

Hebrews 8–9: A Better Covenant

November 30, 2014

Fact: Jesus Christ is better than any earthly priest (8:1–5).

Chapter eight bridges the writer's discussion of our perfect high priest, Jesus Christ (Heb 5–7) and his discussion of the new covenant (Heb 9). Jesus is a better high priest than any descendent of Aaron because he ministers in the very presence of God rather than in an earthly temple (8:1–2). Although the law precluded him from being a high priest in the earthly temple, Jesus ministers as a high priest in heaven (8:3–4). Furthermore, the earthly temple outlined by the Mosaic law is inferior to the heavenly ministry of Jesus Christ, because it is just a picture of the reality of God's presence (8:5).

Fact: Jesus Christ is the mediator of a better covenant (8:6–13).

Jesus Christ is not just a better priest, but the mediator of a better covenant (8:6). The old covenant, mediated by Moses at Mt. Sinai and represented by the tabernacle and Aaronic priesthood, is inferior to the new covenant, mediated by Jesus Christ. The very fact that there is a “new” covenant means that the first was flawed. If something is perfect, you don't need to replace it (8:7). What was the “fatal flaw” in the old covenant? Sinful people did not and could not keep God's laws (8:9).

The writer of Hebrews quotes God's promise of future restoration from Jeremiah 31 (8:8–12). This new covenant would restore the nation, reuniting Israel and Judah (8:8). Unlike the old covenant, which could not cause those under it to obey, the new covenant guarantees a new heart (8:10), obedience to God (8:11), and God's forgiveness and mercy (8:12). The Jewish readers should not be afraid then to leave Judaism and continue in faith in Jesus Christ. The Mosaic law was an “old” covenant even back in Jeremiah's day! God had promised something better—something permanent—and Jesus Christ is the mediator of that covenant.

Objection: So the old covenant was never intended to be permanent (9:1–10)?

Since the old covenant is not a permanent covenant, a new and better covenant has arrived, rendering the old covenant obsolete. The old covenant featured a tabernacle with a “holy place” (9:1), furniture (9:2), and the Holy of Holies (9:3), in which was the ark of the covenant and mercy seat (9:4–5). In this tabernacle the priests performed an intricate daily and yearly ritual worship (9:6). This was an ongoing and continual ritual—every day and every year—and it was limited—only the high priest once a year (9:7–8). Therefore, the temple worship, although ordained by God, was incomplete and temporary (9:9–10).

Fact: The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ provides an eternal redemption (9:11–14).

Contrasted to the incomplete access to God provided by old covenant worship, Jesus Christ comes as a high priest (9:11). He entered just once (as opposed to the daily and yearly rituals of the Old Testament) into the presence of God, not with animal sacrifices, but with his own blood. The result was eternal redemption, since he did this once for all (9:12). If God forgave sin based on the death of an animal, how much more secure a redemption would be provided by the sacrificial death of his infinite Son (9:13–14)! Because of Jesus' sacrifice, he has become the mediator of the New Covenant which offers an eternal salvation (9:15).

Objection: Why did Jesus have to die as the mediator of this covenant (9:15–28)?

Many sorts of covenants require the death of the one making the covenant—for example, a will (9:16). A will can be changed as many times as a person wants because it does not go into effect until the person dies (9:17). Even the old covenant mediated by Moses was inaugurated by the death of sacrificial animals in the ceremonial cleansing and consecration of the people, the tabernacle, and the utensils with blood (9:18–21). In fact, almost anything could be purified by the blood of a sacrificial animal under the law, and it was the death of a sacrifice that provided forgiveness and atonement (9:22). Just as the earthly tabernacle was cleansed and consecrated by animal sacrifices (9:23), the heavenly places were ceremonially “cleansed” by Christ’s death (9:24). Christ offered himself as the atoning sacrifice, not every day or every year, but one time to deal once and for all with sin (9:25–26). Just as a man only dies once (9:27), so Christ died once for all for sin (9:28).

To Think About:

Why does Jesus’ church no longer worship at an earthly temple? Is not having a physical gathering place progress or regress from the Old Testament temple?

What is the significance of the fact that Old Testament sacrifices could not “perfect the conscience” (9:9) but Jesus’ sacrifice could “purify our conscience” (9:14)?

How does the new covenant apply to Gentile Christians like us?

Praying through epistle of Hebrews:

For my own heart: thankful for an infinite sacrifice and eternal forgiveness (9:11–12)

For my brothers and sisters in Christ: to draw near in full assurance of faith (10:22)

For my church: that WBC would eagerly await Jesus’ return to save us (9:28)