

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Eight

PSALM 110

The Priest-King at God's Right Hand

Lesson at a glance

Psalm 110 is seven verses long and is quoted or echoed in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament passage. The lesson works through its two oracles, "sit at my right hand" in verse 1 and "you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" in verse 4, and then follows them into the New Testament: Jesus' unanswerable question to the Pharisees in Matthew 22, Peter's proof of the present enthronement in Acts 2, the three chapters Hebrews builds on the Melchizedek oracle, and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ must reign until every enemy is under His feet. If Lesson Seven was about our perseverance, this one is about His throne and His priesthood. The class should leave knowing where Jesus is, what He is doing, and what that means for a Monday morning.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would understand the two oracles of Psalm 110 in their own setting, and would see why a priest-king was such a startling thing to announce in Israel.

Second, that the class would follow the New Testament's own use of this psalm and see that Jesus is reigning now, at God's right hand, and that His kingdom is a present reality the Christian has already been transferred into.

Third, that each person would grasp the argument of Hebrews 7, especially that a change of priesthood necessarily brings a change of law, and would see why we live under the new covenant rather than the law of Moses.

Fourth, that every Christian in the room would take comfort in the fact that Christ is interceding for them right now, and would draw near to the throne of grace with confidence rather than with dread.

Preparing to lead

Read Psalm 110 out loud several times, and read Genesis 14:17 to 24 for the whole Melchizedek scene rather than only the three verses the lesson cites. Then read Hebrews 5 through 7 at one sitting. Do not try to lead this class having read Hebrews 7 only in pieces; the chapter is one continuous argument and it is much clearer whole than in fragments.

Read Acts 2 from beginning to end, paying attention to how Peter moves from the resurrection to the exaltation to the command in verse 38. Peter does not preach the throne as an abstraction. He preaches it, and then he tells people what to do about it. Your lesson should have the same shape.

Pray over the names of the people in your class. Pray especially for anyone who feels far from God and unworthy to approach Him, because Hebrews 7:25 is written for exactly that person. Pray also for your own tone. This lesson touches subjects on which good people have been taught different things, and the class will learn far more from a leader who is glad about the reign of Christ than from one who is eager to correct.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Expectations about a future earthly kingdom. Some in your class, and almost certainly some of their relatives and friends, have been taught that Jesus is waiting to establish a kingdom on earth. Handle this positively and never by name. The lesson makes the case from Acts 2:29 to 36, 1 Corinthians 15:24 to 26, and Colossians 1:13, and that is exactly how to handle it in class: read the passages, ask what tense the verbs are in, and let people draw the conclusion. Do not turn the hour into a debate about charts and timetables. A person convinced by Acts 2:36 has been convinced by Scripture and will stay convinced.

Feeling unworthy to come to God. Question 12b and the Optional Application both press on this. There are people in every congregation who believe, in some corner of themselves, that God is tired of hearing from them. Hebrews 7:25, "he always lives to make intercession for them," and 4:16, "let us then with confidence draw near," are among the most comforting sentences in Scripture. Read them aloud. Let them do their work. Do not rush past this to get to the next question.

The violence of verses 5 to 7. Shattered kings and a battlefield full of corpses will unsettle some readers. Do not soften the text and do not apologize for it. Say plainly that Scripture takes evil seriously and promises that God will finally deal with it, and point to 2 Thessalonians 1:7 to 10 and Revelation 19:11 to 16, which say the same thing in the New Testament. Then note the difference between what God will do in judgment and what He tells us to do in the meantime (Romans 12:19 to 21).

The difficulty of verse 3. Psalm 110:3 is the hardest verse in the psalm; the Hebrew is obscure and translations differ noticeably. If someone asks, say so honestly. It is a good moment to teach the class that admitting a difficulty costs us nothing, since no doctrine in this lesson rests on verse 3, and that a teacher who pretends to certainty he does not have will eventually be found out.

Melchizedek himself. Someone may suggest that Melchizedek was a preincarnate appearance of Christ. Hebrews 7:3 says he was made to resemble the Son of God, which is not the same thing as being Him. The writer's point is what the Genesis record does not say: no father, no mother, no genealogy, no beginning, no end. In a book organized around genealogies, that silence is deliberate. Keep the class in what Hebrews actually claims and away from speculation.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 110 aloud, then Matthew 22:41 to 46, and let the class sit with Jesus' question for a moment before you say anything.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask which Old Testament verse the class thinks is most important for understanding Jesus, and why.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 2 (the two words for Lord and the meaning of the footstool), 7 (the question the Pharisees could not answer), 8 (Peter's proof of the present enthronement), 11 (the change of priesthood and the change of law), and 13 (Christ seated and reigning now). If time runs out, protect 8 and 11. Everything else in the lesson depends on them.

Notes on key questions

Question 2. The first "LORD" is the divine name, the covenant name of God, printed in capitals in most English Bibles. The second is a Hebrew word meaning "my lord" or "my master," used of a human superior. David, the king of Israel, is quoting God speaking to someone David calls his Master. This is the very point Jesus will press in Matthew 22. On the footstool: the image comes from the ancient practice of a conqueror placing his foot on the neck of the defeated (Joshua 10:24). Two things follow. The King is already seated in the place of authority, and the subduing of His enemies is God's work, guaranteed and in progress. The word "until" marks an end point, not a delayed beginning.

