

Session 3: A Priest Forever

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

Tonight the group returns to the stranger from Session 1, and they get almost all of him. From Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 they discover that the Old Testament itself, centuries after Levi, promises a different kind of priest: a king-priest, from Jerusalem, standing outside Levi's genealogy, established not by descent but by God's unbreakable oath, and holding the office "for ever." They will also discover that Jesus himself put Psalm 110 at the center of his own identity. One thing stays locked: the bread and the wine. Tonight the group learns everything about Melchizedek except the sealed question, and the discipline of not answering it is half the fun.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that everything the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus, the one mediator, and that the Church's tradition sees the unique high priest "after the order of Melchizedek" in him (CCC 1544). Christ fulfills the anointed offices of Israel, priest as well as prophet and king (CCC 436). Tonight builds the Old Testament half of that claim so that when the fulfillment arrives, it arrives on rails the group has laid themselves.

What You Need to Know

Genesis 14:18 to 20 gives Melchizedek three verses, and the three verses are strange on purpose. He is "king of Salem," which the Old Testament later identifies with Jerusalem (Psalm 76:2, "His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion"). He is "priest of God Most High," a legitimate priest of the true God, generations before Sinai, outside any Israelite line, because Israel does not exist yet. He blesses Abram, and Abram gives him a tenth of everything. In a book obsessed with genealogy, Melchizedek arrives with none: no father, no mother, no birth, no death recorded. Scripture's silences are load-bearing here, and later Scripture will lean on exactly that silence.

Then, roughly a millennium later, Psalm 110. David's psalm speaks of a lord enthroned at God's right hand, and then verse 4 detonates: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." Weigh every phrase with the group. Sworn: God takes an oath, something the Levitical institution never received. Will not change his mind: irrevocable. For ever: an enduring priesthood with no expiration written into it; its full, deathless weight the New Testament will unfold. After the order of Melchizedek: a priesthood that is royal, Jerusalem-rooted, and independent of Levi's bloodline. The psalm is Israel's own scripture announcing, while the Levitical system is running, that the ultimate priest will come from outside it.

Two supporting witnesses sharpen the picture. Zechariah 6:9 to 14 crowns Joshua the high priest (the crowning itself is verse 11) as a sign of "the Branch," the coming one who "shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne. And there shall be a priest by his throne, and peaceful understanding shall be between them both"; the oracle strains toward one figure uniting crown and priesthood, and Christian tradition has read the Branch messianically. And 2 Chronicles 26:16 to 21 shows what normally happens when a king grabs priestly work: King Uzziah burns incense and is struck with leprosy on the spot. Royal priesthood is NOT routine in Israel; that is precisely why Psalm 110:4 is such a shock, and the Uzziah story is tonight's answer to the steelman.

The steelman tonight: "Melchizedek is a nobody, three verses of ancient Near Eastern local color, and Psalm 110:4 is just florid coronation poetry; Christians have inflated a footnote." Build it honestly; it is what many modern readers quietly assume. The answer is that the inflation, if that is the word, was done by the Old Testament itself (Psalm 110 is doing the typology, not the Church), that David's successors were emphatically NOT priests (Uzziah), so the psalm cannot be routine coronation flattery, and that Jesus of Nazareth personally placed this psalm at the center of the question of his identity (Mark 12:35 to 37), with Peter preaching its enthronement verse at Pentecost (Acts 2:34 to 36). Whatever Psalm 110 is, the New Testament did not discover it in a corner; it was already the loaded gun on the table.

Guard the seal. When the group re-reads Genesis 14:18 tonight, the bread and wine are sitting right there in the verse, and someone will reach for them. Your line, delivered with a grin: "Not yet. That part is still sealed." The group now knows enough to make their guesses very interesting, which is exactly the point.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight the fulfillment arc begins to bend. Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 are the two Old Testament poles, and the group discovers the first New Testament touch: Jesus quoting Psalm 110 about the Messiah (Mark 12:35 to 37) and Peter preaching its enthronement at Pentecost (Acts 2:34 to 36). Do not go further into the New Testament than those two texts; in particular, stay entirely out of Hebrews 7, which belongs to Session 5 and will land like a thunderclap precisely because the group will recognize every move it makes.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Justin Martyr

St. Justin, in his Dialogue with Trypho, argues in substance that Psalm 110 cannot finally rest on any merely human king, and he points to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High before circumcision was ever given, as a sign that God's priesthood was never confined to Levi's line and would reach the nations. Writing within a century of the apostles, Justin shows how early the Church was reading tonight's two texts together. (A summary of Justin's argument rather than a quotation.)

Dialogue with Trypho

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

St. Augustine, expounding Psalm 110, teaches in substance that the psalm is a prophecy of Christ, and that God's oath ("the LORD has sworn and will not change his mind") is the strongest possible language of divine promise: what God swears concerning this priest is irrevocable and eternal. For Augustine the "for ever" of verse 4 already rules out any priest who dies and is replaced. (Summary of his exposition.)

