

Hebrews 4:12: *“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.”*

The Character of God’s Word: Understanding and obeying God’s Word is crucial. God is the Living God, and He cannot be ignored with impunity, not even by the redeemed. God is sovereign in all things, Lord of all. He is creator, savior, and sustainer. He loves humanity which He created. He is gracious and merciful. He is intrinsically holy and righteous. People are intended to live in ways compatible with God’s nature. All information necessary for living a life pleasing to God is available in Scripture.

God’s Word is *“living and active”* having life in itself. It endures forever (Psalm 119:89). God lives (Hebrews 3:12) and the Word of God (as God’s breath 2 Timothy 3:16), partakes of God’s living character. By His word God brought all creation into existence. His Word seems to vibrate with active, effectual power as it marches to fulfill the purpose for which it was spoken. The Word of God enables us to examine our thoughts to distinguish what comes from our fallen nature from what comes from the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In the prologue to the Gospel of John we learn the Word of God was with God in the beginning, and the Word is God. In Isaiah 55:10-11, God says, *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”*

Living, Active and Endures Forever: Because God’s Word is living and active, there is no end to the insight to be derived from it. It endures forever, its truths are eternal, so it is always there to help and encourage us. We can diligently study the same passage every day and after years of such study still gain new insight into its application in our lives. Just before he was stoned, Stephen in Acts 7:38 referred

to God's Word as ***“living oracles.”*** In 1 Peter 1:23 Peter refers to, ***“the living and abiding word of God.”***

The description of God's Word as ***“sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit”*** is a metaphor referring to the astounding ability of God's Word to discern and assess our thoughts, to expose the deepest concerns of our heart, and to enable us to see sin and unbelief that otherwise lies hidden in our heart. Piercing to the division of soul and spirit is sometimes interpreted to mean spirit and soul are separate immaterial things. But humans consist of a material body in union with an immaterial soul. The soul includes all immaterial aspects of a person. Spirit is not a separate immaterial aspect distinct from the soul.

The metaphor of the two-edged sword is also used in the Old Testament in a warning against adultery. Proverbs 5: 3-4 ***“For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, ⁴but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.”***

Every believer is to be diligent to hear and, having heard God's Word, to heed it. In God's Word we see Him. He shows us how we appear to Him, and we see ourselves as we really are. That experience helps us to be honest with God, to trust His will, and to obey His commands. James says God's Word is like a mirror revealing who and what we truly are. What the Word teaches us is of value only if we are obedient doers of that Word. James 1:23-24 ***“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.”*** If we trust God, then His Word enables us to know how to be obedient to Him and how to claim His promises.

God's Word is effectual; it accomplishes its purpose. God's Word is penetrating. It reaches and searches the deepest secret places in our heart. God's Word is discerning and acts like a mirror to reveal our true self. How we use the knowledge we gain from God's Word is vital. We are to be obedient followers of what the Word teaches us. Jesus said we demonstrate our love for Him by obedient actions (John 14:15). Obedience confirms our faith. Confession and desire to turn from evil come before forgiveness.

Hebrews 4:13: *“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.”*

This verse continues the thought begun in 4:12, but the focus shifts from God’s Word to God Himself. Nothing can be hidden from God and everyone must ultimately give an account of their life to Him. Everyone is vulnerable to God’s scrutiny and judgment. In the sight of God no one can hide their self, their deeds, thoughts, nor their emotions. In the discerning gaze of God everyone appears fully exposed. All are accountable to God.

The choice of whether to follow Christ or not is of utmost seriousness. We should be thankful that God’s Word is an instrument by which every nuance of one’s condition, both good and bad, can be revealed. God is gracious and merciful. He knows our faults and our good points. We can go to Him to confess and repent our sin and seek His forgiveness and His guidance in our life.

Hebrews 4:14-16: *“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. 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. ¹⁶ 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.”*

Believer’s Great High Priest in Heaven: No one can escape giving an account of their life to God. Believers should be greatly encouraged that they have been redeemed and are now represented in heaven by their Great High Priest who sits at the right hand of the Father. From His incarnate experience as a man, Christ can *“sympathize with our weaknesses.”* He enables us to *“draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace.”* These three verses are the introduction to a discourse on Jesus’ qualifications to be high priest. Later, in 5:1-4, the author reviews the Old Testament description a high priest’s role and calling. A description of Jesus’ qualifications as high priest is in 5:5-10.

The adjective “great” suggests Christ uniquely fills the exalted office of High Priest. He is the man Jesus, but He is also Christ, the unique Son of God. The Levitical

High Priest, once each year, representing all the Hebrews, started at the altar of sacrifice, carrying the blood of atonement, passed through the outer court, then through the holy place, and lastly through the veil into the holy of holies. There he sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat to symbolically atone for all the sins the people committed during the previous year. He stayed in the Holy of Holies no longer than it took to do that task. The blood atonement had to be repeated every year.

