

Introduction:

I'm facing an interesting preaching challenge this morning. The text I've chosen is 35 verses, dense and complicated with ideas that don't come up often. So I've decided to tell you of story, a kind of imaginary scenario, that captures the point of these wonderful verses, even though we won't actually go verse by verse. Later, I want you to sit down on your own and read this passage thoughtfully yourself. Have your Bibles open to **Heb 6-7**.

Some Christian friends were talking. Life was hard for each of them. They each admitted living in a dry time. The conversation had become very honest; very vulnerable. First one and then another had admitted their sins and had talked honestly and sadly about the pressure of temptations and their fear that they would betray Jesus. *"I want God to bless my life like he promised,"* said one guy, *"but I keep messing up."*

"When did God actually promise to bless your life?" asked another.

"Well, to begin with, 4000 years ago when God promised Abraham, 'I will bless you and give you many descendants.' Because I trust God like Abraham did, I'm one of his spiritual descendants, and I share his promise of the God-blessed life. God not only promised, he promised with an oath, and God cannot lie."

"Maybe so," said the friend, *"but how can God bless our lives when we still sin, when our lives are so messy? He must just shake his head over us sometimes!"*

"I don't understand it," said the first, *"but I am holding on to that promise."*

They all grew quiet, unsettled, nervous. They had a promise, to be sure, but they were afraid they'd be disqualified. Then the first guy stood up and looked around. *"You know what I'm going to do?"* he asked. *"I'm going straight to God and ask him."*

Then the strangest thing happened. There was a sound, like heavy curtains being drawn, dragging across the floor, and the sense of a vast space opening before them. An angel stood before them, so bright and mighty that the sight of him hurt their eyes. He pointed at the guy and said, *"Come with me."*

Suddenly our friend was swept up, as if moving past strata of celestial glory, higher and higher, till he stood in the very temple of heaven. There before him was a great blood-stained altar and he knew he was seeing the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus. And there was a smaller altar, aglow with burning incense, fragrant and strong, and he knew he was breathing in the very prayers of the saints.

“*Enter,*” the angel said, and our friend looked to see before him the true Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the Lord Most High, the very center of heaven. He thought he would die. His heart seemed to lurch and clutch. He shook. **But he held in his hands that ancient treasure, God’s promise, oath-bound, of a God-blessed life for those who believe in him.** So he carried that treasure out head of him. “*You promised,*” he whispered. “*You promised. You can’t lie, and you promised.*” And he stepped through the great curtain into the very glory of God himself, into the presence of the Promisekeeper.

Our friend tried to gather his words: *O God Most High, how can you bless the lives of people like us? Our lips are unclean. We’re so afflicted by temptation?* But before he could speak who should he see but Jesus. Our friend wasn’t surprised to see Jesus for he knew that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. What surprised him was to see Jesus in **the garments of the high priest.**

Now I say this with all due respect, but Jesus, it seemed, wasn’t qualified to be a high priest. Our friend knew Jesus is the Lamb of God, the sacrifice for our sin. But that’s different than being a high priest. God’s own Law, recorded in our Bibles, is that priests of God must be descendants of the tribe of Levi, and in particular, of Levi’s descendant, Aaron. But Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. Kings came from Judah, but never priests. Surely God wouldn’t break his own law about priests! No wonder he was confused.

Seeing our friend’s confusion the Lord God spoke in words familiar from Psalm 110, “*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’*”

A promise and an oath, just like God’s promise of blessing to Abraham, and now this promise made to the Son of David, the coming Messiah, who is also himself the Lord.

Melchizedek. He may be the most enigmatic man in the Bible. He appears in one brief story, a story that then lies in wait in the Bible for 2000 years before we really understand its importance. In this story, what we are *not* told is as significant as what we *are*.

The backstory was that Abraham's nephew Lot, who lived in that wicked city Sodom, was captured by an alliance of local kings. Abraham rescued him, conquered the kings, and was returning home with the plunder. This is what happened, according to **Gen 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 praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”*

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything

That's it, that's all that said about him, till 1000 years later when God gives King David this prophetic Psalm 110 where God says on oath that the Messiah would be *“a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”* Then all is silent for another thousand years till the book of Hebrews was written.

