

Our Hope for a New Year

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn back to our reading in Hebrews chapter 7. I'll read again verses 23 to 25. We're going to be thinking about a theme today, but we'll be beginning here.

Hebrews 7 at 23. The former priests were many a number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office.

But he, Jesus, 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.

So in this first Sunday of a new year, as we think about hope for a new year, I want to focus your attention on one key truth in the book of Hebrews, the continuing priesthood of Jesus exalted in heaven.

Now, priests were called by God throughout the Bible to be intermediaries. They acted on behalf of human beings before God.

[1 : 2 3] Of course, all that was looking to the great priest who would come, our great high priest, Jesus, the God-man, the unique priest, both God and man, who is a priest who offers himself as we read as a sacrifice for us.

Now, the verses we've just read there distinguish Jesus from all the many priests who have gone before, verse 23, because they were prevented by death from continuing office.

They had to be succeeded and succeeded and succeeded through the centuries by yet more priests. He's different, because verse 24, the exalted Jesus in heaven holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever.

And so, the logic, verse 25, he can therefore guarantee complete and final salvation to those who come to God through him, because he's always alive and he's always active on their behalf, as the text says, interceding for them.

Now, when we think about the priesthood of Jesus, we tend rightly to focus on what he did on earth as the priest who suffered for us, who offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

[3 : 0 0] He has done that once and for all and forever, and that finality cannot be stressed often enough.

But Hebrews also is teaching us that his priesthood is not over. His suffering is over. His sin-bearing is over, but his priesthood is not finished.

So if you're a Christian today, then Jesus is your priest today. He's thinking about you today, and he's acting for you today, and that will be true every single day of this year.

So that, I hope, will be a message for us for 2018, for every single day, that Jesus is our great high priest, and that is true for every moment of every day of this year and every year.

So the question is, what's he doing, and what does that mean for those who trust in him? Now, it may be a bit of a risk to say that I want to highlight seven things, seven words as we think about the present priesthood of Jesus, but we'll see how we get on, and we'll certainly be finished 30 minutes from now.

[4 : 29] So seven words, and we may accelerate through them as we get nearer the end. The first word is presence.

I want to highlight at the very beginning the sheer presence of exalted incarnate God in heaven, that Jesus is really there, and really there in the body as the God-man.

Now the fact that Jesus is there is a wonderful thing to reflect on. The same Jesus who was here, the Jesus who took human nature here, and who lived and died and rose again in this world, has ascended from this world and has gone to heaven.

And that's the great sign of his work being absolutely perfect and final and complete, that he has been received by heaven, welcomed by heaven, and invited to sit at the right hand of the majesty on high.

This begins, it's very first paragraph by saying he made purification for sins, and he sat down at the right hand.

[5 : 59] So he's there as our triumphant high priest. The other priests had to stand, he brucees, every day and do their work, but he has finished his work and he has returned to heaven and he sits at the right hand, that part of his work done.

And so today we celebrate the fact that Jesus is our victorious high priest, present in heaven at the right hand of God.

Jesus has taken that journey from heaven, that sort of parabola journey where he came all the way down here in humiliation, and he has returned all the way up there in exaltation, and there he is in glory forever.

As he said, in his high priestly prayer, as we often call it, John 17, that he asked to be invested with the glory that he had with the Father before the world was, and now he has that glory as the God-man, victorious as our priest in heaven seated the work done.

But as we think about his presence there, his visible physical presence there, I want to highlight something else too that I think is very important, and in relation to the language of intercession at the end of verse 25 here in our text, he always lives to make intercession for them.

[7 : 42] Now I believe that intercession means more than this, we'll come to that, but I believe that part of the intercession of Jesus in heaven is simply his presence as the exalted one who still bears the marks of a suffering in this world.

Remember that in the Gospels, we read it in Luke's Gospel, the risen Jesus in that body that will never die still bears the marks of suffering.

In Luke he shows them his hands in his feet, in John he shows them his hands in his side, he still bears the wounds. And in the vision of Revelation 5, when John sees Jesus, the Lamb, standing by the throne, he sees one who still bears the mark of slaughter as a lamb, though alive.

So Jesus, I believe, still bears the marks of his suffering today, and I believe that he is the only one in heaven who will ever retain the marks of wounds they received in this world.

You will not retain these wounds, psychological or spiritual or physical or in any other way, but Jesus still bears the physical scars, and he is celebrated in heaven always worthy as the lamb who was slain.

