

Jesus our Permanent High Priest

Sermon Series on Hebrews

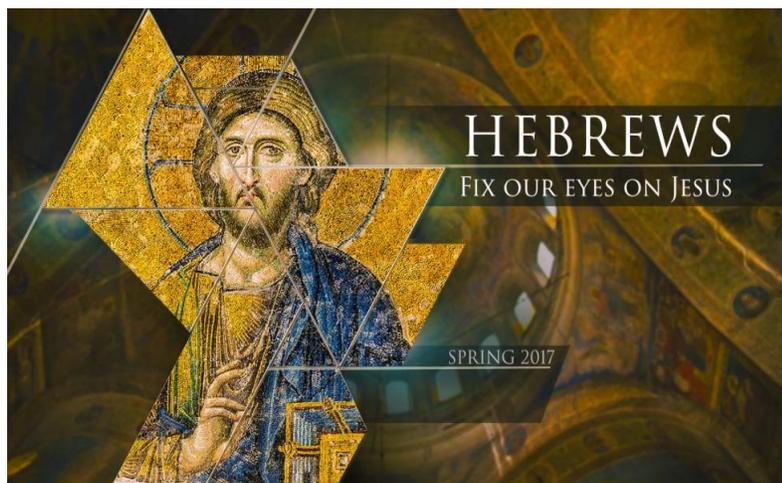
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

March 26, 2017

TEXT: Hebrews 7:1-28

We continue in our spring New Testament series on Hebrews, and we look this morning at *Jesus our Permanent High Priest*. The word permanent is a word we often use for fabric. It's a word



that we long for but find very little of in our lives. We are surrounded by impermanence. The average American will change jobs 10 to 15 times over their career. Politics, culture, fashion, and technology move rapidly in new directions, and the world around us seems in a constant state of flux, and we long for a fixed point. Hebrews 7 presents Jesus Christ as this fixed

point around which we orient our lives, and the rubric that Jesus is presented for us within is as a permanent high priest. We enter this morning into the central section of the sermon which we know as Hebrews, or the letter to the Hebrews. Remember that Hebrews is really a sermon about 45 minutes long, and we are about 15 minutes into the original sermon at this point, and we move into this large central topic. There's a single idea that is presented in Hebrew 7, 8, 9, and 10, and the central movement of the sermon concerns Jesus as our high priest; Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant, the one promised by Jeremiah; Jesus, who in His high priesthood offers Himself for your sins and mine, once for all time and opens up a new and living way. When I was planning this series of messages, I wondered how this would relate with the Holy Week and Easter coming up. Will we really go through Hebrews 8, 9, and 10 during the events around Holy Week? I thought about it a little bit further: Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant; Palm Sunday, we will talk about how Jesus offers Himself once, for all time, for our sins; and on Easter Sunday, Jesus is the resurrected, new and living way. God's Word has a coherence and power to it, and this morning we begin this central great section which is four chapters long. In the original sermon, it is about 12 minutes.

The central section begins from a vantage point of Jesus as this new high priest after the order

of Melchizedek. This is introduced in Hebrews 6:20 and it is the subject of Hebrews 7. N.T. Wright, who is coming in April, was asked what his favorite book of the Bible is, and the answer he gave was very instructive. He said: "My favorite books are actually dictionaries and reference books, because oftentimes I am reading a text and I come across something that I don't understand—a name, a place—and I'm puzzled about it. I grab a relevant dictionary and through this single word or person often a whole new area of thought opens up in front of me and the text I'm reading springs to life through this one person. We offer get an entirely new world that opens. What started off as a small puzzle in the midst of a text has turned into a lighthouse sending rays of light flashing over the rest of the subject." He says profoundly that is the effect that Hebrews wants us to grasp with Melchizedek. It is an obscure reference. Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament, but the effect of Melchizedek provides for us an explanation or vantage point from which we can see the high priestly ministry of Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews has quoted Psalm 110 three times already in his sermon: in Hebrews 5:6; 5:10, and 6:20. Melchizedek is mentioned in only one other place, and if you were here two weeks ago, I introduced to you the interpretive mode called *gezerah shavah*, which is when you tie two passages together that share a word, and the word shared here is *Melchizedek*. Melchizedek in Psalm 110 is said to be a priest forever. We meet him in Genesis 14 when Abraham the patriarch was returning from a battle in which he sought to rescue his nephew Lot who had been taken prisoner. God gave him the victory, and he is returning south. As he is returning, he is met by this enigmatic figure named Melchizedek, who was introduced for us in Genesis 14 and in Hebrews 7:1 as King of Salem and priest of the Most High God. This is a remarkable thing: Melchizedek is both a king and a priest. His name in Hebrew, means *King of Righteousness*. He is also said to be King of Salem, which most scholars think is a reference to ancient Jerusalem. Melchizedek appears in the text of Genesis 14 suddenly, without introduction, and he is both a king and a priest. Hebrews 7:3 says:

