

The Great High Priest

Hebrews 8:1-13

Introduction

This morning's passage serves as a transition in the book of Hebrews. The author is moving from the superiority of Christ's person to the superiority of Christ's work as the Great High Priest of the New Covenant.

Hebrews 8:1-13

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

⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says:

"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."

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.

Exposition

I. A Better Priest (Vss. 1-5)

The author serves notice to the reader in verses 1-2 by explicitly stating the point of his writing so far: "Now the point of 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, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."

As I noted last week, the audience of Hebrews was being tempted to return to Judaism. It was more familiar to them. It was less risky. It was more influential. Yet, for all the seeming merits of a return to Judaism, the author of Hebrews presses his reader to see that it is bankrupt. Now that Christ, the Great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, had appeared the Judaism had nothing to offer on its own. The priesthood of Judaism was temporary and intended by God to point to the priestly work of Jesus Christ, the Son. The Levitical Priesthood was never intended by God to deal with sin forever. It was ceremonial, and thus, once Christ appeared to render people not only ceremonially clean but spiritually clean forever, there was no longer a need for such practices.

Hence the point of verse 5: “They (that is, the Levitical Priesthood and the temple) serve as a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” To get an idea of what I am saying, think about the scene of a wedding. Now, think about the bride coming down the aisle, she arrives at the altar and as her father is giving her away to the groom, you start to notice that the groom is staring at the floor. Why is he staring at the floor? Well, the pastor asks him, “Son, why are you staring at the floor?” The groom answers, “I’m just so in love with this shadow on the floor.” If you were at that wedding, be honest, you would seriously question the sanity of that groom. Why? Because he is missing out on the substance of his wife in favor of her shadow. Now, we would call that crazy, but that is pretty much what the audience in Hebrews is doing. They are infatuated with the shadow of the Old Covenant instead of the Substance, who is Jesus Christ. The shadowy things were helpful for a season and served an important purpose for a while, but the reality of those shadowy things is now here in Jesus Christ. There is no need to turn back to the shadow, the substance is Here! Jesus fulfills what the Old Covenant promises have been pointing to for centuries!

T.S. - So what makes Jesus’ work as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant promises so much better? We find the answer to this question in verses 5b-13...

II. A Better Covenant (Vss. 6-13)

Verse 6 clearly states that Jesus is better: “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.” So, in what way is Jesus better? Well, under the Old Covenant, the blessings of the covenant were dependent upon the obedience of the covenant people. Notice how verse 9 explicitly teaches this truth: “For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.” The problem was that the promises of blessing and curse in the Old Covenant depended upon the people. If they were faithful, they would be blessed. If they were unfaithful, they would be cursed. And history tells us what they did – they were unfaithful to the covenant and sent into exile. So how is the New Covenant better? Thomas Schreiner writes, “The new covenant is entirely different (from the Old), for now the obedience of the covenant member is a divine work.” Note with me, if you would, verses 10-12. Unlike the Old Covenant, which was written on stone tablets, the New Covenant with its promises and law will be written in the hearts and minds of the covenant people. Furthermore, everyone in the New Covenant will “know the Lord,” and He will be “merciful toward their iniquities and remember their sins now more.”

Do you see how much better the New Covenant is? It is based on the divine work of God's grace in Jesus Christ to convert the sinner, write his law upon their heart, and call them His child! Unlike the Old Covenant community, which consisted of faithful Jews and unfaithful Jews, the New Covenant community consists of only faithful believers in Jesus Christ. And while the promises of the New Covenant are, as Paul would say, "To the Jew first," they are also for the Gentile, that is, those who are not ethnically Jewish. The New Covenant community is a community of believers in Jesus Christ, and we call this New Covenant community the Church of Jesus Christ! We are baptized into this community of faith, and our faith is feed as we feast spiritually upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, which is depicted in the Lord's Supper. We gather regularly to attend to the "apostle's teaching" and for "fellowship with other believers" in "worship of Jesus Christ, the Risen King." And as the church, as we gather and are equipped as disciples, we go out into the world to make disciples of others. We do not return to a physical temple nor do we look for another priest to make intercession for us. No! The covenant that we belong to is better, because Jesus is better!

Conclusion

And that is the point that we must realize this morning: Jesus is better! His promises are better! His commitment to us is better! The community that He created with His own blood is better! You might not be tempted to return to Judaism this morning, but you are always tempted to turn back to something is inferior to Jesus.

More than all our sorrows, more than all our victories, more than all of our comforts, more than all our riches, brothers and sisters, Jesus is better! May the Lord make our hearts believe this today!