

## **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

### **“Priests: Melchizedek, Jesus, and Us”**

**By Eric Howell**

**Hebrews 5:1-10; 7:1-10**

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A lot of people who visit and come around DaySpring talk about the church like it's a little bit of a different kind of Baptist church. And that's true. And it's that way for a reason. Some of those differences are why we are here. It's not that we set out to be different for difference's sake. It's just that there are some things, like spiritual formation, connection with the older and broader tradition, silence, and spiritual formation that we think are important. We'd be very happy if everyone thought they were just as important, but if they don't, that's ok. We'll keep trying to do the best we can to be what God is shaping us to be and welcome folks to join us along the way to know, worship, and follow Jesus Christ.

So, DaySpring is a little bit different. But that can be said about every Baptist church. That's one of the things about Baptists, every church is different. The official word for that is 'autonomous.' Every Baptist Church is autonomous. Churches might partner with other churches for mission and ministry and might even join a denomination. But there's no one that we report to or take direct instruction from. That's very different from some other denominations, but it's one of the main convictions that makes Baptists Baptists. We believe your local church is yours—the Christians who make up the church. At DaySpring you really see that in the Church Council who you have empowered to lead the church and you see it in the Chart—every person has a role to play. But any responsibility and authority, even that of, or especially that of the pastor and staff, is derived from the congregation as a whole.

So, since each church functions like this, Baptist churches all over the world look different from one another. Some have big white columns and loud pipe organs. Some are in storefronts with plastic chairs and a guitar and projector screen. There's a church in Houston that's spending nine million on their sound system and video boards. There's a church in Waco that meets under a bridge. Some tend more Red. Some lean more Blue. Some try to keep all of that outside the church walls. Preachers are all different, too. Some read, some cry, some pass out notes, some tell stories. Some try to do a little of it all. There are Baptist churches in Africa, China, Australia, all over that are very different from one another. I guess there's even a Baptist church out there somewhere that doesn't like fried chicken and banana pudding, but who knows where. Some have church councils, some elders, most have deacons. All of this can be a little confusing to someone who is a new Christian and is learning about churches. They sometimes think that all Baptist churches are like what they hear from the Big Convention. Not really true. Also bewildering for someone who has been Catholic, Episcopalian, or Lutheran—traditions with slight variances compared to the differences between Baptists.

You get the idea—Baptist churches are different from one another.

One thing though that every Baptist church has in common, no matter where it is, is that in a Baptist church you will not find a priest. Oh, you'll find a pastor, or minister, or brother. In my first church, one man called me 'preacher' for four years. I think he thought it was my name. But you won't find a priest.

We don't have priests because we believe you are the priests—a priesthood of all believers. It has something to do with hierarchy—the congregation is the authority. It has something to do with theology—you don't need someone else to read your Bible or to go to God for you. It has something to do with ministry—it's not someone else's job. It's all our jobs to work and witness for Christ. This makes Baptists unusual in the history of Christianity and Judaism.

Because we don't have priests, scriptures like the ones we are reading today from Hebrews can be harder to understand than they might be to someone else. Unless you've got a sense for the ancient Jewish priesthood, it's hard to figure out what this is talking about. To read, "Jesus is a high priest" isn't all that helpful if the idea of a 'high priest' means little to you. And to read "Jesus is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek" is just eye-glazing if you don't know anything about 'Melchizedek.' But this is really interesting stuff and I think it has something to do with exactly who we are as a church and exactly what you might encounter this week.

Priests are all over the Bible, especially the Old Testament, but Melchizedek only shows up in the Bible in two other places besides here: Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. His brief story, both in what it says and doesn't say, is fascinating. His story really begins with Abram, who later became Abraham. Remember Abraham? He's the one that God chose to be the father of many nations (Genesis 12). God picks him, tells him to pack his family and his stuff. He's to go to the land God will show him. And Abram is obedient. He heads out to Canaan, what we think of as what became Israel, the promised land. In Chapter 14, Abram gets word that some of his family have been taken captive by raiding kings from across the river valley. So he gathers his allies and goes after them. He rescues his family along with the bounty from his victory. Upon his return, Melchizedek bursts on the scene, introduced to us as priest of the Most High God and the king of Salem (possibly early Jerusalem), and brings Abram a gift of bread and wine and blesses Abram. In response, Abram gives him a tenth, a tithe of everything he won in battle. Then Melchizedek disappears, only to be remembered by Psalm 110, which refers to a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

In good preacherly fashion, remember Hebrews is a sermon, three chapters are gleaned from this short story. A lot is made from very little. Preachers may not be able to produce food for 5000 people from five loaves and two fish, but watch what we can do with five verses and two references. Not much is said about Melchizedek, but what is said is full of meaning. His name, with *tsedekah* in the root, means "king of righteousness," and he is the king of Salem, so he is the king of shalom, peace. So the king of righteousness and peace, also the priest of the Most High God serves bread and wine. Any of that sounding familiar? And what is not said is just as important. Ancient scripture interpretation had, as one of its principles, that if it doesn't say it happened in scripture, then it didn't happen. The preacher of Hebrews employs that principal beautifully—He says, notice that Melchizedek just bursts on the scene. Nothing about his father, or mother, nothing about his children or his death. Like a Son of God, he

mysteriously arrived among us and like the Son lives on forever as a priest. He appeared and then disappeared leaving his memory and blessing in his wake.

