

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Eight

PSALM 110

The Priest-King at God's Right Hand

Any Pharisee in Jerusalem could have quoted it from memory. "The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." Everyone agreed the psalm was about the Messiah. What no one had done was stop and ask the obvious question about it. Then, in the last week of His life, standing in the temple courts with a crowd listening, Jesus asked it. Matthew says that from that day on, no one dared ask Him another question.

Psalm 110 is quoted or echoed in the New Testament more often than any other passage in the Old Testament. It stands behind Peter's sermon at Pentecost, Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15, the entire central section of Hebrews, and the words of Jesus Himself before the high priest on the night He was condemned. Two short oracles in seven verses do all of that work. The first says that David's Lord will sit at God's right hand. The second says that He will be a priest forever, and not from the family of Aaron.

Read Psalm 110 several times this week; it takes about a minute each time. Then read Genesis 14:18 to 20, Matthew 22:41 to 46, Acts 2:22 to 41, and Hebrews chapters 5 through 7. That is a good deal of reading, and it is worth every minute of it. Carry one question with you all week: where is Jesus right now, and what is He doing?

First impressions

Psalm 110 carries the superscription "A Psalm of David," and Jesus treats that heading as accurate and inspired: "David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord" (Matthew 22:43; compare Mark 12:36, "in the Holy Spirit"). The psalm is a royal oracle. Twice David reports words that the LORD Himself spoke, in verse 1 and again in verse 4, and both times the words are addressed to someone else, someone David calls "my Lord." Keep one fact about Israel in mind as you read. Israel had kings and Israel had priests, and the two offices were kept strictly apart. King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for going into the temple to burn incense (2 Chronicles 26:16 to 21). Psalm 110 announces a man who will hold both offices at once.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 110 slowly two or three times. Find the two places where the LORD speaks. What does He say in each?
 - b. What surprises you most about this psalm?

The LORD says to my Lord (110:1–3)

Two different Hebrew words stand behind the two "Lords" in verse 1. The first is the divine name, the covenant name of God, which most English Bibles print as LORD in capital letters. The second is a word meaning "my lord" or "my master," a title of respect used for a superior. So the sentence reads: the LORD said to my Master, "Sit at my right hand." David, who had no superior in Israel, is listening in while God speaks to someone David himself calls Master. The right hand is the place of highest authority beside a throne; it is not a second throne. And a footstool is the picture of total subjection. Ancient kings were shown with their feet on the necks of the conquered (compare Joshua 10:24).

2.
 - a. In 110:1, who is speaking, and to whom?
 - b. What are the two different words translated "LORD" and "Lord," and why does the difference matter so much?
 - c. What does the phrase "until I make your enemies your footstool" tell you about the King's present position and about how the conflict ends?

Study Skill, Using a Cross-Reference Chain: Take one verse and follow it everywhere it goes in Scripture. Psalm 110:1 is the ideal place to practice. Using the margin references in your Bible or a concordance, find every New Testament passage that quotes or clearly echoes it: Matthew 22:44; Matthew 26:64; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:34 to 35; Acts 7:55 to 56; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20 to 22; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3 and 1:13; Hebrews 8:1; Hebrews 10:12 to 13; Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22. Write the list in the margin beside Psalm 110:1. A chain like that will preach for the rest of your life.

3.
 - a. Read 110:2 to 3. Where does the King's scepter go out from, and where is He told to rule?
 - b. Verse 3 says that His people "offer themselves freely on the day of your power." What sort of army is this? Compare Romans 12:1 and 2 Corinthians 8:5.

A priest forever (110:4–7)

Verse 4 is the second oracle, and it arrives with an oath: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind." Under the law of Moses a priest had to be a son of Aaron from the tribe of Levi, and every one of

them eventually died and handed the office to the next man in line. This priest is "forever," and He belongs to a different order altogether, "the order of Melchizedek." That name appears only once before this psalm, in three verses of Genesis. Melchizedek met Abram after the rescue of Lot, brought out bread and wine, blessed him as priest of God Most High, and received a tenth of the spoil. Then he disappears from the record. No father, no mother, no genealogy, no death notice. In a book that is full of genealogies, that silence is deafening, and Hebrews 7 makes it the point. Note carefully that Hebrews says Melchizedek resembles the Son of God (7:3); it does not say he was the Son of God.

