

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY** **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

### **Learning to Hang Our Hopes on Jesus**

Study #7

(Hebrews 6:9--7:28)

#### **Introduction: The power of hope...**

During the years that he dominated in the pool, Michael Phelps made swimming fans of us all.

Phelps was special. He famously trained either six or seven days every week, 5-6 hours a day for his whole career. He ate twelve thousand calories a day. He lived to swim.

And he won. Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympian of all time, winning twenty-three gold medals (twenty-eight overall) while competing in the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 Olympic Games.

It was a very impressive career. And why did he do it? Why keep the grueling schedule, endure the punishing workouts, live in the pool, live with a single-minded obsession?

When someone asked him that question in an interview, Phelps replied, *"I want to stand up on the top of the podium. I don't want to be second."*

We could say that Phelps' success in swimming was fueled by the hope of being first, the hope of winning gold. Hope for gold catapulted him to the top. Well, today, we're going to think together about hope.

We who have believed in Jesus for eternal life will never face God's condemning wrath. Believers are God's redeemed children, and that will never change. That's a rock solid certainty.

The message of Hebrews (and many other places in the New Testament!) is that having received the free gift of eternal life by grace through faith, there still remains the question: Will we receive the rich inheritance and reward that Jesus is eager to give us, which will be given to us on the basis of our faithfulness in this life, or will we not receive it?

What's on the line for us isn't a shiny gold medal, or a moment on a podium. What's at stake is reigning with Jesus in glory - or not, being Jesus' companions and partners in the world to come - or not.

Today, the author of Hebrews fans the flame of hope for what could be ours IF we faithfully follow Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

*Review... (Hebrews 6:1-8)*

Last Sunday, we looked at Hebrews 5 and began to consider Jesus in His role as our High Priest.

But just as it was about to get really interesting, our author interrupted himself and scolded his readers for not being fit to hear some meaty things he wanted to say about a guy named Melchizedek.

The author couldn't go there because they were too immature. And then he warned them against remaining in immaturity - or of even ***"falling away"*** from following Jesus.

He told them and us, *"Pay attention to your life with Jesus. Soak in the rain of God's rich gifts. Don't drift away. Don't harden your heart. Don't become a lazy listener. Don't linger in babyhood. Don't fall away. Press on to maturity in Jesus!"*

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<sup>1</sup> The letter to the Hebrews is a hope-filled letter, start to finish. In the passage before us today, the author particularly highlights hope, clustering most of the uses of the word ***"hope"*** here in chapters 6 and 7.

Today, we listen as he follows those strong words with encouraging words.

### **An encouraging word (6:9-20)**

*A good reason to hope for a good outcome (vv. 9-10)*

***[9] But, beloved,<sup>2</sup> we are convinced of better things regarding you, and things that accompany salvation, even though we are speaking in this way. [10] For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, by having served and by still serving the saints.***

So, sure, the danger of the readers falling away is real, but the author is optimistic that they will heed his warnings and that their lives will take off on a great trajectory. And why is he so confident?

Well, on the one hand, these readers have been in the past - and still are! - serving fellow-believers who are suffering persecution.

The author is confident that God will not forget their faithfulness. God will reward them. To forget would be unjust!<sup>3</sup>

Just as true, he also knows that because of the resources they have in Jesus, his readers are fully able to continue with diligence firm until the end.

*A call to diligence (vv. 11-12)*

Diligence, not sluggishness, due to hope

***[11] And we desire that each one of you demonstrate the same diligence<sup>4</sup> so as to realize the full assurance of hope<sup>5</sup> until the end, [12a] so that you will not be sluggish...<sup>6</sup>***

<sup>2</sup> Addressing them as “*beloved*” is an indication that he is writing to Christians.

<sup>3</sup> Unstated here, but also true, is that IF they do continue, they won’t experience God’s severe discipline (vv. 1-8).

<sup>4</sup> We can be certain that God will not forget our past faithfulnesses, but we must not presume upon that. Diligence is our role.

The opposite of being diligent is being sluggish. Like a slug.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to following Jesus, by all means, don’t be a slug.

Instead, be diligent, zealous, energetic, and high energy, fueled by a hope for all the good things ahead of you when are faithful.

Learn to hope to enter God’s rest, to experience God’s rich blessings now and in the life to come.

Learn to hope to reign with Jesus as His companion in His coming kingdom and to be rewarded for your faithfulness here and now.<sup>8</sup>

And it isn’t like we’re the first people to travel this road of following God, even when it’s tough. We can imitate those who have gone before us, showing us the way.

