

The Heavenly Reality of Jesus' Ministry

Hebrews 8:1-6

Sometimes, Biblical truth seems so – theoretical. We might even be tempted to say, unreal. The Bible describes images and realities that are too often unseen and distant from us. Now this often leads us not to really believe many things the Bible tells us is so. Since they have little bearing on the day-to-day realities of my life, so what?

This next section of Hebrews is addressed to people who would have felt and thought this in a more piercing way than we do. Most of them had professed Christ out of a religious system that the Bible had established with its solemn feasts and majestic rituals and priests in their vestures and the warm blood of real sacrifices. Their worship of God would have been very present and tangible and real and physical. It smelled and tasted and touched and was seen.

Now, they must believe what they cannot see. The New Testament is shatteringly silent about worship places and times and things. It still speaks of great realities, but they tend to be invisible. This led them and sometimes leads us to a basic question: “Why is this better?”

John Piper helps us with this illustration: Imagine for a moment that you are a child. In fact, children, imagine for a moment that you are lost in a large store. We've all seen this happen. The child peering up into faces, wandering aisles accompanied by plaintive little cries of, “Mommy...Mommy.” But then around the corner you spy your mother's shadow. And you are glad. You know it's her. And you run towards the shadow and then there she is in all her comforting and possibly even scolding presence. You see, why would you only be satisfied with the shadow? This is the message of this huge section. We now have the eternal reality – why go back to shadows?

The Greatness of His Present Ministry

(v.1-2)

Don't miss the author's main part. In all of the details of his argument, don't lose sight of Jesus who is just this kind of High Priest.

¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.

It seems to me that this is a very important principle for us in our own approach to the Word. As we study, learn, and communicate God's Word, there are a myriad of sometimes confusing details which support and strengthen what we believe. Depending on your gifts and abilities, you may or may not be able to understand or retain all the details. *But we must hear and understand and retain the main things.* In all of the complex discussion about unbelief and rest in chapters 3-5, we must remember the main thing: *that we must believe God in an obeying way that looks like rest and trust.* If I may make it even simpler: *you do what you really believe.*

So in all of this long discussion on the Old Testament Levitical priesthood which seems to so distant from us and the arguments so trivial, let us not forget the main thing: *Jesus is just this kind of High Priest-Sovereign, sufficient and sympathetic.*

Its Majesty**(v.1b)**

We've already seen this phrase. We understand that it is rulers and kings and sovereigns who sit on thrones. Here is the majesty of our priest. He has been exalted above the heavens and is seated on a throne.

This means He will command us and will rule us. The sufficient and sympathetic High Priest is still also our Sovereign. *And none of these are in tension.* What He has told us to do He identifies with us in our weakness to do them and in our failures to obey them and is utterly sufficient to cleanse and forgive.

Don't ever forget this when sometimes the commands of Jesus appear harsh. Don't forget this when people want to disobey Jesus because, well, He is so gentle and sympathetic. And don't forget this when the accuser and your conscience reminds of sin in the past and wants you to not believe that Jesus' sacrifice really does deal with them.

Its Ministry**(v.2)**

Jesus serves or ministers in the heavenly tabernacle. Heaven is a real place. It was made by God. It is somewhere we go and something He will bring to us at His appearing. It is where angels and cherubim and seraphim and saints are. And there in some amazing way, Jesus is and being there serves as the finished sacrifice.

Another contrast is highlighted here. Not only is Jesus seated and serving in the true tent or heavenly tabernacle, but it is the one set up by God and not by Moses. Moses was to make the Old Covenant tabernacle after the pattern given him and he was responsible to erect it in the precise way God ordered. But the place of Jesus' superior priesthood is greater because God has erected it. He has created it by His own word and power. Thus, point by point, the superiority of Jesus' Priesthood is argued.

And so we have verse two. He sat down in verse one and He serves in verse two. We have a sovereign who serves. This is not what we expect and yet it is just like what the Bible pictures. Jesus in His regal majesty and magnificent greatness serves His own. Is this not a pattern and motivation for us? I do not see here that Jesus just serves good Christians. He serves his people. He is great as God. He is great as the God-man, His incarnation. He is great in His resurrection. He is great on the throne. But it may be the most amazing greatness of all – He sat down and He serves.

