

The Greater Priesthood

SPEAKER Wes Neely

DATE Sunday, April 7, 2024

PASSAGES Hebrews 7; Genesis 14; 1 Chronicles 23; Numbers 18

MESSAGE Begins at 1:14:43 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Levitical priesthood was not a footnote in Israel's life — it was an entire tribe, funded by a tenth of everything the nation produced, running sacrifices that had to be repeated every year. Hebrews 7 says all of it was pointing past itself. Jesus is a high priest from a different order altogether, and the thing that qualifies him is not ancestry but an indestructible life.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Hebrews is written to people with a Jewish background — around 90 to 95 percent of Christians at the time — who were trying to make sense of what happened to the system they had been raised in.
- ◆ The priesthood was enormous. David numbered 38,000 Levites over the age of thirty and assigned them work in the temple, courts, gates and music. They were, in effect, the local government.
- ◆ Their support was a tithe of the whole nation. For scale, the United States spends roughly two to three percent of GDP on the military — the Levites were a bigger line item than that.
- ◆ Melchizedek matters not as a mystery to be solved but as a parallel to be seen: king of righteousness, king of peace, receiving a tithe from Abraham and blessing him.
- ◆ Jesus is from Judah, and Moses said nothing about priests from Judah. That is intentional — he is not a better Levite, he is a priest of a different order.
- ◆ What makes a priest of Melchizedek is “not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”

- ◆ Levitical priests kept dying and being replaced, so the sacrifice never stopped. Jesus holds his office permanently, which is why he can save to the uttermost.
- ◆ Whatever we are still clinging to because it feels safe is, like the old system, a brittle comparison to what Christ actually offers.

► 1:14:43

Hope had been away from Hebrews for about four weeks — Easter, and the weeks around it, had pushed the study aside. Wes picked it back up with a one-sentence recap of chapter 6: the forgiveness of Christ is limitless. There is no quantity of sin a person can accumulate that makes Jesus say he has changed his mind. That is the pastoral warmth the argument of chapter 7 sits inside.

Who this letter was written to

► 1:16:07

Wes made a point of orienting the room before opening the text. The New Testament letters were written overwhelmingly to people with a Jewish background — whether they lived in the land or were scattered across the Roman Empire, they carried the assumptions of the old system with them. Reading Hebrews without that in mind flattens it. The audience is not being handed a new idea; they are being asked to let go of the one they were raised on.

What a priest actually was

► 1:18:24

Most of us picture one man, once a year, going behind the veil. That is the high priest on the Day of Atonement, and it is a small fraction of the picture.

“David assembled all the leaders of Israel and the priests and the Levites. The Levites, thirty years old and upward, were numbered, and the total was 38,000 men. ‘Twenty-four thousand of these,’ David said, ‘shall have charge of the work in the house of the LORD, 6,000 shall be officers and judges, 4,000 gatekeepers, and 4,000 shall offer praises to the LORD with the instruments that I have made for praise.’”

1 CHRONICLES 23:2–5 ↗

The whole tribe of Levi was set apart, not a handful of men in vestments. Gatekeeper was not a doorman's job — it meant checking who belonged where and adjudicating disputes. If you had a problem with a trade or a contract, you took it to a Levite. They were the closest thing the nation had to a local government.

► 1:21:12

Which raises the practical question Wes went straight to: tens of thousands of men who farm nothing and sell nothing still have to eat. The Levites alone received no allotment of land when Israel entered it, because they were to live scattered among the people.

“To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting.”

NUMBERS 18:21 ↗

Ten percent of the nation's produce, permanently. Wes reached for a modern comparison and was careful to call it apples and oranges: about ten percent of American GDP goes to mortgages and rent, and only two to three percent goes to the military. The priesthood was a larger share of Israel's economy than the largest military in history is of ours. This was not a minor institution. It was the load-bearing wall of the culture — and it was the only way a person's sin got dealt with. You could not do it at home. You went to a Levite.

Melchizedek, and why he is in the argument

► 1:25:15

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him... He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.”

HEBREWS 7:1–3 ↗

The background is [Genesis 14](#), which Wes cheerfully admitted is one of those chapters you read twice and still cannot follow — a wall of kings with unfamiliar names making war on each other. Underneath the list: Abraham's nephew Lot was living in Sodom, the northern kings swept through and carried him off with everyone else, and Abraham raised a force, went after them and won.

► 1:28:15

On the way back he meets Melchizedek, whose name means king of righteousness and whose city, Salem — king of peace — is very likely the place that later becomes Jerusalem. We headed off the obvious detour. The line about having no father, mother or genealogy is not a mystery box to pry open, and the sermon is not going to speculate about pre-incarnate appearances or angels. In the Old Testament you normally get a man's father, his grandfather, his trade. Here you get nothing — and the silence is doing work. What the author wants seen is the parallel to Christ, and the fact that this priest, whose office came from God rather than from a family line, commanded honor from Abraham himself.