Imitate those who came before

***[12b]...but imitators of those who through faith and endurance inherit the promises.***

In the later chapters of this letter, we’ll read about lots of examples we can follow. Here is the example of Abraham.

*Exhibit A: Abraham (vv. 13-15)*

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<sup>5</sup> Losing hope may not immediately result in not doing good works. We may continue in good works for a while. But we won’t long continue in good works without the crucial grace of hope. See Rev. 2:2-4.

<sup>6</sup> We could infer from the words used that the readers were on their way to general sluggishness, but for the moment were only guilty of sluggishness in their spiritual hearing.

<sup>7</sup> Greek: *nwthros*; a word also used in Hebrews 5:11 to refer to their sluggishness / laziness in hearing.

<sup>8</sup> All of this would have been associated with “salvation” as referring to the rich inheritance spoken of throughout Hebrews, not, technically, the justification with God they received once-and-for-all when they believed in Jesus.

### God's promise and oath

**[13] For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear an oath by no one greater, He swore by Himself, [14] saying, "INDEED I WILL GREATLY BLESS YOU AND I WILL GREATLY MULTIPLY YOU."**

That Old Testament quote is direct from Genesis 22.

So, we know that our author is referring to the story of Abraham's greatest test of faith, when God commanded him to offer his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.<sup>9</sup>

This episode in Abraham's life took place long after the birth of Isaac. By this time, Isaac was a teenager.

And be sure to notice that the promise from Genesis 22 (v. 14) was not a promise of eternal life.

God dealt with Abraham on that issue years earlier when he "**believed**" the Lord's promise to him. That faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Here, the promise was that God would greatly bless and multiply Abraham's descendants in the land of promise for his willingness to do this hard thing that God had commanded.

### The promise and oath fulfilled

**[15] And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.**

If you are familiar with the story of the decades-long leadup to the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, you know that Abraham didn't wait all that patiently for a son.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Further study will reveal that while this was a test of Abraham's faith, it was also a lesson in what kind of a God Abraham was following. He was not the kind of "god" who would require human sacrifice, as did the gods of the Canaanites.

Even so, God did fulfill that promise and Isaac was born to a ninety-year old mother and a one-hundred year old father.

The promise referred to in Hebrews 6 was a promise of super-abundant offspring from Isaac, a promise that wasn't fulfilled in Abraham's or in Isaac's lifetime.

Yet our author says that "**[Abraham] obtained the promise.**"

Given that even at Abraham's death, he didn't have lots of descendants,<sup>11</sup> in what sense did he "**obtain**" it?

Abraham accepted it as "**as good as done.**" He took God at His word. He leaned into hope that God would keep His promise, "**obtained**" it, and lived in light of its eventual reality.

What an encouragement this story would have been to the readers, who were suffering for their faith in Jesus.

They read this and realized, "*If we are faithful and obey God like Abraham did in trying times did, we'll receive blessing like Abraham did.*"

And the same is clearly true for us. We simply have to do what Abraham did. Take God at His word. Hope in God.

What we read next is about oath-making and oath-taking. The author explains by this how God has made it reasonable for us to hope in Him.

*God's promise and oath, serving as a solid hope (vv. 16-20)*

### The way of oaths (v. 16)

<sup>10</sup> The Old Testament tells us that Abraham tried to give his inheritance to his chief servant Eliezar (Genesis 15). Later, he took his wife, Sarah's maid, Hagar, and fathered Ishmael. (Genesis 16) Not very patient.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 11 will tell us that he didn't receive it and won't until the world to come. The fulfillment of that promise awaits the coming of the kingdom of God. (Romans 4:11-18; Galatians 3:29)

***[16] For people swear an oath by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath serving as confirmation is an end of every dispute.***

We get this. Today, people bind themselves to do certain things in a certain way by a contract. That's oath-making.

By making an oath, we are inviting a greater power (God; the courts; family or friends) to punish us if we break our oath.

God's oathing (vv. 17-18a)

***[17] In the same way God, desiring even more to demonstrate to the heirs of the promise the fact that His purpose is unchangeable, confirmed it with an oath,***

To encourage Abraham to hope for this multiplication of descendants, God:

(1) gave Abraham a promise. And He

(2) followed that promise up with an oath, guaranteeing the outcome by swearing by Himself, since there was no one greater by whom He could swear.

So, without ever seeing the fulfillment of that promise, Abraham lived in hope of seeing it, which he will, in the world to come.

