

Hebrews 8
Jeremiah 31
Psalm 63

“A Better Covenant”

March 21, 2021

How do you think of yourself?
As the son of God?
Or as the bride of Christ?

Jeremiah 31 calls you to think of yourself in both ways.

You are a son. (v9)
And you are a bride! (v4)

But also in verse 15-17 – you are a mother,
in verse 22, you are a daughter –
and for that matter, in verse 24 you are a sheep.

I think that God did this because he wanted us to see how all our gendered relations
reflect the relationship between God and his people.

It all starts with God.

As one commentator puts it,
“God loves like a lover wooing his bride,
like a father caring for his family,
like a shepherd watching over his flock,
like a mother mourning her lost children.” (C. Wright, p314)

When you are suffering -
when you are grieving -
you need to remember that your only hope is to turn away from yourself
and turn to the LORD your God!

God promises in Jeremiah 31 that he will restore the fortunes of Israel -
he will bring the captives back
and unite Israel and Judah again under the throne of David.

But there's a problem.

What guarantee do we have that next time it will be different?
So what if God restores Israel?
What will make next time different from last time?

The difference is that God will change our hearts!

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 63 –
a song that calls us to draw near to God through Jesus!

Sing Psalm 63
Read Hebrews 8

What are you worried about?

Are you dealing with family troubles?

Are you facing difficult decisions at work?

Are you wrestling with sin and temptation?

Hebrews 8 speaks to you.

The priestly ministry of Jesus is exactly what you need.

You might think at first blush that a passage comparing Christ's priestly work
with that of the Levitical priesthood
has very little to do with your situation.

But Hebrews thinks differently—

which really means that *God* thinks differently,

because God inspired the book of Hebrews.

He gave this “word of exhortation” to those who struggle—
to weak Christians who need encouragement.

When the apostles wrote to weak, struggling churches,

they didn't spend a whole lot of time analyzing the problems —
and trying to understand the underlying motivations.

They didn't give a list of “how to” tips
or provide “practical suggestions” for “fixing things.”

If you insist on putting a band-aid on a severed artery — go ahead —
but your patient is going to die!

When the apostles write to the weak — to the helpless —
they don't waste time with nonsense.

They point the church to Christ.

They point those who are struggling to who Jesus is and what he has done,
and they call *you* to a life of participation in Christ:

because of who Christ is, and because of what he has done,

you have a new identity.

And so everything in your life must be reoriented around him.

1. So What's the Point? (8:1-2)

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^[a] that the Lord set up, not man.

I know — you are probably wondering:

“Why should I care what sort of high priest I have?”

We aren't familiar with priests anymore.
We don't have people who offer sacrifices on behalf of the community—
Or do we?

We have all sorts of “priests” who seek to mediate various blessings.
Do you want a long life?

Well, then go see your priest – the medical doctor,
who will give you potions to make you feel better,
until you die...

Well, maybe *long* life isn't the point.

How about a happy life?!

I know that I'm going to die – so just keep me entertained and happy!

Athletes, actors, singers are the priests of our entertainment culture.

Where do you look for life, for happiness – in a word, where do you look for blessing?
That is your priest.

Every priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices.

The priest's job is to placate the deity,
offering the required sacrifices and bringing the blessing of the deity
upon his people.

Otherwise the deity just might curse his people, and all sorts of bad things happen.
When people are feeling stressed out or upset,
what do they do?

Turn on the device!

Tune out from everyone and everything!

Have you ever tried to interrupt a sports fan when his team is winning?

A computer gamer in the middle of his favorite game?

If you think about it objectively, it's absurd.

Whether you are watching that game or not is irrelevant to the outcome.

And yet you are drawn to it, and your happiness becomes tied to the result.

But in the end, it proves to be nothing but a temporary distraction –
and you die.

What priest can you turn to who can deliver you from death?

This central section of Hebrews (chs 6-10) is dealing with the better priesthood,
the better covenant, and the better sacrifice,
that have come in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We saw in chapter 7 the better priesthood.
Chapters 8-9 now speak of the better covenant, the better sanctuary, and the better sacrifice.
(You can see the connection between the high priest offering gifts in 8:3 and in 9:28)
Indeed, the superiority of Christ's priesthood is the foundation
for saying that Christ is the mediator of a better covenant.

We heard in chapter 7 how Hebrews uses Psalm 110
to help us understand what Genesis 14 says about Jesus.

Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek because Jesus is a priesthood of one.
He is a priest who is also a king—
and most important of all, he is a priest who is first and foremost a Son.
*For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests,
but the word of the oath, which came later than the law,
appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (7:28)*

Verses 1-2 of chapter 8 then gets to the very heart of the point:

The point of all this discussion in Hebrews 7 is that we have such a high priest.
We have a high priest who did not simply enter an earthly holy place,
but who entered into the heavenlies
and sat down on the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven.

The word translated “point” is a word that comes from a root meaning “head.”
So perhaps you could translate this,
“the crowning affirmation of what we are saying
is that Jesus sits at the right hand of God.”

Why is this “the crowning affirmation”?
Why is this “the point of what we are saying”?

Because without this we are still in the old covenant.
We have a high priest seated at the right hand of God.
Normally “sitting at the right hand” is a royal designation—
that's where the son of David is said to sit.
But as we have seen, Christ's priesthood is grounded in his sonship.
He is the priest after the order of Melchizedek—
a unique priest who is also a king.

Verse 2 refers to Jesus as “a minister in the holy places (the sanctuary),
the true tent (or tabernacle), that the Lord set up, not man.”

The term “minister” is the word “leitourgos” (from which we get the word “liturgy”),
which emphasizes Christ's active service.

A priest is a priest regardless of what he is doing.
But a “leitourgos” or “minister” is one who is active in religious service.
And Christ is a minister in the sanctuary—in the true tent.
The old tabernacle was a shadow.
Even the temple, Solomon acknowledged, was not the true sanctuary.

“Heaven of heavens cannot contain you –
much less this house that I have built!”
And so Solomon asked God to:
“Look from heaven, your dwelling place.”

The heavenly sanctuary is the true tent,
and that is a tent not framed by human hands,
but was pitched by God himself,
when God created the *heavens* and the earth.

So let’s think about what it means that the old covenant
was a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”

2. The Old Covenant: A Copy and a Shadow of the Heavenly Things (8:3-6)

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.*

And since every high priest is appointed to bring gifts and sacrifices,
therefore Jesus, too, must have brought a sacrifice.
We do not hear, yet, what that sacrifice was,
because Hebrews wishes for us to understand how the shadow points to the reality.

So, verse 4:

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.*

Children,

how does a shadow work?
How is your shadow related to your body?
In order to have a shadow, you need two things:
1) a body
2) a source of light
There must be something that casts the shadow,
and there must be some light that creates the shadow.

Hebrews explains how this works:
the earthly priests “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.”

Think about what this means:

If the earthly tent – if the tabernacle was a “shadow” –
that means that there is something *else* – some *body* –
that cast the shadow that Moses saw!
Moses was shown a picture of the reality.

Moses saw a pattern (the quotation is from Exodus 25:40),
Moses saw the heavenly sanctuary,
and God commanded him to build a replica–
or, better yet, a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary.
The whole of the earthly sanctuary is patterned after the heavenly one.
Which means that the whole of earthly worship
was designed to reflect the heavenly worship.

And Hebrews is saying that

Jesus is the substance—or the body that casts the shadow.
And so when you look at the OT sacrifices and ritual,
you see a picture and a shadow of Jesus.

And that is why verse 6 says:

⁶ But as it is, Christ^[b] 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.

The Mosaic Covenant was a good covenant.

It was an administration of the covenant of grace.
But compared to Christ, it was a faulty and flawed covenant,
because it had no way to deal with death.

3. The New Covenant: What the Old Covenant Promised (8:7-13)

⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

In order to show the surpassing greatness of the new covenant,

Hebrews insists that the Mosaic covenant (the “first covenant”) was faulty.

It wasn't a *bad* covenant.

It was a *good* covenant –
it just had a very obvious fault:

It was faulty because it could not accomplish what Christ accomplished.

We often highlight how Israel failed.

We see over and over again throughout the OT how *flawed* the people were.
Even the greatest of Israel's leaders fell short.

But verse 7 makes it clear that the first covenant was not faultless.

And then in verses 8-12 he explains this with a quote from Jeremiah 31:

⁸ *For he finds fault with them when he says:^[c]*

*“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah,*

⁹ *not like the covenant that I made with their fathers
on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.*

*For they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.*

¹⁰ *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, declares the Lord:*

*I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.*

¹¹ *And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor
and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.*

¹² *For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.”*

Jeremiah 31 is one of the most glorious statements of the coming of the new covenant.

Jeremiah prophesied the coming destruction of Jerusalem and Judah,
but promises that after this, the LORD will make a new covenant
with Judah.

We often think of the positive side of Jeremiah 31—
the promise of the new covenant.

