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A BETTER PRIEST FOR A BETTER COVENANT

Hebrews 8:1-13

By

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Hebrews Lesson 23

A Better Priest for a Better Covenant Hebrews 8:1-13

One of Satan's aims is to diminish the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. You can evaluate a teaching or practice by this: if it diminishes the glory of Christ, it is not of God. Satan has used legalism to divert Christians to the superficial and external, as opposed to the substance, which is Christ (see Col. 2:16-23). If he can get our focus onto rules and outward observances, we are fooled into thinking that we are "good" Christians. But if the person and work of Jesus Christ is not our focus and joy, we can do all sorts of outward things, but miss the vital thing, which is to glory in Christ and to know Him (see Phil. 3:1-11).

Sometimes the enemy uses trials to get our focus off of Christ. Rather than allowing the trial to drive us to Christ for sustenance and comfort, we turn to worldly counsel that anyone could use, whether he knows Christ or not. The counsel may even "work," in the sense of providing relief from our pain. But if it is relief without Christ, it is deceptive relief.

Sometimes the enemy uses the temptation of the world and its pleasures to lure us from Christ. As with the seed sown on the thorny ground, "worries and riches and pleasures of this life" (Luke 8:14) choke out the Word that directs us to Christ. We become satisfied with all that the world offers, forgetting that its pleasures are fleeting at best. Only Christ satisfies for time and eternity.

The first readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews were tempted to abandon Christ and return to Judaism under threat of persecution. Judaism had been the practice of their forefathers for centuries. God had revealed Himself through the Hebrew Scriptures and the religious practices spelled out there were comfortable and satisfying. Why endure persecution for their faith in Christ? Why not just go back to the old ways that had been followed for centuries?

To counter this danger, the author sets forth the supremacy of Jesus Christ over the old ways. He has shown that Jesus is the one of whom the entire Old Testament was written (1:1-2). He is the

fulfillment of all that it pointed toward. As God's priest according to the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is far superior to the Levitical priests. In chapter 8, he shows that...

Jesus is the better priest who mediates a better covenant.

In 8:1-6a, he shows that Jesus is the better priest who ministers "in the true tabernacle." In 8:6b-13, he shows that Jesus mediates a better covenant, the new covenant that had been predicted by the prophet Jeremiah.

This chapter raises a number of difficult exegetical and theological issues, which I cannot delve into here. As I mentioned several weeks ago, the question of how the Old Testament law relates to believers under the new covenant is one of the thorniest issues in all of Scripture. These verses are at the center of that debate. I confess that I am not completely clear on all of these matters. If I leave you with unresolved questions, I invite you to dig deeper.

The author is working through an argument here, and so I will explain his line of thought first, and then offer some applications.

1. Jesus is the better priest who ministers in the true tabernacle (8:1-6a).

There are three points:

- A. Our high priest is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens (8:1).

The author states the main point of what he has been arguing: "We have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens" (8:1). This is in contrast to the Levitical priests who were weak and imperfect (7:28). They served in the earthly tabernacle on behalf of the worshipers. But Jesus, our priest according to the order of Melchizedek, has ascended into heaven and taken His seat at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1). The author reverently refers to God as "the Majesty in the heavens." It connotes God's sovereignty as the King of kings, and His splendor as both Isaiah (6:1-7) and Ezekiel (1, 10) saw in their visions. It was one of Calvin's favorite ways to refer to God. As a title for God, it is used only here and in 1:3 (see also, Jude 25).

The Levitical priests always stood when they were in the tabernacle or temple, indicating that their work was never done. But

Jesus has taken His seat at the right hand of God's throne, having accomplished His work of purification of sins (1:3). He has done all that can be done to accomplish our redemption. As He cried out from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). To add any human works or merit to what Jesus accomplished on the cross is an affront to His death as our perfect sacrifice.

The right hand of the throne is a place of honor, power, and exaltation. "In the heavens" refers to the dwelling place of God. Rather than an imperfect human priest who can only enter the Holy of Holies once a year, and never stay there for long (much less sit there permanently!), *we have* a high priest seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens! The point is, "Why would you even *consider* going back to the old system when you have such a high priest permanently seated in such an exalted position?"

B. Jesus ministers in the true, heavenly sanctuary (8:2-5).

There have been a number of interpretations proposed for these verses, but without wading through all of them, I think that his main point is that the earthly tabernacle was only a shadow. The true tabernacle is the very presence of God in heaven. "Sanctuary" refers to the Holy of Holies within the tabernacle. Although Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, He is not inactive. He is ministering as a priest.

The author's point in both 8:2 and in 8:5 is that this sanctuary and tabernacle in heaven is the real thing. The earthly tabernacle was only a copy and shadow of heavenly things. To support this, he cites Exodus 25:40, where the Lord told Moses to make all things according to the pattern that he had been shown on the mountain. Some think that God actually revealed a model of the tabernacle to Moses. We cannot know this for certain, but the point is that Moses was not free to design the tabernacle according to his own ideas. The design of the tabernacle revealed some specific truths about the person and work of Jesus Christ. It was a limited, earthly picture of heavenly, spiritual truths. As such, the priests who served in the earthly tabernacle were inferior to our high priest, who serves in the true, heavenly dwelling place of God.

