

# A Better Priest of a Better Covenant

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Date: 28 June 2015

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[ 0 : 00 ] ...an executive from United Christian Broadcasters. UCB is a radio network that produces Word for Today Bible Notes.

Phil and I met to discuss evangelism in the Pacific nations, including Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Solomon Islands. You may already know that in 1568, a Spanish explorer believed he found King Solomon's mines in the Pacific.

That is why we now have a nation called Solomon Islands. Some also believe the 10 tribes of Israel settled in Solomon Islands and built a Jewish temple there.

There are remains of a settlement of some kind, but there is no credible scientific evidence to support the myth. Towards the end of our meal, Phil told me about a Christian leader in Solomon Islands named Michael.

Michael, a former leader in the South Seas Evangelical Church, has bought into the lost tribe's myth and introduced some elements of Judaism into his church.

[ 1 : 09 ] Apparently, Michael has erected a curtain to create a sanctuary that can only be entered by a priest, and he publicly sacrifices bulls to God. He has clearly drifted away from Jesus.

He is ignoring salvation in Christ. He has let go of his courage and his hope. He is at serious risk of having a sinful, unbelieving heart that has turned away from the living God.

A similar problem occurred in the early church in or around Rome. Christians were seeking comfort in old traditions and ceremonies.

The letter to the Hebrews addresses that return to Judaism. Chapter 8 contrasts the new covenant with the old covenant and challenges Christians to remain faithful to Jesus Christ.

However, the writer begins by reminding us of his main point, that we have a great high priest.

That's what he says in verse 1. Let's read it. The point of what we are saying is this.

[ 2 : 14 ] We do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven. We have seen he is our great high priest for a number of reasons.

From chapter 4, he can sympathize with our weaknesses. He understands us. From chapter 7, he lives forever in the order of Melchizedek, so he always intercedes for us.

And today, the writer adds two more reasons he is our great high priest. First, because he serves in the true tabernacle or temple. And second, he is the priest of the new and better covenant.

We see this in verses 2 to 5. Let me read them. Jesus serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. And so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.

[ 3 : 23 ] They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle, see to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.

The tabernacle on earth was merely a copy of the tabernacle in heaven. So the ministry of Jesus is superior to the ministry of the earthly priests because they served in a replica, but Jesus serves in the original.

A replica or a copy is sometimes described as a shadow. That word is used in verse 5 to describe an earthly tabernacle.

And while you already understand shadows, it might be useful to briefly mention C.S. Lewis, the Oxbridge professor and Christian apologist.

You may know his series of children's books, the Narnia Chronicles, including The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. You may have also seen Anthony Hopkins and Deborah Winger in the 1993

biographical film *Shadowlands*.

[ 4 : 35 ] However, that cinema film was merely a shadow of the original 1985 television film of the same name, which was more accurate.

Lewis initially rejected the gospel because he saw it as a copy of the ancient myths about dying saviors. How could the gospel be true when it merely copies similar ancient legends Lewis knew from his wide-ranging reading habits?

Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, helped Lewis with this blockage. Tolkien suggested to Lewis that the ancient myths were clues or hints of what was to come in the future. In other words, the myths were shadows of a heavenly reality, which was the gospel. Lewis and Tolkien copied that same method and wrote myths or epic tales.

Some of the most beautiful scenes in the Narnia stories are the ones that show the interplay between Narnia and Aslan's kingdom. Lewis presents death as a door, which is not merely an exit, but an entrance into a new existence.

[ 5 : 49 ] That is the true reality. Verses 6 to 8, the next section of chapter 8, introduce the new covenant.

It is here we see the second reason Jesus is a better priest, which is, he is the priest of the new covenant, which comes with better promises. Verse 6 says, But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs, meaning the earthly Jewish priests, as the covenant of which he is the mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

The writer discussed the new covenant because the Hebrew Christians were returning to Judaism and to the Jewish covenant. He argued that the covenant was better because it was more promising.

That is, it offered an internal solution to a problem that could not be solved through external ceremonies. We will see next week in Hebrews 9 that the gifts and sacrifices being offered by the earthly priests were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.

They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings, external regulations applying until the time of the new order. Jesus came to offer gifts and sacrifices, but he was not concerned with mere external regulations.

[ 7 : 17 ] There was something internal about the new order that Jesus established. Jeremiah 31 will say more about that. The new covenant was also more promising because it brought permanent forgiveness to God's people.

No longer would annual sacrifices be made to cover over sins. Jesus died in our place so we could approach God with a clear conscience, mindful that God accepts us completely only because of Christ's perfect life and his sacrifice on the cross.

I should mention that the old covenant was not bad. It was simply the old or first covenant.

God established it. We may feel tempted to think God made a mistake since it was his covenant. As verse 7 states, If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.

However, the new covenant was not plan B, enacted because plan A failed. God's plan of salvation is comprehensive and so he must look beyond a mere change of strategy or tack.

[ 8 : 34 ] God used the first covenant to prepare the way for the new covenant. It was a stepping stone or a shadow of what was to fully come through Jesus Christ. God's sending of Jesus was not his backup plan.

God foreknew all that has happened and will happen. We may also feel tempted to blame the Jewish people for the ineffectiveness of the Old Testament, the Old Covenant.

After all, verse 8 states, God found fault with the people. Yet God was not surprised they could not live up to the covenant. Only one human has ever been able to live the right way and that of course was Jesus, God the Son.

