

A Change of Priesthood

The Book of Hebrews

By Chris Hand

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Crich Baptist Church
Market Place, Crich
Derbyshire. DE4 5DD (UK)

Website: www.crichbaptist.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/crichbaptist

Well, that is the passage before us this evening, Hebrews 7:1-19 and the title is this, "A Change of Priesthood." A change of priesthood. Where initially this is very much a bespoke argument that the writer is employing here which, well, like with Jeremiah this morning, there are things that pertain to the context which are unique, and so that context which occupied the writer, the way in which the believers there had decline from the Christian faith somewhat and were turning their attention to, well, sacrifices, circumcision, and observances surrounding the temple, the things belonging to the law of Moses and of Aaron, and so what he's saying is very much to remonstrate with them at that point and to use what they're beginning to think is the right way and demonstrate actually not at all, and even from the Old Testament that that can be proved.

So it is very much a bit of a one-off kind of bit of reasoning that worked very much for there and then, that had its points about application which was very carefully and with inspiration worked out for the benefit of those hearers, but of course, we know that God is always looking beyond the initial recipients of any of his letters to us, to our day, to any day, to the believers in churches and to help them to understand things with greater clarity, avoid the mistakes which occur, can see things with greater clarity, to be able to discern more accurately. Of course, we saw at the end of chapter 5 this is one of the things that the writer was keen that they should have in order to discern between good and evil, to be able to be schooled and skilled in the word of righteousness, and so this is what he was attempting to bring to the people here. So timeless truths emerge even from very detailed, quite complex, perhaps a little puzzling arguments that are present in Scripture but they have all of them something to teach us.

We notice that what the writer is, in fact, doing is picking up on the theme of Melchizedek that he began to allude to in chapter 5, verse 6, alluded to again in chapter 5, verse 10, and then digressed because he felt it futile to even try to begin what we now have in chapter 7 with our issuing the very stern wake-up calls that we saw are in Hebrews 6. So he felt perhaps now he'd got their attention, perhaps now having given them something of a shot across the bows in Hebrews 6 that they would have their minds fully engaged, that they would be alert and awakened, and that he could now pursue this very detailed argument and hope to get a hearing. So we have to ask ourselves are we ready for it? Are we up to this? Is this something that's going to find us wanting or are we

able to follow what he's writing here? Because essentially, of course, he's supporting the case that Aaron's priesthood is inferior to that of Christ, that it is insufficient and always was insufficient. It was never the finished product because God always intended the ministry of our greater high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ to replace it, supersede it, and that here in the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, we'll come to him in a minute, already in the Old Testament God was placing hints and placing comments that showed the he already had in mind a replacement, another priesthood, a different law, if you like, that would come into being and that would replace, at least those parts that were to be replaced, of the law under Aaron, under Moses.

So this is to show them that in going back from Christ, in reclining from him, going backwards from him, they were deserting actually the only way in which they could draw near to God, the only way that they could have a better hope, and they were replacing that with an inferior hope and with a means that would not enable them to draw near to God because it never could, that was never its plan and its intention, and this is what he is showing in this detailed argument essentially that the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ is superior to that of Aaron. That opens up to us the appreciation of the Old Testament. Well, it is just full of allusions and illustrations and hints and pointing forward to our Lord Jesus Christ everywhere, interesting places, places we hadn't expected to find them, and here is perhaps one of them that we hadn't expected to find here in the case of Melchizedek.

It is a challenge to us. Well, how well do we know the Old Testament, how about that? How well do we know it? How familiar are we with its contents? We're saying to our young people in the mornings looking at the wood for the trees, having the big issues because they keep getting referred back to both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Big events. Creation. Fall of judgment in the flood. The call of Abraham and all the further things that follow. David being established as king and on and on it goes. Big events which are full of significance and which are ever referred to. How well do we know the Old Testament? How familiar are we with it? Are we able to give an account of its history? The break-up of the kingdoms and the divisions that happened and the wars that take place, the empires that come and engulf God's people, how familiar are we with those things?

