Sunday Class **Notes**

We Have Such a High Priest

Hebrews 8–9 · English Standard Version

None of us were raised Jewish, so none of us ever had a high priest or lived under a priesthood. Likewise, most of us were not raised Catholic, so we have never felt a personal need of a priest. That is why the conversation has to begin with the question of why it should matter at all. Why do I need a priest, and why should I know the truth about whoever my priest is? The answer is the condition we are in. We are sinful, inadequate, limited, wicked apart from God, and hostile to him. In that condition we cannot approach God, have a relationship with him, be in his presence, or communicate with Him. The only way a relationship with God is possible is if somebody will go between us and him, which is literally what a priest does. Everything about salvation and relationship with God hinges on it. I cannot have anything to do with God, nor he with me, apart from a priest and go between.

Hebrews 7, the chapter associated with Melchizedek, has already said that the original covenant was imperfect. It could not do what was need. It was inadequate and weak, and at the end of the day it was useless, because the old covenant could not do the most important thing. It could not reconcile us to God, and it could not give us salvation by forgiving our sins. It was overseen by human priests who were mortal and who were themselves sinful. That is not good enough. A mortal, sinful human needs somebody better than he is. Those priests were priests because of physical heritage. They were no better than anybody else. They happened to have the right DNA. What we need, the writer says, is a high priest who can actually do the job, one who is holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens, who would offer a sacrifice for sin one time for all time, who is the Son of God and perfect. Chapter 8 begins by saying that this is what we have.

The Main Point

Hebrews 8:1 is one of those sentences the Bible writers give us as a marker, the kind we underline and circle because it tells us where everything is going. The main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest. He is not just a man. He is God. He is not sinful. He is perfect. He is not on earth. He is in heaven.

Hebrews 8:1

"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."

The writer introduces three points in verses 2 through 5 that he will elaborate through chapters 8 and 9, and every word is doing work. He has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens. He does not say that Jesus has taken his place; he says he has taken his seat. He is a minister in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man. And every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices, so it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer.

The seating is worth more explanation, because there are only two times after the ascension when Jesus is pictured standing. When Stephen is dying, he looks into heaven and sees the Son of Man "standing." A parent knows the difference between the two kinds of falls a child takes. One is just a child falling, and even if there is wailing and screaming, the child is fine. The other is a fall in which the child is really hurt, and nobody stays in the recliner for that one. You get up. Stephen is in crisis, and Jesus stands. The only other time is in Revelation 5, where Jesus stands before the throne to take the scroll the Father is offering, so that he can reveal the rest of the book. Other than those two moments, he is seated, and there is a reason for it. That reason is that Jesus's work was completed.

A Change of Covenant

We cannot go from Aaron as priest to Jesus as priest without something happening between them. Under Old Testament law, Jesus was not qualified to be a priest. So, there has to be a change of covenant, a change of law. It would be like deciding in 2028 to replace the presidency with a monarchy. We could not do that because our law, the Constitution does not allow it, and the law would have to be changed first. In the same way, a better priest requires a changed covenant. The reason for the change is that the first covenant was faulty. Laws are not changed for the sake of changing them. They are changed because something is wrong and not working. God changes the covenant because there was something wrong with the first one.

The change should not have been a surprise, because the old covenant itself predicted a new one. Jeremiah said that a new covenant was coming, so the announcement of the change is inside the covenant that is being changed. There are other reasons God did not begin with the new covenant. Paul makes the point in Romans that God gave the law knowing that nobody could keep it, so that sin would increase, so that we would know how bad the problem was, and so that we would then be prepared to receive grace through faith. The point here is that the covenant has been changed, and because it has been changed, there can now be a better priest, Jesus.

The old covenant was a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. Everything about it pictured the new covenant and the reality that was coming. The tabernacle itself, the furniture, the veils, the items, the priesthood, the monarchy, the cities of refuge, all of it is a picture of what was to come. That is why God told Moses on the mountain to make the tabernacle according to the pattern,

exactly. We usually take that as a command to do everything the way God says to do it, which is true and not in dispute. It is not the only way the verse is used, and it is not the way it is used here. The writer does not say it to warn Moses to follow the pattern. He says it because the pattern was a replica of heavenly things, and if Moses had built it differently, the heavenly things would have been obscured. We would not have been able to see them.

The heavenly things are the new covenant. Paul says in Ephesians that we have been raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly places, so that a Christian is, in that sense, in heaven with Jesus now. Everything about the new covenant is heavenly and spiritual. We tend to picture our existence as a timeline we walk down until we reach a fork and go to either heaven or to hell. The claim here is stranger than that. We are already in a kind of proto-heaven, and everything about the church is heavenly. Moses had to build exactly as God said so that the copy would reveal the original. If the old covenant was a copy and shadow, the new covenant is the revelation of, and the access to, the actual heavenly things. It is a better covenant, enacted on better promises, served by a better ministry.

Written on the Heart

The new covenant was necessary because the old was faulty, and the fault is not where we expect it. If that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to seek a second. Then the writer says that God, finding fault with **them**, not with it, announced the new covenant. The faulty thing was not the covenant. It was the people under it. They did not continue in it. They lost their relationship with God. The reason they did not continue is that they were unable. The covenant was external to them, and they did not have the ability to obey it.