Melchizedek was a real man. He wasn't God appearing in the flesh, or anything like that. The strange thing is that while he is very important—a priest of God Most High—he comes out of nowhere and then disappears without a trace. In the Old Testament, there's no important person mentioned without identifying his or her family. Remember how everyone has a genealogy? Noah, the son of Lamech. Abraham, son of Terah. Moses, son of Amram. Joshua, son of Nun. David, son of Jesse. It's like that all the time... except for Melchizedek. *Figuratively speaking*, he was timeless. A priest of God who descended from no one and who had no heirs to take up his duties. A priest who, *figuratively speaking*, never died.

The author of Hebrews draws our attention to several things about him in **Heb. 7:1-4**:

- His name, **Melchizedek**, means *king of righteousness*.
- His kingdom was **Salem**, *shalom*, which means *peace—the rest and blessing of God*. The king of shalom, of peace.

This is also the city later named *Jeru-salem* and the first Israelite king to rule over Jerusalem would be David 1000 years later. Yet here, Melchizedek is its king.

- He was a **priest of God Most High** who brought bread and wine to Abraham, which suggests fellowship not only between the two men, but also with God, and which hints at other God-attended meals in the Bible, like Communion.
- As God's priest he was **the intercessor between God and Abraham**. He gave Abraham God's blessing, and he gave God Abraham's praise for the victory over enemies.
- But what is really important to the author of Hebrews is in **v.3**: "*Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.*"
- And there's one more very important detail: the great Abraham, the father of Israel, gave this priest a tithe of all the plunder. The priest was greater than Abraham, and by extension, greater than the whole order of priests who would eventually be the descendants of Abraham. **This priest was in a different league; a different order.**

So here was a **King of righteousness and peace who was also a priest of God Most High**. A king *and* a priest. Furthermore, **he was a priest forever**. And finally, he was a **priest greater than the priests who would descend from Levi**.

So the Bible introduced us to another kind of priest way back at the beginning of the Bible story, then left him in the background till Jesus came. **Then this book of Hebrews connects the dots from Genesis 14 to Psalm 110 to Jesus**, the King of righteousness and peace, declared by God on oath to be "*a priest forever, in the [priestly] order of Melchizedek*."

Our friend there in the inner sanctuary of the Lord, having passed behind the curtain that guarded the glory of God, **sees Jesus, not only as our sacrifice, not only as our reigning king, but also as our high priest**. Jesus is not there for his own sake only but for us. **Heb. 6:20** says, "*Our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.*"

Our friend entered that Holy of Holies carrying God's promise and oath of a God-blessed life as a kind of passport, his great hope anchoring his soul, firm and secure. Once, that hope required keeping the Law of God, including the priesthood who represented God's law to the people. But now that we have a better high priest, **Heb. 7:19** says, "*a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*" **V.24-26:** "*Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.*"

In my story, our Christian friend already believed in Jesus as his Savior. Had his sins not been forgiven through Jesus' blood he would never have had access into the courts of heaven and through that curtain into the Holy of Holies. **But he came anxious over his own heart.** He came knowing that he still sins; worried that his heart might grow cold; knowing how deceitful sin can be. He came thinking, "*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.*" He wanted to say, *Lord, so many Israelites perished in the wilderness because they hardened their hearts. I'm no better than they. How will I ever make it safely to your Rest, to the land and life you've promised?*

Surely you know that feeling? Surely as you've heard the sermons in previous weeks warning us so sternly of drifting away from Jesus you've wondered about your safety. Surely when you've heard the story of Jesus' last night and the way his disciples abandoned him you've wondered how you would fare. So the Lord has taught us all this—about his promises and oaths of blessing and of Jesus, our "priest forever"—to bring us to this great **v.25:** "*Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*" There are **two great assurances** in that verse:

