

This is Emei mountain in Sichuan, China. It is 10,167 feet tall and is one of four sacred Buddhist mountains in China. I have climbed to the top of this mountain twice.



When I climbed Emei-san, I had to keep my eyes fixed upward rather than on the danger. When I climbed it there were roughhewn rocks, or a dirt path, and if you slipped you died. Three times I was on my knees crawling I was so scared of falling. I had to keep my wits about me and keep my eyes on the next step, on my upward movement and not on the danger. Now they have concrete steps and handrails. **Fear focused my actions.**

This was last week's passage: 'Fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest (He 3:1 NIV).'

The takeaway from today's message **is a healthy fear of God focuses our thoughts and attitudes on life's goal.**

We are going through **the book of Hebrews** this fall. It is 'a strange and difficult book'¹ for several reasons.

Hebrews can be 'strange and difficult' because ...

1. Five different cultures (Roman, Hebrew, Hellenists, Hellenistic Christians, and our culture.
2. It is a sermon to a very specific audience. They knew what he was talking about even though **we need a decoder ring to figure it out.**
3. It uses symbols from Judaism to make two arguments:
 - Don't go back to Judaism.
 - Jesus, the Messiah, is better than Judaism. Jesus is the *fulfillment* of all that the OT looked forward to. Here is the key verse: 'God had planned something better for us (He 11:40 NIV).'

Today's **OT symbol** and **argument** is that Jesus is better than the OT Priesthood.

¹ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 710.

Something Better

The Book of Hebrews – Better than the High Priest



The preacher's argument goes: **Jesus is the one man who is both priest and sacrifice. He 'replaces the old high-priesthood ... because his "appointment" is on a higher level.'**²

- The **high priest** was the key figure 'in maintaining Israel's relationship with God' especially the Day of Atonement ritual in the inner sanctuary.³
- But this idea of a **high priest is obscure** to us *as is* the mysterious character, Melchizedek.

Let's review.

Minute Review

- Jesus is better than the angels, 1:4-2:18. The angels are mere servants.
- Jesus is better than Moses & Joshua, 3:1-4:14. Moses and Joshua were faithful servants.

Let's jump in.

1. Superior to the High Priest, 4:14-16.

'Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.** ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (He 4:14-16 NIV).'

Verse 15 is powerful; **Jesus knows temptation and weakness** *but* did not sin.

- He can **understand** and **meet** our every need.
- We are to **hold firmly and approach God** with confidence, **because his grace is so rich.**

2. Jesus is Qualified, 5:1-10.

² France, Expositor's, 71.

³ R.T. France in Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, eds., The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2006), 71.

Biologically, Jesus could not have been a priest because he was **not a descendent** of Aaron. But our preacher reminds them of two **other qualifications**:

‘Every high priest is selected *from among the people* and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (He 5:1 NIV).’

- The high priest **is to be chosen from among the people**, so he can serve as a representative for them before God.

‘And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it *when called by God*, just as Aaron was (He 5:4 NIV).’

- **As an example of his priestly role**, our preacher points to **Jesus’ prayers**: ‘During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission (He 5:7 NIV).’ The preacher will return this near the end of this sermon segment.

The third of five warnings is next. Remember: **A healthy fear of God focuses our thoughts and attitudes on life’s goal.**

3. Third Warning, 5:11, 6:4-6.

He tries to ‘shock his readers’ to keep them from falling back into Judaism:⁴ ‘We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand ... ⁴It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (He 5:11, 6:4-6 NIV).’ This is the **most controversial** part of Hebrews. Wow, these are real believers ...

- They have **received revelation** – enlightened.
- They tasted the **heavenly gift**.
- They have **shared in the Holy Spirit** – the Holy Spirit dwells in them.
- Tasted the **good things of God** and have an inkling of what is coming.

For people like that ‘it is impossible ... to be brought back to repentance.’ *What does that mean?*

Let’s pause the message for some theology.

Remember, **theology is man’s thoughts** about God.

In church history, theologians have slid to **two sides**.

⁴ France, *Expositor’s*, 79.

On the **one hand** there is an ...

Assurance of Salvation

- Calvinism: honors God's sovereignty at the expense of human free-will.
- Paul - 'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ...³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Ro 8:29-30 NIV).'
- Jesus - 'No one will snatch them out of my hand (Jn 10:28 NIV).'
- I know a lot of people who believed in the 'once saved always saved' position. Many of them just wanted a license to do as they pleased. They prayed 'the sinner's prayer,' got their fire insurance policy, and now live ungodly lives.

On the **other hand** there is a real ...

Possibility of Falling Away

- Arminianism: honors human free-will at the expense of God's sovereignty.
- Jesus - 'Love of *most* will grow cold (Mt 24:12, Lk 6:35).'
- Jesus' parable of the soils (Mk 4). Three of the four soils 'receive the seed with joy (Mk 4:16),' but only one of the three is good soil.
- I know some who were terrified they had committed the unpardonable sin. They live in fear.

Friends, be wary of politicians or pastors who present you with an either / or choice.

Binary choices are a means to divide and conquer.

Often **truth is more nuanced** and requires us to hold two contradictory positions at the same time.

Both are true ...

1. Timing issue. The preacher gives us a **word picture to illustrate his point**: 'Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. *In the end* it will be burned (He 5:7-8 NIV).'

- *When is the land going to be burned?* At the end of the harvest, after it has proven to be unproductive.
- Paul wrote, 'Wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed (Ro 13:11 NIV).' Our ultimate salvation is future.