The sacrifice of atonement our Great High Priest offered was quite different. Christ's atoning sacrifice was His own innocent blood given on the cross. It was a once and for all atonement for all sins past, present, and future, an atonement never to be repeated. After the resurrection Christ ascended, passing through the heavens to the most holy of all places, the presence of God. And there He remains, not briefly, but forever. He sat down at the right hand of the Father signifying the completion of His work of salvation (no Levitical High Priest ever sat down in the presence of God in the Holy of Holies). After Christ's sacrifice, no further sacrifices are needed. Christ remains at God's right hand making intercession for us.

Let us hold fast our confession: Jesus was sent by God to do everything necessary to procure salvation. Believers are to hold to Jesus. In heaven He continues to intercede with the Father on behalf of believers. Nowhere other than "in Christ" is there mercy, grace, forgiveness for sins, and life eternal. No one else can do what Jesus has already done. No one else can do what He continues to do. Jesus is our Lord and great High Priest.

Jesus, the Son of God, understands our humanity. Some people have thought that High Priests in the earthly Temple could obtain a more sympathetic hearing from God than Jesus in heaven. That makes no sense. Being in heaven in no way hinders His care of us. Jesus, our great high priest, sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes on our behalf. His capacity for sympathy for human suffering and misery is unsurpassed. He has a boundless love for humanity. He understands the human experience from His own earthly personal experience.

Jesus knows us from the inside out. He is "*one who in every respect has been tempted as we are.*" Yet, "*without sin.*" Because He too experienced temptation, Jesus can "*sympathize with our weaknesses.*" The huge difference is that He

withstood all temptation and never sinned. One who gives in to a temptation never experiences the true intensity of that temptation. The sins Jesus atoned for on the cross was not His sins but ours. The word translated “sympathize” means “to share the experience of another.” What a blessing! Jesus, the most sensitive man who ever lived, now exalted in heaven, shares our every experience and feeling.

Draw Near to the Throne of Grace: Therefore, because Jesus is who He says He is and has done what He says He has done for us, *“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.”* We are needy people with urgent needs. Believers are urged to stand firm in the faith even in the face of overpowering trouble and temptation. Stand firm when even when weakness seem insurmountable. This can be done when believers avail themselves of the mercy and grace available from our Great High Priest. Mercy speaks of God’s choosing to not give us what we deserve and instead relieves our misery. Grace speaks of God’s choosing to give us that which we do not deserve, bestowing His favor without regard for merit on those who put their trust in Him.

We are invited to draw near to the throne of grace where there awaits mercy and grace to see us through our troubles, to comfort us in our pain. While not stated explicitly, we know it is our great High Priest who meets us when we come to the throne of grace.

At this point, the author turns to setting forth Jesus’ qualifications as High Priest. He does this by beginning with a review of the role and nature of the office of High Priest according to the Old Testament, and then demonstrating that Jesus meets or exceeds each of the criteria.

Hebrews 5:1-4: *“For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.”*

Old Testament Priestly Functions: The function of the Old Testament priests was to mediate between people and God. Angels cannot do that. God designated men to be priests. Specifically he designated Aaron and male members of the tribe of Levite. All priests were to be Levites. All High Priests were to be direct descendants of Aaron. ***“Every high priest”*** simply means Aaron and those direct descendants who followed him. In mediating between God and men, priests offered sacrifices commanded by God. “Gifts” refers to voluntary sacrificial gifts like peace offerings. Sin sacrifices denote the bloody offerings necessary for sins committed, namely sin and trespass offerings.

The ***“ignorant and wayward”*** points to the Old Testament distinction between sins of ignorance for which atonement could be sought, and sins of presumption for which no sacrifices were available (Numbers 15:27-31). Lacking proper understanding, some sinned by wandering and were to be dealt with gently.

The High Priest’s most important duty occurred once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On that day he went briefly into the Holy of Holies carrying blood of atonement to sprinkle on the mercy seat. Because every priest was himself a fallen man, it was necessary to provide for atonement of his own sins. God addressed that issue in two steps. First, sins of the High Priest were accounted for by having the High Priest make atonement for himself before he did so for the people (Leviticus 16). The atonement made by the High Priest for the people also satisfied the need for atonement for other priests.

