



Greater Priest, Greater Covenant

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 8:1-13

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No Hope, No Life During the Second World War, the Nazi's, who were masters of cruelty, had a particularly cruel, psychological tactic that they would employ in order to destroy the morale and the psyche of allied POWs. In the POW work camps, when they wanted to break the will of the allied soldiers, they would often select the men whom they considered to be the strongest willed and the leaders of the POW groups, men who could give them trouble, and they would assign to them the job of moving a pile of rocks, by hand, from one side of the camp to the other. They would wake them early, while it was still dark, and they would have them move this massive pile of rocks from one location to the other. The following day, they would again awaken these men before dawn and have them move that same pile rocks from its new location back to the old one. They did it over and over again, day after day, sometimes week after week. Back and forth they would be forced to move these rocks. And over time, this meaningless and mindless work would begin to crush the morale, the strength, and the psyche of the soldiers. Many of these men, not all of them, but many became a shell of themselves. The principle behind this psychological scheme was simple – rob a man of hope and you will rob him of his life. Rob a man of hope and you rob a man of strength. Rob a man of hope and he will give up. It's true.

The writer of Hebrews knew well that the hardship and the suffering that the Hebrew Christians in Rome – his church, his people – were facing were conspiring to try and steal the hope that these Christians had in Jesus Christ. We've talked at length about the hardships and the struggles that these Christians had already endured and which were about to get even more difficult. Following Jesus had cost them much and was going to cost them even more. They were under government persecution and pressure to conform to the "accepted religions" of Rome, in which OT Judaism was included. They had already lost jobs and possessions, lost some of their rights. Their pastor and other believers were already thrown in jail and a martyr's death for faith in Christ was, for some of them, just on the horizon. Their families, who rejected the gospel and remained in the Jewish religion, rejected them

and opposed them outwardly for their faith. The Roman society marginalized them for their insistence that Jesus Christ is Lord and Caesar was not. This unrelenting pressure was taking its toll. Many had left their fellowship and apostatized from their original profession of faith in Christ and there were some who were still a part of the church but who were seriously considering returning to the Jewish faith they once followed – to the old priesthood, to the system of sacrifices and external laws. They would remain religious, of course, but it would be so much easier, in a temporal sense, to just let go of Jesus altogether. They were getting worn down.

These battered and buffeted believers needed hope. The writer of Hebrews understood that. Hope is not found in the absence of suffering and hardship and trial. Hope is not found in a right set of circumstances. Hope is found in the ultimate reality of Christ in any set of circumstances. Hope, from a biblical perspective, is a future certainty grounded in an ultimate reality. And that ultimate reality that the writer of Hebrews has been laboring to put fresh and anew before the eyes of these Hebrew Christians, is the glory and worth, the person and the power of Jesus Christ – His powerful redemption, His faithfulness to His people, His constant intercession, His saving work as the Great High Priest of God's people, His reign over all of creation and the certainty that He will make all things right, that His every enemy will be put under His feet, and that He will give His people a glorious future and nothing can derail that.

Over and over the refrain of this letter to the Hebrews has been that Jesus is greater. He is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the OT priests and their sacrifices, greater than Melchizedek. He is greater! And belonging to Jesus is greater than acceptance with Rome, greater than the approval of unbelieving family, greater than the approval of the unbelieving world that is passing away. The hope a future with Him is far greater than gaining the whole world now. What we have in Christ is far greater than anything the world, that is passing away, can offer in exchange for Him. That has been the message all along, a message meant to ground their heart and ours, their minds and ours hearts, in the undeniable glory and reign of Jesus Christ. Get a clear and surpassing vision of Jesus Christ in all of His splendor, and your hope, no matter the circumstances, will be filled to overflowing.

And today, in this chapter that we are looking at, the writer of Hebrews intends to stoke the hope of his struggling congregation, and to steel their hearts from falling away from Jesus and returning to Judaism, by telling us more about Jesus.

A Far Greater Priest (1-5) Look at what he writes, starting in verse 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, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.””*** (Hebrews 8:1–5, ESV) Here, for just a moment, the writer of Hebrews sort of catches his breath for just a moment and gives his readers a chance think about everything that he just been saying about Jesus. He has said a mouthful, right? He has been talking about our need for the perfect High Priest to make us accepted with God the Father and then presented Jesus as the only one who fits that description. And it reminds us of something that sometimes, I think, we forget. The foundation of our faith is centered on the need for a priest, for a mediator, for someone who can atone for our sins. Our faith is built upon the need for a sacrifice and for someone better than us that can mediate for us. We need someone who can appease the Father’s righteous anger toward our sins. We cannot do it. Where is one who can plead our case and remove our guilt? Where is the one who can stand in our place and satisfy the justice of God? Who is one whose own hands are pure from sin, so that he can represent me at the judgment seat of God and stand in my stead and pay the cost in His own body and give me forgiveness and righteousness before God? There is only one – Jesus Christ the Lord. My High Priest! ***“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”*** (1 Timothy 2:5–6, ESV)

