



Hebrews 4:14-16, 7:23-8:2  
 Hebrews: Seeing Jesus Clearly  
 “A Better Priest”

Rev. Brian North  
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Today we’re continuing our series in Hebrews, a letter written to Jewish Christians who seem to have been experiencing a temptation to drift back toward their old religious ways and old systems. Hebrews continues to drive home that Jesus is the better way—the more complete way. Everything in the old way pointed toward, and has been fulfilled by, Jesus Christ. That’s the message conveyed in Hebrews.

And this message is particularly driven home over the course of several chapters regarding the work and role of the high priest and what that meant for the people of Israel. Now, this might sound dry or irrelevant to our ears. Most of us aren’t tempted to return to a Jewish high priest or the Temple as some kind of replacement for Jesus.

**But there are practical implications of this for us, because we all feel the pull toward what’s familiar, comfortable, tangible, and within our control for our sense of purpose and meaning in life, assurance, and hope.** Some people seek comfort in the emotion of a mountaintop spiritual experience, continually trying to return to that feeling. For others it’s the thrill of success at work or in hobbies—the accolades, the recognition, even the financial reward—and we begin to find our identity in what we do. These are some of the modern “temples” and “high priests” people turn to today to find meaning and hope, and so forth.

So, let’s turn to today’s passage, which is actually two. I want to read **4:14–16**, and then later we’ll turn to the end of chapter 7. This is God’s word to you and me today.

The first word we get is “therefore.” **This is the third of three “therefores” in chapter 4, and it’s the most cumulative of all three, connecting back to 2:17.** That’s where Hebrews explains the necessity of Jesus becoming human so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest and make

atonement for the sins of the people. It's where this idea of Jesus as our "high priest" is first introduced, and we looked at it two weeks ago.

Now, here at the end of chapter 4, we're given the summary of what that means: Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tempted just as we have. Jesus lived a fully human life and understands what it means to be human.

Now, in one sense he didn't need to become human to know our experience. After all, Jesus created us. **Nonetheless, in becoming human, there's an identification and understanding of the human experience that makes him more accessible to us.** There's trust being built. There's relatability. There's this sense of "He gets us" because he's been there with us. But though he experienced temptation, he remained without sin. No blemishes. It's what allows him to be the once for all sacrificial lamb fulfilling the requirement of the Old Covenant that a spotless sacrifice be offered for the atonement of sins.

All of this allows us to approach him with confidence. **Verse 16 says we may approach "the throne of grace" with confidence.** The throne is not described as a throne of judgment—but a throne of grace. This is a stunning inversion from their old way of thinking.

**In the Mosaic system—in the Old Covenant—approaching the Ark of the Covenant unmediated (without a priest to stand between you and God) meant death.** The Ark sat in the innermost room of the Tabernacle and later the Temple. Its lid was sometimes called the mercy seat, but it was the place where they believed God's holy presence rested and where judgment against sin was addressed through sacrifice. Only the high priest could enter there, and even then only once a year, following precise rituals of purification and dressed the right way, in order to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

**But Hebrews 4:16 says the throne before which we now stand is defined not by judgment but by grace. And importantly, we don't need an earthly mediator to approach it.** We have direct access to God because Jesus has fulfilled everything the old system pointed toward.

I want to briefly summarize chapters 5 and 6 and then get a little more detail about chapter 7 before we look at the closing verses of chapter 7. Chapter 5 then explains the qualifications and role of high priests under the Old Covenant and shows how Jesus fulfills that role perfectly. At the end of the chapter the author briefly rebukes the readers for their spiritual immaturity. Chapter 6 warns about the danger of turning away from Jesus but also reassures them that the author is confident this does not ultimately describe them.

Chapter 7 then brings in a mysterious figure from way back in Genesis 14: Melchizedek. Genesis says very little about him. There is no genealogy of him ever recorded — no birth, no death, no family line. Genesis 14:18-20 says this about him: **“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram [Abraham]... Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:18-20).**

So, Melchizedek outranks Abraham — the lesser is always blessed by the greater, and Abraham pays him tithes. Salem is the city that would later become known as Jerusalem. Melchizedek is its king, and simultaneously its priest of God Most High. He holds both titles because this is before Moses, and the Mosaic Covenant, and before the formal Levitical worship system that defines Old Testament priesthood as we usually think of it.

The fact that he is not a Levite is important — there are no Levites yet (the 12 tribes of Israel – of which the Levites are one – are not established at this point). The fact that he is both priest and king is equally important, because the Mosaic covenant would later divide those roles strictly. A king who tried to act as priest, or a priest who tried to rule as king, was overstepping — and the Old Testament records serious consequences for those who tried (like King Saul did). But Jesus reunifies them both — plus the office of prophet — in himself, which is exactly what the prophets anticipated. We'll come back to that in a moment.

