

Hebrews Study Session 12 - Chapter 8

In Chapter 8 the author continues to hammer home the superiority of Christ, the great high priest of the new covenant over that of the Levitical priests of the old covenant. As in previous chapters where the author introduces and truth only to leave it for the present and then complete it later, we are going to see that tonight. Chapter 8 serves as the launch pad for all the major themes concerning Jesus Christ our great high priest for the rest of the book.

It is also critical to remember the historical background to this entire book. There were Hellenistic Jews who had converted to Christianity many years ago. In the beginning their faith was vibrant and active and fruit-bearing. At this point in history, Christianity was a huge minority and it did not enjoy any of the protective benefits of Judaism from Roman persecution. Thus, as persecution was sweeping across the empire, these believers were being tempted to return to the Jewish faith. The entire book of Hebrews is a sermon preaching the futility and dangers of such an action.

Here are the points the author is going to make about Jesus Christ, our great high priest, in chapter 8 that he is going to expand upon in later chapters.

- 1) Jesus' priesthood is better than Aaron's (8:1 - already discussed in 4:16- 7:28)
- 2) Jesus works in a better sanctuary (8:2, 5 - picked up in 9:1-17)
- 3) Jesus offered a better sacrifice (8:3 - picked up in 9:13 -10:18)
- 4) Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant (8:6 - picked up in 8:7-13)
- 5) Jesus works are based on better promises (8:6 - picked up in 10:19 - 12:3)
- 6) Thus, Jesus obtained a better ministry in general (8:6)

[Read Hebrews 8:1-6]

Chapter 8 begins with the word "main point" - which is a good translation. The author uses this to introduce new material which he will elaborate on later as discussed already. While it often gets accurately translated "sums up" - that isn't appropriate here as what follows is not a summary but new material.

The author is introducing a new thought concerning our great high priest which has deep significance. He says that our high priest has "*taken His seat at the right hand of the throne...*". In the Law the only time a priest could sit down was when he was finished with his work. The problem was that since the sacrifices were on-going and perpetual, if you were one of the priests allotted to be performing the sacrifices, you never sat down until other priests came to relieve you.

Q: Based on this, why is it significant that the author states that Jesus sat down? (*It signifies that He completed His work. It was finished for all time. The verb tense is aorist which means that Jesus sat down after He completed His work and the results of that completed work are still in effect now.*)

In v.2 - the words "sanctuary" and "true tabernacle" are referring to the same location. One of the main ideas the author is bringing out is that of location.

Q: As a refresher from the last two weeks, when did Christ assume the office of high priest?
(after his resurrection and exaltation back to heaven)

The priesthood of Christ, which is like the priesthood of Melchizedek, doesn't fit with the priests of the old covenant. The Levitical priesthood was earthly and bound to this world. However, Christ's priesthood was heavenly. The Levitical priesthood, in general, was but a shadow of the reality which is found in Christ's priesthood. Think about it. When Jesus was on the earth, He was a layman. He served no priestly functions or did no priestly work. However, He became a priest only after He returned to heaven. Yet, His one and only sacrifice which He performed, was done on earth in the form of His own death on the cross.

Q: Why does the author state that if Christ were on the earth, He would not be a priest? *(because those who were priests on the earth were so because of the Law and Jesus didn't meet the legal requirements to be a Levitical priest)*

Q: Why does the author call the earthly elements of the Levitical priesthood a copy and shadow? *(The old covenant tabernacle was made by humans and thus imperfect. It was only a shadow and that suggests that it mimics the heavenly one enough to point people to God's greater, heavenly realities. Yet, in the end, it belongs to the realm of this world, which is the realm of things which are passing away.)*

Notice that Moses was commanded by God to make the earthly tabernacle according to the pattern God gave him on Sinai. Despite Moses' attention to detail, it was still constructed by humans and served sinful humans under the Law.

Q: Based on our previous discussions, especially those from chapter 7, why was the old covenant called weak and useless (7:18)? *(It did not bring man to God. It only brought an awareness of sin.)*

Q: In v.6 what is the more excellent ministry Jesus has obtained over the Levitical priests? *(He has the ministry of bringing man to God, not just revealing their sins.)*

Q: Does the writer of Hebrews put down the ministry of the Levitical priests? *(no - while the old covenant wasn't without a certain dignity and worth, it cannot compare to the dignity and worth of the new covenant.)*

The word "mediator" is a legal word to describe the one who arbitrates between two parties.