And now the author of Hebrews focuses again on his readers, then and now, with hopeful words.

The hope God's oath gives us (vv. 18b-20)

***[18] so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge<sup>12</sup> would have strong encouragement to hold firmly to the hope set before us.***

***[19] This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and reliable and one which enters within the veil,***

The starting image here is of a fortified refuge to which we have fled for safety. And from that image, the author shifts to a ship's anchor.

This "**hope**" is "**an anchor**" for our souls. It steadies and stabilizes us when the winds howl, and the waves crash in on us. Our anchor will never budge, will never slip.

The image changes yet again to the most holy place in the tabernacle.

This "**hope**" is one "**which enters within the veil,**" into the most holy place in the tabernacle or temple, and the most secure place in the universe, the place where the presence of God dwells.

During times of difficulty, we need a place of safety and strength. In Jesus, we have just such a place.

In this place, we can lay hold of the hope set before us, that we may one day be our Lord's trusted companions, that He will reward us.

And then we read, ***[20] where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.***

In the middle life's pressures and stresses and pain, the High Priesthood of Christ is our greatest resource.

We now continue what the author began to discuss earlier, looking at what we can learn from Melchizedek.

**The Greatness of Melchizedek (7:1-10)**

**Melchizedek's Personal Greatness (7:1-3)**

*The story of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1; Genesis 14)*

***[7:1] For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.***

<sup>12</sup> "**We who have taken refuge**" (Greek: *Oi kataphugontes*) is a picturesque figure of speech for the fact that our future (eschatological) hope is a refuge.

Melchizedek figures prominently into the argument of Hebrews, but he is not, really, a prominent biblical figure. He only surfaces once in a narrative in the whole Old Testament, way back in Genesis 14.

There, five Canaanite kings went to battle against four kings from Mesopotamia in the Jordan River valley.

At the end of the battle, the victorious Canaanite kings took Abraham's nephew, Lot, captive. So, Abraham went after him and rescued Lot from their hands, taking plunder from these kings.

Afterward, when the king of Sodom went out to meet Abraham, seemingly out of nowhere there appears this guy named Melchizedek.<sup>13</sup>

The author of Hebrews reminds us of some of the details from the Genesis account.

*Abraham and Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:2)*

***[7:2] to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace.***

Abraham tithed to Melchizedek, which, as we'll see, was very significant.

And His name, in Hebrew means "King of Righteousness."

AND he was the king of the city of Salem (likely the site of Jerusalem before the Jews took possession), meaning that he was the King of a place called "Peace."

The author of Hebrews continues.

*The identity of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:3)*

***[7:3] Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.***

There are a number of ways to understand this.

Based on verse three, some believe that Melchizedek was an angel. Others think that He was the preincarnate Christ. Others are of a mind that he was simply a Canaanite king/priest whose genealogical details have been left out.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, at this moment, I haven't come to a firm opinion as to the identity of Melchizedek. Fortunately, I don't believe it is essential that I do so.

The main point here is that the author is using Melchizedek, as he is described in Genesis, to give us a picture of a high priest who does not stop serving due to death.

Every Jewish priest died and was then replaced. The snapshot we have of Melchizedek is of a priest who lives. He remains a priest forever...just like Jesus.

And the Melchizedek story continues.

### **Melchizedek's Comparative Greatness (7:4-10)**

*Melchizedek is greater than Abraham (vv. 4-7)*

***[4] Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. [5] And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have a commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their countrymen, although they are descended from Abraham. [6] But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them***

<sup>13</sup> There is also mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, which we will soon see.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix at the end of the manuscript for some thoughts on the identity of Melchizedek.

***collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. [7] But without any dispute the lesser person is blessed by the greater.***

Melchizedek was greater than the one through whom God would bring blessing to the world. THAT is a big deal!

And we know that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham because Abraham tithed to Melchizedek.<sup>15</sup>

And if he was greater than Abraham, Melchizedek was also greater than Abraham's great-grandson, Levi.

*Melchizedek is greater than Levi (v. 8-10)*

***[8] In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. [9] And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, has paid tithes, [10] for he was still in the loins of his forefather when Melchizedek met him.***

Levitical priests were regular human beings. They died. But Levitical priests were also special in that they received the tithes from the other eleven tribes of Israel.

But Melchizedek is greater than Levi, since Abraham - Levi's ancestor - tithed to Melchizedek. So, as special as the Levites were, Melchizedek was more special.

