

# **Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 7b, Hebrews 7:1-8:13: Better Priesthood, Better Covenant (Part 2)**

© 2024 David deSilva and Ted Hildebrandt

At the beginning of chapter 8, the author continues with his exposition of Jesus' priestly ministry with an explicit statement of the leading idea or the main point, the *cephalon* that the foregoing discussion has been driving at. The main point regarding these things being said here is this. We have so great a high priest, one who sat at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens, a minister of the holy places, and the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not a human being.

The author here is refocusing the argument, which will, from this point, take up the particulars of Jesus' better priestly sacrifice in the better place of mediation. The author also affirms yet again for the hearers their enjoyment of the great advantages that the author describes and thereby their ground for hope and for continuing to invest in their earlier commitments to continue to seek God's benefactions. The second aspect particularly fuels the practical exhortations that flank the central discourse in chapter 4, verses 14 to 16, and chapter 10, verses 19 to 25, where the author keeps encouraging the hearers to focus their attentions and their energies centripetally toward one another and that center where God is to be found as the location of their hope.

In the opening of chapter 8, we again hear Psalm 110, verse 1, in the combination of the notions of being appointed a priest by God and sitting down at God's right hand. The author may have found the order of these events in Psalm 110 to be important. In Psalm 110, verse 1, God invites this figure into the heavenly places to sit at God's right hand.

A little later in the fourth verse, God appoints this figure to a new order of priesthood. The author of Hebrews reads this psalm as suggesting a heavenly priesthood, one that will be exercised from the vantage point of the right side of God's own throne in the invisible realm rather than in this visible material creation. It'll be exercised in the true tabernacle, the one which the Lord pitched and not a human being.

Other texts from the first centuries B.C. and A.D. bear witness to the tendency to critique material earthly temples as inferior holy places since they are built by human hands. We find this, for example, toward the close of Stephen's speech in Acts chapter 7 or in the process of Paul's defense speech before the Areopagus in Acts chapter 17. The author of Hebrews seems to implicitly bring this topic of critique in here, and he contrasts the material human origin of any earthly sanctuary with the

eternal divinely manufactured origin of the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus has gone to minister as a priest.

The very nature of that place is so far superior to any earthly tabernacle, as the maker of that heavenly tabernacle is superior to the builders of earthly temples. The author draws thus upon the tendency to think of human-made versus God-made, visible and earthly versus invisible and heavenly to underscore the better venue in which Jesus enacts his priesthood. The next verse introduces the sacrifices that are offered by this better priest in a better venue, a topic that will be discussed quite a bit in chapters 9 and 10.

The author writes that every priest is appointed in order to offer gifts and sacrifices, for which reason it was necessary for him, that is, Jesus, to have something to offer up. The definition of the role and responsibility of a priest recalls the earlier definition given in Hebrews 5 verse 1. The major occupation of priests in the prescriptions of the Torah, the Pentateuch, and the five books of Moses is the offering of sacrifices so that for Jesus to act as a priest, it would also be necessary for him to have something to offer. The author will develop the nature, the warrant, and the efficacy of this sacrifice later.

Right now, he is moving on to answer an implicit question. If Jesus were not in the heavenly places, could he be a priest at all? So, we read in verse 4, if then he were upon the earth, he would not be a priest since there are already those offering gifts according to the law. This is an argument from the contrary in support of the earlier claim of verses 1 and 2 here in chapter 8 that we do, in fact, see Jesus as a priest in heaven.

On the contrary, if Jesus were still on earth, he wouldn't have been a priest. The presupposition here is that Jesus is a priest somewhere, and if he's not on earth, since he wouldn't be qualified to offer the kinds of sacrifices that the Torah prescribes, he must be a priest in heaven. Regarding the rationale that the author offers here since there are already those offering gifts according to the law, the author is drawing once again on the fact that Jesus was descended from Judah rather than Levi.

The author has already admitted in chapter 7, verse 14, that Jesus stood outside of the Torah's qualifications for priesthood based on genealogical descent from Levi as they are. Thus, we see some of this argument developing in this passage. Since Jesus must be a priest, as Psalm 110 verse 4 declares, and since he cannot be a priest in the earthly sanctuary, regulated as it is by the Torah, with its own rules for what qualifies priests, he is, therefore a priest in the heavenly sanctuary, the only other sanctuary legitimately connected with the one God.