Questions 4 and 5. The oracle in verse 4 says four things: the LORD has sworn it, He will not change His mind about it, the priesthood is forever, and it is of the order of Melchizedek rather than of Aaron. The oath matters. Hebrews 7:20 to 22 points out that the Levitical priests took office without any oath, and that the oath attached to this priesthood is what makes Jesus "the guarantor of a better covenant." An oath from God is a promise He has bound Himself never to revise. Genesis 14:18 to 20 tells us Melchizedek was king of Salem, a priest of God Most High, that he brought out bread and wine, that he blessed Abram, and that Abram gave him a tenth of everything. Hebrews 7 draws several things out. The name means king of righteousness, and Salem means peace. The lesser is blessed by the greater (7:7), so Melchizedek outranks Abraham, and through Abraham he outranks Levi, who was still in Abraham's body. And the total absence of any genealogy or death notice, in a book preoccupied with both, makes him a fitting picture of a priest who continues forever. Guard against two errors: do not make

Melchizedek into Christ Himself, and do not build anything on the bread and wine that the New Testament does not build.

Question 7. Jesus asks whose son the Christ is. The correct answer, "the son of David," is the one they give. Then He quotes Psalm 110:1 and asks how David can address his own descendant as Lord, since in that culture the ancestor always ranked above the descendant. The Pharisees are trapped by their own correct answer. To answer honestly they would have to say that the Messiah is more than a man in David's line, that He existed before David and outranks him. Notice also that Jesus grounds the argument in the psalm's superscription and in a single possessive pronoun, and calls it the work of the Spirit. This is worth pausing over with the class: Jesus treated the details of the text as the word of God.

Question 8. Peter's two facts are that David died and was buried, with his tomb still in Jerusalem, and that David never ascended into the heavens. Neither Psalm 16 nor Psalm 110 can therefore be about David. This is the same method Peter used earlier in the sermon, and it is worth naming for the class as sound interpretation: find the one person of whom the text can actually be true. On 2:30 to 33, Peter says God swore to David that He would set one of his descendants on his throne, and then identifies the fulfillment as the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God. This is where the lesson makes its positive case. Do not argue against anything; simply ask the class when, according to Peter, the son of David took the throne. The answer the text gives is that He took it then, and that He holds it now.

Question 10. In Hebrews 5:5 to 10 God appoints Christ as high priest, and the writer quotes Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 together, the two psalms this series began and is now standing in the middle of. Verse 9 says Christ became "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." Let that phrase stand exactly as written. Salvation is entirely by God's grace and could never be earned, and the very same sentence conditions it on obedience. This is the same shape we saw last week in Hebrews 3:18 and 3:19, where disobedience and unbelief describe one failure. If the class asks what obedience looks like, take them to Acts 2:38 and Romans 6:3 to 4 and let Scripture answer.

Question 11. Jesus came from Judah, and Moses said nothing about priests from Judah (7:14). Under the law, He could not have served at the altar at all. That is the writer's lever. Since God announced a priest of a different order in Psalm 110, and since the law tied priesthood to Levi, the arrival of that priest means the law itself has changed: "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well" (7:12). This is one of the most important sentences in the New Testament for understanding why Christians do not live under the law of Moses. Connect it forward to 7:18 to 19 and 8:13. Be clear and be gentle: the old law was not evil, it was preparatory, and it could not bring anyone to completion.

Question 12. The old priests could not continue, because death kept interrupting them (7:23). Christ holds His priesthood permanently because He continues forever (7:24). Therefore, "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" (7:25). Slow down here. Many Christians know Christ died for them and have never considered that He is praying for them right now (compare Romans 8:34). Also note 7:26 to 27: unlike the old high

priests, He had no sins of His own to cover, and He offered the sacrifice once for all when He offered up Himself.

Question 13. Hebrews 10:11 contrasts a priest who "stands daily" with a Christ who "sat down." The tabernacle had no chairs for the priests, because the work there could never be completed. Christ sat down because His was. Then 1 Corinthians 15:24 to 26 tells us what He is doing while seated: reigning, until every enemy including death is put under His feet, at which point He delivers the kingdom to the Father. Put the two texts together for the class and ask the plain question: does Scripture describe a reign that has not started, or a reign that has not finished? Then read Colossians 1:13 and let the perfect tense of "has transferred" close the matter.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in this lesson. Using a Cross-Reference Chain asks the class to trace Psalm 110:1 through the whole New Testament and write the references in the margin beside the psalm. If you have a few extra minutes, build part of the chain together in class; people remember a chain they made themselves. Word Study Using a Concordance uses Melchizedek as its example, and it is a good one, since the name occurs in only three places in all of Scripture. Bring a concordance to class and show the class what the page looks like. Many members of your congregation have never opened one, and the two cautions in the callout, working with the whole context and remembering that words are translated more than one way, will keep the skill from being misused.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, we thank You that You keep Your oaths. You swore that David would have a son on his throne, and You raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at Your right hand, and He reigns there now. You swore that He would be a priest forever, and He is praying for us this very hour. Forgive us for living as though the world were out of Your hands. Teach us to draw near with confidence, to bring You what we have been carrying alone, and to serve gladly under a King who has already won. We ask it in the name of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Nine

Next week is Psalm 118, the last of the Hallel psalms, the songs sung at Passover. Jesus and the disciples very likely sang this psalm together on the night He was betrayed (Matthew 26:30). Its words were shouted at the triumphal entry, and its most famous line, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," was quoted by Jesus against the chief priests, by Peter before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, and by Peter again in his first letter, where the rejected stone gathers living stones into a spiritual house. Ask the class to read Psalm 118 aloud at home this week and to notice how a song of thanksgiving for deliverance became the song of the crucified and risen Christ.