Q: What are the "better promises" mentioned in v.6? *(God's promise to Abram to bless the entire world through his seed, the promise of a new priesthood like Melchizedek's which is headed by a son of David - the Messiah.)*

These are the two promises the author has expounded upon for the first half of the book. Now he is going to bring another promise of God to mind for his frightened flock. This one

comes from Jeremiah and deals with the nature of the new covenant God promised to bring about in His time. This is a new promise in Hebrews. Remember that when the writer of Hebrews brings out Old Testament quotes, that was the Scripture of this time. This was authoritative to those who were listening to this sermon as new believers who had formerly been Jews. The thing in common was their belief that Scripture was authoritative. Those listening to this sermon originally (and the author) would not have seen the author's words as necessarily authoritative - though in an interesting turn - they were later seen that way by the church and this sermon of Hebrews was canonized. The point is that the purpose of the Old Testament quotes is to establish grounds of authority for what he is preaching to them.

[Read Jeremiah 31:31-34]

[Read Hebrews 8:7-13]

The word "faultless" is often translated "blameless" In Luke 1:6 it is used to speak of Zechariah and Elizabeth's observance of the Lord's commands. Paul used it to speak of his own standing under the law in Philippians 3:6. It can also be translated "nothing wrong with". The use here is of an institution instead of a person. The first covenant came up short, not being able to deliver the fulness of a relationship which is what God ultimately desired. Had the first covenant been without fault, then there would be no reason for a new one. But the old one covenant could not create a permanent relationship based between God and man.

Before going through v.8 - there is a "Poor English Translation Alert". The way the NASB translates this verse (and the NIV) they make it sound like God found fault with the people under the first covenant. Yet while that's certainly true and possible, it doesn't flow well in the author's thoughts. Another translation which takes the word "them" as dative (recipients of the message) instead of accusative (objects of the message's content), puts the "them" as the ones God is speaking to and not finding fault with. It would read this way, "*for finding fault [with the old covenant], He says to them...*" While both are possible, the main point seems to be that God found fault with the old covenant itself rather than the people (at least in this passage). Notice that the first sentence of Jeremiah quoted speaks of a new covenant which implies that God has found fault with the old one.

There are three parts of the promise the author is quoting from Jeremiah 31.

- 1) The Lord promised a time when He would make a new covenant with His people.
- 2) Following "new" (v.8), this promise was qualified negatively, that the new covenant would not be like the old one made at Sinai.
- 3) The details of the new covenant described positively established the relationship with the Lord.

Q: Who is this new covenant going to involve? (*the houses of Israel and Judah*)

Q: Why do you think that the promise mentioned both Israel and Judah? (*many possible answers, one is that at the time the promise was made by Jeremiah, Israel and Judah were divided and God always wanted them to be united. This was a way to indicate that the two would*

be reunited under the new covenant - all of God's people would be included in God's new covenant, not just one house or the other)

Q: If this promise was made to Israel and Judah, why does the author of Hebrews bring it up as valid for the Christian he was addressing? *(In Christ, they were God's covenant people, under the new covenant. Christians are the new Israel, so to speak.)*

[Read Galatians 3:26-29]

[Read Romans 2:28-29]

It is important to realize that the promises found in the new covenant are available to all mankind now. All who call upon the name of the Lord are God's people.

Q: In what ways was the new covenant not like the old one? *(v. 9 - In the old one, the people did not continue in the old covenant.)*

Q: What does this imply? *(that the old covenant was conditional and that the people of God broke their end of it... repeatedly)*

The Lord "did not care" for them - those of the old covenant. This is a very strong phrase here meaning to ignore. The people voided the covenant by breaking it and thus God neglected them. Now keep in mind the love of God was still at work in these people. If God's treatment of His people in the Old Testament represents neglect, what glory and honor must the Lord have had in mind if they would have kept the terms of the covenant?

Q: What are the characteristics of the new covenant? *(God will put His laws into their minds, He will write His laws on their hearts, He will be their God and they His people, they will not need teachers because everyone in God's kingdom will know the Lord, He will forgive their sins and remember them no more.)*

Q: What made the "writing the law on the minds and hearts" possible under the new covenant? *(The Holy Spirit)*

The Holy Spirit is the gift of grace from God to mankind. He is who makes all these promises come to life and possible as the He now indwells the believer permanently - not as the result of our works but on the basis of the finished work of Jesus on the cross. We enter into the new covenant when we come to believe God's good news that Jesus' sacrifice of Himself was sufficient payment for all our sins and receive the forgiveness and grace He offers us. At that point the Spirit is poured out upon us - thus, indwelling us forever. The Holy Spirit was also prophesied about in the Old Testament.

