

Message Eight: Our High Priest

Hebrews 4:12-16 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 8

By *Escape the Mustard Tree*

Introduction

The second warning ended on a heavy note — an entire generation forfeiting the rest God had prepared for them, done in by nothing more dramatic than unbelief. Right where you might expect the author to soften the blow, he does the opposite. He tells you that the very Word which issued that warning is alive, active, and cutting straight through you right now. And then, in the very next breath, he hands you the one thing that makes that fact bearable: a High Priest who has already walked through everything you're facing and is inviting you to come close instead of pulling away.

Those two ideas — the sword and the sympathetic priest — sit right next to each other on purpose. And once we see how they work together, we'll be ready to step into the longest, densest section of this entire letter, which runs from here all the way to chapter ten.

I. The Sword That Cuts Both Ways

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Paul describes the Word of God as a weapon in the Christian's arsenal: "take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Every piece of armor Paul lists is defensive — the belt, the breastplate, the shield — *and so is the sword*. The sword, being mentioned in like manner as the shield that quenches "all the fiery darts of the wicked one" works in that same manner. We see this most clearly in the example of Jesus Himself; it's the only weapon He reached for against Satan in the wilderness, answering and defending every temptation with "It is written."

But this sword has a second use, one that belongs to the age still ahead of us. John saw the risen Christ standing among seven golden lampstands, and out of His mouth "went a sharp two-edged sword" (Revelation 1:16). To each of the seven churches that follow, the very first words out of His mouth are the same: "I know your works." And later in that same book, the sword becomes an instrument of judgment outright — "I will fight against them with the sword of My mouth" (Revelation 2:16), and at His return, "out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations" (Revelation 19:15). The sword that presently helps us stand against the enemy is the same sword that will one day judge — and it will judge exactly what each of us has done, since "the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is" (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Now notice the tense of verse thirteen. It's not only describing a future courtroom. "There is no creature hidden from His sight" — present tense. Nothing you're doing right now, this moment, is hidden from Him. That is exactly why this verse sits where it does, right at the close of a warning about drifting and hardened hearts. The One who will one day judge your focus in that coming day already sees your focus right now. Nothing about your response to this warning is happening off the record.

II. A High Priest Who Sympathizes

If the chapter stopped there, it would be crushing. It doesn't. "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Feel the turn. The same chapter that just told you nothing is hidden from His sight now tells you to approach Him boldly. Not cautiously. Not from a distance. Boldly — because the One holding the sword is also the One who was tempted in every way you are, yet never sinned, and who now sits ready to give mercy and grace exactly when you need it. The sword exposes; the High Priest welcomes. Both are true of the same Person, at the same time, and neither one cancels out the other.

III. A Book Built on Comparisons

From here, the letter enters its longest and, on first read, most disorienting stretch — running from this point in chapter four all the way through the middle of chapter ten. If you've ever tried to read straight through this section and come away confused, you're not alone, and it isn't because the material is randomly arranged. It's because nearly everything in this section is built the same way: one thing set directly beside a better thing. Let's do a preview of chapters 5 through 10 to set it all up before we get directly into the details—

Two priestly orders stand side by side: the order of Aaron, made up of men appointed from among their own brothers, and the order of Melchizedek, a name we've already met once, back when Psalm 110 first introduced him in Hebrews chapter one (Hebrews 5:1-10). Milk stands beside solid food — believers who ought by now to be teachers, but who still need someone to teach them the elementary truths all over again (Hebrews 5:12-6:1). Ground that drinks the rain and bears a useful crop stands beside ground that yields nothing but thorns and briars, "rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned" (Hebrews 6:7-8). An old covenant stands beside a new one — "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant... I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts" (Hebrews 8:8, 10), a covenant that makes the first "obsolete" and "ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13). An outer sanctuary, entered daily by ordinary priests, stands beside an inner one, entered only once a year, only by the high priest himself — and Christ is shown entering "the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with

hands... not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood" (Hebrews 9:11-12). And animal sacrifices offered again and again stand beside a single, final offering — "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:9-10).

None of these comparisons are decoration. Every single one exists to press the same point from a different angle: something temporary, partial, and repeated has given way to something final, complete, and permanent. Keep that pattern in view as we move through the chapters ahead, and the density of this section will start working for you instead of against you.

IV. The Bookends

Notice where this whole long section begins and where it ends, because the frame tells you what all the detail inside it is actually for. It opens right here, with the Word as a sword that lays everything bare before the eyes of God (Hebrews 4:12-13). And when we finally arrive at the other end of it, we'll find this: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

However dense the material in between becomes — priesthoods, covenants, sanctuaries, sacrifices — the concern bracketing all of it is the same concern that has driven this letter from its very first chapter. Hold fast. Don't drift. Encourage each other, because the Day is coming closer, not further away.

V. Applying "Our High Priest"

So carry both halves of this chapter with you, not just the half that's easier to sit with. Yes, nothing about you is hidden — your attention, your drifting, your faithfulness are all already laid bare before Him. But that same chapter does not tell you to hide from Him because of it. It tells you to come boldly, precisely because grace to help in your time of need is what the throne is there for.

As we move into the dense argument ahead — priesthoods and covenants and sanctuaries stacked one after another — hold onto this anchor so you don't lose it in the detail: every comparison in this section exists to magnify who Christ is and what He has already accomplished, never to threaten what you already possess in Him.

Looking Ahead

Next, we begin working through these comparisons in detail, starting with the third of Hebrews' five warnings and the two orders of priesthood — Aaron's and Melchizedek's — in chapters five and six.