Expositions on the Psalms, Psalm 110 (109 in his numbering)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas teaches that the priesthood of the Old Law was a figure of the priesthood of Christ, in whom alone priesthood reaches its full reality: Christ is the fountain from which all true priesthood draws. In substance, for Thomas, Melchizedek and Aaron are not rivals; both are sketches, in different colors, of the one Priest to come. (Summary of his teaching on the priesthood of Christ.)

Summa Theologiae III, q. 22

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1544: everything the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds fulfillment in Christ, the one mediator, the unique high priest "after the order of Melchizedek."
- CCC 436: Christ fulfills the messianic hope of Israel in his threefold office of priest, prophet, and king; Israel's anointed priests, at their institution, foreshadow him.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD A (sealed guess): maximum discipline tonight. The group re-reads Genesis 14:18 with the bread and wine in plain sight. Deflect warmly, every time. Three more weeks.
- THREAD B (serve and guard): rest week. Do not force it.
- THREAD C (the firstborn): rest week, though Melchizedek's priesthood-without-genealogy quietly sets up the contrast with descent-based priesthood; you may plant the phrase "not by bloodline" tonight without explanation.
- THREAD D (kingdom of priests): note silently that a priest-king over Salem, blessing the father of the nation, stands at the head of the story before Levi exists. This becomes ammunition in Sessions 8 and 12.

Session Goals

1. The group inventories Genesis 14:18 to 20 and names what the text says and, crucially, what it withholds (no genealogy, no origin, no death).
2. The group weighs Psalm 110:4 phrase by phrase (sworn, will not change his mind, for ever, order of Melchizedek) and articulates why each phrase outstrips the Levitical institution.
3. The group discovers via Uzziah that Aaronic temple ministry was closed even to Judah's kings, so Psalm 110:4 cannot be routine court poetry.
4. The group discovers that Jesus himself made Psalm 110 the riddle of his identity.
5. The bread and wine remain sealed, and the group leaves more curious than they arrived.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: The stranger, second look (20 min)
- 0:35 Build II: The oath, Psalm 110 (25 min)
- 1:00 Build III: The steelman and Uzziah (15 min)
- 1:15 Build IV: Jesus asks the question (10 min)
- 1:25 Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (5 min)

Pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute room: drop the Dig Deeper (Zechariah 6) and compress Build IV by reading Mark 12:35 to 37 yourself and asking only its second question. Never cut Uzziah; the steelman answer depends on him.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, you swore an oath and you do not change your mind. Open the Scriptures to us tonight as you opened them on the road to Emmaus, and let us find in an ancient king of Salem the shadow of a face we love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Have you ever met someone once, briefly, who left a mark on you completely out of proportion to the time you spent with them? What made them unforgettable?
2. What is a promise someone kept to you over a long time? What did the keeping of it, year after year, tell you about them?

Build I: The Stranger, Second Look

Read Genesis 14:17 to 20 aloud. Yes, the bread and wine are in there. No, we are still not talking about them.

Q1. Inventory time. List everything the text actually tells us about this man: titles, actions, location. Then the harder question: in a book that constantly tells you whose son everyone is, what does the text NOT tell us about him?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Told: he is king of Salem (later identified with Jerusalem, Psalm 76:2); he is "priest of God Most High," a true priest of the true God with no connection to Abram's family; he blesses Abram; Abram tithes to him. Withheld: any genealogy, any origin, any death. In Genesis, where genealogy is everything, a priest with no bloodline is not sloppy storytelling; it is a signal, and later Scripture will lean its full weight on exactly this silence.

Q2. Abram, the man who carries God's promise for the whole world, receives a blessing from this priest and pays him a tenth of everything. In the logic of the ancient world, who is the greater figure in this scene, and how do you know?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Melchizedek. The lesser is blessed by the greater, and the lesser tithes to the greater. The father of Israel, and in his loins the whole Levitical priesthood not yet born, bows toward a priesthood older and larger than his own line. Park that thought; you have just done, on your own, an argument a New Testament author will make to you in two weeks. Do not tell the group that last part.

Build II: The Oath

Read Psalm 110:1 to 4 aloud, slowly, then have everyone silently re-read verse 4.

Q3. Verse 4 has four loaded phrases: "sworn," "will not change his mind," "for ever," "after the order of Melchizedek." Take them one at a time. What does each phrase claim, and, thinking back to the last two sessions, which of these things did the priesthood of Aaron have?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Sworn: God binds himself by oath to this priesthood; the Levitical institution was commanded, but nowhere in its founding does God swear an oath about it. Will not change his mind: presented as irrevocable by oath; feel the contrast in tone with the "if you obey" of Exodus 19:5. For ever: an office with no end written into it, unlike Aaron's sons, each of whom died and handed it on; the deathless fullness of the word waits for the New Testament. After the order of Melchizedek: royal, rooted in Salem/Jerusalem, and standing entirely outside Levi's genealogy. Israel's own psalter, sung for centuries in the temple by Levitical priests, announces a priesthood beyond them.

