

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 59

Hebrews – Part Four

Chapters 4 – 13

I. BACKGROUND

As we continue in Hebrews, we should remember several things from last week's lesson. First, it is important to read Hebrews with the overall sense that the author is writing to those who are Jewish Christians who are perhaps contemplating a return to mainline Judaism, breaking away from the Christian community as their principle fellowship and affiliation. To those contemplating such change, Hebrews bluntly explains that Judaism is merely the foreshadowing of the reality of God's work that is manifested in Christ. To leave Christ is to leave the reality for a mere shadow. It is Christ and the age Christ has ushered in which is the superlative, the greatest work of God and honor/opportunity for man.

Toward that purpose and end, we outlined the book into basic sections:

Christ is superior to Angels (1:1 - 2:18)
Christ is superior to Moses (3:1 – 4:13)
Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14 – 7:28)
Christ's covenant is superior (8)
Christ's sanctuary is superior (9:1 – 12)
Christ's sacrifice is superior (9:13 – 10:18)
Therefore, persevere and live right! (10:19 – 13:25)

Last week, we dealt with the first two sections: Christ's superiority to angels and Moses. We will emphasize an additional part of the Moses passage this week and then move through the rest of the sections.

II. TEXT

A. An extra on Christ's superiority to Moses (4:1-13)

While noting the portion of chapter 4 that finishes up the author's comparison of Christ to Moses, we have yet to emphasize a subset of the comparison. Moses took the people into the Promised Land. Moses did so also taking the commandments from Sinai, including the commandment to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest and holy to God.

From this story, the writer of Hebrews makes two points we should emphasize. First, as we noted last week, those who have the promise land need faith to enter that land. Just as for Moses where the unbelievers never entered the Promised Land, so it is with faith in Christ. Believing and trusting Christ bring us before God and into the promise. So, no believer should ever contemplate leaving Jesus. Second, the walk we have with God in Jesus is one of rest. This point deserves a little extra attention.

In Jesus, we have entered into God's rest. The rest reminds us of the original Sabbath found in creation itself. In the creation account, we read "on the seventh day God rested from all his work" (Heb. 4:4, Gen 2:2). The work was done. God could have ended the week, but God chose to add a seventh day to signify rest and emphasize that work was over. From these actions, we see God forecasting not only a lifestyle we should adopt in our world system (work? yes, but rest also), but also a foreshadowing of God's work with us.

For God did not leave us alone after creation. He has worked through out history on our behalf in many ways -- most notably as our Savior redeemer. In Moses, God brought about this redemption from slavery in Egypt, taking people to a promised land that is symbolized by the Sabbath rest itself. But in Jesus, look how much greater the redemption, the Promised Land, and the rest.

In Jesus, we have redemption from Satan and sin itself. We are redeemed from sin and death (sin's curse). The salvation we have is one of rest. We do not work to merit it, nor do we work to keep it. Through our faith in Jesus, we have a rest in our salvation efforts. We have entered into the eternal land of promise.

Even Jesus himself was pictured at the beginning of Hebrews as sitting at God's right hand. Jesus has finished his work on our behalf and rests before God. SO, here we have a rest that exceeds that of the Jewish faith – again, another reason not to leave Jesus for mainline Judaism.

B. Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14-7:28)

The writer of Hebrews compares and contrasts the role of the Jewish High Priest to that of Christ in several different ways.

The Jewish High Priest was the one person in the entire world who was allowed to go before God in the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice for the people's sins. The High Priest was allowed to do this only once a year and with very strict requirements. Most notably, the High Priest had to first offer a sacrifice for himself and his own sins. Without first himself being purified, he could never offer purification for the sins of the people. In a way, this was actually a positive, for it showed that the High Priest had a certain level of sympathy for the people for he in fact was as sinful as they!

In Christ, we have a High Priest that exceeds those on earth. Christ became a man and knows temptation, he is able to understand and relate to us, but Christ was never a sinner. Therefore, he doesn't approach God having to first purify himself. Christ is already pure. So, Christ doesn't merely go to the Holy of Holies once a year. Christ ascended into the very real heavenly presence of God to deal with our sin. This should give us great confidence when we approach God.