In response to the author's declaration of Jesus' priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary, we might well ask, what heavenly sanctuary? Twenty-first-century Christians do not commonly think of the geography of heaven, as it were, in terms of a temple with its own rituals and paraphernalia. But in the centuries around the turn of the era, it was not at all uncommon to think of heaven and the place where God fully dwells as, in effect, a reflection of where God dwells on earth. As the author of Hebrews then goes on to write, those who offer gifts according to the law serve a pattern and a shadow of the heavenly things.

Even as Moses was warned when he was about to complete the tabernacle, see that you make all things, he said, according to the model shown you on the mountain. The author introduces a recitation of Exodus 25, verse 40 here to prove both the secondary nature of the earthly temple, which is just a copy, and the existence of a primary heavenly temple, of which the earthly temple or tabernacle is a model. The notion of a heavenly counterpart to the Jerusalem temple or the desert tabernacle was common in Hellenistic-era Judaism, as was the appeal to an exegesis of Exodus 25 40 in support of this belief.

In First Enoch, a portion of First Enoch that dates perhaps from the late third or early second century BC, we find the author speaking of a two-room house in heaven, with a throne of God in the second room. The layout of the heavenly abode of God is thus clearly a reflection of God's earthly house with its two holy places, a holy place and an even holier place where God's presence is especially located. Wisdom of Solomon, a Hellenistic Jewish text from the early first century AD, also shows the prevalence of this motif as its author takes on the persona of Solomon.

Praise to God in chapter 9, verse 8, you said to build a temple on your holy mountain and an altar in the city of your dwelling, an imitation of the holy tent that you prepared beforehand from the beginning. Second Baruch, a Jewish apocalypse from about 100 AD, depicts God comforting Baruch concerning the fate of Jerusalem and its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar by affirming the reality of a heavenly Jerusalem with its temple, something that God had shown to Adam and to Moses long ago, a true temple that could not be touched by Gentile armies. The book of Revelation also contains a wealth of allusions to the heavenly temple as well as its various furnishings.

The author of Hebrews also believed in the existence of this tabernacle, this temple in God's realm, which was prepared from the beginning so that it is actually the prototype, as the preacher himself puts it in Hebrews 8.5, of which the earthly tabernacle is the anti-type, as the author will say in chapter 9 verse 24. It is the imitation, the copy, the shadow. Now, when we encounter words like copy and shadow, we might naturally think of platonic definitions of reality, whereby that which is real exists in the realm of ideas, the realm of mental constructs, whereas

physical representations here in the visible world are merely copies or models, secondary representations of those ideal or ideational types.

But the author of Hebrews was hardly a Platonist. He would agree that invisible realities are superior to their material imitations, but he places these convictions firmly within Jewish cosmology. That is to say, he doesn't contrast the visible and material with the realm of ideas but rather with the eternal heavenly realm, which is currently invisible but will not always be invisible.

He also places it within a temporal framework in line with the Judeo-Christian interest in the historically unfolding drama of redemption and eschatology that would be completely foreign to Plato's thought. The author now returns at this point in verse 6 to his thesis using new words to express the same idea found in chapter 8, verses 1 and 2. But now, he has received a correspondingly more distinguished ministry as he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was legislated on the basis of better promises. The ministry of Jesus is an effect of the new covenant, which is itself an effect of better promises.

All of this is guaranteed by God's oath in regard to Jesus' priesthood and, by extension, the new covenant attached to it. This will lead the author to one of the most stunning claims he makes about the old covenant in the course of his sermon in the remainder of chapter 8. In Hebrews 8 verses 7 through 13, the author now provides the scriptural evidence for the setting aside of the old covenant in favor of a new and more effective one, reciting Jeremiah 31 verses 31 to 34. This Jeremiah text also provides an indication of what those better promises are, a topic that the author will develop at length in Hebrews 9.1 through 10.18. What follows then in Hebrews 8:7 to 13 is a confirmation of the claim that the author made in verse 6 that Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant founded upon better promises.

At the same time, it provides a transition to the next section of argumentation. The author approaches his recitation of Jeremiah with an argument from the contrary. He writes that if the first had been faultless, a place would not have been sought out for a second.

Then, he recites the Jeremiah text to prove that God himself had set aside the first covenant as ineffective, establishing a time in which he would make a new covenant that would be effectual and thus better. Once again, the chronology of God's oracles proves significant. Speaking through Jeremiah, after centuries of the Levitical priesthood's operation under the regulations of Torah, God is seen as setting aside an existing covenant in favor of one that he will make with his people in the near future.

