

## **Mel-chi-ze . . . Who?**

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

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**Scripture: Hebrews 5:1-10**

### **Sermon**

If you don't know your Old Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews can be confusing. That letter is about the Old Testament all the way through. But it's about the Old Testament viewed through the lens of Jesus.

HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN FOR JEWISH CHRISTIANS. It was written to show them how Jesus connects to the story the Jewish people had lived by for more than a thousand years. In a nutshell, Hebrews says that Jesus continues the story, that Jesus completes the story, and that Jesus surpasses the story.

It all adds up this this: Jesus is the greatest. He is greater than angels and the Old Covenant. He is greater than Moses and the Law. And he is greater than the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices. To explain all that, Hebrews says that Jesus is "a priest in the order of Melchizedek." Mel-chi-ze- . . . Who?

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Melchizedek is a mysterious figure in the Old Testament. He is a priest, and he is a king. He makes one appearance in Scripture. He comes out of nowhere, and then he returns to nowhere. Melchizedek is before and above the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices. He is before and above Moses and the Law. He is even before and above Abraham. And his mystery endures.

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So, in the Letter to the Hebrews, we have angels and the Old Covenant. We have Moses and the Law. We have the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices. And, to top it all off, out of nowhere, we have Melchizedek. Ok. Fine. But what does any of that have to do with us? The answer to that question begins in the first century.

FOR JEWS IN THE FIRST CENTURY, JOB #1 WAS THIS: to maintain their shared identity as God's covenant people, as Israel. And there was one way for them to do that: through Moses and the Law, through the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices. That is how Israel remained Israel.

Moses and the Law taught Israel how to be Israel. Laws covered the big themes and the details of daily living: how to worship, who to marry, what to eat. Laws determined the calendar: when to work, when to rest, when to have a party.

But the Law was easily broken. So every day and every year the people needed forgiveness. And every day and every year their relationship with God needed to be healed. That's where the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices came in. The Temple and the priests and the sacrifices allowed Israel to stay Israel.

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For Jews in the first century, nothing mattered more than Moses and the Law, nothing mattered more than the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices. It was the only way they continued to be the people of God. It was the only way Israel remained Israel.

WITH ALL THIS IN MIND, THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS MAKES ITS CASE FOR JESUS. If you were a defense attorney offering your closing argument, you would sum up the case this way. You would say that the Old Covenant—that's Moses and the Law, that's the Temple and the priests and the sacrifices—you would say that the Old Covenant is not up to the challenge, but Jesus is.

The challenge is how to keep the people in a covenant relationship with God. And Jesus meets that challenge in every way. In fact, Jesus is so effective that he bursts the seams of the Old Covenant and establishes a New Covenant in its place. Jesus is a priest, a priest in the order of Melchizedek. And he meets the most basic need of Israel: to be and to remain the people of God.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US? There are lots of ways to answer that question. For now, let me think with you about one answer, an answer that has to do with a basic need. To begin with, what's the most basic need people have today? And how do we try to meet that need?

When we start thinking about basic needs, we can make a long list. We need food, clothes, and a place to live. We need work, education, and at least basic health care. We need peace, stability, and freedom. That's just a start on the list of basic needs. And we can make another list of all the ways people try to meet those needs.

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But instead of going down that road, let me try something out, something I think is a good candidate for a basic need, even the most basic need. It's a need we all share together. It's the need we all have to belong.

BELONGING IS A BASIC NEED. It may not be as basic as our need for food and water. But it is more basic than our need for clothing! Do you remember how Genesis 2 goes? There's a man. And things aren't good with him. He's incomplete. And he stays incomplete, until there's a woman with him. In Genesis 2, God's creation is out of balance, it's not good, until the man and the woman belong to each other. And there are no clothes involved.

The lesson is clear enough. Human beings are made to be like God. And a key part of being like God—God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a key part of being like God is not being alone.

WE HUMAN BEINGS ARE MADE FOR EACH OTHER. So we need to belong. And we do all kinds of things hoping, trying to belong.

Think about it. We join social media, looking for people who share a hobby or a disease. We join a band or the army, looking to be on a team. We join a gang or a church, looking for the family we never had.

We do all sorts of things hoping, trying to belong. And some of them actually do work. We find a good fit. We make connections with other people. And we're not alone anymore!

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But Jesus is the greatest. And he meets our deepest need, our need to belong, better than anything else. Because Jesus gathers us into a new and genuine family.

SOME OF US START OFF LIFE WITH A GOOD FAMILY. For some of us, family is the first place and the best place we ever belong. Family is where we find love and support. Family is where we learn faith and responsibility.

But for all of us, family is what gets torn apart. When dad leaves or mom dies, it cuts the heart out of a family. When you move, you're separated from your family. When you go to prison, you leave your family behind—and sometimes they leave you behind. So we all can wind up feeling miserable and alone. And no wonder. Because if there's one thing we want, if there's one thing we need, it's to belong to a family.

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Family is more basic to our sense of belonging than all those other things we try. When it's good, when it's right, family is better than the army. It's better than an on-line group. And it's better than the guys at the weight pit. That's why "home" is the ultimate

warm and fuzzy place for all of us. Family is the Melchizedek of belonging. It's before and beyond everything else.

JESUS CHRIST IS IN THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK. But he is above and beyond Melchizedek. And when it comes to belonging, Jesus is above and beyond home and family. Because in Jesus Christ we really belong. In Jesus Christ we find our true family. In Jesus Christ we become the adopted children of the one true God.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus "became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him" (v. 9). That salvation is about being alive in Jesus Christ and about belonging to Jesus Christ, which is where all real belonging begins. In Jesus Christ, we become brothers and sisters of one another. And so we have family here and everywhere.

I THINK I'VE TOLD YOU ABOUT THE FIRST TIME I VISITED A PRISON. I wasn't prepared at all for what I found when I went inside. I'm not talking about the razor wire and iron bars. And I'm not talking about all the men using wheelchairs and walkers.

No, what I wasn't prepared for was finding my own family on the inside, finding brothers who belonged to Jesus the same as I do. That was a completely unexpected gift—though I should have expected it. The problem was that my picture of the church was too small.

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Last week at the Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, we heard about how much you appreciate those of us who come in from the outside. But there's a flip-side to that. And it's how much we appreciate all of you, our brothers on the inside.

You enrich our lives. You encourage our faith. You make us different people, better people. And it's all because of Jesus. Because we belong to him. Because we belong to him together. That's the good news!

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Glory and thanks be to God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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