What Hebrews points out, however, is the implication of Jeremiah 31.

If God needs to make a new covenant,
then there must be something wrong with the old covenant.

The old covenant could not bring us near to God.

The old covenant had a high priest who entered on behalf of the people,
but he could only bring the people symbolically.

The new covenant, we are told, is “not like the covenant I made with their fathers.”
God made a covenant with Israel,
and gave to Israel a law.
But Israel “did not continue in my covenant.”
Israel rebelled time after time.
The old covenant could not bring the people into their full inheritance.

The old covenant gave Israel a shadow of the inheritance—
the old covenant gave Israel an external statement of the law,
but it did not write the law on their hearts.

The old covenant also resulted in the covenant curse.
God had warned Israel that if they rebelled against him,
he would do to them all that he had done to Egypt (Dt. 27-30).
And sure enough, that is what happened:
Israel was sent into exile,
as Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah 31,
“They did not continue in my covenant,
and so I showed no concern for them, declares the LORD.”

The new covenant is not like this.

What is the difference?
The old covenant had a priesthood that kept sinning and kept dying.
The priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins,
and the high priests kept dying—
thereby signaling their failure to bring Israel to God.

But the new covenant has a sinless priest who never dies.
He serves as high priest by virtue of the power of an indestructible life.
He is God and man in one person!

The old covenant had flawed mediators, who could not guarantee their work.
The new covenant has a perfect mediator, indeed, a sure guarantee,
a surety, who has once for all paid for all our sins with his precious blood.
The old covenant was broken, with the result that Israel was sent into exile.
The new covenant cannot be broken,
because Jesus is the covenant keeper,
he is the pledge and surety of the covenant.
Because he has been faithful and inherited his inheritance,
therefore all who belong to him receive that inheritance with him.

“And he saves to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him,
since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (7:25)

This is the reason why “the point of what we are saying is that we have such a high priest.”
We get preoccupied with our lives, our issues, our “needs.”
And we begin to think that we are the center of the universe.
Hebrews 8 reminds us that we are not the center of universe.
Jesus is.

There are a couple of points from this quotation from Jeremiah 31
that I would to call your attention to.

First, from verse 12:

God will not remember our sins.

The language of remembering and forgetting is worship language.

When we forget God, that is the same thing as idolatry.

When we remember him, that draws us back to worship him.

Psalm 63 used this same language.

Psalm 63 drew on the language of worship--of the sanctuary:

“I’ve seen you in your holy place,”

reminding us of the great works of God.

But then David adds in verse 6 that he remembers God also on his bed at night.

While public worship is where we meet with God corporately,
this worship is not to end when we go home.

We are to “remember” him throughout our lives—

he is to be our chief thought throughout the day and through the night.

And God promises that he will *not* remember our sins.

Why will God not remember your sins?

Because Jesus, the sinless one, has paid for all your sins.

It is once again the once-for-all work of Jesus that is the center of this forgiveness.

It is only because of Jesus that this has application to you.

The perfect sacrifice has been offered.

The new covenant has been established.

THEREFORE, your sins are forgiven.

And then secondly, because your sins are forgiven,
therefore you all know the Lord.

You have access to God directly.

Through Jesus – yes – because Jesus is God!

By the Holy Spirit – indeed! – because the Holy Spirit is God!

The “for” in verse 12 demonstrates that verse 12 is actually the foundation for verse 11.
Why do you all know the Lord?

Because your sins have been forgiven.

I need not say to you “know the Lord”--

I am not a priest who mediates on your behalf--

I cannot bring you near to God;

I can only call you to “remember who you are in Christ!”

Remember that if you are in Christ, then God has written his law on your heart.

He has forgiven your sins and *he* has brought you near to himself.

And so:

¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Hebrews is speaking of how the Mosaic Covenant is ready to disappear.

In 70 AD the temple was destroyed.

Since that day 1,951 years ago –

there have been no animal sacrifices offered by a Levitical high priest.

We no longer depend on a sinful priest who has to keep offering sacrifices
both for himself and for us.

Our great high priest lives forever.

Christian ethics isn't all that different from other ethical systems.

Pretty much every ethical system in the world says “try to be a good person” –

do to others what you would want them to do to you;

don't be a jerk;

don't do things that hurt other people...

The gospel is not a system of ethics.

The gospel is a message – a proclamation – that Jesus, the Son of God,

has done for us what we could not possibly do for ourselves!

He has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil –

and he calls you to believe in him,

to repent of your sin – to turn from all those failed priests –

and come to the only one who can redeem you from the clutches of death!