The Permanence of His Present Ministry**(v.3-5)**

Jesus' ministry is great and it is permanent. This is argued against the passing nature of Old Testament shadows. The shadows are passing and insubstantial. The reality and substance and permanent reality have come in Jesus.

³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."

Now what is it that makes this ministry of Jesus permanent?

Its Purpose**(v.3)**

Priests exist to offer sacrifices and offerings. This enduring principle means that Jesus came as a priest, He also had to offer a sacrifice and offering. He had to have something to sacrifice. And this was Himself.

Its Problem**(v.4)**

But there is a problem. Jesus could not be the priest because there were already other priests ministering. God only recognizes one order of priests and their sacrifices at a time. If the Levitical system was permanent and unchanging and irreplaceable, then Jesus' sacrifice was not legitimate.

Its Pattern**(v.5)**

Here is the solution. Earthly priests minister a shadow and copy, not the reality. They should have understood this because Moses was warned to follow exactly the pattern or blueprint which came from the reality shown him on the mountain. This warning comes because of two things:

They were to follow the pattern exactly. They must not deviate in any thing. What was built was to meet the precise specifications.

They were to realize that what they built was an earthly copy of a heavenly reality. What they worshipped in was not the real thing.

The inevitable conclusion then is that they served as earthly priests in the copy of the heavenly reality *as a visible, but passing model* of what was to come at the cross. And once the sacrifice of Jesus has come, there is no more need for the shadow.

Therefore, we are not coming to an earthly priest, but to Christ, our heavenly priest. Drawing near to God is based on unseen realities not outward structures. This is the ever transforming truth of New Testament worship. That is why the only statement Jesus ever made about worship itself is that it must be in spirit and truth.

Jesus' heavenly ministry is great. It is permanent. And finally, it is superior.

The Excellence of His Present Ministry**(v.6)**

The rest of chapter eight and nine are going to show us all the sparkling facets of the diamond of the excellence of Jesus' ministry. I will save all of that for the proper time. From this verse, be gripped by how much superior the sovereignty, sufficiency and sympathy of Jesus are.

⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

Better Covenant

Here is the standard of measurement. Jesus' heavenly ministry for us is *just as superior* to the Levitical ministry as the New Covenant is the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. And He will drive this home with great force by making contrast after contrast between the Old and the New Covenants.

Better Promises

The richness and greatness and betterness of that New Covenant rests on its richer and greater and better promises. If Old Testament saints were to believe God promises in an obeying way, then how much more must we to whom are given so much better promises?!

Now, listen to me. When we either deny that we are a part of the New Covenant or shift the focus of our relationship with God to other emphasis, we are not only doing something the Bible does not, but also devaluing the greatness of what Christ has done. When we honor the New Covenant we exalt the Lord Jesus. The New Covenant is not just for Jews, it is where the saving work and promises of God are located. But we will talk more about that next week.

Reflect and Respond

It is evident that we need to screw these simple truths deep into our hearts. The story is told of Greg Norman, the great Australian golfer who is known for his stoic and aloof presence during the game. He entered the final round of the 1996 Masters with a 6 stroke lead over Nick Faldo. In 18 holes, he blew that lead and watched his victory roll away on a 16 foot putt on the 18 green by Faldo. When that shot dropped in along with Norman's heart, Norman went to Faldo looking to shake his hand. To Norman's surprise, he was embraced with tears. And his own tears flowed. Later he related, "I did not cry because I had lost. I've lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I'll lose a lot more. I cried because I'd never felt that from another man before. I've never had a hug like that before." We often try to go through life as Christians, just a little stoic and a little aloof. We need the embrace of our great High Priest. We've never before had one quite like it—one that is great, permanent and superior. For in it, a sovereign serves.

So then, be satisfied with Jesus. Be satisfied with Him:

- When you go to work...
- When you go to school...
- When you work at home...
- When you are tempted...
- When you feel alone...

pray.