

The Intercessor
Hebrews 7:23-28
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CCUMC
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Introduction

We continue our journey through Hebrews, looking at spiritual practices. In the first week of the series we practiced *lectio divina*, and reading scripture as a spiritual disciple. Last week we examined making personal prayer cries to God, and the way that Jesus carries our deepest-felt struggles right into the lap of God. This week we will explore the practice of intercessory prayers for others, which Jesus makes possible. Hear now the reading.

Hebrews 7: 23-28

I. Setting the Scene

When you hear this text today, you might feel like you've just been dropped down into completely unfamiliar terrain. You may feel like a treasure hunter with no sense at all where the treasure is—with no map or smart phone with a map app. With this text, you some help with orientation, some direction to know where to go for this text to make any sense. What is this about numerous priests who died and can't serve anymore? What is this about being a priest that doesn't need to make more sacrifices?

When a bible text feels a little disorienting, or makes us feel a little lost, we just need to do a little more work to figure out where we are. After all, Clement of Alexander, and early church father, did say that the bible doesn't yield its treasures to the casual passerby. This text is one that invites us to go on a treasure hunt to discover its riches for our lives. Remembering that the book of Hebrews was written to a Jewish Greek audience who was very acquainted with the Old Testament, we need to start our hunt in the ancient Jewish scriptures.

II. Treasure Hunt

1. Genesis 14: 17-20

Our treasure map for this text points us first to the book of Genesis. I invite you to pull out the pew bible, and go on this hunt with me. Please turn to Genesis (first book of the bible) chapter 14: 17-20. Here we have the story of Abram, returning after a successful battle with neighboring kings. Let's read the text. **Genesis 14: 17-20** Melchizedek, a king of Salem and a priest, offers to Abram a blessing. Melchizedek was understood in Israeli lore as a legendary king and an iconic priest. His kingdom, Salem, means "peace"—salem is a translation of *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace and overall wellbeing. In the legend, Melchizedek never died; he continued to live on, the perfect and eternal priest. Supposedly, Melchizedek occupied a place above the heavenly beings; he was an agent of divine judgment whose reign was to continue forever. Prayers offered through Melchizedek to God were sure to be heard. This clue on Melchizedek offers us the first clue to uncovering the treasure in our text.

2. Psalm 110: 4

For the next clue, we travel to the book of Psalms. Please turn to Psalm 110: 4. Reading **Psalm 110: 4**. This psalm refers to King David as one who continues in the line of the legendary priestly king Melchizedek. In Israel, priests always came out of the tribe of Levi (Israel being organized into twelve tribes). Levitical priests were the ones to make sacrificial offerings for the people of Israel; they listened to confessions of sin and offered some kind of pastoral care. Of course, each priest would eventually die (as humans are wont to do); his replacement would come from his own tribe of Levi.

In the psalm, however, the writer associates King David with Melchizedek so that David could be seen in spiritual and political authority over the people, just as Melchizedek

would have been. By associating David with Melchizedek, the psalmist was attributing to David priestly attributes, even though David hailed from the tribe of Judah, not from the tribe of Levi. The psalm then leads us to our next treasure hunt clue, found in the book of Hebrews itself.

3. Hebrews 7: 1-6, 13-17

The author of Hebrews, unique to the New Testament, connects Melchizedek's priesthood and Psalm 110:4 to the person of Jesus Christ. Let's listen to some verses in chapter seven that come before our pericopy for today. **Hebrews 7: 1-6, 13-17.** Ah-ha! Now our clues are starting to make some sense. . . let's keep exploring this text a little more to yield some treasure.