The point is that the ancestor is more honored than the descendant. In what follows, the point is that the newer priesthood is better than the ancient one.<sup>16</sup>

### **The New Priesthood Replaces the Old (7:11-19)**

<sup>15</sup> The detail that Melchizedek "*blessed*" Abraham is included in the Genesis 14 account, but not here in Hebrews.

<sup>16</sup> If the readers were considering leaving Christianity to return to Judaism, they needed to know that they were leaving the new and improved for the old and inferior.

### **Out with the Old, In with the New (vv. 11-12)**

***[11] So if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?***

The question the author asks is important. What's so wrong with the Levitical priesthood, anyway?

Aaron and his descendants had been priests and high priests for fifteen hundred years when Hebrews was written. Couldn't the Jews just keep on using Levites as their priests?

Well, sure, they could...except that because of the inherent weaknesses of the Levites (they were all sinful; they all died), the Levitical system never really worked to finally deal with the people's sins. It was fundamentally flawed and inherently inadequate.<sup>17</sup>

Something better was needed - and that's why David wrote back in Psalm 110 about a new priest who would arise from the order of Melchizedek who would do what the Levitical priesthood could never do.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus came, not only to rescue us from God's condemnation due to sin, but to bring in a whole new system based on His life, His death, His resurrection, and His current ministry as our High Priest.<sup>19</sup>

So radically different is the Jesus Way that it was no problem that He was born from a Jewish tribe that was never associated with the priesthood.

### **Jesus' Tribe Shouts, "Different!" "Better!" (vv. 13-14)**

<sup>17</sup> This is not just Gentile Dave saying this. The author of Hebrews was a Jew. And the Apostle Paul - definitely a Jew! - said exactly the same thing in 2 Cor. 3 and in Gal. 3. The Old Covenant / Law of Moses is "*obsolete.*" (Hebrews 8:13)

<sup>18</sup> The promise of the future coming of Melchizedek's priesthood (Psalm 110) proves that there was always something inadequate about Levi's priesthood.

<sup>19</sup> ***[12] For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.***

***[13] For the one about whom these things are said belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar.***

***[14] For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses said nothing concerning priests.<sup>20</sup>***

Moses never said anything about the tribe of Judah and priestly service.

But Jesus was born of the tribe of Judah, the tribe from which the kings who ruled from Jerusalem all came - meaning that Jesus is not only our High Priest; He is also our King!

And Jesus' priesthood didn't come by way of genealogy, anyway. It came by appointment from God.

### **Jesus' Powerful New Priesthood (vv. 15-17)**

***[15] And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, [16] who has become a priest not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life.***

***[17] For it is attested of Him, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."<sup>21</sup>***

There are two essential differences between the Levitical priesthood and Jesus' High Priestly role ***"according to the order of Melchizedek."***

<sup>20</sup> There had been expectation in the Jewish community at Qumran that Messiah would come from Levi. But, given the imperfections of the Levitical priesthood, it stands to reason that the replacement priesthood would be non-Levitical.

<sup>21</sup> The author is not saying that the Law or the Levitical priesthood were evil. Only that they were severely limited by the mortality of the priests.

One is the absence of sin in Jesus' case. Two is the fact that Jesus lives as our High Priest forever, as was promised in Psalm 110.

### **The Old Covenant vs the New Covenant (vv. 18-19)**

***[18] For, on the one hand, there is the nullification of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness [19] (for the Law made nothing perfect), on the other hand, there is the introduction of a better hope, through which we come near to God.***

With the coming of Jesus, the whole old Mosaic system has been nullified. In Jesus we have both a new priesthood and a better hope.

It is this hope of a new and infinitely better priesthood that provides us with the access we now have to God.

### **The Superiority of the New Priest (7:20-28)**

#### **Jesus Guarantees a Better Covenant (vv. 20-25)**

***[20] And to the extent that it was not without an oath [21] (for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him,***

***"THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, 'YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER'");<sup>22</sup>***

***[22] by the same extent Jesus also has become the guarantee of a better covenant. [23] The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing.<sup>23</sup> [24] Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. [25] Therefore He is also able to save forever<sup>24</sup> those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.***

<sup>22</sup> Again, a quote from Psalm 110. See Hebrews 1:13, 5:6, 7:17.

<sup>23</sup> Josephus counted 83 Jewish high priests who had lived and died since Aaron.

<sup>24</sup> Greek *panteles* - "to the uttermost" would be a good rendering, referring to both extent and duration.

How is Jesus' High Priesthood better than the old one? Jesus...

