

## Jesus is Better: A Study of Hebrews

*A Better High Priest* (Hebrews 4:12-5:10)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 13, 2025

### Introduction

- ❖ This summer, we've been in the book of Hebrews in a series we're calling: *Jesus is Better*. Because that's the theme of the book. It's been arguing that Jesus and the new covenant he inaugurated is far better than all that you might find in the old covenant.
  - Now to this point, the author of Hebrews has been arguing that Jesus's role in *revelation* surpasses that of the angels and prophets like Moses and Joshua. But starting in our passage, the focus shifts to Jesus's role in *redemption*. **He's presented as superior to the high priests and all the sacrifices they offered up for the forgiveness of sins. The redemption they accomplished was limited in scope and duration.** It was only for the nation of Israel and only for a year. But what the Better High Priest accomplished is far better. **Through his high priestly mediation, Jesus secured the forgiveness of sins for *all* nations and for *all* time.**
- ❖ So with him being a better high priest, you would do well to cling tighter to your faith in **Jesus**. And likewise, you'd be foolish to abandon Jesus for anything or anyone else. That's been the general approach of the book.
  - **The author has been maintaining this delicate balance of issuing warnings** – about the dangers of unbelief and of failing to enter God's Sabbath rest (another way of describing heaven) – **but, each time, these terrifying warnings are paired with encouragements grounded in God's grace.** The goal of the warnings is to confront our complacency or any neglect of Christ. But they're immediately followed up with encouragements aimed at comforting our anxious souls. Reminding us that, if we just hold fast to Jesus, he'll bring us to the throne of grace.
    - That's how this morning's text is laid out. Chapter 4:1-13 is one of many warning passages in Hebrews. We covered most of it last week. We'll just look at vv12-13 today, which function as transitional verses. Leading us to an encouragement passage in chapter 4:14 to chapter 5:10. The particular encouragement here centers on the identity of Jesus as our Great High Priest.
- ❖ **One of the most comforting, most encouraging, truths is to be told that you have priest – a great high priest – serving on your behalf.** Now I realize that might sound strange because most of us didn't grow up with priests. Your church, growing up, probably had pastors or ministers. It's the Catholic Church that has all the priests. **Protestants, on the other hand, advocate for the priesthood of all believers** (1 Pet 2:9). Which means we don't have to go through a priest to confess our sins. **We can go directly to God.** We have direct access. We don't have to go through another human being to get to God.
  - But, actually, that's not true. We would be mistaken to think that. Our passage is clear that we still need a priest. **We still have to go through another human being to get to God. But not just any human being.** The human we need as a priest is identified in v14 as Jesus the Son of God. Who, through his Incarnation, became a Son of Man. He shared in our flesh and blood. These were ideas already mentioned in chapter 2. *"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God."* (2:17)

- ❖ Priests in the OT had a distinct and different function than OT prophets. **Prophets were supposed to speak to God's people on God's behalf.** They would draw near to you. Look you in the face. And say, *"Thus sayeth the Lord."*
  - But priests had a different role. **Their job was to speak to God on behalf of God's people.** A priest would draw near to God. His back would be to you and his face would be towards God. He would enter God's presence to offer sacrifices and prayers for you. **Prophets speak God's words to you. Priests speak your words to God.**
    - And you need both. **You need a prophet to confront your sin.** To issue warnings that challenge your complacency. **But you also need a priest who understands your struggle to remain faithful.** One who sympathizes with you. Who goes before God pleading for mercy on your behalf.
- ❖ And that's who Jesus is. **Jesus is both prophet and priest.** And according to Hebrews, he's a better prophet and better priest than anyone available under the old covenant. **In this morning's text, we'll see Jesus functioning in both roles.** In chapter 4:12-13, in his prophetic role, Jesus is presented as (1) a Living Word that can penetrate our hearts. Then starting in v14, he's introduced as (2) a Superior Priest who can draw us near to God and (3) a Sympathetic Priest who can help us in times of need.

### A Living Word

- ❖ Let's begin in chapter 4:12-13 and consider how **Jesus is a Living Word that can penetrate to the deepest recesses of our hearts.** Laying bare our inner thoughts and attitudes. Exposing our deep need for a great high priest to mediate and intercede on our behalf. Listen as I read these verses again, but I'm going to include v11 to set the context, *"<sup>11</sup>Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. <sup>12</sup>For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup>And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*
  - So Hebrews 4:1-10 was a warning to *not* fail to reach this future Sabbath rest (aka heaven), and v11 is a concluding exhortation to strive therefore to enter that rest. **And then vv12-13 explain why it's so urgent that we strive to enter – why we need to be so vigilant to avoid the same unbelief and disobedience that marked Israel's wilderness generation.** Because the Word of God is powerful and penetrating and those who disobey it, and they will in no way avoid judgment.
- ❖ Notice how the Word of God is described as **"living and active."** Which is not how most people perceive the Bible today. Non-Christians, at best, will see it as a collection of ancient writings that offers its own mythological account of our origins in general and of the Jewish people in particular. And in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, they might see a great moral example. Someone who laid down a strong foundation of ethical principles.