"He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever."

That Melchizedek is without father or mother or genealogy has generated speculation throughout the history of interpretation. Melchizedek is considered by writers such as Philo or Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls have a whole document that speculates about Melchizedek. Yet, I think the writer of Hebrews wants us to see something much more straightforward, that Melchizedek is not introduced with any genealogy, like most of the characters in Genesis, and in the future, those who serve as priest according to the tribe of Levi, their genealogy is introduced. Melchizedek is functioning as king and priest, and yet his office seems independent of the genealogy, and our writer wants us to see that. He concludes that he is then made like

the Son of God, and he is like a priest forever. He is a king and a priest forever, and this fundamental point, he sees, foreshadows the person and work of our Lord Jesus, who is both King and Priest forever.

Hebrew 7:4 invites us to see how great Melchizedek was. He was so great, in fact, that Abraham the patriarch tithed to him. The person who receives the tithe, or who exacts a tithe, is considered to be in a higher position of authority, and this is contrasted, he says, with those who descend from Levi. Later, in the narrative of Scripture, the descendants of Levi, in their priestly office, take tithes from the people, but they take tithes from their brethren. They are on the same plane, but this man, this Melchizedek, who is mentioned only in Genesis 14 and again in Psalm 110, is one who receives tithes from Abraham, and in fact, blesses Abraham. His conclusion is that Melchizedek, in his kingly and priestly office, is greater than our ancestor Abraham. He says in Hebrews 7:4:

“See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!”

The writer invites us to think more deeply on the figure of Melchizedek. I want to jump down to Hebrews 7:11 where he asks a question:

“Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?”

Here he enters in and invites us to consider very closely the promise of God that we will see in Psalm 110. In the Scriptures, God had entrusted the priestly office to those descended from Levi; those outside the tribe of Levi are prevented from approaching the altar. He knows this well. Those who have been around Kenwood should know this well, too, from the last few falls where we have considered the book of Leviticus and Numbers, where this office of priesthood, of access to God, of mediating the presence of God, of officiating at the altar, of bringing the sacrifices that both render forgiveness and celebrate communion with God, has been entrusted to a single group. The Levites hold this ministry in trust, yet the writer of Hebrews notices that there is a figure in Genesis 14 who seems even greater than Abraham. He is a king and a priest. He seems to hold his office forever. He is never mentioned as dying, and yet God then speaks again at a later time, in Psalm 110, that there will be another priest arising from this order. This is the point at which we go with N.T. Wright and dive for the dictionary. What is going on? We discover God's promise and intention in Hebrews 7:15-16. He says concerning God's plan, purpose:

“This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”

He has become a priest, not on the basis of a genealogical descent, but He is priest by divine decree, and He holds His office by the power of an indestructible life. The writer of Hebrews interprets for us Psalm 110 when God declares on oath: *“You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”* We learn that Melchizedek's high priesthood is a combination of offices. This is what we are to see—He is king and priest, and he seems to hold these offices in perpetuity, and God promises this very thing of the Messiah.