Verses 5 to 7 turn to judgment, and the language is hard: shattered kings, corpses, a battlefield stretching over the wide earth. Israel sang honestly about a God who will finally deal with evil, and the New Testament does not take any of it back (2 Thessalonians 1:7 to 10; Revelation 19:11 to 16). Verse 7, "he will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head," pictures a king so unstoppable that He pauses only long enough to drink and then presses on.

4.
 - a. Read 110:4. What does the oracle say about this priest? List every detail.
 - b. Why do you think an oath was attached to this promise and not to the Levitical priesthood? Compare Hebrews 7:20 to 22.
5.
 - a. Read Genesis 14:18 to 20. Everything Scripture says about Melchizedek before Psalm 110 is in these three verses. List what you learn about him.
 - b. Now read Hebrews 7:1 to 10. What does the writer make of what Genesis says, and of what Genesis does not say? What is his argument in 7:7?

For Further Study: Read Zechariah 6:12 to 13, a prophecy about "the man whose name is the Branch," and notice the phrase "there shall be a priest on his throne." Then read 2 Chronicles 26:16 to 21 about King Uzziah. Why was it such a serious matter in Israel for a king to act as a priest, and what does that tell you about the size of the claim being made in Psalm 110:4?

6. Read 110:5 to 7. How does the psalm say the story ends for those who set themselves against this King? Why do you think the psalm closes here rather than closing with the priesthood?

The question no one could answer (Matthew 22:41–46)

It is the final week before the crucifixion. Jesus has been peppered with questions all day by one group after another, each trying to trap Him. Then He asks one of His own. "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" The answer was easy and correct: the son of David. Then Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 and asks how David could call his own descendant "Lord." In that culture the father always outranked the son, and the ancestor always outranked the descendant. The only possible answer is that the Christ is far more than a descendant of David. He is David's Lord. Jesus does not supply the answer. He leaves it standing in the air, and Matthew records the silence that followed.

7.
 - a. Read Matthew 22:41 to 46. What question does Jesus ask, and what verse of Scripture does He quote?
 - b. Why could the Pharisees not answer Him? What would they have had to admit about Jesus if they had answered honestly?

For Thought and Discussion: Jesus builds an entire argument on one small pronoun, "my Lord," and He treats the psalm's heading and its exact wording as the word of God spoken through David by the Spirit. What does the way Jesus handled the Old Testament teach us about the way we should handle it?

Peter preaches the enthronement (Acts 2:29–36)

Fifty days after the resurrection, Peter stands up in Jerusalem and reasons from two psalms. From Psalm 16 he argues that David could not have been speaking about himself, because David's tomb was a short walk away and still occupied. From Psalm 110 he argues in exactly the same way: David never ascended into the heavens, so the one seated at God's right hand is not David. Then comes the conclusion in verse 36: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Notice what Peter says God swore to David in verse 30, that He would set one of his descendants on his throne. Then notice what Peter says fulfilled that oath: the resurrection of Jesus and His exaltation to the right hand of God. On the day the church began, the first gospel sermon ever preached announced that Jesus is on David's throne now.

8.
 - a. Read Acts 2:29 to 36. What two facts about David does Peter use to prove that these psalms are not about David himself?
 - b. According to 2:30 to 33, when and how was the promise of a descendant on David's throne kept?

9. Read Acts 2:36 to 41. What did the crowd ask, and what did Peter tell them to do? What is the connection between confessing Jesus as the reigning Lord and obeying that instruction?

For Further Study: If Christ is already reigning, then where is His kingdom? Read Colossians 1:13, Matthew 16:18 to 19, Hebrews 12:28, and Revelation 1:5 to 6 and 1:9. Note the tense of every verb. Where does the New Testament locate the kingdom, and when did people begin entering it?