- ❖ And sadly, even Christians have adopted the same approach. Treating the Bible like a collection of stories. Or like a reference guide where you can look up practical advice on various topics. **And that's why, for many, the Bible is a stale and static book.**
  - But that's what makes v12 so remarkable. The word of God is alive. It's living. That doesn't mean the pages of the Bible are somehow alive and divine. **The physical book is a book like any other book. But in reading the words of the Bible, you encounter a living person.** That's what it means for the Word of God to be alive.
  
- ❖ Not long ago, I purchased a three-part biography on C.S. Lewis. I learned so much about him. About his childhood and how his early experiences prepared him for his famous conversion from atheism to theism to Christianity. I learned new things about his precious friendships with other literary greats and about his peculiar romantic relationships. **I got a lot out of the biography. But the one thing I didn't get is that I didn't get to meet him.** No matter how many books I read on Lewis, I will never meet him in any of them. Those books, no matter how well written, are *not* alive.
  - But the Word of God is. **And when I read it – or when I hear it read and faithfully preached to me – I can meet God.** I can have a real encounter with the Living God through the Word of God.
  
- ❖ **And the Word of God is active in that it's effective to accomplish its tasks.** It never comes back to God void. It always accomplishes every purpose for which it is sent (Isa 55:11). And in the context of Hebrews 4, the particular task of Scripture that the author has in mind is judgement. Judgment against disobedience.
  - **And that's why he goes on to compare God's Word to a two-edged sword that's sharp enough to cut us to the heart.** *"Piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* Now I think some people read too much into this. I don't think the author is trying to provide us a psychological or anatomical analysis. He's rhetorically describing just how powerful God's Word is. **It's powerful enough to penetrate to the deepest part of you – your heart.** It can expose all your thoughts and intentions.
  
- ❖ **You can fool us. You can fool yourself. But you can't fool God.** You might be good at keeping the rules. But God knows if you're disobeying in your heart. **God can see past your surface obedience, and he knows your true intentions.** He knows *why* you're obeying. He knows if you're just doing it to keep up an act. To please your parents. To impress your friends. To avoid punishment. God sees all and knows all. *"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*
  - **That's what makes the Bible the most dangerous book in the world. Because you don't just read it – it reads you.** As you study it, it studies you. As you exegete its message and meaning, it exegetes your thoughts and intentions. No other book does this. Other books can inspire you or upset you. **But no other book can cut you to the heart like the Bible.**

❖ **So take that warning to heart the next time you read your Bible. Tread carefully.**

Because it's sharp enough to cut through all your posturing and all your pretenses. It has the power to expose you and lay you bare. **But should we expect anything less if it truly is a Living Word that presents the Living God?** I'd be more shocked to meet a holy God and *not* be challenged – and *not* be confronted or convicted.

- So let's not treat our Bible reading as a mere routine or religious exercise. **Reading the Bible is a dangerous task.** But, at the same time, there's nothing more life-giving. Because the Living God that you meet in Scripture – who exposes your every thought and intention – is also your great high priest.

### **A Superior Priest**

❖ That leads to our second point. The author realizes he just filled his readers with a holy fear as he warned of rebelling against God's voice and failing to enter his rest. **So he turns to the one theme that can assuage a guilty conscience – Jesus's high priestly ministry.**

- The author has already argued that Jesus is better than angels and better than Moses or Joshua. Starting in chapter 4:14, he's arguing that Jesus's priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood. It's a theme mentioned earlier in chapter 2:17-3:1. **The point is that, in Jesus, we find a Superior Priest who can draw us near to God.**

❖ Look at v14, *"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."* Now it might not seem like it, but what the author is doing here in this verse is pretty groundbreaking. **You see, in the OT, there was a well-recognized expectation that God would one day send a kingly Messiah to deliver his people from the curse of sin.** Their hope rested on prophecies about a Son of David, a kingly figure, who would one day rule and reign in righteousness.

- **But there was also a minor theme within the messianic tradition that spoke of a priestly Messiah, who would save God's people by his priestly intercession.** So these two messianic traditions of a kingly Messiah and a priestly Messiah ran parallel to each other for all these years with no one pairing them together. Until here in the book of Hebrews. **Where the author is clearly arguing that these two traditions have been fulfilled in one man.** Jesus is not just a king but also a priest.