The good news, the hope-inspiring news is ***we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.*** We have a High Priest, Jesus, who has accomplished the salvation of His people, once and for all – that’s why He is seated, because He has finished His saving work, and who now has returned to His rightful place at the right hand of God the Father, there to reign with all authority as the King over creation and the

kingly priest of His church. He sits as ***a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.***

Do you see the glory of this? I love the way that Philip Hughes describes this scene in speaking of Jesus's descent from heaven in the incarnation and His return to His rightful place as Lord. He says, **"He left as the Son of God. He returned both as Son of God and also, by reason of the incarnation, as the Son of Man. He left as Lord. He returned both as Lord and as Minister on our behalf in the presence of the Father. He left as King. He returned as both King and also as High Priest and Intercessor for those whom He is not ashamed to call his brethren. He left as Sovereign. He returned also as Savior."** This is the one who saves us and serves us from heaven, who cares for us, who works all things together for our good and His glory. There is no one greater than Him, no one better, no one higher. OK, so sin is conspiring against us. The prince of the power of the air, Satan, desires to destroy us. This world, under his sway, grows ever more hostile to us. So what? We have a priest who has saved us, a king who commands us, and a coming kingdom that is imperishable!

We have Christ and He is the Greatest High Priest. The job of the high priest in Israel was to offer gifts and sacrifices to God, on behalf of the people, over and over again. And it was necessary that Christ would have something to offer God as well if He is to be our High Priest – that's what it says in verse 3. And He does have something to offer – something far greater, right? His own life in exchange for ours. His once and for all sacrifice that saves us. His sacrifice is the only one that we need and all the sacrifices that the priests in Israel offered in the OT were only a shadow of that greatest of sacrifices. He is far greater than any of the high priests in Israel and do you know why? Because He does not serve in tabernacle or in the temple -- He serves in heaven. He doesn't serve in the copy or the shadow of heaven... He serves in heaven itself.

Look, everything that came before in the OT – all of it pointed to Him. The priests, the sacrifices, the tabernacle, the temple – they were all established to point to Jesus Christ, to God's Great High priest whose sacrifice of His blood could actually take away sins, not just cover them like the blood of bulls and goats in the OT. It was all just a shadow, but He is the reality. He's the culmination of it all. That's what the writer of Hebrews was getting at when he wrote that Jesus serves ***in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man... Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.*** He wouldn't fit in that context. He wasn't from the right lineage. But more than that,

they serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.””

Do you see? The reason that Jesus did not serve in the temple here on earth is because the temple and everything that went with it, the priests and the sacrifices that could never take away sins but only cover them – they were all just an earthly copy of a heavenly reality. When God gave Moses the Law, and gave to him the instructions on building the tabernacle and instructions for the worship that was to take place there, it was all a shadow and a copy that was to point to the real thing – to Jesus and to His ministry in heaven as our High Priest and King. When Christ came, the shadows began to fall away because He, Himself is the reality. He is our temple and tabernacle – the focus and the place of our worship. He is our High Priest and Mediator and Intercessor. He is our atoning sacrifice. He is our spiritual food. He is our life. Once you have the real thing, you don’t go back to the copy.

Let me put it in modern terms. My wife and daughter love to watch cooking shows and every now and then I’ll watch with them. You watch these shows and they show you how to make this incredible food, right? You watch how they mix this and season that and cook this and grill that and then they show you the end result and someone eats it and comments on it. But you know what is better than watching them make this food and someone else eating it? Eating it yourself! Cooking shows are designed to make you hungry for the real thing. When you have the real thing in front of you – Chicken Marsala, let’s say – you don’t go back to watching the show; you eat the food. That is what the copy and the shadow of Christ in the OT was meant to do, to make you hungry for Jesus. He’s telling these Hebrew Christians, “You can’t go back to the copy and the shadow of Jesus, back to the OT no matter how much easier you think it might make your life. In Christ, you have what all of these things pointed to – the far Greater High Priest who mediates the far greater Covenant.” The writer wants the Hebrew Christians and us to know the greatness of what we have in Christ.

The Far Greater Covenant (6-13) Now look what he says here, **“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.”** (Hebrews 8:6–7, ESV) In other words, the writer of Hebrews is saying “Jesus is greater not only because He is a greater

High Priest, but because He is the High Priest of a greater covenant. In fact, He mediates the ultimate covenant.” That is why you can’t leave Jesus; your only hope is in Him.

