

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a question to ask you, one you might remember from your days in Catechism class or adult instructions: “What’s the threefold office of Christ?” Christ served as Prophet, Priest, and King. As a prophet, Christ not only preached the gospel during his life on earth. Now he even sends believers to share the good news of salvation. As king, Jesus won the battle over sin, death, and the devil, and now he rules in heaven and protects us from our enemies.

But how is Christ our priest? Now, he isn’t like a priest you might be familiar with today, like priests in the Catholic Church. No, Jesus is a priest similar to those in the Old Testament, men who were involved in the daily lives, as well as the spiritual lives of the Israelites. During these last days, these end times, Our Great High Priest Appears! He’s appeared in the past to remove our sins. He appears now to plead for us before God. And he will appear in the future to take us home.

Now when I hear the word ‘Hebrews,’ I think of the Old Testament. Hebrew was the language of the Old Testament. But the book of Hebrews is in the New Testament, right?!?! But when reading it, you get the sense you could still be reading the Old Testament. Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians, and so the writer made numerous references to the Old Testament. He could talk about Jewish customs and expect his hearers to understand him. So when Hebrews talks about the old covenant, Melchizedek, and Moses, the Jewish Christians would have understood their significance in the Old Testament.

And yet, all of those Old Testament pictures serve a purpose. Those references are really being compared to Jesus. The old covenant, Melchizedek, “King of Righteousness,” Moses, and the other Old Testament references were important, but they don’t compare to Jesus. The writer of Hebrews uses those Old Testament customs and pictures to show that Jesus is superior in every way to them.

That’s why I’ve called Jesus the great High Priest. He isn’t just a priest. He’s a high priest. Now, the Old Testament priests had been in charge of offering daily sacrifices on behalf of the Israelites. These sacrifices were the way for the people of Israel to receive forgiveness for their sins. And so because the people sinned every day, these sacrifices needed to be done on a daily basis.

But the high priest, he had an even more important duty. Once every year, God allowed only the high priest to go into the temple to offer a sacrifice that atoned, that paid for all of his sins and the sins of Israel. But even that yearly sacrifice never lasted. Every year the high priest had to make this special sacrifice for the people.

But Christ was the superior high priest. He didn’t need to make his great sacrifice each day. He didn’t even need to make the sacrifice of his life just once a year. Otherwise, Jesus would have had to suffer and die over and over to pay for sin throughout history. But Jesus’ one-time sacrifice paid for all sins of all time.

I guess you could say that the best theme for the Old Testament and its sacrificial system was: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Maybe it would do some good to understand how these

sacrifices for sin worked in the Old Testament. Well, the priests would take an animal, usually a young bull, goat, lamb, dove, or pigeon. After killing that animal, they would drain the blood. And then the priest would sprinkle the blood on the corners of the altar. That would symbolize the forgiveness God gave for the people's sins.

Now, of course, we don't follow these Old Testament practices. We would find it odd to see people building altars and then sacrificing animals on them to pay for their sins. But really, aren't there different ways we try to make up and pay for our own sins? "I wasn't very kind to my wife last night when I yelled at her and criticized her. I'll smooth everything over by cooking her breakfast and by buying her some flowers or chocolates." "I won't tell you how much I raged the last few days because the elections didn't go my way, but now I've calmed down and have come to terms." "I know I lied to get that promotion over my co-worker, but I'll buy him a beer to ease his pain."

You and I might think we're making up for our sins, but you know, that sin is still there. And that's not even touching on sins we aren't even aware we commit, pride, greed, hateful thoughts, jealousy. No matter what sin we've committed, there's absolutely nothing we could do by ourselves to balance out the great debt of sin we owe.

But remember: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." The Old Testament high priest had to shed the blood of an animal in order for there to be forgiveness for the sins of the people. But ultimately, no amount of animal blood could pay for all sin. God knew it. That's why he sent his Son. That's why Jesus appeared on this earth as a man. Unlike any other person, Jesus was able to live that perfect life.

And yet, for us, our High Priest offered the most perfect sacrifice for sin, his own life, his own blood. It was fitting for John the Baptist to say, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Not only was Jesus our perfect High Priest. In his love for us, he even became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The apostle Peter wrote, "You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." Jesus' death on the cross was the perfect sacrifice because he truly was the lamb without any blemish, without sin. His blood, his death was the only offering able to completely satisfy God's judgment. Jesus' one-time sacrifice paid for every sin of all time!

Yes, as our Great High Priest, Jesus appeared on earth to remove our sins. But that's not the only way he serves as our priest. Remember that Jesus served as a prophet and king not only during his time on earth, but he still continues to serve as a prophet and king in heaven today! His office of priest is no different. Our Great High Priest appears now in heaven to plead for us before God.