On the Day of Atonement, the first duty of the High Priest was to sacrifice a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household. The bull’s blood was taken from the altar of sacrifice through the outer court, then through the holy place, and lastly through the veil into the Holy of Holies where the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat. The High Priest then killed a goat as a sin offering on behalf of the people, and taking its blood to the holy of holies, sprinkled its blood on the mercy seat. Each time he went into the Holy of Holies, he stayed only long enough to sprinkle the atoning blood. A second goat was released into the wilderness as the “scapegoat,” picturing the removal of the iniquities of Israel (Leviticus. 16:10, 20-22). Atonement each year was for sins committed during the previous year.

Why do People need Priests? Priests are necessary because sin separates people from God. Priests were to mediate between God and His people. Priestly offering of sacrifice was a necessary function for atonement. Therefore, having a priest who was acceptable to God was a vital matter. God gave specific rules to determine which men were acceptable to Him as priests. Since it is God's wrath which must be placated, it is essential to follow His rules.

Priestly Requirements Established by God: When the priestly system was established under Moses, God appointed Aaron as the first High Priest (Exodus 28, Leviticus 8). All priests were to be men from the Levite tribe. All High Priests were to be direct descendants of Aaron (Numbers 16:40; 18:1-7). Any exception to either rule required the explicit command of God (Hebrews 5:4). King Saul decided on his own to unlawfully offer sacrifice (1 Samuel 13:8-15) and was chastised by Samuel and God. Uzziah, King of Judah, intruded into the temple in spite of efforts of the priests to dissuade him, and was smitten with leprosy by direct intervention of God and forced to spend his remaining days in isolation (2 Chronicles 26:16-23).

Hebrews 5:4-10: *“And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵So 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”; ⁶as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” ⁷In 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. ⁸Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.”*

Functions of Priest and King Separated but Christ is Both King and Priest: In Israel, the priesthood and throne were carefully separated by allocating the offices of priest and king to different tribes. Yet, Christ, who is not a Levite, was intended by God to be both high priest and King. How?

Christ as Priest and King Explained: Psalm 2:7 and 110:4 provide the answer. Both refer to Messiah. Christ is of the tribe of Judah in the lineage of King David. Therefore, He is of the right tribe to be king. In Hebrews 5:5-6 the author applies the two Psalm quotes to Jesus to demonstrate He meets the special requirements of appointment by God to the priesthood. The question is how can Christ be a priest (and indeed a High Priest) acceptable to God since He is not a Levite and certainly not a descendant of Aaron.

Psalm 2 affirms Christ as the messianic King. Psalm 110 affirms that He is a priest forever. The startling thing is that Christ's priesthood is not Levitical. Christ's priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek. By recognizing that Psalm 2 and 110 are both about Messiah, the author shows that Jesus, the Son of God, is the messianic King, and is a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek. Priesthood of the order of Melchizedek indicates there are significant differences between Christ's priesthood and priests of the order of Aaron (further discussed in Chapter 7).

Melchizedek: Melchizedek briefly interacted with Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20). That is the only time he is mentioned in the Old Testament. Yet, Melchizedek is an important person. His interaction with Abraham was obviously long before the giving of the Law through Moses and the requirement that priests be Levites. Melchizedek was both king of Salem and a priest of God Most High. That combination would be legally impossible under the Levitical system established much later through Moses. Melchizedek seems almost an aside with little if any connection to the main story of the Old Testament. But God included Melchizedek for a purpose and that purpose is clearly revealed in Hebrews. Melchizedek is a priest of an order much older than that of Aaron, one that had different rules (since Melchizedek is a king as well as a priest). Melchizedek is a "type" of Christ. Christ is unique. He is God's Son, a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek, and the messianic king. These things further mark Him as superior to any other priest known in Judaism.

Days of His Flesh: While flesh often has an ethical sense in Scripture, "*In the days his flesh*" of verse 7 is used in the physical rather than ethical sense. The specific

event the author refers to seems to be Jesus' Gethsemane experience. On that night Jesus knew His death was imminent. The prospect of the physical pain of crucifixion was horrible to contemplate, but the spiritual horror of separation from the Father, which would occur as He bore the penalty for our sins, was truly overwhelming. Jesus prayed that He be spared that agony if possible, but nonetheless not His will but the Father's will be done. In His humanity He submitted to the Father's will and suffered a horrible death thereby completing His experiences as a human from conception to birth to child to adult to death. He made it possible for believers to never have to endure separation from God. Christ's full qualifications as our great High Priest in heaven include His divine call, genuine human life, death, resurrection, and return to the Father. He became our heavenly High Priest after His ascension.

Christ is the source of eternal salvation not partial atonement one-year at a time. His sacrifice was sufficient. No further sacrifices are necessary. All who trust and obey Him have eternal salvation. He is indeed a great High Priest, a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

What is Next? Dull of hearing.