[9 : 14] So I think that that presence in heaven of the living lamb who was slain, of the priest who offered himself a sacrifice, of the one who still bears these scars, is part of his intercession in heaven.

The presence of, in a great poem by Edward Shilata a century ago, the Jesus of the scars. I love the language.

And the Jesus of the scars in heaven is a continual reminder in the Father's presence of the victorious sacrifice of Calvary. So there's a sense in which the physical presence of Jesus is an intercession.

It's a visible prayer, a vivid and powerful and continual argument for the salvation of all whom he has bought by his obedience and his wounds.

So Jesus now appears in heaven victorious, and he appears in heaven with these marks on your behalf as the ultimate argument for your ultimate salvation.

[10 : 24] And it's true for every single day that Jesus is your high priest at the right hand, present in heaven.

Secondly, the word access. Jesus our high priest gives you access to heaven.

He brings you and your needs into the presence of God, and you have direct access to him as your high priest.

And you have continual access to heaven through your high priest. I don't think it can be stressed enough that you and I have permanent access to the throne of heaven because of our access to our high priest who is in heaven.

Now, in the Old Testament, the high priest could only enter the holy of holies once a year on the day of atonement, no other day.

[11 : 31] And the other priests could never enter that very holy place. And the people were limited in their access to various courts of the temple. But when Jesus died, the veil of the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom as a sign that the work was done and access was opened through his sacrifice.

And Hebrews tells us that through Jesus, as our priest in heaven, we have a very special direct access through him into the holy of holies above.

The heavenly holy of holies. Listen to Hebrews 10, verse 19. We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh.

And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

We really do have access to heaven through our priest. In the language earlier in Hebrews at the end of chapter 4, it says, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

[13 : 01] Then the logic of that is, as the writer says, we can now with confidence draw near to the throne of grace to find mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.

You through your priest have direct access to heaven with all of your prayers. I was saying to somebody here recently, I had been very frustrated, phoning about something, and I was on the phone for 50 minutes being told every few seconds, please be assured that your call is important to us.

We're experiencing an unusually high level of calls at the moment, you know that. You don't get that from heaven, please be assured your prayer is important to us.

We're experiencing an awfully high volume of prayers at the moment, but you will be dealt with as soon as the high priest is free to deal with you.

But please go to our website. We have Mary, we have angels, we have all kinds of other saints who may be able to help with your particular problems. So please explore our website to see if there's some other way in which none of that.

[14 : 21] We have direct immediate access every moment of every day 24-7 to Jesus and through him to all the resources of heaven.

We are never left in a queue as we pray through our great high priest. We have access. Third word is sympathy.

Sympathy, the fact that Jesus feels with us and fought us. The passage I just referred to, famous passage in the end of Hebrews 4 where it says we have a great high priest, Jesus the Son of God has passed through the heavens.

That reminds us of another glory of the priesthood of Jesus in terms of his human sympathy. Verse 15 there says, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

That's very important to the writer to the Hebrews. He's mentioned the theme earlier in chapter 2, 17 and 18. He had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people, for because Jesus himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

[15 : 56] Of course, that's a huge theme, the real humanity of Jesus and the fact that he retains that humanity. It's important to see that Hebrews is saying that his heavenly priesthood isn't just based on what he did at Calvary, though that's the fundamental, but it's based on his whole human experience throughout his life in this world.

It's very important to me personally that I have a high priest who is still truly human and who remembers what it's like to live in this world and to suffer and to be hungry and to be thirsty and to be afraid and to know bereavement, and at last he knows what it is to taste death.

This has been through the gamut of human experience in this world, and he remembers that and he sympathizes with us in all of our needs and struggles and temptations in our real experiences in this world.

We do not have a detached savior. We do not have somebody who got rid of his humanity when he left this world, but we have somebody who had become incarnate forever, truly human and who remembers and who sympathizes with us in our struggles.

That's true as well for every single day as you go through your trials and tribulations, whatever they might be. As you come to God in prayer with your struggles, you're coming to a high priest who cannot but be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, Hebrews is saying.

[17 : 48] He knows, he feels, he has empathy and sympathy beyond our imagining, and you can take anything to Jesus, and Jesus will listen because Jesus has a heart for human beings because he is a human being, sympathy.

Fourthly prayer. Jesus, I believe, prays. Let's go back to verse 25 and chapter 7.

I referred already to him making intercession for us, and many believe that that intercession is just his presence.