The Christian Jews did not miss out on anything when their relatives were celebrating the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Christians did not need to feel anxiety or worry as the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies for the annual sacrifice for the nation. The Christians could rejoice knowing their High Priest never went into a symbolic room in an earth temple that symbolized heaven and God's throne. Jesus went into the very real throne room of God and straight before God in all his glory. There, Jesus laid our sacrifice – his own body as the slain lamb – and there our atonement was made.

In this way, Jesus became the source of real atonement and real salvation. This is a priestly role that exceeded those of the Jews. The writer compares it to the priestly role of Melchizedek who was not Jewish. Melchizedek is the priest before whom Abraham, and through Abraham all Jews, bowed and worshipped. That is our Jesus and High Priest.

The writer uses this as a time to really encourage the readers not to leave their faith. In the sixth chapter, the writer puts this thought into strong language that challenges many who hold the doctrine that once you are saved, your salvation cannot be lost. In Heb. 6:4-6, the writer notes:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

This passage poses several avenues of interpretation. One option is that Christians can actually reach a decision to turn their back on God and lose their salvation. A second option is that the passage is referencing people who came under the “Christian influence” but never really became Christians, losing what (I guess) they never really had! A third option, which certainly seems to fit the context, is that the writer was not actually writing about the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.”

Instead, the writer was telling those considering abdicating the Christian fellowship for mainline Judaism that doing so is wrong. It is an immature response that has no future. Faith is not something to move back or forth on. Christ died once and that was enough. The Christians need to press on to maturity in Jesus, not return to Judaism for a season and then return back to Jesus. Christianity is not a revolving door where you may enter and leave as you like. It is a new state of being in which you remain.

In this sense, the writer urges the Christian Jews to continue in faith “and patience” (6:12). Patience was key for them. The promises of God were not void. The failure of them to see fruition of much of what God spoke through Jesus was a question of timing, not mistake. Time would show God faithful on all accounts. “It is impossible for God to lie” (6:18). Just as Jesus entered into the sanctuary itself, into the real Holy of Holies, we have actual promises of blessing and redemption from God himself.

This is a covenant relationship that is deeper than anything the Jews could have or understand, just as the priestly relationship between Jesus and God exceeds that of the Jewish High Priest and God. Hence, Jesus only needed one sacrifice to offer God, as opposed to the sacrifices the human High Priests had to offer year in and year out (7:26-27).

There are many comparisons of Jesus to Melchizedek. Because Edward spent so much good time on that in his lesson several weeks ago, we will not cover it in this week's lesson.

C. *Christ's Covenant is Superior (8)*

At the start of chapter eight, the writer draws a big conclusion to what he has thus far said before going any further:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.” (8:1-2)

You won't see Jesus serving as high priest on earth...others did that inferior function. We do not physically see Jesus for he functions before the very throne room of God. The readers are reminded that the earthly temple “is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (8:5). In fact, that is why Moses was given such exacting instructions on how to build the tabernacle. No changes were to be made. The earthly tabernacle had elements and parts that held eternal symbols and significance.

The covenant being administered under the earthly system is similarly an inferior copy of the covenant we enjoy in Christ. Prophets told this truth long ago. The writer quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 where God declared that a time would come when God would “make a new covenant with the house of Israel.” The covenant was different. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them” (Heb. 8:8-9).

So, what is the difference in the covenant? The difference is night and day. The difference is between being a nation for God and being the children of God. The difference is between seeing God outside and having God inside. As Hebrews quotes Jeremiah:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Heb. 8:10-12; Jer. 31:33-34)

Which should the Jewish Christians embrace? Which covenant is superior? Lest there be any doubt, the writer adds that the new covenant makes the old one “obsolete!” The old covenant was obsolete and aging and will one day disappear. The new covenant is everlasting.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Our salvation work is over.
2. Enter Christ's rest.¹
3. Jesus is our Answer.
4. Now and forever.

¹ To quote from a Keith Green song, “My son, my son why are you striving? You can't add one thing to what's been done for you. I did it all while I was dying. Rest in my grace my peace will come to you.”