My first heading: who was Melchizedek? Well, who was Melchizedek? If it were not for the fact that I'm now going to give you the reference where we can find him, would you be able to find him? Would you be able to locate where he is in the whole narrative of the Old Testament? We ask who is he and that's a difficult question to answer because Scripture is very silent on it and the writer to the Hebrews is going to make much of that very fact. But it is indeed in Genesis 14 that we are to turn to find Melchizedek. It's the only mention of him other than in Psalm 110 and then into Hebrews that we find. Genesis 14, and just to familiarize ourselves with what's happening. Lot has been taken captive and various alliance of kings has come and performed the raid on, well, Sodom wasn't the best place for Lot to be, was it? But anyway he and family and all the booty that had been taken possession of by this group of kings that it was reported to Abraham and Abraham was able to raise up a rival team of kings and they went and actually recovered Lot and

all the possessions, and overcame and defeated, slaughtered indeed those first set of kings that came against Sodom, against Lot and took possession of all the people.

And Abraham is returning victorious and this is what we read happens in Genesis 14:18, "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.' And he," that is, Abraham, "gave him a tithe of all." That was the repossessed of possession plus extra booty that they had acquired from those kings that they had defeated. From that, tithe was given to Melchizedek. There he is. That's all that there is. That's all that Scripture gives us about him.

Well, where do we go from that? Well, the writer brings out some extraordinary points, doesn't he? And we notice there in Hebrews 7 that he has no father, no father that's listed. How often in Scripture, isn't it, we have the whole genealogy. We know who Abraham is, who his parents were and their parents, and it's all listed there, the genealogies in Genesis 10 and elsewhere. Well, there isn't one for this man. He has no father or mother that is recorded. There is no genealogies. Hebrew 7:3 tells us, "having neither beginning of days nor end of life." We don't read of his beginning, nothing about his birth, where he was born, his parents, nothing about it, nor about his death. That's not recorded. Of course, Scripture would say how much in the genealogies, how long people lived and then they died. Adam living 930 years and then he died. Methuselah living 969 years and then he died. Here's Melchizedek who never seems to have his death recorded. How curious that that is and the writer picks that up because we find none of that detail in Genesis 14, the man simply materializes and then if you like, putting it a little bit mysteriously there, dematerializes, never appears again. So this is quite a figure.

If we were to look at Aaron, we'd find that his death is recorded. So we could turn to Numbers 20 and we would find that his death there is recorded in verses 22 and following. Numbers 20:22 reading from there, "Now the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying: 'Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at the water of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor; and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; for Aaron shall be gathered to his people and die there.'" There's Aaron. There's that priesthood. People died in that priesthood and there's Aaron, the first holder of office and on Mount Hor he was to die and his garments were given to his son Eleazar who was going to succeed him, and this was the established procedure. Eleazar would die and he would be succeeded by someone and so it would proceed that the holder of the office of high priest under the Levitical Aaronic priesthood would die and then have to be replaced.

But not Melchizedek. No record of his death any more than there was a record of his birth. No coming from the tribe of Levi either. Aaron was from the tribe of Levi and all the priests, high priest, had to be descended from that. You couldn't come, you couldn't

officiate at the altar if you were not from that particular tribe. Not Melchizedek, he's not from any tribe that we can discern whatsoever, and moreover that he's a king, the king of Salem. Well, that is Jerusalem, isn't it? There's a place that always holds out significance. And his titles are very high and very exalted. He's a king of righteousness, a king who governs in righteousness, a king whose rule promotes righteousness, and uprightness of heart. And again he is king of peace, that his rule is characterized by peace. It produces peace. That is the nature of the man, that is what is the outcome of his kingship. There is righteousness and peace, promoting things that are pleasing to God.