2. Pastoral issue. It is like our children, sometimes you must be firm and sometimes you must be gentle.

- To those **who doubt and fear**, they need assurance of God's eternal salvation.
- To those in **danger of walking away**, they need a rude awakening.

3. Mystery issue. While God has **revealed himself** to us through history, the Bible, and most wonderfully in Jesus himself, **we cannot fully understand God**.

- **Be careful of theologies** that do not leave room for God's *mystery*. **If someone has god all figured out, it's probably not *the* God, but their projection of a god.**
- Isaiah – 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord.
⁹ 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8-9 NIV).'

Back to the message.

4. Encouragement, 6:9-20.

Our preacher has just delivered his strongest warning, so he quickly moves to encourage them: 'Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them ... ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised (He 6:9-10, 12 NIV).'

- He is saying, '**God has something better for you.**'
- **God is a just God.** We can trust God to do what is right, just, and good.
- **Just imitate those** who are more mature in faith.

He uses **three illustrations** to put them at ease.

First, **of the promise God made to Abraham**. They have security in Jesus, if they continue to hold on, because God keeps his promises.

- 'It is impossible for God to lie (He 6:18 NIV).'
- The unchanging plan is backed up by God's truthful word.

Second, the word picture of an **anchor**.

- 'We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (He 6:19 NIV).'
- If you have put your trust in Jesus, your hope is secure like an anchor.

Third, the word picture of the **inner sanctuary**.

- 'Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek (He 6:20 NIV).' The **inner sanctuary** is a safe place to these Hellenistic Christians. They remember **Joab who** 'took hold of the horns of the altar (1Ki 1:50)' as a refuge.

He moves back to Melchizedek as an illustration of Jesus' superiority. Here is the short version.

5. Like Melchizedek, 7:1-10.

'This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High ... ²and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything ... ⁴Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder ... when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor (He 7:1, 2, 4, 10 NIV).'

The preacher's point is that, *like Melchizedek*, *Jesus has a superior status to the Levitical High Priests*.⁵

- **Levi had not even been born**, and yet his father gave a tenth of the plunder to him.
- Melchizedek *was* a **king and a priest** – the only OT precedent.⁶

Therefore, *because Jesus is like Melchizedek*, his priesthood is superior to Judaism's.

The rituals were imperfect.

6. Imperfect Priesthood, 7:11-19.

'If *perfection* could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest ... not in the order of Aaron?

- He reasons: *If the priesthood and sacrifice took away sin, why did Israel look forward to a Messiah?*

But Jesus 'Has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life ... ¹⁸The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹(for the law made nothing *perfect*), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God (He 7:16, 18-19 NIV).'

⁵ Melchizedek 'is superior to Abraham ... (and) to Abraham's descendants', France, Expositor's, 91.

⁶ France, Expositor's, 71.

- Note the **two key words** in Hebrews: perfect and better. **Jesus and his work** bring a perfect salvation; **it is something better**; it is what Judaism looked forward to!

Simple put, Jesus is better.

7. Jesus is Better, 7:20-28!

‘Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant ... ²⁴ because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ **Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them** (He 7:22-25 NIV).’

- This contrast shows that Jesus is better than a high priest – he is our eternal savior and intercessor.⁷

‘Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. **He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.** ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever (He 7:26-28 NIV).’

Jesus is better than the OT’s system of high priest and sacrifices because he is ...

- Holy, blameless, set apart, and exalted.
- He **did not need someone** to sacrifice on his behalf.
- He **offered himself** as a perfect sacrifice, v. 27.⁸
- He is eternal, so it does not need to be repeated.

Conclusion.

Our preacher has been **pleading with them** not to turn back to their former belief. He uses **a healthy fear of God to focus their thoughts and attitudes on life’s goal.**

I have a fear for our student – our schools and universities. Many students are in danger of slipping into secularism, a religion of self.

⁷ ‘Explicit contrast ... makes Jesus a complete savior and ... also a pastorally effective high priest ... (with) unending intercession for his people’, France, Expositor’s, 98.

⁸ ‘It is the combination of his humanness and his sinlessness that makes him uniquely qualified to be the Savior of humanity’, France, Expositor’s, 101.

At the conclusion of today's message, we are going outside and gather around the flag and pray for our schools and children. There is a national movement called *See You at the Pole*. This week thousands of kids prayed around the flagpole. We are going to join them as best we can.

I came across an article by Sean McDowell,⁹ his father is famous for his apologetic books and work on college campuses. Sean picked up his father's work and noticed some things that should cause us to pray.

What has changed for students?

1. Students are asking questions about God at a younger age than before.
2. Nonbelievers now have equal access to young people.¹⁰
3. There has been a move from objective to subjective approaches to faith.¹¹
4. The rise of relational brokenness shapes how students process truth. 'Truth in the context of relationships,' and the next generation approaches everything through a therapeutic lens.

A healthy fear of God focuses our thoughts and attitudes on life's goal.

Eight times the bible says wisdom begins with a healthy fear of God: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction (Pro 1:7 NIV).'

Pray.

⁹ Sean McDowell, 'A New Horizon: What Cultural Shifts Mean for Apologetics Today,' Outreach (May/June 2025) pp. 45-48.

¹⁰ 'With the advent of the internet, smartphones, social media and YouTube ... Muslims, progressive Christians and more use these mediums to evangelize our kids away from the historic Christian faith. The playing field of influence has been largely leveled.'

¹¹ 'Science is largely considered an objective enterprise ... but religion and morals are considered subjective.'