[Read Joel 2:28-29]

These Christians, the original recipients of Hebrews, would have been familiar with the

writings of the Old Testament. They would have known these prophecies and known that the Holy Spirit was going to be poured out upon God's people as well as the glory of the new covenant God was going to make with mankind through His Messiah.

Both covenants have a few things in common and one of the biggest is that in both God says, *"I will be your God"*.

Notice that the new covenant is internal while the old covenant was external. The law isn't something written on our doorposts any longer but rather it is written on our minds and hearts. This is a radical statement for that day and time. The Qumran community that lived in the desert south of Jerusalem (and from which we have the Dead Sea Scrolls) despised the corruption that had taken hold of the Levitical priesthood in the 1st century A.D. Through the Old Testament, they envisioned a day where a new priesthood would emerge that would overthrow the corrupt present priesthood. Yet, this would be only a refined and pure Old Testament priesthood in the same line as the old one. It was basically setting up a ritualistic paradise on earth. They missed the point that the new covenant promised by God would be based on a different priesthood and be radically different from the Levitical one - not merely a purified version of the old one. This is one reason the author of Hebrews spent so much time on this thought of the priesthood because of all the wrong notions swirling around in that time.

Q: What do you see is the foundation of this new relationship with God? (*forgiveness of sins*)

Where sins are forgiven there is no wrath or condemnation.

Q: What does it mean to you that your sins are forgiven? (*personal answers*)

[Read Galatians 5:1]

Q: Since Christ has set us free from sin, what type of slavery did Paul fear the Galatians would subject themselves to again? (*to that of the law - the old covenant*)

Q: What is the extent of our freedom in Christ? (it is limitless but Christians are to avoid sin)

[Read I Corinthians 6:12-13]

This passage is discussing grey areas of our faith - things which are not clearly condemned or commended by Scripture. These are areas of life in this world where a person's individual relationship with the Lord and his conscience will guide in how to behave. Not every use of our freedom is spiritually profitable.

[Read I Corinthians 9:19-23]

Q: How does Paul say he uses his freedom in this passage? (*He uses it for the sake of spreading the gospel.*)

The point on freedom is that while Christians experience tremendous freedom from the

law and ceremonial regulations of the old covenant, this freedom is to be tempered by the leadership of the Holy Spirit and be used in manner profitable for God's kingdom, not our self-centered desires or worldly agendas.

[At this time the conversation took off on being free from judging other believers. Quite by "accident" you can read the summation of our discussion in today's My Utmost For His Highest, by Oswald Chambers (June 22). He speaks of the same things and draws the same conclusions the group made last night. Say there is no God!]

The author finishes his discussion in v.13. He uses the word "obsolete". This word means to be decayed or worn out. It was originally used to describe the wax of a candle which had already been used. It was that hard, useless residue left behind from burning a candle. The old covenant was decayed and worn out, useless now. Another use of the word means "unserviceable", it was outmoded. God canceled its validity when Jesus offered Himself on the cross. The Lord no longer used it in His redemptive plans for mankind. There is no need or reason to return to the old covenant out of a sense of nostalgia. It's completely ineffective. As the author makes mention of the old covenant's obsolescence, it shows us that the two covenants were never meant to co-exist. The new covenant based upon the sacrifice Jesus made of Himself, was better than anything that the old covenant could envision. The new covenant superseded and fulfilled the old covenant but it was not portrayed by the author as being in opposition to it.

If you recall, chapter 7 stressed the relational nature of the new covenant. This is still true in chapter 8 but he adds in this one that Christians need to reject the externalization of our faith. We are not to neglect or ignore that the dynamics of the Christian faith, our relationship to God, is now focused internally first - salvation brings an internal change and an internal new life. These will lead to external behavior but the basis for those behaviors is the internal change that has already been brought about by God.

Another point this chapter makes as a whole is that it doesn't reject Judaism as the foundation of Christianity. It sees Judaism and the old covenant as the moon while Christianity and the new covenant are the sun. Under the old covenant God worked mightily on behalf of His people to show His love and faithfulness to them. When this was written, Judaism was the larger religion and enjoyed the privileges of being an established, "majority" faith. However, the tables have certainly turned now with Christianity being the established, majority religion in our nation (and over a good segment of the world). So we would consider a given that Christianity with the new covenant is superior to the old covenant. But this should lead us to being careful in our witness to Jews as to not reject their religion as opposed to show its fulfillment in Christianity. For the foundation offered, we can be thankful and find common ground.

Q: Are there any other questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?