

Hebrews 8

M. W. Bassford, 7-10-11

As we've discussed before on any number of occasions, one of the most important things we can do to understand the Bible is to read it from the perspective of the original audience. If we fail to do this, we are likely to twist its meaning to suit our own circumstances. This problem is most obvious in the study of the book of Revelation, when men try to make a book written to a first-century audience fit the current events of the twenty-first century.

The problems with that particular interpretation are obvious, but similar problems can arise from making the same mistake anywhere in Scripture. If we wish to avoid these pitfalls, we must constantly ask ourselves why this particular book was written to a particular audience in a particular place and particular time. Many times, the concerns of that original audience are not concerns that we share, and we can miss the meaning if we miss that original mindset.

This is often important to remember in the book of Hebrews. One of the main concerns that the Hebrews writer meant to address is something that we take for granted today. The church that Christ established has been around for 2000 years now, and no one thinks it's a problem that Christianity represents a dramatic departure from Judaism.

However, in the first century, that was emphatically not the case. Hebrews was written about 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, but by that time, it was already obvious that most Jews were not going to obey the gospel. This was a big logical problem. The Jews had been God's chosen people for 1500 years, God had made His covenant with them and His promises to them, so how come the followers of Jesus are primarily made up of Gentiles and not Jews?

The Hebrews writer explains this massive demographic shift by attributing it to an even more massive shift of covenants. God's covenant people are different because God's covenant is different, and God had planned this new, different covenant from the very beginning. Let's see how all of this works out in Hebrews 8.

Old and New High Priests

In this chapter, the Hebrews writer begins his explanation by returning to the main subject of the last chapter: **JESUS, OUR HIGH PRIEST**. We find this discussion in Hebrews 8:1-3. In this section, he highlights the three main attributes of Jesus as a high priest. First, Jesus is in heaven, not on earth. Nor is He tucked away in some insignificant suburb of the heavenly Jerusalem. Instead, He is seated at the right hand of God. This is important because it shows the access that we have through Jesus. No one could be better placed than He is to intercede for us.

Second, Jesus doesn't serve in the earthly tabernacle that the ancient Israelites constructed. Instead, His duties took place in the true tabernacle, the spiritual reality that God constructed. In other words, the difference between the old high priests and Jesus is like the difference between some eight-year-old boy who pretends that he's the quarterback in the Super Bowl and Tom Brady, who has won the Super Bowl. Every priest before Jesus was just playing make-believe.

Third, in that true spiritual tabernacle, Jesus had something to offer, just like every high priest on earth had something to offer. As we've seen before, the Hebrews writer likes to offer sneak previews of the major points he's going to discuss later. Here, he's previewing possibly the most important chapters in the whole book, Hebrews 9 and 10.

In comparison to Jesus, the writer briefly describes the **PRIESTS UNDER THE LAW**. We can see this in Hebrews 8:4-5. Interestingly enough, this discussion begins by pointing to something that Jesus is not. He is not a priest according to the Law of Moses, so He is unable to serve as a priest on earth. This has important implications for the false doctrine of premillennialism. Premillennialists believe that before the end of the world, Jesus will return to earth and reign for 1000 years as King in Jerusalem. However, as Hebrews 8:4 clearly implies, if Jesus were to come to earth, He couldn't be a priest anymore, and all of us who depend on Him for forgiveness of sins would be doomed. Clearly, God is not so foolish as to send Jesus back to earth if that would doom His chosen people. Jesus only reigns as King in heaven.

However, even though the earthly priests can do something Jesus can't, that doesn't make them better. They serve in a tabernacle carefully constructed to imitate the heavenly reality, but they don't and cannot serve in the real thing. Even their example, though, teaches us a valuable lesson about how we should serve God. God didn't let Moses build a tabernacle according to His preferences. Instead, He commanded Moses to build the tabernacle according to the pattern He was shown. Today, as we build the spiritual tabernacle of the church, we also must take care to follow the pattern.

Old and New Covenants

Next, the writer reveals that Christ's priesthood was so much better because it was founded on **A BETTER COVENANT**. He introduces this idea in Hebrews 8:6-7. As the Hebrews writer is about to explain, this covenant is intrinsically better because it is founded on the promise of better things. God's people under the new covenant have more spiritual advantages than God's people under the old covenant did. Because it was possible to enact a better

covenant at all, the old covenant, the covenant that underlay the Law of Moses, had to have been flawed. It could neither perfectly join God's people to Him nor perfectly accomplish the forgiveness of their sins.