Here’s the thing I want you to see, ok? The old covenant, like we have said before, was never intended by God to be final. The prophets understood that. Around 600 years before Christ was born, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to tell His chosen people, that the days were coming when He would establish a new covenant. God had always intended to replace the old covenant with the new. The old covenant was temporary and was intended to be superseded by the new covenant that we have in Christ and the reason why is this: because the old covenant was faulty.

Where did the weakness and faults in the old covenant come from? The faults in the old covenant did not come from some weakness or inadequacy in God. They couldn’t; God is perfect in every way. The fault was not in God in or in His commandments. Some people will say that the issue was that the old covenant was not a covenant of grace. But the old covenant was given in the midst of the greatest display of grace in the OT, namely the Exodus. God saved Israel by grace and led them out of Egypt and only then did He bring them to Mt Sinai and give them the Law. The problem was not a lack of grace. The flaw in the old covenant was not that it did not do what it was intended to do. God never intended the old covenant rituals and laws to be the ultimate thing in which His people trusted. They were always designed to point the Israelites away from themselves to God and ultimately to Christ. So what was it?

Quoting from Jeremiah 31, the writer of Hebrews tells us: **“For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.” (Hebrews 8:8–9, ESV)** The problem with the old covenant was the unfaithfulness of the people. Read the history of Israel as a whole in the OT, and though you find a remnant of those who responded to God by faith and sought to live in obedience to God’s Word and lived a life of continuing faith and repentance, looking to the fulfillment of the covenant one day, by and large the history of the nation was that of idolatry, disobedience, faithlessness and falling away from the Lord, the very thing that these Hebrew Christians were being tempted to do. The fault was squarely on the shoulders of

the people. The result for the nation as a whole was that God **“showed no concern for them”** in the sense that they experienced military defeat, the vast destruction of their society, and national enslavement. This is the result of turning away in your heart from God. This is the result – not freedom, not blessing, not ease, not prosperity, not better circumstances but the withdrawal of God’s special care. You can see how this is warning for the confessing Hebrews who were thinking about retreating from their faith in Christ and faithful obedience to Him.

But what the writer of Hebrews wants to emphasize to this little flock is that they cannot go back to the old covenant that didn’t work because they are not a part of that old covenant any longer. Through faith in Christ, they were part of the new covenant that was far, far better. He wants them to see the superiority of the new covenant, the new relationship, they have with God through the work of Christ. Check this out.

“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...” (Hebrews 8:10a, ESV) The Law in the old covenant was external, it told you how to live but it did not actually give you the power to do it. It did not change the heart, but in the new covenant in Christ, that is exactly what happens. God puts His words into our minds and writes them on our hearts. They are not just words on a stone, or words on a page of the Bible. By God’s grace and by the work of His Holy Spirit, He gives to us new minds and new hearts – minds and heart that have been raised from the death of sin – so that we can understand His truth, and embrace it, and commit ourselves to it, and love it. The truth of God pierces our hearts, wins us to Jesus Christ, and reshapes our lives and our loves –that is the work of God in saving us. That’s true faith that God creates in us. He does it. He gives us new minds and new hearts.

Every true Christian knows something of this. If you have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, you start wanting to do things that you never wanted to do before while the things that you once wanted to do, old pleasures and sins lose their attraction. You find yourself eagerly attending church, wanting to read and hear His word, wanting to pray, serving others, and rejecting sin more and more, as Christ shepherds your soul and God writes His law upon your heart. And that God does that should be such an encouragement to our souls. We can come before the Lord in honesty and say, “Lord I believe in Jesus, but I am struggling. I am wavering. I need you to make me faithful” And you can know that God

will hear you and he will work faithfulness into you; He will engrave His word on your heart. You can come and confess, “Lord, I find myself too often drawn to things that are wicked, to what I know is sin, and find weakening attraction to what is holy and good.” And you can know that He will change you and write His truth upon your mind and heart, and cause you to increasingly reflect the character of Christ. You can come to the Lord, admitting “Father I find myself in this world not knowing what to think about all the things that I see going on around me, how to discern the Spirit of this age.” And you can know that He will give you grace to know the truth and to discern the truth because He will take the words that you read on these pages and write them into your heart and mind. That is the work of God.

The result is this. God says, ***“I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”*** (Hebrews 8:10–11, ESV) The OT echoes this truth repeatedly – ***I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*** And though this reality was only fulfilled in some in the nation of Israel, this promise is perfectly fulfilled in every single person who partakes of the new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. We actually become God’s possession and not only that, we lay hold of God. It is a radical reorientation of everything in your life. God gives Himself to you. God takes you to Himself and you can know Him.

