

## SESSION TWENTY

# THE PRESENTATION OF JESUS AS A PRIESTLY MINISTER OF A BETTER COVENANT

*Heb 8:1-13*

### I. INTRODUCTION

With the close of chapter 7, the author has finished his first major argument of the book (1:5–7:28). He has shown the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old by demonstrating the superiority of Christ to the major *figures* of the Old Covenant: to angels, to Moses and Joshua, and to the Levitical priests. Beginning in Heb 8:1, he will now build upon the latter category of Christ's priestly ministry but argue the superiority of the New Covenant on a different basis. The thrust of chapters 8–10 will now be upon the nature and accomplishment of His priestly sacrifice itself. Whereas chapters 1–7 highlighted the superiority of Christ's person and office, these chapters in 8–10 will highlight the superiority of Christ's sacrifice. His priestly sacrifice is superior for numerous reasons, not the least of which is that the blood of His sacrifice is better than *animal blood* and the place of His sacrificial presentation is in the heavenly tabernacle itself.

### II. THE STRUCTURE OF 8:1–10:39

If one scans the commentaries on Hebrews, it quickly becomes noticeable that hardly anyone agrees on the structure of these chapters. Ellingworth and Lane, for example, both see 5:11–10:39 as forming one large unit of material, while F. F. Bruce takes 8:1–10:18 as a major unit. In light of 8:1-2 ("Now the main point . . ."), I would tend to see a major break at 8:1. Also, there is a thematic shift from the argument and significance of Jesus as High Priest in 5:11–7:28 to the nature of His sacrifice in 8:1ff. Hence, I am of the opinion that 8:1–10:39 is a major unit. Yet even then, it is not easy to understand the structure and development of the author's thought within these bounds. For reasons I will show later, Heb 9:1-28 seems to be a unit. Also, we can see a clear shift from doctrinal presentation to exhortation at 10:19. Thus, I see the major units of this section to be:

1. 8:1-13
2. 9:1-28
3. 10:1-18
4. 10:19-39

### III. THE INTRODUCTION OF CHRIST AS A HIGH PRIEST OF THE HEAVENLY TABERNACLE (8:1-2)

Verses 1-2 serve as an introduction to the chapter. The initial words "Now the main point in what has been said" obviously indicate a major structural marker of the book. Of all that the author has talked about in the preceding chapters, the *main thing* is the matter of Christ being a high priest.

This was mentioned in every chapter except chapter one, and even there it was implied in Heb 1:3 by the statement that he had made purification of sins.<sup>1</sup> Verse one looks backward, that is, it does not add to anything that has been said before. Even the idea that He "has sat down at the right hand of the majesty in the heavens" was first enunciated in Heb 1:3 (the word "majesty" is a figure for God the Father). The author will highlight the implication of Christ's *having sat down* in Heb 10:11-12.

Verse two, on the other hand, looks forward to considering a new facet of His priestly ministry. Christ is not merely a legitimate high priest (as chapter seven had substantiated), but He has carried out His priestly sacrifice in a "tabernacle" of far more significance than the earthly tabernacle/temple at Jerusalem. He carried out His priestly ministry in the *heavenly tabernacle* itself.

When the text says that He was a "minister," the term that is used (λειτουργος) is commonly used in the LXX of the priest's ministry. Thus, it has a cultic connotation speaking of a *priestly minister*. Furthermore, the location of His priestly ministry is in the "Holy Place" (τῶν ἁγίων). This expression should not be confused with the *earthly* "Holy Place" (the outer room of the tabernacle). Rather, this expression speaks of the *heavenly* Holy of Holies (note how τῶν ἁγίων is used in Heb 10:19, and compare τῶν ἁγίων ὁδὸν in 9:8 which also speaks of the *heavenly* Holy Place).<sup>2</sup> The *heavenly* aspect of this Holy Place is underscored by the additional descriptive phrase "and in the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man." Thus, verse two is launching a new focus to all the things that have been said about Christ's priestly ministry. It has been carried out at the level of the heavenly tabernacle, not the earthly. Since the Levitical priests functioned at the level of the earthly tabernacle, Christ (by virtue of His ministry at the heavenly level) has an infinitely superior ministry.