A step ladder, and who is at the top of it

► 1:30:51

“See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!... But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.”

HEBREWS 7:4–7 ↗

The argument runs like a ladder. Israel tithed to the Levites; the Levites descended from Abraham; Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. So the priesthood Melchizedek represents stands above the one Israel knew — which sets up the question the room may never have asked.

Why isn't Jesus a Levite?

► 1:32:30

Jesus is from Judah, and there were never any priests from Judah. The lazy answer is that Jesus is Jesus and can bend the rules. We rejected that. The tribe is deliberate: he is not a better Levite, he is not in that order at all.

“Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood... what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek?... For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests... who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”

HEBREWS 7:11–16 ↗

The whole biblical file on Melchizedek is three passages: Genesis 14, one line in the Psalms — “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” — and Hebrews 7. That is all there is.

► 1:37:29

So what does the order consist of, if not a bloodline? Wes said he wrestled with this. The Levitical office was a family business: your father was a priest, so you would be one. Melchizedek has no such line — one man in Genesis, and then Jesus. The defining mark is the phrase in verse 16. And note what it does not mean: Melchizedek was a man and presumably died. The indestructible life describes the spirit and the character, not a body that never wore out. In Christ it is true in every sense — he died, came back with a glorified body, and his soul was never touched by sin. That, and not a genealogy, is what makes him a priest of this order. Nobody fits the titles king of righteousness and king of peace better.

What the Jewish believer was being asked to give up

► 1:35:25

Wes asked the room to stand in their shoes. The temple, the sacrifices, the temple tax, the tithe to the Levites — a thousand years of it, the staple of their society. And now they are told it was never able to make them perfect. Their answer, essentially: *but this is how our sins get paid*. The reply of Hebrews is that a high priest is simply someone who takes your sin, goes before God and makes the offering, and the old system’s real purpose was to teach the people they needed one — a better one, from outside the tribe that had been doing it.

Once, and still

► 1:39:49

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

HEBREWS 7:23–25 ↗

► 1:40:44

Twenty-four thousand men on temple duty in a single generation under a single king. Wes asked the congregation to do the arithmetic on the offerings — and, if they could stand it, on the gallons of blood — required to make what was never even a partial payment. Every year another Day of Atonement.

Every generation another high priest, because the last one had died. All of it, he said, a shadow next to the blood of one man.

“For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily... since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.”

HEBREWS 7:26-27 ↗

And the intercession is present tense. If the function of a high priest is to intercede, Jesus is doing that today, was doing it a hundred years ago, was doing it the day after he rose. Which removes an anxiety the old system could never remove — no worry about human error, about a priest performing it wrong, about whether you brought the right sacrifice or missed the deadline.

What we are still holding

► 1:44:33

Wes brought it home without pretending the original problem is ours. None of us is tempted to go back to the sacrificial system. But the shape of the temptation is familiar: “what we hold on to is always such a brittle, pale comparison to what is offered.” The letter’s word to its first readers was not that their old ties were bad — they were given by God and they were beautiful — but that they were nothing next to what they were pointing at. He named the offices in one breath at the end: judge, king, high priest, and the architect of our lives and our faith.

The closing note was rest. We have a high priest who never makes a mistake, whose forgiveness is a treasure that cannot run out, and who is on our side — which Wes called both a wonderful and a humbling place to stand.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- [1 Chronicles 23:2–5](#)
- [Numbers 18:21](#)
- [Hebrews 7:1–3](#)
- [Genesis 14](#)
- [Hebrews 7:4–7](#)
- [Hebrews 7:11–16](#)
- [Psalm 110:4](#)
- [Hebrews 7:23–25](#)
- [Hebrews 7:26–27](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Before this message, what did you picture when you heard the word “priest”? How does a tribe of 38,000 doing courts, gates and music change that picture?
2. The old system meant your sin was dealt with somewhere else, by someone else, on a schedule. What is appealing about that, and what does it cost?
3. Wes argued that Jesus being from Judah rather than Levi is deliberate. Why does it matter that our high priest comes from outside the system?
4. “He always lives to make intercession for them.” What difference does the present tense of that verse make to how you pray this week?
5. Name one thing you are holding on to because it is familiar rather than because it is good. What would it take to let go of it before next Sunday?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely serves as Hope Chapel's middle school pastor. He also manages the church's workdays and helps lead the mission trip to Mexico, and he was introduced from the platform as a member of one of Hope's small groups. He opened the service with news of the church's summer fun nights — hoping to build them around small groups so that people who do not know each other can meet before they ever need to ask each other for help.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jabRdbtTfQY&t=4483s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.