❖ But that suggestion of Jesus being a kingly priest raises a biblical problem. **Because, in the OT, there's a tragic history of Israelite kings overreaching and attempting to perform the duties of a priest.** And each time, they paid for it. There was King Saul who lost his throne because he was audacious enough to make a priestly sacrifice on his own (1 Sam 13:8). And there was King Uzziah who was struck with leprosy because he arrogantly entered the temple to perform the priestly duty of burning incense (2 Chron 26:16).

- The author of Hebrews is not ignorant of this problem. He even explains, in chapter 5:1, how high priests were never self-designated. You had to be chosen and appointed to the task. **So he acknowledges that a king can't just make himself a priest.** They have to stay in their lane. Kings rule. Priests sacrifice.

- ❖ **So how then can Jesus be both?** It makes sense to claim him as a king. His genealogy traces back to King David and to tribe of Judah. But how is he a priest? He's not from the tribe of Levi (and only Levites serve as priests). And he's not a descendant of Aaron (the designated family of high priests). **He might be fit to be a king – but *not* a priest.** So how can he be both? How can he fulfill both traditions?
- ❖ Listen to chapter 5:5-6 and to how the author of Hebrews weaves these two strands of messianic tradition together. *“So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”*
  - **His point is that Christ didn't exalt himself as a priest.** Like any good priest, he was called by God. He was appointed. The author first quotes from **Psalm 2** which was a well-known messianic psalm about God appointing a **kingly Messiah** to save us all. And then he quotes from **Psalm 110** which was another messianic psalm about God appointing a **priestly Messiah** from the order of Melchizedek.
- ❖ That's a reference to a mysterious biblical figure that shows up only in Genesis 14:18. **There Melchizedek identified as the king of Salem (Peace) and as a priest of God Most High.** So apparently, when David took over Jerusalem and made it his capital, the priesthood of God Most High now belongs to him and to his successors.
  - So Jesus may not be a Levitical priest. But that's okay. He's of a more superior order. Jesus the *Great* High Priest doesn't serve in a mere temple on earth. **V14 says he “has passed through the heavens,” and now he carries out his priestly duties before the very presence of God.** The high priests of old merely served among earthly symbols and representations of heavenly realities. They served among shadows. But Jesus serves among those very realities.
- ❖ Scripture tells us that the temple in Jerusalem was designed with a central room **called the Holy of Holies**. It housed the ark of the covenant. It was where God's manifestation of his earthly presence would reside. Scripture tells us that the entrance to the Holy of Holies was blocked by a thick curtain. **And only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was allowed to pass through that curtain and serve before the mercy seat of God.**
  - And it was a dangerous task. **We're told in Exodus 28 that the high priest was fitted with garments that had little golden bells attached to the hem.** Scholars think that those jingling bells were there to signal to his colleagues, who were waiting outside, that the high priest was still alive and still ministering on their behalf.
- ❖ **The high priest had the most dangerous job in all of Israel.** If he could make it into the Holy of Holies without dying, he would first take the blood of a bull to make atonement for his own sins (Lev 16:6). And then he'd take the blood of a goat and sprinkle it on the mercy seat of God (Lev 16:15). That would secure forgiveness for the sins of the Jewish people.

- ❖ That's why this day (Yom Kippur) was the most important day in the Jewish calendar. **But the fact that it showed up on the calendar every year proved that the Day of Atonement was insufficient.** The blood of bulls and goats were not enough to fully take away sin.
  - That's why we need a better high priest who offers a better sacrifice that can put away sins once for all. And that's what Jesus did. The high priests would pass through the curtain and serve in the Holy of Holies for only a few moments and only once a year. **But the Great High Priest passed through the heavens (not just curtains) to appear before God.** And there he offered a better sacrifice of his own blood to atone for sin. And there he remains at the throne of grace to always intercede for us.
- ❖ After a Levitical high priest finished his work, he can walk out of the temple and tell people, "I've made the requisite sacrifice on your behalf. Let us then with confidence *go home* knowing we're forgiven until we gather again next year on the next Day of Atonement."
  - But Jesus can walk out of the heavenly temple and tell people, **"I've made the requisite sacrifice on your behalf. Now come inside and draw near to the throne of grace yourself."** Look at v16, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*
- ❖ Do you realize that, in the OT, no one talked like that? **No one would've dared draw near to the Holy of Holies.** Definitely not with confidence. No one had confidence to draw near to God. Only the fear of certain death. **I think Christians fail to realize how dangerous it is to draw near to God.** We take it for granted, but the Bible is full of warnings.
- ❖ **When the Israelites reached Mt. Sinai, the glory of God appeared on the mountaintop, but the people were forbidden to go up and draw near to God.** It wasn't safe. But they were fine with that. They heard the peals of thunder. They saw the clouds of thick darkness and the consuming fire. And they had no interest in drawing near. They were sure they'd die.
  - **So they begged Moses to draw near for them (Deut 5:27).** Go be a priest for us and come back and tell us what God has to say. Tell us what it's like to be in his presence. But there's no way we're going to draw near ourselves.
    - **V16 would sound as strange as telling them to draw near to a blazing fire.** "Let us with confidence draw near to a live volcano." That's what it sounds like to tell them to draw near *with confidence* to the Living God.
- ❖ **Friends, until you read this passage from that perspective, the full significance of Jesus's high priestly work will be lost on you.** You won't realize how badly you need a priest. Even today. Even this very hour.
  - But here's the good news: **Because of what Jesus has accomplished, he can say to you, "Come up the mountain with me and draw near to God yourself."** The thunder is still there. The thick darkness and consuming fire are all still there. He's still the same fearsome God. **But because our Great High Priest shed his own blood to put away sins, we can with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.**

