical Priesthood is not the only priesthood. The prevailing idea at the time was that if you were going to be a priest then you had to come from the tribe of Levi and the problem with Jesus was that he did not come from the tribe of Levi but rather from Judah and priests did not come from them or did they? This is where Melchizedek comes into play.

The Genesis text tells us that Melchizedek was the King of Salem. Salem was what later became known as Jerusalem and Jerusalem was encompassed in the land of Judah. So Melchizedek (the first Priest mentioned in the Bible) was from Jerusalem, which was later inhabited by the tribe of Judah. Guess what tribe Jesus came from? The tribe of Judah and if Melchizedek came from Judah and he was a priest then how much more can Jesus be our High Priest?

But it goes deeper than that. The writer of Hebrews also makes the point that not only is Melchizedek *before* the Levitical priests but also that he is superior to them because when Abraham paid his tithe to Melchizedek (after Melchizedek had blessed Abraham) Levi also in essence paid a tithe to Melchizedek as well (even though the Levites had not yet been born) because the Levites were in the loins of Abraham. The point here is that the one who pays the tithe is always inferior to the one who is tithed to!

We tithe to God. Are we inferior or superior to God? Likewise Abraham (the inferior one) paid a tithe to Melchizedek (the superior one) and so did Levi by default. Consequently this makes the Levitical priesthood inferior to the Priesthood of Melchizedek! And since Jesus is a priest "in the order of Melchizedek" then it makes the Levitical Priesthood inferior to Christ's work as our Great High Priest.

To go even deeper, the writer of Hebrews further reinforces his point that Melchizedek is superior by pointing out that Melchizedek seems to pop up from out of nowhere to bless Abraham. There is nothing else in the book of Genesis about him, no genealogy or anything about his beginning or end.

In other words, Melchizedek, the one who has no beginning or end and no genealogy, foreshadows the Savior who was to come who also had no beginning or end but lives as the eternal Son of God. In contrast, the Levitical Priests died and had to be continually replaced, whereas Jesus was *and* is permanent and everlasting.

And to go even deeper yet again, the Levitical priests were sinners and they had to make sacrifices for their own sins. But Jesus was sinless and died only for our sins. Also the atonement that the Levitical Priests made was ineffectual because their sin blemished their sacrifices. But again, Jesus was sinless and his sacrifice was perfect. Also since the Levitical priests sacrificed animals and not themselves sin couldn't be atoned since a human being must die for humanity's sin. As the one who was fully human Jesus fulfilled the requirement of a human dying for humanity's sins. Also since only God can ultimately take away sin and the Levitical priests were not God their ministry could not do what Jesus' ministry did as the one who was also fully God. That is why Jesus is our great High Priest because he is the one who fulfills the priesthood of Melchizedek, which is far superior to the Levitical priesthood for all of aforementioned reasons.

Did you get all of that? If you didn't I got enough copies of this sermon for everyone in the congregation. Go back home and read all of the texts for this sermon and then read the sermon again and you will hopefully begin to get it.

Why does this matter? What does it have to do with my life today?

First, it matters because it is in the Bible. This is the most quoted psalm in all the NT. The Bible matters.

Second, it matters because you are not just a NT Christian. You are not only a NT Christian but an OT Christian as well. This passage perhaps more than any other, reminds us that the early apostles preached and taught from the OT and not the NT because the NT had not yet been formulated. It also reminds us of the fact that we can't fully understand the NT without an understanding of the OT.

Third, it matters because the Bible says to **“Study to show thyself approved as a worker who correctly handles the Word of God” (II Tim. 2:15)** and it also says that we should always be **“prepared to give a good answer in regards to what we believe.” (I Pet. 3:15)** We need to be good students of the Word.

Finally, it's important because of Jesus. Jesus saves and the way in which he saves and reconciles us unto God as the Great High Priest comes alive in a deep way when we begin to wrap our hearts, souls, and minds around Melchizedek

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.