#### IV. CHRIST'S MORE EXCELLENT MINISTRY THAN THE EARTHLY LEVITICAL ONE (8:3-6)

What has been introduced in verses 1-2 is now elaborated in verses 3-6. Obviously, anyone who serves in a priestly capacity in the Bible is involved in bringing "gifts and sacrifices." Levitical priests did this on a daily basis, and the high priest brought a special sacrifice once a year into the earthly Holy of Holies. If Christ is a priest (which the author has painstakingly argued in chapter seven), then what is His offering? Christ not only comes with a sacrifice, but He comes with a better one. Verse three thus anticipates what the author will have to say about Christ presenting His own blood in the heavenly tabernacle (cf. Heb 9:14).

Verse four reaffirms the logic of a heavenly scene for Christ's ministry by pointing out that there would be no need or opportunity for Christ to participate in the earthly sacrifices. There are priests doing that according to the Mosaic Law. Since the Law called for men from the tribe of Levi to do that, He would not be qualified anyway. [Verse 4, by the way, implies that Herod's temple was still standing at the time that the author of Hebrews wrote this epistle]. Certainly the Old Testament (by virtue of Ps 110:4) would lead one to anticipate that Messiah would have to carry out His priestly

<sup>1</sup> Prior to chapter 8, Christ's priesthood was mentioned in 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1,5; 6:20; 7:26-28.

<sup>2</sup> The earthly "Holy of Holies" at Jerusalem was expressed as Ἁγία Ἁγίων.

ministry at a different tabernacle than the earthly one.

According to verse five, the earthly tabernacle system is a mere "copy and shadow" of the heavenly things. That is, it is not the reality itself, but a *model* that reflects the reality. There is a heavenly tabernacle, and that is the reality. The author is leading up to something here, and what he is leading up to is the fact that an astute reader of the Old Testament should be able to deduce from the instructions that Moses received (in Exodus) that the earthly tabernacle was never intended as an end in itself. The last line of verse five is drawn almost exactly from Exodus 25:40.<sup>3</sup> Moses had been instructed to build the earthly tabernacle according to the "pattern" (Gk τύπος) which God had shown him on the mountain. The word τύπος can mean a "pattern" or "model." If the earthly tabernacle is "patterned" after something else, then that *something else* is obviously superior. That which is the "copy" and "model" is inferior to the original itself. The point here is that Christ has gone into the *original*, not the "copy" of the original. He has gone into the heavenly tabernacle to minister, whereas the Levitical priests merely go into the earthly "model" of the heavenly tabernacle. Thus, His priestly ministry is superior to theirs! [Be sure you don't miss how the author's argument in vv 3-5 differs from vs 2. In vs 2, He argued for the superiority of Christ's ministry because it was carried out in the heavenly tabernacle. In vv 3-5, he builds upon this by pointing out that the instructions in Exodus about making a "pattern" should have enabled one to anticipate that the ministry of the earthly tabernacle would have had a corresponding *but greater* parallel in the heavenly reality].

In addition to the fact that Christ's ministry is superior because it is done at the level of the heavenly tabernacle, it is a "more excellent ministry" because it involves Him mediating a better covenant based on better promises (vs 6). The Levitical priestly ministry was done in accordance with the Old Covenant, whereas in Christ's priestly ministry He mediates the New Covenant. One way that the latter can be shown to be better is by looking at the promises attached to each. The promises attached to the New Covenant (which are revealed in the Old Testament and thus available for anyone to confirm) are decidedly better than any promise associated with the Old Covenant given to Moses. Probably the author is thinking primarily of the promise of forgiveness of sins, because that is the climactic statement of his doctrinal teaching in Heb 10:14-18.

#### IV. THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NEW COVENANT IS PROOF OF ITS SUPERIORITY (8:7-13)

The conjunction γὰρ at the beginning of verse 7 signals that the author is now telling us the reason why the New Covenant is a better covenant containing better promises. The very fact that a second covenant was deemed necessary demonstrates that the first covenant was inadequate. There would have been no need for a second covenant, if the first one (the Mosaic covenant) had been adequate.

