

Hebrews 8:1-13

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. I'd like to offer my welcome to you, especially those of you who are new, perhaps, to the neighborhood of Hyde Park or new to this church. We're glad you're here.

My name is David Helm, and I've been one of the pastors in this congregation now going into my 19th year and looking forward to what the Lord has for us in the days and weeks ahead.

We spent the summer in the book of Exodus on the mountain listening to God speak. We weren't smart enough to know how it would weave its way back into picking up the book of Hebrews where we left off last spring. But as God orders our steps, chapter 8, verse 1, now the point in what we are saying is this, we have such a great high priest. We seamlessly move from Moses building the pattern of what was to happen for the tabernacle on the mountain to the New Testament interpretation of the whole. And so we look forward this fall all the way to Advent, moving through the book of Hebrews. And once we hit chapter 10, verse 19, this book is going to unfold with powerful application and force. I want to take from my text today, though, these opening words in verse 4. The message today is going to run up and out of those opening words.

Here they are. Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all. That's a striking line.

An unusual line, catching the reader off guard. It implies that the writer wants his readers to know that as far as he is concerned, he would prefer a Jesus who dwells in another place.

[2 : 21] He doesn't want him down here. Not on this earth. He wants a Jesus that he cannot see. He prefers a Jesus that he cannot touch. He desires an absent Jesus to the incarnational one.

He's got no time for an earthly Jesus anymore. And he even tells you why. Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all.

Now, that statement has arrested me during the week. It's at odds with everything I normally consider concerning my own needs. We want a Jesus who shows up at our place, not one who dwells in a far-off place.

We want a Jesus that we can lay our eyes on. We want one we can rub our shoulders with. We prefer a Jesus that might actually reach out and touch me.

Truth be told, for many of us, our only perceived need is for an incarnational Jesus. Our city needs him, we say. Our world needs him, we say. Our country needs him.

[3 : 49] I've even heard in the last few weeks of those who are going to cast their ballot by a write-in vote for Jesus come the election.

We want him here. We want him now. Now, we find it hard, don't we, to fathom the value and meaning of a Jesus in any other way.

And yet, the writer to the Hebrews, in my opinion, this New Testament provocateur, has laid it down. You can read it.

Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all. Our preference for an earthly Jesus aligns us to the initial readers known to us today as the Hebrews.

They, too, preferred a Jesus that they could see. They wanted a priest that they could look at in the eye. They wanted one that would actually be able to return the gaze.

[5 : 06] They wanted a grand leader. They wanted pomp, circumstance, and ceremony. They wanted a real man that they could trust.

Preferably one that dwelt in their corner of the world. They wanted their senses filled with the sights and sounds and aromas of actual sacrifices rising up before their very eyes for all to see.

But the writer of this book has none of it. Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all.

So, the verses before us, these five verses that I'm taking, are trying to demonstrate something that we better come to grips with.

Because it swings entirely against the grain of our own mind. The author's aversion for an earthly Jesus who would be performing ongoing priestly functions in the presence of God's people is contrasted with his inclination for a Jesus who will minister to you from a better place. Take a look at verses 1 and 2. Now, the point in what we are saying is this. We have such a high priest.

[6 : 30] 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. You see, the writer knows that the ultimate need of God's people is for a priest that not only shows up, but one that can go up.

It's not only one that was buried into the ground, but one who rose up. It's not only one who rose up, it's one who ascended up. It's not only one who stands up, it's one who sits down.

That's what he wants. Your need depends on one who stands in the very throne room of God. Not running to and fro where you might be able to greet him one day if you stood in a long line.

He rules. We look at all the concerns of the world and our city, and it almost undoes us into a frenzy and a fury.

[7 : 41] And our Lord is seated. Surprised by nothing. Ruling over everything. Executing his will with great contentment.

Ensuring that all the nations will be judged. And that his own will be collected before he returns. Think about it.

The writer is happy that Jesus is now in heaven. Because from there, he can dispatch angels at a moment's notice.

Myriads and myriads of angels. Thousands and ten thousands. To minister to the needs of his children that are under great weight and duress.

Even being present in their sufferings and death. Seeing them through those deep waters into his own arms. That's the place of intercession.

