

A Better Priest

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[0 : 0 0] visitor. And it'd be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Hebrews chapter four. We're actually going to begin just back over the page on page 1203 with verse 12. So let's pray. You'd find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful. There's an outline in there just to see where we're going. But let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer.

Father God, we praise you and marvel that you are a speaking God who has made truth known to us in your word. And Father, we are mindful of how we depend upon you by your spirit that we would have eyes to see this truth and hearts that are willing to accept it for ourselves.

And so we pray that your spirit will be among us now. And Father, that our thoughts and meditations will be pleasing in your sight. For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. So we're carrying on in our series in the book of Hebrews. We've been in Hebrews together as a church family. And if you're at all familiar with the Bible, when you get to Hebrews, it's this sense a bit like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz of thinking, I'm not sure we're in Kansas anymore. Because we're used to the Gospels and the stories of Jesus' life. And we might be used to Paul's letters and the logic that they go from A to B to C.

And you can follow this logic. And you get to Hebrews and it's a much less familiar letter. The concepts that get covered are much less familiar to us. And the way that the arguments are written, they kind of spiral around and you keep picking up themes. We heard about Melchizedek today and then he gets dropped and then he gets picked up again later and we find out more about him. And so it's difficult. But that's why it's really good for us to look at this book as a church family. It's good to find things stretching when it comes to thinking about God. And we're hoping that God will take some of the rich theological meat of Hebrews and use it to feed us, to kind of reshape our minds and how we think and reshape our hearts to get our hearts kind of burning afresh for God. So last week we were being stretched through history as we saw the idea of God's rest and how it starts with God in creation and then heads right through into the new creation, this idea of God's rest. And we looked at that last week. This week, rather than being stretched across history and into the future, we're being stretched in a different dimension from earth, where we are, up into the heavens where God is, the spiritual realm, the spiritual universe where God is. And the writer is fixing our mind on how we connect with those heavenly realities.

And our three questions, really, that the passage answers are, what's our greatest problem? And then what is God's solution? And then thirdly, so what? How do we respond to that? So first of all, what's our greatest problem? That's our first point, the living word that cuts us like a sword. And we see that in verses 12 and 13 of chapter 4. They're a conclusion to that first big section of Hebrews that we've covered. So chapter 4, starting at verse 12.

[3 : 1 1] For the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Now, double-edged swords, they're not for swinging at people like a scythe. They're double-edged so that you can pierce with them. They're for piercing the skin. And with a picture one here that's kind of laser sharp, as sharp as a razor's edge on either side of it, so that when you push it into somebody, it effortlessly works its way through, even through the joints and the ligaments, tearing them apart as it just plunges into somebody. It's a great picture. And it's a picture that shows us there's no hiding place from the word of God. It is the sword of God's Holy Spirit. And he uses it to pierce right into us. And the relationship between God's word, the Bible, and God himself is so inextricably close that the writer moves seamlessly on in the next verse from the word of God to God himself. Verse 13.

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. God's word coming right from God so that he can see everything. So that a God-centered church, if it wants to be a God-centered church, we're to be a Bible-centered church. As God, by his spirit, takes his word and he uses it to accomplish his will in us.

And among us. And these two verses, they point us back to how Hebrews began. We heard that we've had a better word now from God in these last days, that God has spoken to us by his majestic son.

And we have to pay careful attention to him. Then last week in chapter 3, we encountered that living active word warning us as God's people in verses 7 to 12 of chapter 3. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as Israel once did. And our verses this morning, they remind us that there's no hiding what our hearts are really like from God. He knows exactly what our hearts are like.

[5 : 29] We can hide our true selves from others, can't we? We can hide behind a thin veneer of respectability. But we can't hide behind a mask before God. I don't know whether you can think of a time when you've tried to hide something about yourself and you didn't get away with it. I spent a summer working at Buckingham Palace when I was a student, when they opened it to the public in the summer.

And obviously, it's quite high security, Buckingham Palace. So even though you're staff, every day you've got to have your photo ID with you that shows your security cleared. But I noticed that some days when we all kind of piled in as staff in the morning, they didn't kind of check everybody because they'd see that you're kind of fumbling in your wallet for it and they'd just kind of wave you through. And one day, I forgot my security pass.

And if you forgot, it was a complete pain in the neck because it was a real effort and you had to summon down senior management to sort of vouch for you and get you in and you were late for work and you got in trouble. And I'd forgotten my card, okay. So I thought, well, I'll just try and sneak in.