Psalm 110 has been quoted three times already in the sermon we know as Hebrews where God swears by Himself. Pastor Scott interpreted this for us last week that when God takes an oath, He swears by Himself because He could swear by none greater than Himself. So, God takes an oath, and He installs His King, His Savior, as Priest forever, and He is confirmed in this place, in this office, with an oath by divine decree. The writer of Hebrews wants us to see in Hebrews 7:22, that this makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. This better covenant will be the New Covenant, and this will be the subject for us next week. One of the greatest promises that God has ever spoken to His people is through the prophet Jeremiah. It is one of the longest quotations of the Old Testament that we have in the New Testament. The promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, Hebrews 8 will treat in detail. But this morning, we are invited to see that Jesus holds Kingship and High Priesthood. His bodily descent is from the tribe of Judah. He is a son of David, and yet He is given High Priesthood by divine decree, like the offices that Melchizedek combines. This places Jesus in a unique position before us. The writer of Hebrews spells this out with a set of contrasts. In Hebrews 7:23-24, he says:

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but He holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever.”

The ESV says *but He*; the Greek text says *but this one*, contrasting the many with the one. *This one* after the order of Melchizedek holds His priesthood permanently, and this is the key phrase for this morning: *“He holds His priesthood permanently because He continues forever.”* When we see Jesus in this text, from this somewhat unusual vantage point of the office of Melchizedek, we see a Savior, we see a King, we see a Priest. We see one who holds this office forever.

When I was a university student and I studied in Europe, it was my first time being around things that were that old. I remember going to the University of Vienna. I thought Vienna was a great city. The statues around the city were statues of Beethoven and Mozart, and I remember finding my way to the University of Vienna, and when I rounded the corner of this central courtyard, I looked up and there was a list of presidents of the University of Vienna. I was astonished to see that that list of presidents went back for centuries. I was impressed. N.T.

Wright says that in many churches in England, there are plaques or a board where they list all of the rectors or pastors of certain churches. He goes on to say that sometimes those lists go back to the eighth or ninth century. Sometimes in more recent churches that were planted or started in the 16th century, the list goes back just 400 years. He says:

“It's a remarkable feeling to read the names and think of all those people, some, no doubt, holier than others; some, no doubt, wiser than others, who have, as best they could, served the people of that church, preached God's Word. But, where are they now? The answer is obvious. Apart from the last one or two, or three or four at most, they are dead. They held office for a time and are now, we trust, at rest, perhaps some of them in the very churchyard outside the building. For the church to continue generation to generation, God raises up again and again people who take on the calling to serve. But supposing this, as we stood looking at the list, we discovered that someone who had been appointed pastor say in 1600 was still there. Somehow they had escaped the common lot of all the others, and the church never needed to replace them. Suppose the pastor from 1600 was still alive and that he was still a faithful minister of the gospel.”

He goes on to say:

“I know this is a bizarre suggestion, but we would all love to meet such a person, wouldn't we, to talk about what life had been like for the last 400 years? But the real significance would come when you considered what it would be like to have the same person running the church for 400 years. Most of us, especially Americans, would pull back from such an idea for the good reason that we would say no one is perfect. Changing pastors regularly, we often imagine, we will get different skill sets, but in this case, most people on reflection would say, they were deeply satisfied with a faithful leader who continued in office 400 years and that this person was exactly what they needed and no further change was necessary.”

The average length of service for pastors in the United States is three years, and the average length of tenure for youth pastors is 18 months. We are blessed at Kenwood to have way above the national averages for continuity, but I want to tell you the tremendous, great, and wondrous news from Hebrews 7, and that is that Jesus Christ is running the church, and He is holding His office, and He has been holding it for the last 2000 years, and He has been running it exceedingly well! There are no gaps in His gifts set; there are no deficiencies in His leadership; He will never be replaced; He will never come to a place of confusion or uncertainty. He holds His priesthood permanently, forever, and nothing will ever remove Him from this place. The writer of Hebrews takes us through this small, somewhat obscure, window of the figure of Melchizedek, King of Righteousness, priest to the Most High God. He combines these offices and holds them together, seemingly by divine decree, permanently, and so God promises that He would raise up another in this way.