As the author continues, for finding fault with them, he says, behold, days are coming, says the Lord, and I will make with the house of Israel and with the house of

Judah a new covenant, not in line with a covenant which I made with their forebearers on the day I took them by their hand to lead them out from the land of Egypt, because they did not remain in my covenant, and I ceased to care for them, says the Lord. This first part of the recitation provides God's censure of those who failed to execute the first covenant with excellence. Finding fault with them, he says, they did not persist in my covenant, and therefore I took no thought for them, says the Lord.

The author may intend for his hearers to recall specifically the example of the generation that God led out of Egypt by the hand but that rebelled against God and ended up dying in the desert, an example that the preacher has already developed at some length in Hebrews 3:7 through 4:11. The second half of the recitation of the text from Jeremiah provides the text of the better promises themselves. This is the covenant that I shall institute with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord.

Putting my laws into their mind, I will indeed write them upon their heart, and I will be for them a God, and they will be for me a people, and they shall surely not teach each person his or her fellow citizen, and each his or her brother or sister, saying, know the Lord, for they will all know me from the least to the greatest of them because I will be merciful with regard to their misdeeds and their sins. I will certainly remember no more. This part of the Jeremiah text speaks first of an internalization of God's commandments, an internal knowledge of and commitment to live in line with God's laws.

The author does not comment on this verse in the exposition that follows, but it clearly resonates with his interest throughout the sermon in the believers living so as to please God and avoid what God hates, fixing their hearts on God and on God's favor in loyal trust and obeying God's commandments to them, living out the love of neighbor, which is at the heart of God's law. One line in this passage recited from Jeremiah, and each shall certainly no longer teach his or her fellow citizen or neighbor, saying, know the Lord, might seem at first to conflict with the author's exhortation in Hebrews 5, verses 11 to 14, where the author explicitly encourages the believers to teach one another. There, however, the author has in mind the need to continue to reinforce the worldview and the ethos of the Christian culture for one another, something he calls out throughout the sermon.

In a deeper sense, however, the author would affirm that all the members of the community have come to know the Lord intimately through the experience of the Holy Spirit, to which he refers in both chapter 2, verses 3 and 4, and chapter 6, verses 4 and 5. They need only exhort one another to be faithful to the knowledge of God that they have received. The final couplet from Jeremiah 31-34 is, I will be merciful in regard to their misdeeds and their sins, I will certainly remember no more. This emerges as a crucial point for the argument that follows.

Indeed, these verses will reappear in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 17, as the conclusion toward which the whole of Hebrews 9, 1 through 10, 18 drives. The decisive removal of these sins that render the conscience unclean would mean that worshippers could approach the Holy God in the full expectation of favor and help rather than in the expectation that God's holiness would protect itself from contamination by burning up the unclean encroacher. The author will go on in the chapters that follow to develop how Jesus' sacrifice of himself and offering of his blood in obedience to God affects this decisive purging of sin and makes face-to-face access between God and Jesus' clients possible, in striking contrast to the limitations set on access to God under the old covenant.

The author concludes this section with the following controversial statement. In saying new, he renders the first old, and that which is growing old and obsolete is close to disappearing. The author is here drawing out the implications of the text, specifically Jeremiah's use of the adjective new to describe the covenant that God would make.

Calling the second covenant new, the author reasons render the first one old, which carries the secondary meaning of annulled since the covenant did not merely age, but God rendered it out of date. The author adds an additional inference concerning what it means to grow obsolete and aged. It means that something is on the way toward disappearing from this reality.

In this way, the author attaches the old covenant to the material, visible creation that is passing away and presents the relationship that is forged between human beings and God through Jesus as the covenantal relational bond that will last, heightening yet again the value of holding on to this relationship for the addressees, some of whom may be tempted to let it go. The author has advanced his pastoral goals for his hearers in several ways in chapters seven and eight. First, he continues to impress upon the hearers the incomparable honor of Jesus, here by means of establishing that Jesus' place in God's ordering of the cosmos stands far above and beyond that of the priests invested with the honor of serving God in God's earthly tabernacle and temple.

The line of Aaron and the broader line of Levi are indeed honored in God's sacred history, but Jesus and his priestly order stand on a plane above theirs. The author has also established, on the basis of scriptural authority, the reality of the invisible things of which he speaks. He speaks of the installation of Jesus as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek in a heavenly temple, of which the visible temple in Jerusalem is but a model.