And I waited till there was a few other guys I worked with. I didn't tell them. And I just sort of said, hi, how are you doing? And then I just tried to walk in in the middle of the crowd. And as they all held up their passes, I just got out my wallet and pretended that I wasn't a Christian, by the way. So this is quite deceptive. But, you know, as if it was in there and I just couldn't find it, waiting for the guard just to go, oh, just go on. And he looked at me and he said, where is your pass? He realized straight away what was going on. And I said, I've forgotten my pass.

And then, of course, I had a lot of explaining to do. Well, why are you fumbling in your wallet as though it's in there? And I had to go through the process of being cleared. He just looked me in the eye. He knew what was going on. He saw straight through me.

[7 : 14] And that's the picture we're being given of the word of God when we open it today as God's people. That unavoidable, penetrating gaze, the truth can't be hidden from God. And though we might wear a mask in front of other people and behave differently when we're around other people, God sees what we're really like. And that's why listening to God's word should feel a bit uncomfortable at times. You know, if we're in a church where God's word is being taught clearly and faithfully, we will feel confronted and challenged. At times, we'll be sitting uncomfortably as we listen to God's word. It's like that sword pushing itself through you, dividing your joints and your marrow. And I found it very alarming just thinking over the last week about how often I behave differently if someone's watching me. I don't know whether you've noticed that about yourself. The times when in anger, I'll react on my own in a way that if other people were that, I just wouldn't do. Sometimes you even get caught out. Yesterday, we were driving along in the car and there was a speed camera. And, you know, a car, a few cars in front of us slammed on the brakes because of this speed camera. Everyone's slowing down. And as soon as we realize something's watching, our driving habits change. It's like a little parable for how we live our lives, that when people are watching, we change. And it's sobering to think that the living God of blazing purity sees us all the time. He sees every web page we've ever looked at. He sees every thought we've ever thought. Every little thing we've muttered under our breath about somebody else we were angry with. God's there for that. And it exposes for us our deep need for help. We were made for God and we can't get near him. We depend every day of our lives on the generous face of God. And instead, we face deep hostility from him because he is holy. And we have to feel that need, that separation, that alienation if we're going to appreciate the good news that comes next. So our second point is about

God's solution, the perfect priest who meets our every need. What God says is that to put that problem right, to get right with him, we need a priest. In the Old Testament, God came to live among his people in this tabernacle. It was a representation of God's presence among his people, this big tent. But the only way that he could be present with them was if they kept their distance. And so he created among his people the office of priesthood, the idea of priests. And the writer of Hebrews reintroduces us to that old office in verse one of chapter five. We'll just have a look at that. Verse one, every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God.

So in this tabernacle where God was among the people in history, I think we've got a picture of it. There was, anybody could go in the outer place, in the outer court, but then there was an inner tent and only the priests could go into the inner tent. And once you got inside the inner tent, there was another tent within that one, the most holy place. And only the one high priest could go into the most holy place of God's presence and only once a year. To protect the people from a holy God, they had to have a representative. And the writer here gives us three essentials for that high priest.

The first is that he has to be able to deal with our sin problem. That's at the end of verse one. The high priest is to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Second thing about the high priest is he has to be familiar with human weakness. We see that in verses two and three. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray since he himself is subject to weakness. So facing God, he deals with our sin. Facing us, he can deal gently because he's familiar with the weaknesses of humanity.

And thirdly, the priest has to be appointed by God. That's in verse four. And no one takes this on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. So it's worth reflecting on this.

[11 : 51] How much does it mean to you that you need a priest before God? Jesus has a threefold office. He is our king, our priest, and our prophet. And sometimes it's easy to focus on Jesus as our king. By his rising from the dead, he has been crowned by God. He's gone to glory. He's coming back to rule the world forever. He's establishing his reign in the world, now building his kingdom. And we can connect with the idea of God giving us Jesus as our king.

And we can focus on Jesus as the prophet. Jesus came into our world as light in the darkness to enlighten us with revelation so that we can know the truth about God.

Not just with his words, but who he is. He is the exact representation of God. He is the king, and he is the prophet. But it's absolutely essential to us that Jesus is also the priest.

Without his priesthood, the news that he is king is really bad news, because we are rebels in a world where Jesus' rightful kingly rule is rejected, and one day he will crush his enemies.

It is bad news that Jesus is king if he's not a priest. And without his priesthood, the news that he is a prophet is bad news. For the news of what God is like as a holy God and a just God condemns us to facing his judgment. It is terrifying what God reveals about himself in Jesus, unless Jesus is a priest as well. It's central to our spirituality. Jesus is the priest we need.

[13 : 32] And we see that all over the world. When you look at humanity on our own, trying to make up what God is like, man-made religion either decides that God is so far beyond us that there's no point even trying to know him. He's too mysterious. Or man-made religion comes up with the idea of a priest.

We need to have somebody in the way between us and God. And that's why God ordains this office. In the law of Moses, in his good law, in the Old Testament, this office of priest.