Friday morning at Lectionary Breakfast, something odd happened as we were just getting started. I think Steve had an omelet. I had two eggs over-medium, I think I saw a couple of breakfast wraps. Several mugs of coffee around the table. We were off in the corner, about eight of us, like usual. We try to be considerate of the other people in the restaurant and we've gotten to know the same faces that are there most mornings. The same people behind the counter, some familiar faces getting their own coffees and getting ready to go to work or school. We were beginning to talk about the scripture passage. And I was explaining all of this about Abraham and Melchizedek. You remember that Abraham wasn't just another man. He was the one God chose to be the father of many nations. The father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of the heads of the tribes of Israel. The map in the back of your Bible bears their names on the spaces of land they were given when they entered the land after leaving Egypt. Names like Dan, Reuben, Judah, Simeon, Manasseh, Asher, Benjamin, Gad. But there's one name missing. Levi. Jacob's son Levi and all of his sons and son's sons were not given land. They were the priests and they were to serve all the other tribes as priests. As priests, they represented God to the people and took the offerings and prayers of the people to God. They had a vital role and were understood to be standing in the gap between God and God's people. Had a sin to confess, take a sacrifice to the priest. Had a thanksgiving, join the worship led by the priest. Harvested your crops. The tithe goes to God through the priest. Needed correction, teaching . . . you hear it from the priest. The priest was the representative of God on earth, and the earth responded to God through the priest.

Just as we are talking about Melchizedek—a high priest unlike any other, who showed up, gave a blessing and disappeared—a woman walks up to me like she knew me. Of course, I was just trying to rack my brain to remember her name thinking she was a DaySpringer. I'd never seen her before in the restaurant. She walks up to me, to-go cup of coffee in one hand, puts her other arm around my shoulder, looks me in the eye and says, "Thank you for teaching this. This is the heart of it, isn't it." And she walks out, patting Kurt on his shoulder. And she disappears down the sidewalk. None of us knew her or had seen her before. We might not have thought about it too much—just another religiously self-confident person in Waco—except that we were talking about Melchizedek and the coincidence just seemed too good to be true.

What makes Melchizedek so interesting—with his bread and wine and blessing—is that there is nothing about him that institutionally justifies why God's chosen human would kneel before him. But there was something about him that brought Abram to his knees. Maybe it is that we all hunger for righteousness and peace and when we find it in someone, we know it.

Like Melchizedek, Jesus himself by any earthly standards was no priest either. He was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi. He was a carpenter, not working in the temple. Hebrews calls Him a priest, not in any sense that people had come to know and understand priesthood, but in the order of the mysterious Melchizedek, the king of righteousness and peace. Jesus is not a priest by any religious authority. Jesus is the Great High Priest of a higher authority. He doesn't just offer sacrifices for our sins. He

takes our sins on Himself and becomes the sacrifice. Jesus doesn't just pray for us. He is the one to whom we can pray for ourselves and one another. Jesus is not just a faithful servant in the house of God. Jesus is the Lord of the kingdom of God. He is not just a priest, not just a chief priest, but the Most High Priest of the Most High God. This is what Hebrews is getting at—presuming that you know something about priests, Jesus is a different kind of priest. There is no category for who He is.

So Baptists of course do have a priest. Together with all Christians, we have Jesus our High Priest, the one who takes our sins, who intercedes to God for us, who is our sacrifice and God on earth. As important as church relationships are with one another and as much as any person might love their church, this is really all about Jesus. Everything else is derivative from that knowledge and relationship with Him.

Because Jesus is our High Priest, we have other priests. We have each other. Every believer is a priest, ordained by your baptism, empowered by the Spirit, entrusted by the Church to pray, to minister to one another, to share one another's burdens, and to increase one another's joy. Hebrews 5 says that a priest is to offer gifts and sacrifices to God for sins. A priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward. Every priest, except for Christ who is like us in every way but without sin, every priest is subject to weakness and sin and so we go to God for our own sins, too. This honor of being a priest is not one we claim or earn, but is a gift from God, bestowed on us by our new life in Christ. You are a priest not in the order of Levi, not in the order of Melchizedek; you are a priest in the order of Christ.

Like the mystery woman who passed our table Friday morning and left a small blessing on us as we shared the basic elements of bread and coffee together, this week, even today, our lives will pass through the lives of people for whom we will burst into their lives and disappear just as quickly. The woman checking your groceries, the guy in the left lane, the student down the way in your residence hall. The person you will pass the peace with in a few minutes. You know whom I'm talking about. I'm talking about children of Abraham all around us, your brothers and sisters who are carrying burdens beyond your imagination. People at war with themselves and with the people they love. And they are hungering for someone righteous—someone who really lives what they say they live. And they are desperate for Shalom. For things to be the way they are meant to be—in the world, in their relationships, in their lives. These are not our gifts to give—we hunger for them, too—but you Christian are a priest who has a blessing to give for people who may or may not have anything to give you in return. The priest gives anyway.

You priests of the Most High God, may your life go beyond any limitations, any fears, any regrets, any shortcomings, any categories other than being in Christ and being a follower and servant of Christ. May you find yourself unexpectedly bursting into the life of fellow travelers and having already in your hands, in your head, in your heart, exactly what they need in that ordained moment.