This is just one more way in which the author is trying to get the hearers to imagine and visualize the invisible, immaterial realm of God as something as real, with, for example, as real a geography and architecture as anything they see carved out of

marble and limestone around them in their cities. God's realm is just as real. He has also demonstrated, through the appeal to Jeremiah, a divine decision to set aside the first covenant along with its duly appointed and regulated priesthood in favor of this new covenant with its new priest.

This is admittedly a highly controversial thing to claim, not because the author of Hebrews is unclear about his position, but rather because of a massive theological shift that has happened in our context since the Holocaust. In the face of the horrors to which anti-Semitism had led, many theologians began to promote a two-covenant theology, according to which the Mosaic covenant remained the way for the Jewish people and the new covenant was the way for non-Jews, each being equally valid and operational in God's sight. While this has become a prominent way of thinking in the late 20th and early 21st century, it was not the view of the author of Hebrews, nor was it the view of Paul, as is often claimed, who was so grieved by his own people's failure to embrace their Messiah that he could wish himself accursed and cut off from God if that would reverse that trend.

All of these points together serve the author's overarching goal of reinforcing for his hearers the value of Jesus and the value of remaining connected with this Jesus rather than allowing his audience to think it's somehow disadvantageous for them to continue being associated with Jesus because of the pressures that have been put upon them by their neighbors and because of what they have lost as a result of their neighbor's hostility. In Jesus, they have a priest of a more distinguished priestly line, one whose priestly work is backed with a divine oath assuring its permanent validity, a priest who possesses better qualifications as a reliable mediator, who will never die, who is not liable to sin and thus to alienating the very deity whose favor he must also mediate, a priest who executes his work in a superior venue, God's eternal realm, in the true holy of holies beyond creation, and a priest who mediates a better covenant involving the decisive removal of guilt and bringing the intimate knowledge of God and God's requirements. By reaching back to Melchizedek in Genesis 14, to the mosaic prescriptions to the service of God in a tabernacle and his personnel in the Torah, to the oracles of God spoken through David and then through Jeremiah, the author also gives the hearers a new perspective on their situation, one also calculated to facilitate perseverance.

If they only look at the direction that their lives have taken over the last five years or 10 years or perhaps 20 years since they converted to the Christian faith, they will have a rather dim view of the trajectory their situation has taken. Things have gotten rather worse than better, but if they take this longer view that the author is laying out from the point of view of God's dealing with humanity to form a people for himself, they stand at a point of remarkable privilege, for God has now brought about the better things that God has been preparing since the failure of the former things. Things toward which David the king is reputed to have looked, things about which Jeremiah the prophet could only speak in advance.

So, from this standpoint, where they are in history is actually an enviable place, not at all a place of a disadvantage as their neighbors might seek to make them think. Once again, the word of Hebrews continues to challenge us also in our situation. The same salvation historical perspective that the author offers his audience about the access to God that they enjoy should also caution us who live two millennia after Christ's death not to take this access for granted.

What was achieved in Christ for humanity's approach to the divine was something of an incredible moment that changed the way humans responded to and were qualified to approach God in an ultimate way. Christian worship coming before the almighty together is, therefore, not a chore, not an obligation that eats into our Sundays, but an astonishing privilege. The assurance given to the Christian not only of being able to draw nearer to God in worship and prayer at any time but also of being qualified to enter into God's presence, whether after death or at the second coming of Christ, is a benefit that was unthinkable to anyone in the period before Jesus.

The author, therefore, challenges us to keep the privilege that Jesus has won for us lively in our minds as if, indeed, it was new and fresh for us and not something two millennia old. Throughout this section and particularly in chapter 8, the author reminds us that the material visible creation is of less value and is a less secure reality than that which exists in God's eternal, invisible realm. This is another point at which the author would goad us out of our commitment to empiricism and materialism, trusting and caring more about what we can see, feel, and hear rather than what remains beyond the observation of our senses.

Following Christ with our full hearts rather than dividing our time, energies, and investment between God and mammon requires latching onto what the author lays out at the beginning and at the end of his sermon. The visible material world is the unreliable one, while Jesus is the reliable foundation on which to build a genuinely secure life. This world's rewards may seem more real than whispers of God's promises, but as long as we think and evaluate matters this way, we will lack the singleness of heart that gives discipleship its power, integrity, and joy.

The author tries to help us understand that God's oath will never fail, that God's promises will come to the faithful, and that Jesus will never disappoint those who rely on him; therefore, the author tries to help us continue to build our lives fully around these promises and upon the word of this Jesus.