DIG DEEPER

Zechariah 6:9 to 14: the prophet is told to set a crown on the head of Joshua the high priest (verse 11) as a sign of "the Branch," who will build the temple of the LORD, bear royal honor, and rule on his throne, with priesthood and throne in "peaceful understanding." Crown on a priest, priest by a throne: the oracle strains toward one figure holding both offices, and Christian tradition has heard the Branch messianically. The honest note: the Hebrew of verse 13 is genuinely debated (one figure or two in view?), and faithful interpreters differ on the details while agreeing on the messianic direction.

Build III: Just Poetry? The Steelman

STEELMAN: BUILD IT UP. At full strength: "A modern reader says: be serious. Melchizedek gets three verses of local color in Genesis, and Psalm 110 is a royal psalm in the ancient Near East's standard sacral-kingship idiom, the exalted coronation language many kings received. Kings dabbled in ritual anyway; David wore an ephod and danced before the ark. Christians found a footnote and built a cathedral on it. Feel the force: it is tidy, it is plausible, and serious scholars hold forms of it."

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "If priesthood were routine perks of David's crown, we would expect kings acting as priests to be no big deal. Somewhere in 2 Chronicles 26:16 to 21 a king of Judah tries exactly that. Find what he does and what happens to him." Give the group a few minutes.

Q4. What did King Uzziah do, how did the priests respond, and how did the affair end? Now: what does this story do to the "coronation flattery" theory of Psalm 110:4?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Uzziah, strong and proud, enters the temple to burn incense; eighty priests confront him: "It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron." He rages, leprosy breaks out on his forehead, and he lives cut off, excluded from the house of the LORD, to his death. Priestly temple ministry was not a royal perk in Judah; grasping it was sacrilege, and heaven itself enforced the line.

So Psalm 110:4 cannot be routine court flattery. To sing to a Davidic figure "you are a priest for ever" is to promise the very thing Uzziah was struck for grasping. Either the psalm is reckless, or it is aiming past every ordinary king at someone with a right no son of David ever had. And as for the "footnote": the elevation of Melchizedek was performed by Psalm 110 itself, inside Israel's own Scriptures, a thousand

years before the Church existed. (Leader background, hold loosely: by Jesus' era some Jewish texts, like the scroll known as 11QMelchizedek found at Qumran, were already fascinated with Melchizedek as an exalted figure; the interest is not a Christian invention. Present as scholarly background, not as an argument the group needs.)

Build IV: Jesus Asks the Question

Read Mark 12:35 to 37 aloud.

Q5. Jesus, teaching in the temple in the last week of his life, chooses this exact psalm and asks the crowd a riddle about it. What is the riddle, and what is Jesus implying about the Messiah, and about himself?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

David calls the Messiah "my lord": how can the Messiah be merely David's son, a descendant and nothing more? Jesus is claiming the Messiah is greater than David, seated at God's right hand, and he poses it, in the temple, days before his death, in a way that unavoidably bears on his own identity. And notice what Jesus has now made unavoidable: whoever this enthroned lord is, verse 4 of the same psalm calls him a priest for ever. At Pentecost, Peter preaches this psalm's enthronement verse (110:1) over the risen Jesus (Acts 2:34 to 36); the priesthood verse, three lines below it, now stands loaded. The New Testament did not discover Psalm 110 in a corner. Jesus put it on the table himself.

Send

1. God's oath "will not change his mind" stands behind this priesthood. Where in your life right now do you most need a promise of God that does not depend on your performance?
2. Melchizedek blessed Abram at the end of a battle, when he was exhausted. Who in your week is walking out of a battle, and what would it look like to meet them with a blessing?

Live It This Week

- Pray Psalm 110 once a day this week, out loud. It is short. By Friday you will have the memory verse without trying. (Bonus: the Church prays this psalm at Evening Prayer II of every Sunday; you are joining her.)
- Find one person leaving a battle this week (an exam, a diagnosis, a brutal shift) and bless them concretely: a meal, a message, a prayer said with them, not just for them.
- Re-read your own sealed guess in your memory if you can recall it. You may not change it. You may, however, grin.

Memory Verse

"The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek."

Psalm 110:4 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Father, a thousand years before Bethlehem you swore an oath concerning an everlasting priesthood. Thank you that your promises are older than our questions and stronger than our failures. Keep our guesses sealed and our hearts open, and bring us back hungry. Through Christ our Lord, priest for ever. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 3

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- Genesis 14:17 to 20 (Build I, read aloud)
- Psalm 76:2 (Build I, leader reference: Salem is Zion)
- Psalm 110:1 to 4 (Build II, read aloud; memory verse source)
- Exodus 19:5 (Build II, leader reference: the conditional contrast)
- Zechariah 6:9 to 14 (Dig Deeper)
- 2 Chronicles 26:16 to 21 (Build III, live discovery)
- Mark 12:35 to 37 (Build IV, read aloud)
- Acts 2:34 to 36 (Build IV, in the ANSWER)