Here the thing, the old covenant at Sinai was corporately entered into as a nation, including many who did not truly know God by personal faith. But in the new covenant, each one who comes by faith to Christ knows the crowning reality of eternal life as Jesus described it in John 17:3, ***“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*** (John 17:3, ESV) When the Word says, ***they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*** – his point is not that there will be no need for preachers or teachers. The language is pointing to the intimacy that we have with God that those under the old covenant, by and large, did not have. “To know” is the language of intimacy. It is not knowing about God in the abstract; it is knowing God relationally and intimately – His heart, His ways, His purposes, His character, His might, His love – a knowledge that leads to passion, excitement, reverence and awe. J.I. Packer asks: ***“What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we have in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? To know God. What is the best thing in life? To know God. What in humans gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of Himself.”*** It is this very blessing that we have in the new covenant.

And all of these blessings are predicated on this one truth, this basis for all of these covenant blessings. What we read in verse 12. **“For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”** (Hebrews 8:12, ESV) Under the old covenant, sins were never completely forgiven because they were never truly forgotten. God was patient toward His faithful people, and the sins of the faithful in the OT were covered – Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, etc., but those sins were awaiting the true forgiveness and complete payment that came through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The crowning promise of the new covenant, the one that makes all the others possible, is the mercy that God has shown to us in the full forgiveness of our sins.

How can God be so gracious, be so merciful, show such kindness to sinners like us? The answer is that God put our sins on His Son and judged them there so that He could deal with us mercifully and wipe away all of our transgressions against Him, all of our sins, and remain just and holy at the same time. And even more than that, so that He could forget them and put them out of His mind forever. How can God, who on the one hand knows all things and is perfect in knowledge and yet on the other, forget all the wicked things that we have done? Because Christ has made the full payment of the debt that we owed. It has been fully satisfied, fully paid, and God can declare that He remembers our sins no more.

This is the fundamental basis for all of the other covenant promises. It is in Christ’s death for us, as our High Priest, that this new covenant has been ratified and fulfilled and given to us by God’s grace. On the night in which He was betrayed by Judas, the betrayal that led to the cross, Jesus took the cup and said: **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it, all of you.”** This is where you find your hope.

The old covenant is over. There is no going back. The writer of Hebrews says: **“In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”** (Hebrews 8:13, ESV) And it was. In a matter of a few years, when Jerusalem fell to the Romans in AD 70, and the temple was burned, the sacrifices stopped, and the priesthood was brought to an end, God was saying with His power and providence: Christ is the goal of it all. The old has passed away and the new has come.

Take Hope In describing the Great High Priesthood of Jesus, His kingly and priestly reign in heaven, His ministry to His people, and the new covenant that He has brought, the writer of Hebrews was seeking to lift the eyes of the struggling and suffering Hebrew Christians in Rome from the hardships they were enduring from faithfulness to Christ and to place them upon Jesus Christ in all of His glory. What they were enduring for faithfulness to Christ was ultimately worth it. And all that they were enduring to remain faithful to Christ would be rewarded beyond their wildest imaginations in the end. We have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. In this they could rest their hope.

The New Covenant in Christ's blood creates a new people, a forgiven people, people who are born from above, a changed people, a people who trust and believe God, who desire to be obedient to God, who want to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and who want to love their neighbors as themselves. Christ seals it by His blood, purchasing eternal life and forgiveness of sins, giving us His perfect righteousness so that we stand before God as people who are justified and declared "not guilty," but He also produces in us by His Spirit, the faith and the obedience – the outworking of real faith – that we must have to inherit eternal life. They have got to see Christ for who He is and remember, as a result, who they are. They cannot possibly fall away and abandon Christ. The promises of God, if they really understand them, won't let them.

The point that the writer of Hebrews is making, over and over again in this letter is that real hope comes from lifting your eyes from your circumstances to the glorious superiority of Jesus Christ and he is saying in essence, "How could you abandon Him? You need to know the One who holds all things in His hands, who has power over even your situation, who is greater in power than any emperor and greater in wisdom than any philosopher, who can reveal God to you in all of His glory and you have Him in Jesus Christ. Where else could you go? You need a High Priest who can purify you from your sins, rescue you from the judgment you deserve, give you eternal life, and open the way to God the Father that your sins have closed and you have Him in Jesus Christ? To whom else could you turn? You need a Shepherd, a Lord, a King, who is greater than all others, who will love you and care for you, who will command you and sustain you, who will be your God and will not be ashamed to call you His brothers and sisters, children of the Living God and you have Him in Christ. What more could you desire? Don't give up what is priceless for what is passing." Rest your hope entirely in Him.

And it's a word we need to hear. Where is your hope?

Health... financial security... peace in your home... approval of other people... presidential election... legislation... immigration reform... revolution...a personal arsenal/

It is only in Christ that true hope is found...

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