However, this wasn't due to some oversight on God's part. Even during the time of the Law of Moses, God had predicted that He would enact **A NEW COVENANT**. We see this promise in Hebrews 8:8. Here, the Hebrews writer begins a lengthy quotation from a prophecy in Jeremiah 31, and it is critically important to the Hebrews writer's argument. As we've seen already, Christ brought earth-shaking change to the entire structure of faith in God. To people who remembered the relative calm of the Jewish traditions before Christ appeared, this must have been terribly disconcerting. Just imagine how disorienting it would be for us if some prophet popped up and said, "Stop doing everything you do to worship God, and do these new things instead." It would be a real challenge for us to do that, because we're so used to our current worship practices. That's the boat the Jews were in. The Hebrews writer points out, though, that they should have been expecting this massive change because God had promised hundreds of years ago that it would take place. Serving God no longer meant following the traditions of the fathers. It meant embracing an entirely new covenant.

This new covenant was necessary, not because God had made a flawed covenant with Moses, but because of **THE FATHERS' DISOBEDIENCE**. We read about this in Hebrews 8:9. As we know, the Israelites did not constantly, reliably serve God. Indeed, the opposite was true. If anything, the history of Israel is a history of constant disobedience. Here, Jeremiah describes the effect this disobedience had. It nullified the covenant that God had made with them. They didn't serve God, and so God no longer felt any need to care for them. The covenant was broken.

This makes perfect sense. We understand in the world of business contracts that if one side fails to carry out the contract, the other side doesn't have to carry out its end of the deal either. The contract is breached. However, some people struggle to grasp this in the spiritual realm. Once again, this brings us to a serious flaw with premillennialist doctrine. One of the reasons they say that Jesus is going to come to earth and reign is because God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants to give them the land of Canaan, and God has to fulfill that covenant, regardless of what Abraham's descendants have done in the interim.

It is true that God does describe the land promise as an everlasting covenant in Genesis 17, but that misses the point of what "everlasting" means. It doesn't mean "forever, no matter what". Instead, it means, "forever, until the humans break it." There are many things in Scripture that God describes as "everlasting" that do not continue today because the Israelites blew it. In Exodus 40, God says that the priesthood of Aaron would be an everlasting priesthood, yet that priesthood was clearly superseded by the priesthood of Christ. In Isaiah 24, God speaks of the way His people broke the everlasting covenant. Today, none of God's covenant promises to physical Israel still continue.

Instead, the new covenant sets up a new relationship between **GOD AND HIS PEOPLE**. The main points of this are laid out in Hebrews 8:10-11. First of all, under God's new covenant, His law would be written on the minds and hearts of His people. The law wouldn't be external to them. It would be within them. Likewise, under this new covenant, there would be no need to teach the covenant members about God, because everyone would already know who God is. This points to a very different kind of covenant than God made with Israel. Men were brought into that covenant when they were born and circumcised. They became covenant sharers even though they didn't know the first thing about God's law or even who God is. Under the new covenant, though, everyone who is bound by the covenant understands both God's existence and God's will for us. Among other things, this concept is fatal for the false doctrine of infant baptism. Those who practice infant baptism say that as soon as the child has been sprinkled, he has become part of God's covenant people. That is impossible. That week-old child barely has a clue about Mama and Daddy yet, much less God. He has no idea that such a thing as rules exist. He cannot grasp that God has enacted rules that govern his life. A child who does not understand those things cannot be part of the covenant people that Hebrews 8 describes.

Finally, under the new covenant, God's people will receive **FORGIVENESS OF SINS**. This point is clear from Hebrews 8:12. This is one of the most important elements of any covenant relationship with God. God will keep His side of the covenant perfectly forever, but even the best-intentioned human being will, sooner or later, violate the agreement. Any covenant like this, then, needs some way to address sin that doesn't reach the level of willful rebellion. This is how it works under our covenant. God forgives us as we repent, and forgets our wrong from that point forward.

The fact that this new covenant is enacted now implies **THE END OF THE OLD COVENANT**. The Hebrews writer takes this logical step in Hebrews 8:13. The language that he uses to describe the old covenant here is very revealing. He says that it is obsolete now, but rather than having vanished, is only ready to vanish. This helps us to pinpoint the time at which Hebrews was written. The covenant of Sinai was made obsolete when Christ died on the cross. Through Christ, godly people now had a far better means of forming a relationship with God. However, even though the Mosaic Law lacked purpose, its outward forms still continued. The temple sacrifices went on until the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. At that point, the old covenant had vanished. The Hebrews writer, then, was writing before that point, before the Romans ended the observance of the Law forever. Since we live after that point, though, it's clear to us that every vestige of the Law has passed. It makes up no part of the law that we follow today.