And I believe that it's more than just his presence. I believe even though people I've been reading over the last week or two who know a hundred times more than I do, a million times more than I do about this, say it's just his presence, I find it very difficult to get away from the language of intercession that is so often used for people to pray and request and ask.

Why would the language of intercession be used here and also towards the end of Romans 8 of Jesus if we're not meant to see that in some sense he actually does pray?

[19 : 23] I'd be glad I don't have time today to go into the discussions people have had over many, many centuries about whether intercession means that Jesus actually prays.

And as I say many I've been reading say, no, it's a nonsense to think that he prays in heaven. He prayed on earth as our mediator, but he doesn't pray in heaven.

That would make him look weak, it would make the Father look unwilling, and anyway we're meant to imagine his lips moving terribly, terribly quickly as he prays vocally and verbally.

Well, no, I don't think we are. But Jesus who prayed as our mediator on earth, the point is this, he is still our mediator in heaven.

He is still our go-between there in heaven. And he goes on acting for us before the Father. So it's not a lesser pleading with a greater, it's not the willing pleading with the unwilling, but it's God speaking to God.

[20 : 34] It's God the incarnate Son as our mediator speaking to God the Father on our behalf. Now I think that one of the very important things about this is that it reminds us of not just the sheer importance of prayer in God's economy of grace, that the God in whom we believe has decided to act in response to prayer, and he acts in response still to the prayers of Jesus.

Now he's doing this, I believe, as the God-man of course. He'll say, well, how can this human being, as man, hear our prayers and make our prayers and pray other prayers of his own?

Well, he cannot. But he's the God-man. And in the mystery of divine communion and communication, he, Jesus, makes our needs known to the Father.

It's beyond our comprehension, I accept, but I believe Jesus prays for us as the God-man in communion with the Father with all the omniscience and sympathy of his deity and all the exalted knowledge and love and sympathy of his humanity, that the God-man is communing with the Father in a kind of prayer for me and for you and for all of his people and for all of our needs, all based in his own atoning work at Calvary.

And doing this, I think, according to the texts, in context, it's about his own people. He prays for his own people. He intercedes for those for whom he has paid the ultimate price.

[22 : 32] And I believe he also prays for those who will be his people, who will come to know him in faith. As in the High Priestly Prayer of John 17 and verse 20, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.

So he prays for his own, and he prays for every one of his own, no Christian, present, or to be a Christian is excluded from the communing with the Father of Jesus as he prays for us in heaven.

Now some of you will want to talk about this afterwards because you don't quite think I've got it right. But I believe this with all my heart, and I know many of you find this to be the teaching of the Bible and also to be tremendously encouraging in your daily life, that Jesus prays for you when you're awake.

He prays for you when you're asleep. He prays for you when you're walking with him closely, and he prays for you when you're wandering away from him.

He's been praying for you from the moment you were conceived and before, and he will pray you at last into his presence in glory.

[24 : 00] One theologian I was reading from three or four generations ago says this, it is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us even when we are negligent in our prayer life, that he is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers, and that he prays for our protection against the dangers of which we were not even conscious and against the enemies which threaten us that we do not notice it.

We are saved by the prayers of Jesus, and surely it's time for us to say thank you for the prayers of Jesus.

So Jesus prays, and let me just add this detail, the Holy Spirit prays too according to Romans 8. The other great text about the intercession of Jesus, we have Hebrews 7.25 and we have Romans 8.34 about Jesus who is at the right hand of God who indeed is interceding for us.

So Romans 8 says that Jesus intercedes for us, but a few verses earlier, 26 to 27 in Romans 8, we read, likewise the Spirit helps on our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words, and he who searches his heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

So that passage is saying that the Spirit intercedes in our hearts while Jesus intercedes in heaven. The Spirit prays in your heart with you and for you, and Jesus prays in heaven.

[26 : 07] I hope this won't sound irreverent, but when we pray, we are part of a prayer triplet.

Many of you are in prayer triplets with two other human beings, but when we pray, if I'm reading these texts correctly, when you pray on your own and you feel lonely in your prayer, remember that you even then are part of a prayer triplet, as the Spirit prays in your heart and as Jesus is praying in heaven, you're never alone when you're praying on your own.

The fifth word is offering. I better move on. Offering. Priests throughout the Bible offer things to God. They offer gifts and sacrifices to God.

You couldn't be a priest without having something to offer. So Jesus has offered the final sacrifice. So what is he still offering in heaven?