So Melchizedek matters, even though he receives very little ink in the Old Testament. He is a priest who is not a Levite, and he is a king. **Hebrews brings him up because he serves as a type — a preview — of Jesus, who is both our high priest and our king.** And for anyone who might argue that a legitimate high priest must come from the tribe of Levi, Hebrews simply points to Melchizedek: a non-Levite priest whom even Abraham honored. The Levitical system never had the last word on what priesthood could be.

Psalm 110 makes this explicit. Written centuries after the Levitical priesthood was well established, Psalm 110 announces a coming priest of a completely different order — not of Levite descent, but in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews chapter 7 quotes this Psalm twice (verses 17 and 21) as scriptural testimony that God himself speaks of a priest who would transcend the Levitical system entirely.

**The argument is pointed: if the Levitical priesthood had been sufficient, why would Scripture announce a replacement?** The very existence of Psalm 110 is the evidence that the old system was always meant to point forward to something greater. Hebrews claims Jesus is that someone, which brings us to the second part of our passage: **Hebrews 7:23–8:2.**

Verse 23 reminds us that previous priests were ordinary humans who died and had to be replaced. **But verse 24 says that because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. No successors are needed.**

For those who are familiar with Catholic theology, this helps explain why Protestant churches have pastors rather than priests. Catholic theology teaches that in Communion – what Catholics call “Mass” – the bread and wine become Christ’s physical body and blood, and the Mass is understood as a sacrificial act administered by a priest.

Protestants understand Communion differently. We believe Christ is truly present, but spiritually—not physically—and Communion proclaims what Jesus has already accomplished rather than repeating a sacrifice. That’s why

we don't call pastors "priests" and it's also why we don't call the Communion table an altar. No sacrifice is being made.

And the key to understanding this comes in verse 27, when we read, "**He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself**" (Hebrews 7:27). "**Once for all**" is the Greek word, *ephapax*. Say that with me: *ephapax*. Not "Equifax"—Jesus is not checking our credit score—but *ephapax*. The word gets repeated later in chapters 9 and 10 where the same point is repeated: Jesus's death is a once for all sacrifice. It is final and it is sufficient. Unlike the point being made here in Hebrews, His sacrifice need not be repeated.

This also connects to the idea of "the priesthood of all believers." That phrase comes from 1 Peter 2, and it echoes back to Exodus 19 where Israel is called a kingdom of priests. The idea is that every believer now has direct access to God through the one mediator—Jesus Christ. No human priest, no earthly mediator, stands between you and the throne of grace.

Your pastors' job is not to access God on your behalf or make sacrifices on your behalf. **Rather, your pastors' job is to help you understand and use the access you already have in Christ.** This is why in Protestant theology and worship we emphasize the Word of God – the Bible – and the preaching of God's Word. It's how God's people are encouraged in faith and equipped for ministry as the "priesthood of all believers."

The first couple verses of chapter 8 then summarizes the main point: we do have a high priest, and he ministers not in an earthly temple but in heaven itself. And he serves continually because he is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

So, what does all this mean? I think there are three things, and we've already talked about them, but let's make them clear here at the end.

**First, Jesus understands you.** He has lived a human life. He has been tempted. He has suffered. He has experienced pain and exhaustion and

sorrow. I think of our seminary professors when Gwen and I were in seminary. There were some who had served, or even still were serving in a church in a pastoral role, and others who had spent their entire careers in academia – they'd never been a pastor. Professors who were pastors can relate the material to ministry contexts in a way the others simply can't. It was more than theoretical to them—they'd lived it. Jesus is not just about theory. He's lived it. So, when we come to him, there is real compassion and understanding.

**Second, you have access to God Almighty through Jesus, which means you have real help.** Jesus is your mediator, your high priest, and you need no other in order to know God and connect with him. This doesn't mean we're rogue Christians all doing our own thing in our individual relationships with God. Rather, we are part of the body of Christ with Jesus at the head, and we work together under his direction. But every believer has direct access to God through Christ. No mediator is needed. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence—not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus has done once for all.

**Third, we will never need another priest to mediate for us.** Jesus is alive in eternity, seated at the right hand of the Almighty and He is sufficient. There is no succession after him. No one comes later and says, “Now I'm in charge and the rules have changed.” What Jesus accomplished stands forever. As Jesus himself says from the cross, “It is finished.”

**So, you can approach God with confidence through Jesus, and you need no one else.** We approach with humility, yes—but also with assurance that God welcomes you because of Jesus our mediator, our High Priest. If you are suffering or grieving—he understands. He has been there. If you keep returning to your work performance or hobbies or accolades from others and keep returning to them to find meaning, purpose, or assurance and hope...we are asking too much of those things, and instead simply need Jesus. He is the one who ushers us into the presence of God. He is sufficient, and has taken care of everything once for all.

And he invites us to trust him beginning right now, so that one day we will stand before him and his throne of grace, and be with him for eternity. Let's pray...Amen.