So he's a king and he is a priest. We learn that just in one half of one verse in Genesis 14:18, "he was the priest of God Most High." How did he come to that office? It doesn't tell us. How was he appointed? We don't know. We know at length in Exodus how Aaron was appointed, the ritual that was undergone in order for him to enter into office. We learn of all that he had to wear, his calling, everything attached to it. But not with this man but he is the priest of God Most High and that is the true God, the God of the Bible, God all-powerful and almighty. And here he is serving God in that way, ministering to him, making sacrifices, representing people to God and also representing God to the people, yet unaccounted for in terms of how he was appointed, how his office finished.

So we can see that he was some figure, that though we have no evidence of what the calling was he was given, how he came to faith. We know all about Abraham there in Ur of the Chaldees and God telling him to leave your country, leave behind your home and go to a country that I will show you, all recorded, very clearly recorded. This man must have had a call. He wouldn't be in the position if he didn't. This man must have been given authority and commandment of God to be the priest and to be the king as well, and to do it in the manner that he did and with such remarkable effects. So what an interesting figure.

What do we know about him? Well, very very little but we know this, that he was a considerable person and in that sparing detail in Genesis 14, in that paucity of verses which jam in so much, well, later in Psalm 110 that priesthood of Melchizedek so fleetingly referred to is spoken of in a way that points forward to a very elevated priesthood to come. And so we have Psalm 110 and immediately there our attention is grabbed by the fact that this is often quoted in the New Testament and quoted about the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, the Lord Jesus Christ himself quotes it and refers it to himself. "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" And we might then just turn quickly to Luke 20 and we would see in the discussions with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the priests in the temple before our Lord's death on the cross that we find in verse 41, for instance, but it's in other gospels too, where he himself having answered all their questions and showed himself beyond in understanding anything that they were capable of throwing at him, he has his own question and he says this, Luke 20:41, "And He said to them, 'How can they say that the Christ is the Son of David? Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: 'The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" Therefore David calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?" And within that there is a question which is answered correctly which show that the Lord Jesus Christ is both God

and man, that he is truly a descendant of David after the flesh but that David himself were he alive as it were there at that time, would have called him Lord. He would have called his own son Lord because not only is he a descendant after the flesh of David but he's also God.

And thus the Lord Jesus Christ takes Psalm 110, that beginning part and proves his own identity from it, and moreover, well, the words that then are spoken which catch our attention this evening, verse 4, "The LORD has sworn And will not relent, 'You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.'" Now who is he speaking to here? We imagine it's who he was speaking to in verse 1, "The LORD said to my Lord." David's son. God is speaking to David's son and saying about David's son, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." And God can speak no such word to any mere mortal, no just simple descendant of David. No, he can only speak this of his own Son, the one equal in authority and power and trustworthiness as his own Son would be.

So if that is the case, then we come to verse 4, well, God is speaking to the same person, to his Son, and he is making here a solemn attestation and saying that on this he will not go back, that "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." So Melchizedek is actually a type of Christ. He is an example to us of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ right there in Psalm 110 is that very promise to who is Melchizedek, quite some figure. Developing it further in the second heading: Melchizedek's senior position. And this is what the writer makes much play upon, doesn't he, in Hebrews 7, that what he's done, the transaction just in those few verses in Genesis 14, that particular transaction is full of significance. There is Abraham, a man who has the promises in chapter 12, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, all these promises are in Genesis 22 on offering up Isaac his son and the Lord promising and swearing there as we saw these immutable things, his own promise and then he makes, as it were, and swears to that in sure proof that it's going to happen and we saw that last week.

So this is some figure. If Abraham with all that revelation and all those promises, the patriarch, the one who is destined to be held there before us as an archetype of what faith is and what the man of faith is, he's the one who's going to inherit, well, as Melchizedek says, heaven and earth, possessor of heaven and earth. The writer to the Hebrews is going to tell us later that Abraham saw afar off a better country. He didn't just see Canaan, he saw heaven. He knew that he was heir of heaven as well, and Melchizedek saw that too.