In 8:3-4, the author repeats what he had said in 5:1, that the high priests offered both gifts and sacrifices. Thus it was necessary

for this high priest (Jesus) to have something to offer. He is referring back to 7:27, that Jesus offered Himself once for all. He will deal with this again (9:12-14, 25-28; 10:10-14). But here he only refers to it in passing. In 8:4 he points out that if Jesus were a priest on earth, He would not be qualified, since He was not from the tribe of Levi. Thus it follows that Jesus' priesthood must be exercised in heaven, not on earth. His statement (8:4), "there are those that offer the gifts according to the Law," indicates that the temple was still standing in Jerusalem, which dates the writing of Hebrews prior to 70 A.D., when the temple was destroyed (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 292).

Thus far the author has argued that our high priest has taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. So, rather than ministering in an earthly tabernacle that is only a shadow, Jesus ministers in the true, heavenly tabernacle. Verse 6 serves as both a conclusion to what he has said and an introduction to the next section. The conclusion is:

C. Since Jesus ministers in heaven rather than on earth, He has obtained a more excellent ministry (8:6a).

It must have been an impressive sight to see the high priest in the splendor of his priestly garments going through the elaborate rituals at the tabernacle. The worshipers would have had a few minutes of suspense every year when the priest disappeared behind the veil. Their imaginations must have run wild as they wondered, "What is it like in there? What is he seeing? What is he doing? Will he come out alive?" Then he appeared and they all breathed easier.

The author is saying, "That was nothing compared to where Jesus is at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens! Their yearly ritual was nothing compared to our high priest offering *Himself* once for all on the cross, and now serving in heaven on our behalf! His heavenly ministry is much more excellent than their earthly ministry ever was!" The implied appeal is, "Don't even consider returning to the old, earthly system that was a mere shadow. Stay focused on Jesus, who is the reality and fulfillment of all that the old system pointed toward."

Two applications before we consider the second section of our text: (1) *Jesus serves in heaven on our behalf—let Him serve you!* Our

tendency is to focus on how we should serve Jesus, and there is certainly a place for that (1 Cor. 15:58). But there is also a place for pausing from our busy activities and allowing Jesus to serve us. Do you recall Peter's horrified response when Jesus took the towel and basin and washed the disciples' feet? He said, "Never shall You wash my feet!" But Jesus countered with, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8-9). We have to allow the Lord, through the water of His Word, to wash off the dirt that we pick up from walking in this world. As our high priest, He ministers on our behalf before the throne of the Majesty. Take the time before Him to allow His ministry to cleanse your soul.

(2) *The heavenly and spiritual is more real than the earthly and visible—keep seeking the things above!* The author is making the point that the earthly tabernacle was *not* the real thing. The *real* tabernacle is in heaven, where Jesus now is seated on our behalf. We are prone to think that the earthly is real, but the heavenly is less real than what we can experience with our senses. But Paul tells us, "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:1, 2).

At the very least this means that we should meditate so often on the things of God that they become more real to us than the things on earth. We can only apprehend the things of God by faith in the truths of His Word. Meanwhile, we're surrounded and bombarded by all of the things that we see on earth. Unless we deliberately and consistently cultivate this heavenly vision, our priorities will get out of kilter. We will get caught up pursuing the transitory and missing the eternal. Like the rich man Jesus spoke of, we will build more storage units to hold all of our earthly goods, but we will be poor in relation to God (Luke 12:15-21). So remember, the earthly is the shadow; the heavenly is the real.

2. Jesus mediates a better covenant (8:6b-13).

Since Jesus is the better priest who ministers in the true tabernacle (8:1-6a), He also is "the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises" (8:6b). The better promises of this better covenant are those of the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied of (8:8-12 cites Jer. 31:31-34 from the LXX). Again, many books (and entire theological systems) have been based on

the interpretation and application of these verses, so I can only skim the surface here. Note three things:

- A. The better covenant would not have been needed if the first covenant had been faultless (8:7).

As I mentioned in our study of 7:11-19, the idea of the Law of Moses being defective in any way would have been unthinkable for the Jews! The Law was the foundation of their entire way of life. It was the basis of their religious worship, which was the very warp and woof of being a Jew. In chapter 7, the author argued that the change of the priesthood required a change of the law also, since the two were inextricably bound together. He used Psalm 110:4 to show that David had predicted the change of the priesthood. Here, he cites Jeremiah 31 to show that the Old Testament itself also predicted a new covenant that would replace the old, Mosaic covenant. The reason for replacing the old covenant was that it was defective.