For the author of Hebrews, Jesus as our high priest remains a key and central theme. However, since Jesus hails from the tribe of Judah, as did King David, the author can't claim that Jesus is a Israelite priest out of the tribe of Levi; he knows that his audience knows this as well. So, in order to make his argument that Jesus is a high priest on our behalf, the author makes the move to claim that Jesus is a priest in the line of Melchizedek. He then reads psalm 110: 4 as a messianic prophecy of Jesus' priesthood. The reading through the psalm allows for Jesus to be a priest forever, as Melchizedek was.¹

4. Hebrews 7: 23-28

Now, finally, our treasure hunt circles us back to our text where we started. Verse 23 states that "the other priests are numerous, with death preventing them from continuing to serve." Here, the author is drawing the contrast between the many priests who served out of the tribe of Levi, who also died (as humans are wont to do), in contrast to Jesus as a high priest out of the order of Melchizedek who never dies. This eternal status thus provides a

¹ Scott Schaaf, "Hebrews 7:23-28" workingpreacher.org.

different order of salvation than that available through the traditional priesthood -- the salvation offered by Jesus is eternal, because his intercession on our behalf will never cease (verse 25).²

In addition to Jesus' priesthood being eternal, the author of Hebrews contrasts Jesus as "holy" and "incorrupt" versus the earthly high priests, who have to keep offering sacrifices everyday. Verses 26-28 continue to highlight Jesus' sinlessness, with Jesus being raised high above the heavens. This exaltation of Jesus enables Jesus as the eternal high priest to offer eternal salvation---something the Levitical priests are unable to do.

Lastly, verse 27 offers that Jesus only had to offer himself once-and for-all for us; his self-offering on the cross. In contrast, the Levitical priests have to keep performing sacrifices repeatedly—and even then still can't eliminate the stain of sin. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, writes on his notes on this text, "Christ, who is one like Melchizedek, a priest forever, died once and intercedes perpetually for us." The author proves definitively in his argument in our verses today that Jesus is the priest worth following, the priest who offers us salvation—versus the Levitical priests who can't offer this for the people. The author of Hebrews is striving to keep his wavering, persecuted audience on the Christian path, instead of reverting back to Judaism. "Look," he is saying, "Christ is the best priest ever in the line of Melchizedek, and Christ offers you eternal salvation--- better than any other priest you have ever known! Christ continues to speak for you, on your behalf, to God---because Christ never dies. Keep the faith!"

III. Treasure for Us. . . and for others

The author offers us this treasure too, embedded in this text. Jesus continues to intercede for us, making prayers and petitions on our behalf. Jesus offers us salvation as well,

² *ibid*

saving us as the eternal high priest. Since Christ never died, we can continue to pray through Christ to approach God—this is what verse 25 tells us. “Jesus can completely save those who are approaching God through him, because he always lives to speak with God for them.” Here is the treasure for us—our salvation and our ability to speak to God through Jesus.

Even more, through Christ we are able to pray for others. Christ, as the eternal high priest, in the line of Melchizedek, grants to us the ability to offer our heart concerns for others to God. Just as Christ is the intercessor for us, offering himself for our salvation and for our relationship with God, we too can follow Christ by becoming the intercessor for others. Here is the treasure for others in this text.

The author of Hebrews teaches us something about prayer in this text---it is Jesus. Karl Barth, a renowned theologian of the 20th century, said that “prayer is the extreme case of God’s grace.” Prayer frees us to dive deep, deep, deep into a relationship with the one who made us and the one who saves us. Prayer really is relationship shaped by the cross. The cross is God loving us to the very end.³

What prayer is not is a “result”. Prayer in the shape of the cross isn’t an end to a result. Prayer isn’t a set of “God gimme, gimme, gimme.” Prayers of intercession for others isn’t a list of demands that God must satisfy. We don’t pray prayers of intercession for others for efficacy, for results; we pray because it joins us deeper with the love of God. When our prayers for others don’t go as we would wish, when people aren’t healed, when lives keep falling apart, we keep praying because we keep needing God to help us through this incredible challenge called “life.” We pray in order to join the pain of the world with the heart of God—this prayer comes in the shape of a cross. This prayer joins us with our high priest in the eternal work of love. This kind of intercessory prayer helps us to discover the

³ Peter Storey, “Lecture on Prayer” Duke University Divinity School.

wholeness and closeness of Christ. Christ, whose symbol in Greek is X, is the X that marks the spot of treasure. Our treasure hunt and our prayers end in the very love of Jesus, shaped in the form of a cross. Thanks be to God. Amen.

IV. Treasure of Intercessory Prayer

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