And it is in this transaction that there is great Abraham, what a towering figure, and yet he actually humbles himself before Melchizedek, this man of whom we know so little and yet whom obviously Abraham knew and respected immensely. Sure, Melchizedek brings out bread and wine to refresh Abraham from the weariness of the battle that he'd been involved in with those kings. Then we see what happens, Abraham gives tithes to Melchizedek. He gives 10% of what he has in terms of the booty, what he's recovered from those kings in their enmity, and here pays tithes to Melchizedek. In Hebrews 7:4 and verse 6, the writer is at pains to show this. Do we notice this, he's saying, how Abraham paid him tithes.

Well, this was something sure. The Levitical priesthood, they were given tithes. He mentioned that in verses 9 and 10, and that is an indication of a respect paid to those who are consecrated to the service of God. The tribe of Aaron, that they have that, sure, they have that respect paid to them but here is Melchizedek having that respect paid to him by Abraham, of all people, this great man with great promises, revelation that God had given to him. And moreover the writer says, notice this, that actually in a way Levi not yet born, as it were, still in the loins of Abraham, he pays tithes as well through, as it were, his grandfather Abraham to this Melchizedek and that is something, isn't it, extraordinary, how it is that in that transaction it's showing actually the deference that Abraham and Levi with him paid to Melchizedek. Even though there was a deference to be paid to Levi, Aaron, because they would have tithes given to them, but Melchizedek outranks them all. How curious.

And then there is the blessing that Melchizedek confers upon Abraham. We read that, don't we, there as we just already alluded to, "Blessed be Abraham of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand." Well, he brings blessing to Abraham and the writer says that, surely, the lesser is blessed by the greater. Oh sure, we bless the name of God, we speak well of the name of God, but we're not conferring upon God some extra light or some extra power or conferring upon him some authority or spiritual resource. We are speaking well of him. But here when God blesses us or when Melchizedek blesses Abraham, he's not just speaking well of Abraham, there's some spiritual transaction here that those words convey light and power, that they would have had great meaning for Abraham and encouraged him in his ministry and assured him of God's presence with him, and that would have been a blessing to Abraham. Not that Melchizedek just spoke well of him but he spoke meaningfully and confirmed to him God was doing what God would do, delivering him from his enemies.

So as verse 7 of Hebrews 7 tells us, the greater blesses the lesser and we find for ourselves, don't we, there we sit under the word of God, we come to hear what is preached there, we read in Scripture we're looking for light, we're looking for understanding, we're looking for spiritual help and this is what Abraham received from Melchizedek. Great Abraham, possessor of the promises, yet here he takes, as it were, second place and sits under this shadowy, this mysterious figure of Melchizedek. No wonder, really, that actually Melchizedek was foreshadowing for us the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. What blessing that he brings. What light, what understanding.

So our final heading: the insufficiency of Aaron's priesthood. This is what this is all leading to, the insufficiency of Aaron's priesthood, that Aaron, family of Levi and, in a sense, show him their deference that they are paying, as it were, their tithes through Abraham to Melchizedek. And we see here that the greater respect now should be paid not to Aaron but our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is patterned on the ministry of Melchizedek, coming from the tribe of Levi, coming from the tribe of Judah, a different tribe, change of priesthood and with that a change of administration, a change of law in that regard, and we are to there give our attention now to that high priesthood, the

priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God through this figure of Melchizedek was already getting us ready for there in the old covenant, Old Testament times, already preparing us for something that was going to go beyond Aaron and eventually replace what this priesthood stood for.

The writer talks there of Aaron's priesthood in, well, very kind of belittling way. He's making the contrast. He's showing us that was the past. It couldn't accomplish anything near to what the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ can accomplish. And so we are to transfer our affections to our Lord Jesus Christ and away from Aaron and we do what the people here are doing, to begin to transfer their affections and allegiance from the Lord Jesus Christ to Aaron. No, he's saying. He describes the appointments to office in verse 16 as a fleshly commandment. A fleshly commandment. Well, read the commentators on that and they'll tell you about 100 different opinions. Perhaps the nearest to it is this, that it's to do with something temporary, that these people had this commandment but they died in office and the contrast which is established would seem to make sense of that kind of way of looking on it there in verse 16, "who has come," this is Melchizedek and basically our Lord Jesus Christ, "not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life." Endless life. Melchizedek, no record of him dying in office and our Lord Jesus Christ didn't die in office because he was raised from the dead and is alive forevermore. Therefore that is not a fleshly commandment, one that is going to go the way of flesh, that it appoints for a season but then that person is going to die, and this person is not going to die. This is a different commandment. This is a different administration, a different law.