I. "HE IS ABLE TO SAVE COMPLETELY THOSE WHO COME TO GOD THROUGH HIM."

- A. Some translations say, "*He is able to save forever.*" Either way is fine, because Christ can only save forever if he

saves completely. *Illus.*: The other day, on my last visit to Soni, her daughter told me that they all had to memorize Romans 8—the whole chapter. It begins, “*There is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Once we are resting in Jesus, God will never condemn us. Jesus’ righteousness put to your account will never be taken away. “*There is now **no condemnation.***”

- B. The encouragement here is especially sweet for us when we feel like our friend in the story—when our sin is heavy upon us. Even when we know that Jesus has forgiven all our sins, we also know the heaviness and discouragement of having sinned. And sinned again. In those times it is a great temptation to stay back from the presence of God, like the tax collector in Jesus’ story who stood a long way back from the altar, beating on his chest murmuring, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This verse promises you and me and that our *Priest forever* “*is able to save us **completely. Able to save us forever.***” So we cannot sing it too often:

*My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more.
Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well with my soul. It is well, it is well with my soul.*

The second phrase is likewise a treasure for struggling believers:

II. “**HE ALWAYS LIVES TO INTERCEDE FOR THEM**”

- A. Now, our **love** for the Lord requires that we **obey** the Lord; that we **trust him in the wilderness times of life.** And that is often difficult. Temptation is its own kind of suffering, added to the struggles of life. God helps us in wonderful ways. He gives us Scripture. He gives us his Holy Spirit. He gives us the encouragement of other believers. **But here the great gift is Jesus himself who “always lives to intercede for us.”** Jesus is always, always our Advocate in heavens, bring us to God and God to us. We’ve already heard what that means back in **Heb. 4:16**, “*Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that*

we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Come confidently because when we come to God’s throne we will *not* be turned away. We will not face the frown of God. You will not hear a catalog of your weaknesses and failures. We carry our hope of a God-blessed life into God’s inner sanctuary—to his throne of grace—and there we meet Jesus, our high priest. And *he* is why we will receive mercy (not condemnation), and find grace (not demands we cannot keep)—*grace* that enables us to be righteous—to actually think what is good, to do what is right, to love the unlovely, and to hope in the face of despair.

- B. *Illus.*: I talked with a friend recently who told me of his concern that his heart was growing cold, that sin was creeping in. At first, I tried to think of solutions, but he’d already thought of everything I came up with. Then I realized, “*You just want me to pray with you, right?*” He nodded. Because there is no better place in such times than at the throne of grace, met there—*welcomed* there—by our forerunner Jesus, who intercedes for us so we might find mercy and grace in our time of need.

Illus.: I read an article by a young woman about daughters and sons of the church like her who suffered disillusionment and distance and despair, moving far away from God. She wrote:

We went on road trips and on airplanes, and we were searching, still, even then. We slung our backpack over our shoulders and went farther out into the world.

Some of us went to therapy and began the hard work of untangling our knotted-up hearts. If we were really brave, we tackled our angst about the years when we were on fire. We tried to find the heart of Christ beating, still, under the sticky, webbed Christian culture that had grown up over it.

Some of us went under the dark waves of our own depression and pain, never to resurface.

Some of us came back.

Tentatively.

Slowly.ⁱ

And when they do, however it is that the great and merciful God draws them, it will be Jesus our high priest who welcomes them home to the God-blessed life.

- C. *Illus.*: There's an old story about a Hebrew professor at the University of Edinburgh many years ago named Dr. John Duncan. One Sunday in his Highland church Communion was being served. Dr. Duncan felt so unworthy that when the elements came, he felt he couldn't take them and let them pass. As he was sitting there feeling absolutely miserable, he noticed a girl in the congregation whom, when the bread and wine came around, also allowed them to pass, and then broke down into tears. That sight seemed to bring back to the old saint the truth he had forgotten. And in a whisper that could be heard across the church, he said, "**Take it, lassie, take it. It's meant for sinners.**" And he himself took the bread and wine.ⁱⁱ

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand.

His oath, His covenant, and blood
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand.

ⁱ Addie Zierman, "Replacing Sunday Mornings," *Her.meneutica*, Oct 2013

ⁱⁱ James S. Stewart, "The Rending of the Veil," *PreachingToday* audio, #57