Melchizedek, then, is a type pointing to the anti-type of Christ. Melchizedek was a real human being who combined these offices and pointed forward, made like to the Son of God. This One, this Son of God, our Savior, King, our Great High Priest, is priest permanently and continues forever. The great conclusion of Jesus' permanent High Priesthood is this, in Hebrews 7:25:

“Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

Jesus is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him. The permanence of Jesus Christ in His office means that He can save permanently all who draw near to God through Him. It means that He ever lives to make intercession for us. Sometimes Christians face the danger of forgetting just how central and vital Jesus is. Do you know that we face that? When you talk to new Christians, all they want talk about is Jesus. When you talk to faithful saints who are near the end of their lives, they often just want talk about Jesus. In the middle, between our new birth and our preparation for seeing Christ face-to-face, sometimes we get distracted. It is possible for us to get so wrapped up in Christian theology or the insistence on practical action or application that sometimes we push Jesus to the side, almost as an afterthought.

That is why we need Hebrews this spring at Kenwood. Hebrews gives us a strong antidote for any such tendencies. The writer of Hebrews inspires us because he cannot get enough of Jesus; he cannot get enough of thinking about who Jesus was and is; he cannot get enough of what Jesus has achieved in His death on the cross and the new life that is emerged from the other side. That alone is worth pondering. When we look at the details of the picture, when we realize the ways in which Jesus has brought to perfection. has brought to completion, God's intended purposes, these ponderings turn us to gratitude, and our gratitude then turns to assurance, and our assurance turns into hope. That is what Hebrews 7 has done for me all week. I am seeking this for you. Most of us have never, or rarely, thought of Jesus as our Great High Priest like Melchizedek, and yet, as we go through this window, we see something extraordinary. We go through this window and we see that Jesus is everlasting. We go through this window and we see Jesus is King and Priest. We go through this window and we see that Jesus holds these offices by divine oath, that the Lord God Almighty has installed His One and only Son: *“You are my Son. Today I have begotten You.”* *“You are my King,”* He says in Psalm 2; and in Psalm 110, He says: *“You are Priest forever, like Melchizedek.”*

When we look at Jesus, when we go through this window, we see that Jesus has an indestructible life, that He lives forever. That means whatever your situation, whatever your need, Jesus Christ is alive. That means that He is attentive to your cry. When we go through the window that Jesus is our Priest forever like Melchizedek, we discover that Jesus is ever interceding for us. In early morning prayer this morning, it was as though I could see Him

standing, listening to our prayers, and interceding on our behalf. When we go through the window that Jesus is our High Priest permanently like Melchizedek, we discover and see that when we draw near to God through Him, He saves us completely. As we focus our gaze on this Jesus through a somewhat unexpected window, we see what Wright described as using the dictionary—that it is as though rays of light illuminate our path. When we have Jesus our permanent High Priest, this summons us to seek to be permanent in our lives. What do I mean by that? I mean that we should seek this constancy; we should seek such constancy in our own lives of prayer. Hebrews 7 has stirred me to pray this week. I know someone is listening. Hebrews 7 has also stirred me to be permanent, to be faithful, to be a fixed point in relationships around me. Don't be ever-changing, because we serve One who is not. Lastly, when we consider Jesus our Great High Priest who holds His office with all power and permanence, I have found in my own soul, just rising up within me, an unshakable trust and confidence: this is who we go to. Shall we trust Him today?

Lord Jesus, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Word that gives us access to Your resplendent glory. We thank You for passages that are familiar, and we thank You this morning for ones that are unfamiliar. Lord, in the unfamiliarity of Hebrews 7, we go through the window and we find a glorious King and a permanent Priest. We find, Lord Jesus, that You hold Your office in perpetuity, that You live forever more. Would You hear our prayers that we pray even now? Lord, would You in Your glory be the concrete expression and realization of our hope? May we come near to You boldly, knowing into Whose powerful hands we run. We worship You, and we praise You.

In Jesus' mighty Name, Amen.