So it is an endless life and who also says in verse 11, well, perfection has not come by Aaron, by that administration. It didn't bring perfection. It couldn't. It wasn't intended to. It wasn't complete. It was an unfinished business. And well, what bold words the writer uses in verse 18 describing the commandment as weak and unprofitable. How? In comparison to our Lord Jesus Christ. It was powerless compared to what he does. It was unprofitable compared to the, well, the profitability of our Lord's ministry, that all that belonged under the law of Moses was not able to effect and accomplish those things that our Lord Jesus Christ could do. It couldn't perfect life. They couldn't inject, as it were, a willingness. You have the 10 Commandments but they couldn't produce that life just on their own, just as led us there standing there telling us all we need to know. Paul tells in Romans 7 the commandment is good, it's holy, and it's excellent but we're not. We can't hear it. We can't receive it. We can't do it because of sin.

It couldn't produce that perfection and neither could it produce peace of conscience, us drawing near to God with hope. It pointed to a hope. It pointed to something better, pointed towards the ultimate sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. But it was only pointing to it, it wasn't it, and so you had the repeated sacrifices and the constant reminders of sin and of an outstanding debt, of something not yet finished, not yet accomplished, and the reminder to the sinner that this needed to be repeated constantly there before them, their conscience not perhaps as fully at peace and able to entertain that hope of fellowship with God, that these things were still compromised, still there was a cloud between heaven and

earth, still that veil in the temple between the most holy place and the holy place. It showed that that way was not yet fully open.

God would have fellowship with believing people but there was still always always the reminder of sin, always the reminder of the need of blood sacrifice, of something that had to be repeated and constant provocation to the conscience of the worshiper. And so that was not able to bring perfection. It couldn't bring the same peace, couldn't bring the same joy, couldn't produce the same hope yet until the coming of the better thing which was the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now access to God is open and unhindered. No blood to bring now. No more blood needed. The most precious blood of all has been shed and nothing more is required and that is peace to the conscience of the worshiper, and we don't have to keep looking back and looking around and bearing something of fear and having our hopes still somewhat diminished, somewhat unclear and hazy. No, the hope is clearly delineated. It's now so clarified to us. We look at the finished work of our Savior, we look at the cross, we agree with what we find there, we hear what God has said about it, we follow it to the resurrection, we see the approval of God for all his Son has done and we take away from that great peace, great great assurance. And we now draw near to God. Well, we do draw near to God. We come boldly to the throne of grace because we have a better hope. We can see our sins are now finally atoned for and that we can believe without contradiction, without fear of denial or of something stopping us, preventing us, that we have hope and access to our God.

So the detail is there but the wonder is in the detail, isn't it, because the implications of this are all huge and wonderful. They're good implications and the writer here is trying to grab the attention of these people, take them back, "What are you doing? Come back." And it's a reminder to us of just what a strong position we're in. We had that as a title the other week. Well, what a strong position that we are actually in and one that we shouldn't compromise or forsake, one that we shouldn't sort of cast away from us, casting away our confidence. The writer is going to talk about that later in this letter.

So a new priest it is, a new law, a new administration. This is a new covenant. It doesn't require in the law fleshly commandments, a high priest is going to die, repeated sacrifices, constantly having to be followed to the letter. This has all passed, ascribed as unprofitable compared to what is now here, described as weak compared to the power that is now ours in the new covenant where we have our Lord Jesus Christ as our high priest offering himself, not offering another animal but himself, fully human, but this is the sacrifice that was needed and there is now full, total, unconditional reconciliation between us and our God. No more reminder of sin. God is satisfied and that for us is a source of hope and joy and peace that carries us beyond that which the old covenant could quite reveal, could give as a constant, that always that which would burn the soul, always that which would bring consternation, and those clouds now for us are lifted. It's gone. It's lifted and we are free to come and use that liberty wisely to serve our God.