Christ. And we've got our essential criteria for a priest from verses 1 to 4, chapter 5. And then in verses 5 to 10, he introduces us to Jesus as the priest who fits the bill.

The turning point comes with those first five words in verse 5. In the same way, Christ. And then we see how those qualifications are fulfilled in him. First, that the high priest has to be appointed by God. And look at verse 5 and 6. In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, you are my son. Today I have become your father.

And he says in another place, you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Those are two psalms, Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, where God makes a declaration about his Christ, his son, that he is appointing him. And he has appointed the Christ to be our priest.

[15 : 06] He's appointed by God. Secondly, the high priest has to be familiar with human weakness. And we turn to verses 7 and 8. And we see that, thinking mostly about Gethsemane.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverent submission.

So, no, he was. He learned obedience from what he suffered. So, turning to God, he can deal with our sin. He's appointed by God. But turning to us, he can deal with us and our weakness and our vulnerability.

Are you struggling with temptation today? Temptation to sin? Temptation to give up on God altogether? Well, Jesus knows how you feel in temptation.

In fact, he was tempted far more strongly than you or I will ever be. Because one little sip of temptation and we give in. But he drank the cup of temptation down to its dregs.

[16 : 15] And he never sinned. So, when we feel tempted, he can deal with us in that. He knows what it's like to be tempted to turn from God. Even when we give in, Jesus is our priest.

He is grieved by our sin. But he is moved with compassion towards us. That we would be so foolish as to sin. He can sympathize.

And then there's the third qualification. That our priest also needs to deal with our sin problem. We made it at the end of verse 1. The high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

And now in verse 9. Jesus was always perfect, of course, eternally.

But when the writer in Hebrews uses that word perfect, it's about being complete. Fulfilling what he was there for. And he completes the mission because now he can save us from our sins.

[17 : 27] Having shown that he is the perfect man who never sins. The priest has to offer a sacrifice that bears our sin and satisfies God's wrath against our sin. And this high priest stands before God.

Not in an earthly sanctuary that we've made as a kind of a replica. But he stands before God in heaven. And he pleads his own self-sacrifice. I was telling you about trying to sneak into Buckingham Palace and not making it.

But I did once have an amazing experience of sneaking in somewhere. And it was that once I successfully gate crashed a ball. It was a college May ball when I was at university.

And they are these epic nights out. They run from 9 p.m. till 6 a.m. Tickets are about 200 pounds. And I didn't have a ticket for this amazing ball.

And gate crashing these balls was like a hobby for people. You kind of dress in your dinner suit or your ball gown. And you go into the woods.

[18 : 31] And you try and sort of leg it across the fields. And the security are sort of rugby tackling people in their ball gowns and sending them out. Okay, so there's all this stuff going on.

And I was around the front of this ball. And it was kind of late in the evening. And there was no way I could get in. I tried walking through and couldn't get in. And then a band were leaving.

They performed their sets. And they were coming to put their instruments back in their van, having put on a concert at this ball. And one of the guys in the band saw me. And they had these badges on that said performer.

And he said, do you want a badge? So he gave me this badge that said performer on it. And I walked straight in. Okay. And I spent the whole night there. And inside, it was absolutely amazing.

It was one of the best nights of my life. Okay. It was free drinks everywhere. Free food everywhere. Amazing bands on different stages. Amazing music in different courts.

[19 : 28] And they do these spot checks everywhere to check you've got like a wristband on that shows you've paid. And every time a security person came near me, they came to check.

And then they saw this badge. And they said, oh, sorry, you're a performer. Sorry. And they got out of my way. And I just carried on like that. Okay. I had no right to be inside that ball.

But it didn't matter. Because he did, the performer. And because of his performance, he could give me a badge that meant I got in.

I was wearing his badge. And here in Hebrews 5, we learn that we can't get into the throne room of heaven where the glorious God is. The delightful God that we were made to know.

We can't get there. But we can go right in thanks to the performance of another. Our high priest. He is physically there now.

[20 : 23] The physical risen Jesus. Not some spiritual being. The physical human. The man, Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead with a physical body, is in heaven right now in the throne room of God.

And we can be there with him thanks to his performance. And your access to God like that has nothing to do with how you got on today in obeying God.

It's all about his performance because you're wearing his badge. So we thought about what our problem is. That the living word cuts us like a sword. We've heard about God's solution.

The perfect priest. And now we have to respond. Our third point. The throne of grace. That we approach with confidence. So the application comes at the end of chapter 4.

First it's that we keep going. That's in verse 14. In other words, don't drift.

[21 : 25] Don't give up on being a Christian when it seems really hard. When you feel disheartened by the people around us who don't believe. The apathy around us.