Paul says it several times. The old covenant was supposed to be on the heart. Moses said that the word he was speaking should be on their heart, but it was not. It was on tablets of stone. It remained external, and they could not obey what was out there. The same danger exists now. There are people who are Christians, broadly speaking, to whom all of this is still external rules and laws. For it to do any good it has to be in here, and the problem is that we cannot put it there ourselves.

Hebrews 8:10

“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.”

God puts his word in our hearts in the new covenant. We don’t put it there. The result is a personal relationship with God, because our sins are forgiven. They shall not teach each one his neighbor, saying know the Lord, for all will know him, from the least to the greatest, and the reason is that

God will be merciful to their iniquities and remember their sins no more. That is not how it was under the old covenant. The old was external. The new is internal, and God is the one who puts it there.

The reality underneath this is that I am unable to be obedient to God by my own power. Romans 7 pictures a person who wants to do God's will and keeps saying so. I want to do good, and I do not. I do not want to do what is bad, and I do. Why do I keep doing what I do not want to do? Because the person in Romans 7 is trying to do it himself. An external law can never lead to obedience. It is impossible, because it is out there. For a law to govern a person it has to be in the heart. Deuteronomy 29:4 has Moses saying that the people are not obeying God because God has not given them a heart to obey. God must himself create in me a willing obedience. He must place his law in my heart, and then he must empower my obedience to it. Romans 7 is a man trying to obey on his own power. Romans 8 is the Holy Spirit from start to finish, because God puts his Holy Spirit in us. Paul says that we put to death the deeds of the flesh **by the Spirit**. Until God acts, the law is outside of me. That is the difference between the old and new covenants. The writer of Hebrews is not Paul, and Hebrews is not a Pauline letter, but the argument is the same.

What the Old System Could Not Do

The writer returns to the old covenant in the opening of chapter 9 and describes where everything was in the physical tabernacle and temple, and then says that of these things he cannot now speak in detail. The reason is that the Jews no longer had them. The Babylonians had come, conquered, and the ark and the furnishings were gone. One of the problems with the old covenant begins with the fact that it was a physical location, and a physical location is a problem when what is needed is access to God.

The priests who worked there were continually entering the outer tabernacle, and the word continually is there for a reason. **Something done continually is not done finally.** We wash our hands often because once is never enough. They are going to get dirty again. We will sneeze, or eat, or touch something, or have to throw out rotten food. These things soil our hands. A priesthood that enters continually is a priesthood that never finishes. Access was limited. Into the second room, where God was, only the high priest entered, and only once a year. A Jew living under that system never had direct access to God. The blood was animal blood, which is not sufficient, because we are not animals. If we were cows, killing a cow might answer for us. We are not, and what needs to die for us is a person, Jesus. The priesthood was sinful, and that is not good enough.

Then the writer says that the Holy Spirit is signifying something, which is another of those sentences where the Bible tells us what it means. The way into the holy place, meaning the actual heavenly presence of God, has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing. As

long as that physical tabernacle was there, a person could not get to God. It was a symbol for the present time, not the reality. Accordingly, gifts and sacrifices were offered that cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience.

When Christ Appeared

Verse 11 turns on a small word that is doing enormous work, the word "…'but,' when Christ appeared." We could not get to God. We could not have our sins forgiven. We could not have reality, or spiritual things. When Christ appeared, everything changed. The old covenant has been removed, the new covenant is here, and Jesus is our high priest. Now the three points can be explained.

1. That he has taken his seat means his work is finished. Every priest stands daily, offering again and again. He has taken his seat. At the end of a long day of work, in the yard or in the shop, what a person looks forward to is sitting down. Seated means the work is done.
2. That he serves in the true tabernacle means we now have access to a heavenly location. Chapter 9 says that Jesus is in the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not of this creation, a minister of heavenly things, so that we can enter a holy place not made with hands, not a mere copy of the true one, but heaven itself, in the presence of God. We have access to God.
3. That he has something to offer means his effective sacrifice. It is his own blood, not animal blood. It obtained eternal redemption, not a temporary reprieve. It was through the eternal Spirit, and it was the offering of himself, and it works to cleanse the conscience. He does not have to offer himself often. The Catholic Mass, according to the Catholic Church, is a repetition of the sacrifice of Jesus, offered again every time the Mass is taken. The writer says the opposite. Once he has been manifested to put away sin, he offered himself once to bear the sins of many.

Hebrews 9:12
"He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."

Concluding Thoughts

Jesus is our perfect high priest. He is a better person than the old covenant priests. He brought a better covenant. He is of a better priesthood, the order of Melchizedek. He ministers in a better place. He made a better sacrifice. He effects a better forgiveness. He guarantees better promises. There is one word that could be changed to capture how great what he did is. The word "better" could become "perfect," totally complete or sufficient. He is perfect in all of it. There is no flaw in

any of it. The point of the two chapters is that we have such a high priest, and that because we do, we have access to God.

Hebrews 9:24

"For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."