It tells us don't go to other priests, don't go to other priests. That's what they're doing, they're going back to Aaron. No, don't do that, he's saying, and we shouldn't either. And we're astonished, aren't we, at the people who forsake having understood evangelicalism

to be, to then ally themselves to the Roman Catholic Church and to come under repeated sacrifices that bear a lot of resemblance to the very things that the writer to the Hebrews here is saying don't do, and those repeated sacrifices and an incomplete Christ, an insufficiency and not being able to draw near to him with a better hope because we've still got to do all these sacrifices to build up the merit to be able to by our works basically get ourselves to heaven and that is an entirely entirely different religion.

That's what these people were going back to, they were turning to another religion, in fact, and one which they had misunderstood its original intention which was that it should be replaced one day and there's the order of Melchizedek prefiguring the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't need priests to make offerings. We don't need some guru figures to tell us what we are to think, what we are to do, who we need their approval before we can feel that we are at peace with God. We're detached from all of that. We grow up and we rely on Christ and we look at his high priesthood and we are persuaded by it. We're persuaded by the evidence of Scripture, all that it teaches us about him and that God is satisfied and so our conscience is satisfied, we're satisfied that he's done it all. And to say he hasn't done it all is blasphemous, it is to deny what the Son of God has actually done and is stated to have done, and because he is the Son of God could do it to a degree of such perfection that our guilty conscience seeks.

No sacrifice beside, and so we don't go to any other priest, we go to him. If we sin, we fall short in the Christian life to the glory of God, we go to him. We go to him. We don't look for some absolution from some priest in a confessional or something like that, or expect to be given penances to do. We go to him and we cry out our hearts to him and we look to him for strength and power and the Holy Spirit to be given to us to live and to do better in the future. So we don't need other priests. We just don't need them. He is our all in all and we should rest our hope fully, fully upon him. If we don't do it, well, I can quite ungenerously suggest it is blasphemous. It is to make little of the sacrifice of the Son of God. That's where the writer came in, didn't he, with his strong warnings in Hebrews 6, begin to go down that path and in the end you'll be putting him to open shame. You'll be dismissing his death upon the cross and making a mockery of it. Don't do it, he says, and we shouldn't do it either.

Then finally this: the details of Scripture are good news. Details, they are important and we should study it. We should study this book. We should be attentive to it. We should see what it's saying and here we have the benefit of inspired New Testament writing to shed some light upon the Old Testament and to see things we might have missed otherwise. And well, that's what the New Testament is here to do, give us suggested lines of reasoning, expectations that we can bring to the text of the Old Testament, and ways that we can validly expect to see there, well, we talked before about these, the types of Christ, examples, people. We looked at Elisha, hadn't we there, and seen he is a type of Christ, what he's doing, how he's doing it, where he's doing it. It points toward things our Lord Jesus Christ is going to do.

So we see this book as a book indeed has treasure in it as we're trying to tell the children last week. There's treasure in it and that treasure so often is actually our Lord Jesus

Christ, finding him in different pages, in different places, but finding him nevertheless and finding him in the details. He's there in the details, that the details are important and the details count. It's an inspired work. It's important and God has placed it there, details and all, for us to profit from. So it calls upon us to be students of Scripture, to understand it as best we can and wrestle with it, and this passage tonight was one that has a fair bit in it to follow, it's a carefully worded argument and one which had particular relevance to the people in that situation, one in which God looks beyond them to us and there's truth in here for all seasons and all days, and that truth as so often establishes again absolute supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ and his ministry and of our absolute rightness in resting all our hope upon him. We trust we are and I trust we will be until God calls us home one day.