The hostility around us. Don't drift away. Look at this high priest. And hold firmly to the faith you profess to the very end. Perhaps you're here and you're not a Christian yet.

And the invitation here would be to take that step of faith towards God. For if you are willing to put your trust in this Jesus. The eternal son.

He offers that role of priest to you. That he can be your mediator. Your go-between before God. And with him as your priest. You could be right with God today.

And forever. Whatever you've done. But holding firmly to the faith can be hard. And in verse 15 we're given the solution. It's that we approach the throne.

[22 : 21] Verse 15. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses. But we have one who has been tempted in every way. Just as we are. Yet he did not sin.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. So that we may receive mercy. And find grace to help us in our time of need. In other words, thanks to our great high priest.

We can engage with God. We can come into the presence of God in prayer. We don't have to be in a special place. You don't have to be in this building or any other special building.

Because God is in heaven. And our priest is right there with him. We don't have to have special music playing. Or light candles. Or summon God down to be with us.

Because Jesus is there with him. And through him we can engage with God anywhere. We don't have to be on good form as a Christian. In fact the whole point here is that we go to the throne when we're struggling.

[23 : 22] At the times when we would most want shamefully to retreat from God. He compassionately longs for us to come into his throne room. And as we do that. We turn to our high priest.

Who knows exactly what we're like. We can talk to him anytime about our fears. Our struggles. Our doubts. Our failings. This is such precious truth.

You know in pastoral ministry. I talk to people who have experienced deeply painful situations in their life. Where they have prayed to God. And their experience has been that apparently.

It didn't really feel like God answered those prayers. That's a very real experience for people. And in those situations. You come out of that finding it difficult to trust God.

But just consider our high priest. That God has appointed for us. He knows the experience of prayer being apparently unanswered. We heard in chapter 5 verse 7.

[24 : 22] He cried in anguish to the one who could save him from death. And was heard. I think that's a very confusing verse. When was he heard? He cried in anguish in Gethsemane.

And he was forsaken by God the next day. And he died butchered on the cross. Only later was he raised to life. And that means that when life is hard for you.

When you're struggling to trust God. When prayers don't seem to be answered. He can empathize with you. He has been there.

And he came out of the other side. If you feel even remotely like that today. If you feel confused by your life. And what God has done.

Even disappointed with God. You have somebody to share that with. And he will deal gently with you. He is gentle. And it's worth saying.

[25 : 20] He's not like that. Because he's different from God the Father. We mustn't think that God the Father is somehow harsh and austere. And it's okay. Because Jesus is our friendly priest. No, Jesus is gentle with us like that.

Because his heart has the same character as God the Father's. And when we approach God's throne. As he longs for us to do. Vulnerable. Honest. Humble.

Cut open by the sword of his word. He gladly offers us two things. In verse 16. We receive mercy. And we receive grace. Mercy is about forgiveness.

That God the Father is not going to hold us responsible for our sin. When we approach him in Christ. And grace is the help and strength God gives us. As he picks us up.

He dusts us off. And he empowers us by his spirit. To be godly today for him. God stands ready to supply that grace. Thanks to his son and his priestly work.

[26 : 19] So come before him boldly today. This week. And with confidence. Because you picture Jesus there. As the hymn writer says.

My name is written on his hands. My name is hidden in his heart. I know that while in heaven he stands. No power can bid me to depart. No power can force me to depart.

So let's pray together now. We'll have a moment of quiet. And then I've written a prayer. Inside the notice sheets. And I'll read that for us. Shortly. Just to lead us in it.

Amen. Perhaps a moment to reflect on our failings, our weakness, our sins and our shame.

The things we hold back from God and seek to hide from him.

[27 : 45] Eternal Son, Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for being our supreme prophet. We worship you as the radiance of God's glory, sustaining all things by your powerful word.

And we marvel that in these last days, God has spoken to us by you. We praise you as the appointed king, the one whom all God's angels worship.

We rejoice that you love righteousness and hate wickedness and that you are seated in victory at your father's right hand until your enemies are subdued and your throne, O God, will last forever.

But today we especially thank you for your work as our great high priest. We come before you in weakness, in vulnerability, in suffering, struggling, doubting, and convicted by your living word of our many sins and wickedness.

Deal gently with us, we pray. Help us rest in the limitless merits of your once for all sacrifice of yourself, reassured by your promises that you have gone through the heavens to plead that sacrifice on our behalf before the father.

[28 : 56] And so, heavenly father, we draw near to you now. We approach your throne of grace with confidence. In your mercy, pardon us.

By your grace, strengthen us. Grant that from now on, we might always hold firmly to the faith, live wholeheartedly for your will, and rest continually in your presence.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.