In order to show that the New Covenant contains better promises, the author is now going to recite the passage from Jer 31:31-34 (LXX 38:31-34). He introduces his quotation with the words, "For finding fault with them, He says." This is a reminder that the people had failed under the Old

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<sup>3</sup> Notice that he adds the word "all things" (πάντα), and the verb δείκνυμι is changed from a perfect participle in the LXX text to an aorist participle in Heb 8:5. The addition of "all things" may be an exegetical technique to account for several similar statements in Exodus (note 25:9; 25:40; 26:30; and 27:8). The word πάντα occurs in the Ex 25:8 statement in the LXX.

Covenant that had been given at Sinai. When the New Covenant was announced (by Jeremiah around 586 BC), it was stated in the context of God's wrath for covenant unfaithfulness (e.g., Jer 30:12-15, 23-24). It was at the time that Jerusalem and the temple were being destroyed by the Babylonians that God chose to announce His intention to one day (in the future) institute a new covenant with the people, i.e., a covenant which would replace the Mosaic Covenant that they were presently operating under. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC (and their subsequent exile from the land) represented God's discipline upon the people for their covenant unfaithfulness. Hence in Jer 31:22 he calls the people "O faithless daughter." In the book of Deuteronomy (chapters 28–29), God had announced the "curses" (measures of discipline) He would pour out on His people if they were unfaithful to the covenant made at Sinai. Although these would vary in intensity, the pinnacle of the curses would be an invasion by a foreign army along with the exile from the land altogether. For the southern kingdom of Judah, that moment came in Jeremiah's day. God chose that occasion, the lowest moment of despair for Israel in the Old Testament, to announce that a new covenant would be instituted with them at some future point. The destruction by Babylon in Jeremiah's day was *prima facie* evidence that the Lord had found fault with His people. After over 800 years of trying to live under the Old Covenant, it was apparent the people had failed.

The passage about the New Covenant in Jeremiah is not the only mention of this covenant in the Old Testament. The New Covenant was to be characterized by the "pouring out of the Spirit," and the Lord made numerous predictions of this both before and after Jeremiah's time (cf. Isa 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; Ez 11:17-21; 36:22-32; 37:26-28; 39:25-29; Joel 2:28-32). Yet the New Testament is clear that this *New Covenant* was inaugurated by the blood of Christ shed at calvary and has been operative since that point (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6). The pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the expected result of the New Covenant. In other words, the Old Covenant inaugurated at Sinai lasted from 1446 BC until the death of Christ on the cross. At the cross, the Old Covenant was replaced by the New Covenant. All believers since the cross are participants in the New Covenant, and are no longer under the Mosaic Law (Rom 7:4-7; 1 Cor 9:19-21; Heb 7:18).

In the book of Jeremiah, the New Covenant was proclaimed for Israel. Does this mean it was *only* for Israel? No. But God truly gave it to Israel at its inception. Those who first participated in the New Covenant were all Jewish believers. However, God was certainly free to *extend* the New Covenant to others, and thus Gentiles were allowed to participate in it as well. [We should be careful not to say that the church is the "new Israel"]. Furthermore, Paul in Romans 11:25-27 envisions a day in the future when Israel *as a whole* will be brought into the New Covenant bond (though at the national level they now reject Jesus and His salvation).

The author cites the Jeremiah 31 passage about the New Covenant, because (1) this was the primary passage in the Old Testament announcing the New Covenant and (2) this passage clearly articulates the promises/blessings of the New Covenant. These are: (1) an inner inclination to obey (laws in minds and on heart); (2) all to know the Lord; and (3) forgiveness of sins. The latter promise is particularly important to the author of Hebrews, because animal sacrifices (which were ordained by the Old Covenant) simply cannot bring eternal forgiveness of sins. Only the blood of Christ can do that.

The author ends the chapter (8:13) by pointing out that the mere mention of a "new covenant" in Jer 31:31 should have alerted the people to anticipate that the Old Covenant from Sinai would one day

be replaced. They should have been living with that expectation, and knowing that their present covenant (i.e., the Old Covenant) was becoming more and more obsolete as each year passed. By the witness of their own Scriptures, these Jewish believers to whom our author wrote should know that the Old Covenant was destined for replacement. What would be a more likely candidate than a covenant based on the work of Jesus Christ?