Well he's offering what we give him to offer. We bring, we are priests, that's another theme. We are priests.

[27 : 25] Every man and woman who's a Christian is a priest and we bring our offerings to God. We bring them to the high priest and he on our behalf offers them acceptably in heaven to God.

Think of praise, prayer and service. He offers our praise. He sanctifies our praise. He endows that praise on earth and he presents our praise in heaven.

We always do everything we do, for example in church. We do it through Jesus. So we praise through Jesus.

He's the ultimate worship leader there in heaven. And when our praise, even my praise reaches heaven and has been tuned by Jesus, it sounds awesome to heaven.

And he offers our prayers. You pray through him. You pray in Jesus' name and he sanctifies your prayer and he presents your prayers to the Father in his own name.

[28 : 39] And he also offers your service. All our service is done through Jesus Christ. For example, listen to 1 Peter 2 and 5 talking about us as priests offering spiritual sacrifices, all the things we offer to God in service.

And it says they are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. So how is my poor, puny, sinful, weak service acceptable to God?

Because it's offered through Jesus and Jesus, my high priest, takes my service and sanctifies it and makes it acceptable in heaven.

He offers it to God. Let me try and illustrate just that detail. Think of two little girls out for a walk.

One is just maybe two to three years old and the other one's a little older. And the little one sees some flowers, a couple of different colors of flowers.

[29 : 53] And she says, I want to pick these for a mummy. So she just grabs a handful and picks the flowers. Now, she has picked these flowers and she's going to give them to mummy.

But they're a bit of a mess. So our big sister says, give me that bunch for a minute. And the big sister takes some of the grass away and takes some of the weeds away and two or three bits of litter away.

And we arrange as the flowers, gives them to the girl and the presented to mum. Now, it's her gift. They are the flowers she wants to give to mum.

But somebody else has taken that and made it acceptable and got rid of the weeds and the rubbish before they're presented to mum.

Jesus I think in heaven is a great high priest. He's doing that all the time with our praise and our prayers and our service for him. He's taking it and making it perfect and offering it before the throne as the priest who offers sacrifice to God.

[31 : 06] And that's true for every day and for all your service for this year that Jesus will be doing that. Sixth word is blessing. The priests had a ministry of blessing, especially in benediction.

We read that at the end of Luke 24, remember, when Jesus ascends, his hands are outstretched. He raises his hands over the disciples and it says that while his hands are still outstretched like a priest, he's lifted up before them as a sign that his priesthood is continuing and he is going to heaven to benedict them.

He's going to heaven to bless them. It's so reminiscent of the priesthood, the high priest in the Old Testament. Remember Aaron, end of number six, we hear the Aaronic benediction often, especially here at baptisms.

The Lord bless you and keep you and it's about grace and peace and Jesus is the fulfillment of Aaron, the high priest and Jesus goes to heaven to bless us with grace and peace.

All the blessings we enjoy flow from his nail pierced hands. And again, that is true for us every do this year, that in Christ we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[32 : 37] From these heavenly places, our high priest pours down his blessing from his nail pierced hands and we live daily under the benediction of Jesus.

And the last word is governing. And Jesus as high priest governs his church. You remember that the people of God in the New Testament are called the temple of God in various ways, in various places.

You like living stones are being built, a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices. And Hebrews teaches that Jesus is the priest in charge of his temple, beginning of chapter 3.

Moses was faithful in God's house as a servant, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. Or 1021, we have a great priest over the house of God.

So who's in charge of this church? We think Derrick, Corey, and various others who we see every week involved in the work here.

[33 : 54] But ultimately, we have a great high priest who is over this church and over his whole house on earth.

Jesus is in charge of the house. Jesus rules his temple on earth. So as we think about the church this year and the church is throughout the world, and we long and hope and pray for the peace of the church and for blessing on the church, who do we look to?

We look to our great high priest who is over the house of God. I've Anglican friends who often talk about a priest in charge or not having a priest in charge.

Well, we all have a priest in charge and we trust him for this year to look after his house, to look after his temple, and to bless his work in and through his church as he governs it in this world.

Well, that's something else to say in conclusion, but I did say 30 minutes, 32 minutes ago, and that was two or three minutes in.

[35 : 10] So let me just finish with one final verse from Hebrews, Hebrews 6, 19 to 20. We have this for this new year, hope.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind that curtain where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become our high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Amen. May God bless his work.