The priest we needed (Hebrews 5 to 7)

Hebrews leans on Psalm 110:4 harder than any other writer in the New Testament and builds three chapters on it. The argument runs like this. A man does not appoint himself high priest, and neither did Christ; He was appointed by the God who said, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (5:4 to 6). He was qualified by real human suffering, learning obedience through what He suffered (5:7 to 9). He has gone behind the curtain ahead of us as a forerunner (6:19 to 20). If the Levitical priesthood could have brought people to completion, no other priest would ever have been needed, yet Psalm 110 announced one, and announced Him from the wrong tribe (7:11 to 14). Therefore, and this is the hinge of the whole letter, when there is a change in the priesthood, there must be a change of law as well (7:12). The old covenant and its priesthood have been set aside, not because they were evil, but because they could not finish the work (7:18 to 19).

Study Skill, Word Study Using a Concordance: Look up "Melchizedek" in a concordance. In the whole Bible the name occurs in only three places: Genesis 14:18 to 20, Psalm 110:4, and Hebrews chapters 5, 6, and 7. That is the entire file, and you can read it in ten minutes. A concordance lets you gather every occurrence of a word and see for yourself how much, or how little, Scripture actually says about a subject, instead of relying on what you have heard. Two cautions belong with the skill. Always work with the whole verse and its context, never with the bare word. And remember that one Hebrew or Greek word may be rendered several ways in English, and one English word may translate several different originals.

10. a. Read Hebrews 5:5 to 10. Who appointed Christ as high priest, and which two psalms does the writer quote?
- b. Look closely at 5:9. Christ became "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." What does that phrase say about the relationship between salvation and obedience?

11.
 - a. Read Hebrews 7:11 to 19. What tribe was Jesus from, and why does that matter for the question of priesthood?
 - b. State 7:12 in your own words. What must follow a change of priesthood, and what does that mean for the law of Moses today?
12.
 - a. Read Hebrews 7:23 to 28. What could the old priests not do that Christ can do?
 - b. What does 7:25 say Christ is doing at this moment? What difference should that make on a day when you have sinned and know it?

Optional Application: Hebrews 4:14 to 16 and 7:25 tell us that we have a High Priest at God's right hand who is interceding for us and who invites us to draw near with confidence. Take one burden you have been carrying by yourself, name it out loud in prayer every day this week, and thank Him that He is praying for you too.

Seated, and reigning now

Hebrews 10:11 to 13 sets two pictures side by side. Every Levitical priest "stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." There were no chairs in the tabernacle, because the work there was never finished. "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." He sat down. The work is done. And He is not waiting somewhere for a reign to begin; He is reigning already, waiting only until His enemies are made a footstool for His feet.

Paul says the same thing from a different angle. "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25 to 26). The reign is present tense, and it runs until death itself is destroyed and the kingdom is delivered to the Father (15:24). Paul told the Colossians that God "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Not will transfer someday. Has transferred. The Christian is not waiting for the King to take His throne. The Christian already lives under a King who is on it.

13. Read Hebrews 10:11 to 13 alongside 1 Corinthians 15:24 to 26. What is the significance of the fact that Christ sat down? According to these passages, when does Christ reign, and when does that reign come to its end?

Your response

14. Name one situation in your life right now that feels completely out of control. What changes about it if the One at God's right hand is already reigning over it?
15. Christ is interceding for you at this very moment (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34). What do you most need to bring to Him? Is there something you have been afraid to bring?
16. Write one specific step you will take this week, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask the class which Old Testament verse they think is the most important one for understanding Jesus, and why. Let two or three people answer. Then tell them what the New Testament writers' own answer appears to be, judging by how often they reach for Psalm 110:1.

Discussion. There is far more material here than one hour will hold, so choose in advance. Questions 2, 7, 8, and 11 carry the lesson. If the class has never worked through Hebrews 7, question 11 will be new to most of them and is worth the extra minutes. Keep the tone glad and confident rather than argumentative. The best answer to any mistaken timetable for the kingdom is Acts 2:36 read aloud and left to do its own work.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 110:1 and 4, then Hebrews 10:12 to 13, and thank God that our King is seated and our High Priest is praying. Then tell the class that next week they will meet the stone the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.