One important detail I left out earlier was that the Old Testament high priest had another distinct privilege. When he made that yearly sacrifice, the high priest was allowed to enter into the Most Holy Place. You see, the Old Testament temple was divided into two main rooms. There was the Holy Place, where all the priests were able to enter. And then there was the Most Holy Place, where the Ark of the Covenant was located. The Most Holy Place was sacred because it was the place where God told the

Israelites that he was living among them. And so because it was sacred, only the high priest was allowed to enter that room, into God's presence, as a representative for all the people.

But our Great High Priest, Jesus, has gone up to the new sanctuary, the new temple, heaven. As our high priest, he is appearing before the presence of God as our representative. He's pleading to God on our behalf. Jesus is pleading for God to forgive the times when we give in to temptation and sin.

This picture of what's happening in heaven really reminds me of a courtroom scene. I'm a John Grisham fan, so I've read a lot about the court system and how it works. It makes me thankful for lawyers, professionals who understand the ins and outs of our laws. They are best able to defend the rights of defendants who may not fully understand their rights.

Now, probably the worst situation in court would be to not have a lawyer and try to prove your own innocence. But really, without Jesus, that's where we would be, having to defend our crimes of sin. I can imagine each of us standing before God's bench, before his throne, with God, the great Judge, reading off our transgressions. Hitting your sister in a fit of anger. Guilty. Telling lies about your friend and ruining his reputation. Guilty. Taking needless oaths to assure your spouse you're telling the truth. Guilty. And as God continues down the long list, our penalties piles up. "The wages of sin is death" seems so clear when he reads our final verdict: a life sentence in the prison of hell. And this isn't like the life sentence we have in our society, where you can get out after twenty years of good behavior. No, this sentence is for eternity.

That would be terrible, but because of our sinfulness, that verdict would be fair. And yet, we never hear that judgment. Before God could finish reading the verdict, our hotshot lawyer came to our rescue. Jesus, our High Priest, went to heaven to represent us before his Father. The apostle John wrote, "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And Jesus argues against every sin we've committed. "Look at what I've done!" "Billy hit his sister in anger, but I lived the perfect life in his place." "Lucy told lies about her friend, but I took that sin to the cross and died for her." "Joey swore carelessly, but my resurrection from the grave cemented his forgiveness." And for every sin of all time, Jesus just keeps pointing to himself. And that new verdict is sweet music to our ears: "Your sins are forgiven, paid in full!"

It's awesome to know that Jesus loves us so much that he not only died on the cross for our sins, but he is still pleading to God on our behalf. Our Great High Priest is truly superior to any other priest, to any other person throughout history. But his love doesn't even stop there. Jesus appeared in the past to take away our sins, he's in heaven now to represent us, but he's promised he will come back to earth. Our Great High Priest will appear in the future to take us home.

Jesus hasn't forgotten about us here. Hebrews says, "Christ will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation." Throughout the Bible Jesus has promised that he'll come back to take believers with him to heaven. Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

But he'll be bringing salvation this second time?!?! Don't we already have salvation, the forgiveness of sins? When Jesus comes back, he'll be bringing the fulfillment of that salvation, eternal life for all believers. And so we are waiting for Jesus. And we're not just waiting, but as other translations say, we are "eagerly awaiting" Christ's return.

Christmas, right around the corner, is a great example of eager anticipation. I'm sure all of us get at least a little excited when we see those presents under the tree, wondering what's under there for us. Well, parents you know how your children act at Christmas, don't you? Christmas morning, and they're up way before they should be, sitting at the top of the stairs, whispering anxiously...crowding at Mom and Dad's bedroom door, itching to rush in and wake them up, eager to open up their gifts.

That's what our life on earth is like. Sure, God gives us blessings during our lives, but they pale in comparison to the eternal riches waiting for us in heaven. And so, we too are eagerly awaiting, like little children at Christmas, for that greatest gift, life in heaven!

But not everyone on earth is as excited as we are. Many people don't want to talk about the end of life. They want to pretend the end of the world won't come. People want to focus on life right now. They'd rather enjoy life to its fullest without thinking about consequences as after death. But what about you? Are you prepared? Or do your actions put you in the same boat as the rest of the world?

God clearly tells us that this world will end. There will be a judgment day, and there each person will be judged according to their own lives. And yet, we aren't afraid of that day because of Christ. Because of his life, his death, his resurrection, we are sure of our final destination. Our faith rests in Jesus and on the eternal life he has promised. But we want others to be with us in heaven as well. And so we warn others to be prepared, to follow God's commands, so that they are eagerly awaiting Jesus' second coming, too.

In this season of End Times, we lean on Jesus as our great High Priest. We don't need to fear his second coming like the rest of the world does. Why not? Because Jesus appears as our High Priest. He came once to sacrifice himself to remove sin. He's pleading for us in heaven right now. And Jesus will return again to take us to his heavenly home. During our lives, we wait in eager anticipation for Christ's return, when he will finally take us to the mansions he's prepared for us in heaven.