- ...is more glorious because He became a High Priest, not by way of genealogy, but because of God's oath.
- ...remains a High Priest forever.
- ...not only "saves" from God's condemnation for sin. He is also able to "save to the uttermost" by giving us a rich inheritance in glory for faithfulness in this life.
- ...our High Priest, intercedes for us and comes to our aid when we need help to stand firm for Him at life's toughest moments.

Our passage concludes with the author arguing that the High Priest we have in Jesus is exactly the High Priest we need.

### Jesus is Exactly the High Priest We Need (vv. 26-28)

*Our priest's character (v. 26)*

***[26] For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.***

Perfect.

*Our priest's sacrifice (v. 27)*

***[27] who has no daily need, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because He did this once for all time when He offered up Himself.***

Our Lord didn't simply sin less than the Levitical priests. He was sinless.

*Our priest's perfection (v. 28)*

***[28] For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, who has been made perfect forever.***

Jesus, the Son, replaced the priests who could never meet our needs. He is, indeed, just what we need.

### Conclusion:

Hope is an indispensable grace for any endeavor in life.

Whether we are aiming to win Olympic gold, attain academic success, or flourish in a life for Jesus, leaning into hope energizes us for the battles we face on the way to a win.

Unfortunately, as the word *hope* is often used today, it is code for little more than wishful thinking. "I hope you win!" or "I hope you pass the test!" = "Good luck!" There's nothing compelling about that.

Or our connection to *hope* is tied to trivialities. We hope for a cool summer in San Antonio (finally!) or a restful Sunday afternoon. Nothing strong about that.

Or we hope for things God has never promised to provide. Polite national politics. Peace between nations. A long, healthy life. Economic prosperity. A pleasant outing with friends.

Today, Scripture invites us to learn a new way to hope, to exercise our hope muscles in the way God intended.

Learn to set your hope...

...on accessing the spiritual resources He offers (like that stabilizing anchor for the soul) which we cannot now physically hold on to.  
 ...on being Jesus' companion / partner in His coming kingdom (which you cannot now see) if you live faithfully now.  
 ...on Jesus' High Priestly role to strengthen you when you are tested (even though you can't touch Him).

Remember. ***[Hebrews 6:10] God is not unjust so as to forget your work...***

Hang your hopes on hearing, ***“Well done!”*** from Jesus.

Those hopes will stand you in good stead when you are tempted to stop following Him and will equip you to win the prize.

## APPENDIX: The Identity of Melchizedek

(1). Some believe that Melchizedek was an angel.

This view would explain why he didn't have parents, but not how he could have no beginning of days, since angels are created beings.

Some have argued, though, that while not eternal, Melchizedek's angelic origins belong to a past so remote that it precedes our concept of "days."

As evidence of this possibility of Melchizedek being an angel, elsewhere in Genesis, we do see angels operating in the realm of human existence.

For instance, angels visited Abraham in Genesis 18. Then, two angels visited him to warn him of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Genesis 19)

But, if he was an angel, he was a unique angel, in that he dwelt on earth in human form long enough to be king over the realm of Salem. Even this, though, would not destroy this theory. Melchizedek would simply be an angel who carried out a ministry on earth different from other angels.

There is also evidence from the literature found at the Jewish community at Qumran, that those Jews identified Melchizedek as *"the heavenly one"* who would usher in God's kingdom. So, this idea is neither new nor bizarre.

(2). Some believe that Melchizedek was the pre-incarnate Christ.

Often when we read of appearances by *"the Angel of the Lord"* in the OT, it seems that we are witnessing a theophany, an appearance of the second Person of the Trinity. So, some believe that Melchizedek was exactly that.

However, Hebrews 7:3 says that he was *"like the Son of God"*, not that He was the Son of God.

(3). Some believe that Melchizedek was a normal human being who is presented without genealogy to drive home a point about Jesus' High Priestly role.

In this view Melchizedek was a Canaanite king of Salem who had parents, was born, and did die. Those details are simply not recorded in Genesis.

Since they are not recorded, the writer of Hebrews treats him as if he actually didn't have a genealogical past.

Some have problems with this, though, wondering how he was greater than Abraham if he was a regular human. One possible answer to this would be, *"He was king of Salem."*

While respecting the other positions, I am most drawn to this idea that Melchizedek was a man, a king from a line of priests of God Most High, who is treated as a "type" / foreshadowing in Hebrews to help us understand something crucial about Jesus' priesthood.

Namely, that He lives and serves forever, never to be replaced.