

Text: Hebrews 7:4-10

Title: The Greatness of Melchizedek...and of Christ

Date/Location: March 6, 2011 at FBC

Introduction

We could put ourselves in the shoes of a Jewish convert to Christianity or an almost convert who was in the first audience that received the letter to the Hebrews. If you were such a person, who would be your “heroes” of the faith, or people that you sort of put up on a pedestal? This group would probably include the Levitical priests since they are supposedly closer to God. Your top picks would definitely include Moses. You would also have to include Abraham, the father of the nation, as well as Isaac and Jacob (Israel). The twelve patriarchs may be included in your list as well. Now suppose someone comes along and tells you to totally re-think the hierarchy of these people that you have in your head.

In verse 4 we run into another use of the word “consider” that we saw in 3:6. God is asking us to THINK about something and come to an understanding of it. Thinking is not such a popular thing these days. Many folks have a short attention span and want to be entertained, but not to think!

Let’s focus our thoughts for a few minutes on this text about the greatness of Melchizedek because it will highlight in our minds the greatness of Jesus.

I. Melchizedek Greater than Abraham, v. 4-8

We are not talking about Melchizedek or Abraham being “better” than another person in the sense of having more worth as a person. The passage deals with greatness in rank or position. Abraham considered that since God had called Melchizedek into an important priestly role in Jerusalem, it was his responsibility to support Melchizedek with gifts. These gifts then were not just gifts to a man, but became gifts to God because of God’s call on the man.

The author offers three explanations as to why Melchizedek was so great:

A. Melchizedek Received Tithes From Abraham, v. 4-6a

1. Note the emphasis is on “*even Abraham*” – the great father of the nation of Israel himself paid tithes. This is not what you expect.
 - i. Abraham labored to retrieve the spoils in the battle with the kings, taking a long journey to catch up with the kings, and then another long journey back. He traveled a total of perhaps 200

miles. But of his spoils, the fruit of his labor, the return provided by God, he set aside a tenth of them all and gave them to the king-priest of Jerusalem.

- ii. Given the greatness of Abraham, it seems he should be the one receiving a tithe!
 - iii. Part of Law was that the priests had to receive tithes from their brothers, fellow Israelites. Now they were descended from Abraham, so if they receive tithes, doesn't it seem strange that their great-great grandfather is paying a tithe?
 - iv. Finally, the tithe is being paid to someone "outside the family." Melchizedek has no genealogical connection to Levi yet he received tithes. This lack of connection is significant for a Jewish person.
2. Note that the word *tithes* is in the plural. This could refer to the continuing offerings that happened over time, or to the fact that there were multiple tenths given at various assigned times. These tithes included the following:
- i. Lev. 27:30, Deut. 14:22: The **tithe of produce**. Out of what the land, the flock or herd produced for the farmer, 10% was to be given to the Lord, or else redeemed with money for a 20% premium. It was to be eaten before the Lord at the tabernacle or temple. Note that this tithing comes from what is gained from the land, and is not based on wealth (that is, you don't give 10% of all your assets when you tithe!) It is interesting to note that apparently, a worker was not told to tithe of his wages. This may actually argue that the tithe was made on the gross return on the land, not the return "after expenses."
 - ii. Num. 18:26-32: **The Levitical tithe**. This went to the Levites for their support.
 - iii. Deut. 14:28-29, 26:12: The **tithe of the third year**. It was stored in the city and used as a "benevolence fund" or "welfare program" for the poor to have something to eat. The Levites were also able to eat out of it, since they had no inheritance in the land of Israel.
 - iv. Num 18:26: The **tithe of the tithe**. This 1% was required from the Levites—the tenth of the tenth that they received from the Israelites.
3. Also note the use of the tithe to support a servant of God.

- i. The normal pattern is for ministers of God to be supported by those to whom they minister. From the early stage in Genesis 14 forward to the Levitical priesthood, until the NT era and today's pastors and missionaries, the gifts of God's people like Abraham provide sustenance to ministers of the gospel.
- ii. The work of ministry is easily a full time task if taken seriously and does not leave time for a full time job. In less-than-ideal situations, the minister may have to take part-time or full-time work to pay the bills, but that limits his ability to minister.
- iii. Such ministry would include personal preparation, prayer, and godliness; study of the word of God; teaching the Bible; one-on-one meetings or other small group meetings for purposes of counseling, answering questions, dealing with difficult circumstances; talking to those outside the flock; and ministering to the wider church through speaking, writing, etc.

B. Melchizedek Blessed Abraham, v. 6b-7

1. Usually the ones pronouncing blessing are older or more mature believers, like Isaac when he was old (Gen 27:4ff), or Jacob when he was about to die (Gen 49). Thus the greater blesses the lesser.
2. In the course of life, the greater dies off and the lesser becomes the greater to a new younger generation who is lesser. But with Christ, there is no dying off, so He always remains the greatest!

C. Melchizedek Seems to Live On Beyond Abraham, v. 8

1. In verses 1-3 we saw the figurative way of explaining that Melchizedek had no father, no birth, death, etc. The implication was that Melchizedek seemed to remain a priest continually with no conclusion. He (at least seems to have) outlived Abraham, the great patriarch (see John 8:53).
2. So here in verse 8, the lack of a report of his death makes him seem like he has an enduring priesthood that has not ended. And in fact it has not ended, because Jesus Christ inherited it and carries it on.

II. Melchizedek Greater than Levi and Levi's Sons, v. 9-10

A. Levi Paid Tithes to Melchizedek Through Abraham

1. Once again the act of tithing indicates a lesser-greater relationship. The one to whom the tithes are paid is greater than the one who pays them. So, Melchizedek is greater than Levi in a collective sense—Levi and all his descendants who received the tithes.

B. Figuratively Speaking

1. In chapter 7, the author of Hebrews has been quite free in his use of what you could call types, analogies, or figures. Here, he explains what he means that Levi paid tithes through Abraham. It is not immediately evident why this should be the case, since Levi was not alive for quite a few years after this event occurred.
2. The author uses the phrase “so to speak” or “after a manner of speaking” or “it could be said.” He is not teaching here that Levi actively, consciously did the act of paying tithes. He could not, because he was not alive. But figuratively speaking, since Abraham was the “container” of Levi, Levi also figuratively participated in this tithing activity to Melchizedek.
3. The qualifying “so to speak” prohibits us from importing verse 10 over to Romans 5:12 to explain “because all sinned.”

Conclusion

All this talk of “greater than” might wear you out. What does it mean?

For one thing, how much more is Christ worthy of our “tithes?” What I mean is not “tithes” in the traditional sense of the word, but by application I’m talking about our offerings, worship, praise, service, work, etc. If the great father of the faith, Abraham, gave an offering to Melchizedek, then by an argument from lesser *and* greater, we ought also to give offerings to Christ. Humbly, we would have to say we are lesser than Abraham. And certainly Christ is greater than Melchizedek because Christ is the creator of all things including Melchizedek (Col. 1:16). It would only seem reasonable that we would offer ourselves to God as it commands in Romans 12:1-2.

The author of Hebrews is setting the audience up for a message of change in 7:11-22. He will say there that the Mosaic Law had to be changed to accommodate the Melchizedek priesthood and ultimately the priesthood of Jesus, from the tribe of Judah, that would bring in a better covenant and hope and sacrifice.

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