[8 : 54] Jesus, because he is where he is, can speak to God all day long about your problems. If he's here on earth, you might just be lucky to hold up your phone and get a little shot of him some quarter of a mile away.

And all the other people on earth, well, they'd have no chance of seeing them on the day that you caught your glimpse. That's our Jesus.

He not only came down to earth, but more importantly, was released from the grip of the earth. He was released from the grip of the earth. And not only that, he went straight on up to recline at the right hand of the Father.

That's what he's doing today. He's reclining. He's ruling. He's executing his will. On every corner of the globe.

The mysterious will of God. In which nothing is beyond his gaze. You and I should be thanking God that Jesus is in a better place.

[10 : 07] Think of it. Somebody passes away. What's the first thing we say? Well, they're in a better place. But when it comes to Jesus, we would rob them of his presence so that we might have him here.

But the writer is clear. Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all. Let me take you to the other side of verse 4.

There's something more. In verses 5 and 6, the writer does his best to change our minds about where we should want Jesus to be. He will say that when Jesus did walk upon the earth, the things that were done by him here served as mere copies and shadows of the things he was actually in those moments accomplishing up there.

That means that having people lay their eyes on him on the day he was crucified does not compare to the fact that in that act he was breaking through into the heavens where God the Father could lay his eyes on him.

And count it as a perfect and complete sacrifice. We want everything done for us under the threshold of the Son. But there's nothing new under the Son. Jesus himself has broke through all of the known things that you and I feel.

[11 : 39] And when he died on the cross, he wasn't merely dying on a cross. This is the shadow and the copy. He actually entered into the presence of God.

And accomplished something one time that was sufficient for all time. Look at the way he puts it. Verses 5 and 6. They serve as a copy.

That is this whole earthly, priestly realm of forgiveness. They serve as a copy and a shadow of heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, seeing, see that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain. You and I live in the world of the pattern. We're on the blueprints. We're in the shadows. What he did for you was in the real presence of the living God.

I don't know how to wrestle with it. I won't spend the rest of the time though. Trying to apply it. The point of the author is clear.

[12:51] Jesus dwells in another place. And to the writer's perspective, thank God he does. He's glad that the priestly service and sacrifice Jesus performed was done in heaven and not on earth.

So what are the implications? I'm going to roll some out. Things I've been meditating on this week. What does this verse mean for you? Let me put it differently. What is the key takeaway for your conversations this week?

Simply this. The last thing the church needs today is the one thing it wants most. An earth-bound Jesus.

For if we had gotten what we wanted most, it would have been a sure sign that we're still relating to God in a faulty and failed way. Wisdom, according to the writer, knows that we need a Jesus who rules from heaven.

You don't need one rustling around in your midst. We don't need a Jesus who's down here standing around. You need one up there sitting down. We don't need a Jesus we can see.

[14:05] We need a Jesus that God the Father can see. We don't need his ear down here. We need his voice in the ear of the one who can send aid to anyone, anywhere, at any time.

That's the first takeaway. The last thing the church needs today is the one thing it wants most. An earth-bound Jesus. Now let me roll this out, not only according to what it would mean then for your individual life, but let's roll this out for what it means for our religious affiliations.

Remember, the letter was written to a congregation. It was written to a plurality. It was written to a collected group that was religious in orientation.

I want to lay out four or five ways that this text will challenge all of our religious corporate identities. You ready?

[15:09] Are you ready for that? I don't know. You might not like me when we're done. Think of what this truth means for old-school Protestant liberalism. The Jesus of the main line.

For this corporate religious entity in our world, more so than others, has carved out a limited space for Jesus.

It's one that's completely committed to bringing about social justice on earth. Yet, it's these same ones, more readily than most, that will reject the notion that we have a heavenly Jesus that isn't just concerned with social justice on earth, but He's going to mete out eternal judgment on any who don't walk according to His ways.

They want the one Jesus here according to their own making, but not the one that the Bible explains in all of His fullness. Now, if He were a priest on earth, He would be no priest indeed. That challenges all of our last 100 years in this country, at least with a dominant downstroke of religious affiliation. I'm not done.