For the rest of us, God knew an internal change was needed. You will recall, Jesus said to Nicodemus, you must be born again. When God changes our heart, he gives us the inclination to live the right way.

We still cannot live a perfect life, but increasingly, the Holy Spirit enables us to follow Jesus and reflect God's good character. Verses 8 to 13, the final section, contain a prophecy from Jeremiah 31 about the New Covenant.

[ 9 : 56 ] Let me make six brief points. First, Jeremiah announces the New Covenant will unite both the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will be for all of God's people. Verse 8. Second, Jeremiah prophesied that the New Covenant will be different, in part because the forefathers did not remain faithful, which resulted in God turning away from them.

Verse 9. Third, Jeremiah declares a key difference of the New Covenant. God said, I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.

Verse 10. This contrasts the external nature of the gifts and sacrifices offered by the Jewish priests with the internal changes that God would cause in people's minds and hearts.

That is, the inclination to go God's way would be gifted to people. This would be far superior to past human efforts of trying to obey God with only the external help offered by ceremonies and rules.

[ 11 : 07 ] Fourth, through Jeremiah, God declares, I will be their God and they will be my people. Verse 10. Now, they were already God's people.

God was already their God. So, what has changed? God is not a God of the dead, nor does he receive us into his patronage without giving us a share in righteousness and life.

In other words, there is never an end to the relationship established by Christ in the new covenant. The relationship God has given us will transcend the death we will experience as we pass from these shadow lands into the true reality of heaven.

He will be our God forever and ever. Fifth, Jeremiah prophesied, they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest.

Verse 11. In the new covenant, there will be no secret knowledge of God held by just a few special people in God's church. Each member of the faith community will not be distinguished from those outside the church merely by knowing more about God.

[ 12 : 47 ] Each one will also have a similar personal experience and knowledge of God to that of Jeremiah. It is as though the prophet was informing his listeners that in the future he will be out of a job.

This reminds us of the opening words of Hebrews. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom also he made the universe. Now, all of us can know God personally.

Not just the Jewish priests, not just the prophets. We can all know God from the least to the greatest. The sixth point from the Jeremiah 31 quote is that God says I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more.

Forgiveness of our wickedness is a key feature of the new covenant. Under the old covenant, people's sins were covered over through sacrifices. The people were made outwardly clean but it is impossible for the bulls, the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

[ 14 : 06 ] It was not a permanent solution. The sacrifices were repeated endlessly year after year and were an annual reminder of sins. People still felt guilty in Old Testament times but now Jesus has offered for all time one sacrifice for sins.

Forgiveness is the final solution that God had been working towards since the creation of the world. The promise in Jeremiah 31 to not remember our sins is hinted at in Leviticus 16 where we read about scapegoats.

Let me read it. Aaron is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting the tabernacle. He is to cast lots for the two goats one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat.

Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by Lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.

They would lay their hands on and put the sins on that second goat and then take it out into the wilderness. The second goat the scapegoat is a symbol for us of God's promise to remember our sins no more.

[ 15 : 38 ] Psalm 103 says as far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Having reviewed and developed in this chapter some of the concepts found earlier in Hebrews and having quoted the prophet Jeremiah concerning the new covenant the writer confirms in verse 13 by calling this covenant new he has made the first one obsolete and what is

obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

In Jesus we have a high priest in the order of Melchizedek a permanent high priest who has been made perfect forever. He sits at the right hand of God and God has given all his authority to him. We no longer need earthly priests. Jesus serves at the true tabernacle or tent and not in a temple made by people. We no longer need sacred tabernacles or holy buildings since our earthly structures are merely a copy or shadow of the real thing.

The ministry of Jesus is superior to all other ministries and he is the mediator of a new covenant. Why flirt with danger and the wrath of God by reintroducing old covenant ceremonies as if those were able to deal with sins? Jesus has offered himself as the perfect sacrifice that brings us permanent forgiveness.

[17:10] If we are truly enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, it is impossible for us to behave in this way.

Land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end, it will be burned. The old covenant with its sacrifices and ceremonies cannot save us, nor can it please God.

God has spoken to us through his son and won salvation for us. To reintroduce priests and holy places and sacrifices is to subject Jesus Christ to public disgrace.

Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. God has put his law in our minds and written them on our hearts. We must not return to external ceremonies as though they can save us.

We are God's people and he is our God forever. We must not behave as though our relationship with God is dependent on earthly sacrifices year after year.

[18:29] We all know God personally now, just like the prophet Jeremiah did. We do not need priests to mediate for us or stand in the gap between God and us. God has forgiven our wickedness and he chooses to never again remember our sins.

What is forgiven is as far as the east is from the west. Jesus has given that to us by his perfect once for all sacrifice on the cross.

The old covenant is obsolete and has disappeared. Let us remain faithful to Jesus, the majestic son of God. For us, this means ensuring we rely only on the finished work of Jesus Christ for our salvation.

When looking for reassurance that we belong to God and will go to heaven, we will not look to sacraments or ceremonies to save us. We will trust only in Jesus.

When approaching God in prayer, we will not look to techniques or liturgy to bring us into his presence. We will trust only in Jesus. When reflecting on our acceptance by God, we will not look to our devotion or our behavior.

[19:50] We will trust only in Jesus. And when faced with difficulties, like the Hebrews, let us maintain our confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done.

let us not waver and foolishly shift our confidence away from Jesus and towards priests, ceremonies and sacred buildings. Whatever challenges we face, let us remember the conversation in John chapter 6 between Jesus and his disciples.

You do not want to leave too, do you? Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Let us pray.