He is quick to add that the problem was not with the Law itself, but with the people who failed to keep it: "For finding fault with *them*" (8:8). Paul said the same thing: "The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). But he goes on to say, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). As sinners, we are unable to keep God's holy Law. It did not supply the change of heart or the enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit that we need to obey it. As Paul explains in Galatians, the purpose of the Law was not to impart spiritual life, but rather to reveal our sin so that we would be driven to faith in Christ as our only remedy (Gal. 3:19-24).

- B. Since God found fault with the people, He promised a new covenant (8:8-12).

This covenant would be made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." Some argue that the church is the new Israel, and since Jesus said that the communion cup is the new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20), the church has replaced Israel as the recipient of this new covenant. But Romans 11:17-21 says that the branches of unbelieving Israel were broken off so that we (Gentiles) might be grafted in. Thus we who believe share in God's new covenant promises to Israel, but as Paul goes on to say, after

the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, all Israel will be saved. Then he refers to Jeremiah 31, "This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:27).

It is also important to recognize that while these new covenant blessings have been inaugurated by Jesus, their complete fulfillment awaits His second coming (see Craig Blaising & Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* [Baker], pp. 200-211). Craig Blaising writes (p. 208),

While the New Testament is clear on the fact that the new covenant has now been inaugurated, that is that blessings belonging to the new covenant are now being dispensed to all those who believe in Jesus (whether Jew or Gentile), it is equally clear that new covenant promises are not yet fully realized. The promises in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel describe a people who have the law written in their hearts, who walk in the way of the Lord, fully under the control of the Holy Spirit. These same promises look to a people who are raised from the dead, enjoying the blessings of an eternal inheritance with God dwelling with them and in them forever.

After further discussion, he adds (p. 209), "Only in the future will those blessings be granted in full, and the complete transformation promised by the new covenant will be realized. That future will arrive when Jesus returns to earth."

I can only skim the features of the new covenant here (we will look at them in more depth next week). Note five things:

- 1) The new covenant will be distinctly different than the old covenant that Israel did not keep (8:8-9).

The emphasis here is on discontinuity, not on continuity. God says, "Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers..." This is a major problem, in my estimation, for Covenant Theology, which views the old and new covenants as two different administrations of the same covenant of grace. The emphasis in that view is on the unity and continuity of the covenant throughout history (*The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter Elwell [Baker], p. 280), whereas the emphasis here is clearly on discontinuity.

- 2) The new covenant will involve God putting His laws into the minds and hearts of His people (8:10).

In Deuteronomy 29:4, just prior to his death, Moses told the Israelites, "Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear." They had the Law written in tablets of stone, but they lacked the heart to obey. But in Ezekiel 36:26-27, which parallels the new covenant promises in Jeremiah, God promises, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." In Romans 6:17, Paul rejoices "that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient *from the heart* to that form of teaching to which you were committed." The new covenant blessing changes our hard hearts!

- 3) The new covenant will involve a close relationship between God and His people (8:10b).

"I will be their God, and they shall be My people." This is really nothing new, in that God promised this to Israel at the exodus (Exod. 6:7). But, as Leon Morris explains (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:78), "The God who saves people in Christ is the God of his redeemed in a new and definitive way. And when people have been saved at the awful cost of Calvary, they are the people of God in a way never before known."

- 4) The new covenant will mean that every person will know the Lord (8:11).

The point is not that there will be no place for teachers (Eph. 4:11), but rather "that the knowledge of God will not be confined to a privileged few. All those in the new covenant will have their own intimate and personal knowledge of their God" (*ibid.*, p. 79).

- 5) The new covenant will bring complete forgiveness of sins (8:12).

The sacrifices of the old covenant could not completely remove sins (10:1-4). They were the shadow of the good things that were to come in Christ, who by the one sacrifice of Himself, completely paid the debt of our sins (9:14; 10:10, 14)!

Thus the better covenant would not have been needed if the first covenant had been flawless. Since God found fault with the people, He promised a new covenant.

- C. From the time that God promised a new covenant, the old became obsolete and was about to disappear (8:13).

Jeremiah's prophecy (about 600 B.C.) started the countdown to the time when the old covenant would disappear. In A.D. 70, when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, Israel ceased to exist as a nation and the sacrifices, which were the heart of the old covenant system ceased to be offered. In light of the argument of Hebrews (especially verses like 8:13), I cannot accept the view that literal sacrifices will again be offered in the Millennium. The argument here is, the perfect has come in Christ; why go back to the old and obsolete?

Conclusion

We will look at these blessings in more detail next week. For now, ask yourself, "Is Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, the mediator of the new covenant, the consuming focus of my Christian life? Do I daily seek to know Him, to love Him, and to glorify Him because He gave Himself on the cross for me?" While Christianity requires obedience, it is not the external obedience of rules and rituals, but obedience from the heart out of love for God. "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Col. 3:1-4).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean (practically) to "seek the things above"?
2. With all of the worldly things that bombard us, how can we cultivate keeping our focus on Christ?
3. Since there are commands to obey in Christianity, how does it differ from being under the Law?
4. What does it mean to have God's laws written on our hearts?

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