[16:22] This text challenges the soft teaching of also very high church Anglicans and Episcopalians. In these religious circles, we show our propensity to want a Jesus who's content to conduct a ministry on earth by appealing to our senses, to our taste, to our smell.

Let me explain it. A week or so ago, I had a conversation with somebody who attends just such a church. He told me of how wonderful the high liturgical service was, especially the moment when the incense enveloped the congregation as the priest in his robes came down the aisles swinging vented receptacles of fragrance.

According to him, this is the moment in the week when he could smell Jesus, see Jesus, feel Jesus in the midst of the people. I was kind. I was quiet.

But in my mind, in my right mind, I thought, are you kidding me?

You think Jesus is somehow transporting himself into these vapors? Hey, the incense is incense. It's not Jesus. In fact, when we see incense in the Bible, it refers to the prayers of the saints going up.

[17 : 52] It doesn't refer to Jesus coming down. And as far as the robed priest goes, well, we'll see. He's no real mediator. I've taken two swings. Let me take another. Let me take another. Think about how this text challenges the carnality of evangelicalism.

Can't leave that group out, this group out, our group out, some anyway. They too prefer an earthbound Jesus. We want one here, not in heaven.

We may pride ourselves in turning away from the social gospel or the high church heirs of smells and bells and sacramental priests, but we simply replace them for a penchant for celebrity pastors and prosperity.

Evangelicals are always wanting powerful leaders they can see. Who's going to be the next this? I wonder who God will raise up to be the next that. How immature.

[19 : 08] More than that. Evangelicals, more than most other religious groups, desire an earthbound Savior who will baptize their every wish with earthbound glory, earthbound success.

We pray to him for what he'll do for us. Walk alongside me so that you'll make something of me. We actually dislodge him from the throne that he might elevate us in the world.

We tell him to get out of the spotlight because we assume he's there to put us in it. And I know this because evangelicals aren't all that keen in getting to heaven.

Not all that keen, generally speaking, of making a difference in the world because we're kind of self-absorbed, but not all that keen also in getting to heaven. We're not quite sure what we'd do once we got there.

We're quite content to simply bring Jesus on in to what we already got going on down here. Hope it lasts for a long time and I'm healthy all the way through.

[20 : 18] Let me give you another one. I've got more. I told you I got to the application early so I could do it. Others need to be reminded that the last thing the church needs today is the one thing it wants.

There are some holdouts. Not in those groups. You might be going, I'm not in the group you mentioned yet. I'm feeling good. I'm coming to you. I'm going to find you by the time we're done. There are those who rightly sense that only a vacuous Jesus resides among religious cultural elites of liberal Protestantism. There are those who know the insufficient nature of a Jesus who's reduced to an earthbound aromatic presence.

There are those who see the problems of wanting a popular or a prosperous Jesus as so many do among low church evangelicals. But convinced of these things then, they decide to do what?

I've got to go into the Roman Catholic Church because the rest of these groups are nuts. Now they may be nuts, but you've got some blind spots when you walk in the door to Rome.

[21 : 30] Let me just illustrate the earthbound nature even of the mother church. Think of the words, the Trinitarian complexities. We call him the Pope, which means Father.

Don't call anyone the Father. God's the Father. He's not on earth. We call him the Pontiff.

What's that mean? It's like the great high priest. That's a bridge to get you over. There's only one bridge getting you between here and heaven. That's Jesus.

No other bridge. You're not going to set your eyes on him. He lived long before you showed up. And he's going to go on long after you leave the stage. We call him vicar, which means substitute.

Imagine. Jesus says the substitute is the spirit that he sent. Right there, the three words take on all the Trinitarian complexities. You go into something thinking that this at last is going to be the answer.

[22 : 36] This is going to get me away from all the earthbound religious affiliations. And you find that you just substituted the church in the place of Christ. He's not on earth.

If he were on earth, he would be no priest at all. So then you say, wow. Good thing I'm a first year. Because I've finally come to the university.

I can think my way clear. I'm not going for any of this stuff. I only visited this church because it was one of the first two or three weeks in. But I can see now the pastor has convinced me we shouldn't be here.