## A Sympathetic Priest

- ❖ But I know what some of you are thinking, “You don’t understand, pastor. My sin runs too deep. My shame is far too great. My temptations are far too strong. There might be hope for others but not me. You don’t understand.”
  - Perhaps I don’t understand. But there is one who does. **There is one who knows exactly what you went through and what you’re going through.** One who identifies with your pain, with your weaknesses, with your temptations. He’s a sympathetic priest who can help us in times of need. That’s our final point.
- ❖ There are two things that make a good priest. **Two things you look for in a priest. Someone who is like you and, at the same time, unlike you.** You want a priest who can walk the hard path with you (so he can sympathize), and yet you want a priest who’s off the path. Who’s already reached the final destination (so he can help you get there too).
  - **So you want to be able to bare your soul to your priest.** To pour out your heart. To speak of your unfulfilled longings, of your loneliness and disappointments. And for him to get it. To understand. That’s why you need a priest who’s been there.
    - **And yet you don’t want to bare your soul to your priest, only to have him respond by sharing his own set of problems.** You’re looking for a priest – not an accountability partner. You don’t want a priest who’s too much like you. Who’s so much like you that he can’t really help you.
- ❖ **What you want is a priest who is like you and, at the same time, unlike you.** So look at chapter 4:15, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*” As we are, yet without sin. Like us. Yet unlike us. Do you see how Jesus is the perfect priest?
  - The reason he can sympathize with us is because “*in every respect [he] has been tempted as we are.*” **He knows how hard it is to walk the straight and narrow. He knows what you’re going through.**
- ❖ Now I know you’re probably wondering, “How can that be? He never did anything wrong in his life. So how can he know temptation if he never sinned?” **It’s because he never sinned – that’s what makes Jesus an expert in temptation.** He understands it better than all of us. Only someone sinless has experienced temptation at its fullest strength. Everyone else – even the best of us – have yielded to temptation at some point or in some degree. Only Jesus knows what it’s like to resist temptation every waking hour of his life. No one else knows what that’s like.
- ❖ But you might still be wondering, “**How was Jesus tempted like we are in every respect?**” You’re probably thinking, “He’s never been through a bad break up like I have. He’s never had a miscarriage like I have. He’s never experienced a painful divorce like I have. He hasn’t felt the lure of pornography like I have. He’s never been through these things.”

- He hasn't. He died at age 33. He never experienced the unique trials and temptations of an elderly man. The same could be said about the unique trials and temptations of a single woman or married person. He never *personally* experienced them.
- ❖ **But you have to realize that there's the *surface* of an experience, and then there's the *core* of an experience.** On the surface, our experiences are all unique. But at the core, every experience is going to touch on the same basic emotions. And when it comes to difficult experiences, at the core you'll find weakness and suffering, confusion and distress, abandonment and loneliness, betrayal and sadness. **And of those raw human emotions, Jesus is very familiar.** He knows them all too well.
- ❖ Chapter 5:7 is likely referring to his experience in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was betrayed and arrested. Listen again, "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*" **But, as the story goes, the Father didn't save him from death on the cross.** He didn't let the cup of wrath pass over. Instead he asked his Son to drink it down to the dregs.
  - **That means Jesus knows what it's like to cry out to God for relief and not have your prayers answered.** Jesus knows what the silence of God sounds like. **He knows what forsakenness feels like.** He felt it on the cross (Mk 15:34).
- ❖ Jesus gets you. He's like you – which enables him to sympathize with you. **But he's unlike you – in that he never sinned but always obeyed.** He was obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. Which is why we're told in v9 that, by his perfect obedience, Jesus "*became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*"
  - **We have a high priest who can sympathize with us and identify with us – but more importantly we have a God who is can save us eternally.** Why would we look to anything or anyone else? Why would we neglect such a great salvation?
    - This passage boils down to one simple command: Don't give up on Jesus. Draw near to him. **Hold fast your confession of faith in Christ.** And rest in knowing that he's holding fast to you.