I'm going to be an atheist. I'm going to identify myself with the majority people among me.

Because I've seen clear on all the problems you have. Really. I don't think so. There are many young people who are going to cast off faith altogether.

[23 : 40] And more often than not, atheists are going to have a growing disdain for much of what they see in the religious groupings I've already mentioned. But listen.

There's not an atheist in the world who hasn't fallen prey to the same dilemma. They have simply rejected a frail and faulty understanding of how we relate to God for another.

They have substituted science for the Savior. Which is another way of saying, I'm only believing in everything earthbound.

Think about that. They shed themselves of God altogether.

And they do by nature. Become the most earthbound grouping of all. Let me put it to you this way.

[24 : 41] For the religious, we have said, now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all.

But to the atheist, I say, now if all we have is the earth, then life is in reality void of real purpose at all.

And while you may call religious folks foolish, don't be surprised. This book lays it out. The final word, the end of the matter may very well be that in escaping it all, you yourself have played the fool.

There's drift. We all tend to drift. The writer to the Hebrews is saying, You have got to come back to the word that was proclaimed to you.

That Jesus fulfills everything in the presence of the Father that's required for you. That you embrace it by faith.

And when you do so, he seals you with the Spirit. And his Spirit then is democratized out all across the universe. Think of it.

[25 : 54] This is what Jesus himself said. We just haven't quite understood it yet. John. 16. Verse 5.

But now I'm going to him who sent me, and none of you asked me, where are you going? But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. See, they got all sorrowful when they realized he wasn't going to be on earth.

He says, Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it's to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you.

But if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. That is the way you relate to God.

That's why His priesthood is effective. Embrace by faith that Jesus' death actually rent the veil that separated heaven and earth and allows you to walk into the presence of God.

[26 : 55] Embrace that by faith. Not by anything you see. But not a leap of faith. Because it's something He actually did.

And when you embrace Him by faith, He will give you His Spirit. And through His Spirit, He will empower you to live productively for Him on the earth.

But you won't be showing anybody something visible other than the sense of, other than Christ in you, the hope of glory. That's the end of the matter.

This is what the world needs most. The religious and irreligious alike. It's the last thing we're likely to consider. We need a Jesus who's dwelling in the heavens.

Here is a Jesus, says the writer, that is more excellent than any Jesus you can create and put in your own midst. But Jesus in heaven allows me to be less anxious about what I see on earth.

[28 : 01] Yes, our cities are crumbling on multiple fronts. Yes, the moral fabric of this country is disintegrating under the judgment and wrath of God.

Yes, we are destroying one another because we have rebelled against Him and gone our own way. Nevertheless, Jesus sits in the heavens, having taken the scrolls from the Father and is unfolding the very will of God with what He is going to intend until He brings the earth to a close.

And until that time, He is calling forth you to proclaim the name of Jesus that people might have His help from heaven. A Jesus in heaven means I don't have to put my stake down too deep on earth.

A Jesus in heaven keeps me from despair. A Jesus in heaven keeps me from becoming overly sentimental in my old age. A Jesus in heaven actually will expand my productive sense of mission and purpose and seeking of justice on the earth because it is His Spirit at work in me and His kingdom, which is nothing less than His rule, the Word of Christ taking effect in me and in those around me.

We need a Jesus on heaven. Now, if He were on earth, pity the thought, He would be no priest at all.

[29 : 28] That one line, 14 words, has the power to upend the way we think and certainly the way we live. Our Heavenly Father, we come to You this morning having heard this New Testament

provocateur, this writer to the Hebrews that challenges almost everything that we consider to be preferential.

and He's laid us all out. We thank You then that You hear us because Your Son has Your ear. We trust You now to bring many to faith in our midst and for those who know You to begin living rightly, confidently, assuredly, walking with a step of great ease in the midst of a world gone wrong. Lord, we pray that our service to You would flow forth from Your very throne. We pray that our service to You, which comes as a consequence of Your work on the cross and the garden and the laying down of Your life, we pray that we would have eyes to see those words taking place in the heavens for that is where You really were when You called us to live for You. We pray these things now in Jesus' name. Amen.