

Better Ministry, Better Covenant

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me to Hebrews chapter 8, it's page 1005 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there, let me encourage you to turn there.

Hebrews chapter 8, this morning we're going to look at verses 1 through 6, and as Matt mentioned, next week we'll look at the rest of chapter 8, but this morning I just want to focus in on the first six verses of chapter 8.

Page 1005, let me pray for us as we turn to God and his word.

Father, as we have just sung, we have a complete salvation in your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. So as we come to your word again this morning, we ask you would help us to see more and more the beauty of him who is our complete salvation.

Be exalted this morning, Christ, in the reading and preaching and hearing of your word. We pray this in your name, amen.

[1 : 08] Hebrews chapter 8, 1 through 6, the writer says this, now the point in what we are saying is this, always nice when a writer does that, isn't it?

Makes my job a lot easier. 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.

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.

[2 : 27] So one of the TV shows that my two and a half year old son loves to watch is Thomas, the tank engine. And if you're not familiar with Thomas, it's a kid show about a bunch of friendly trains who live and work on the imaginary island of Sodor.

And the sort of life goal of all these trains is to be, as they say, a really useful engine for the owner, Sir Topham Hatt, who's bald, just like me, so I have an affinity with Sir Topham Hatt.

And each of the trains is a character with his or her own little personality quirk, as the unbelievably catchy theme song lets you know, Thomas, he's the cheeky one.

James is vain, but lots of fun. Percy pulls the mail on time. Gordon thunders down the line. Emily really knows her stuff. Henry toots and huffs and puffs.

Edward wants to help and share. Toby, well, let's just say he's square. Poor Toby. It's embarrassing the number of times I've found myself humming that tune.

[3 : 36] And if you know the song, I'm sorry for putting it in your head for the rest of the service. There are two, there are four, there are six, there are eight. Gotcha. You know who you are. Yeah. But of course, my son and I don't just watch Thomas.

Thomas, we also love to play with our wooden Thomas train set. So every once in a while, we'll clear off the dining room table and turn it into a big wooden train track and we'll race our little wooden engines around and up and down and pull the little wooden train cars and of course, get into little wooden train accidents.

It's all quite fun. But then one day, after we had been watching and playing with Thomas for a while, we decided to go see a real steam engine. So we drove out to Essex to show Jack the real thing.

And I hadn't been up close and personal with a steam train before either, so I wasn't really sure what we were getting into. So as we pulled into the parking lot, I'm humming the Thomas song and ready to see some really useful engines.

And then I found out that in real life, these things are massive. We ended up standing right next to it when the whistle blew.

[4 : 44] And it didn't just hurt our ears, it sort of shook our guts. And then as it churned out of the station, you could just sort of see the sheer force and power of this thing as it slowly began to pull the cars up the line and eventually picked up speed down the track.

Now, if you can picture in your mind a little wooden toy train and the ferocious, powerful, gut-wrenching reality of a steam engine, you'll start to get a picture of the contrast that's at the center of our passage in Hebrews this morning.

And that contrast is actually between two places, between two locations or two spheres. The one place is the earthly tabernacle that God told Moses to build where the Old Testament priests had their ministry, which was a copy and a shadow, a representation, a representation we're told.

It's the toy train, if you will. And the other place is what our passage calls the true tent or the real tabernacle, the throne of the majesty in heaven, the very presence of God where Jesus ministers on our behalf.

Not a mere representation, but the ferocious, gut-wrenching, powerful reality itself. And in drawing this contrast between the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly sanctuary, Hebrews wants us to see how much more excellent Jesus' ministry truly is.

[6 : 25] Because he ministers in a much more excellent place, he achieves a much more excellent ministry on our behalf. That's where verse 6 takes us at the end of our passage.

And so this morning, we want to spend some time thinking about just that, the location of Jesus' priestly ministry for us. And we want to see how this makes a difference for us today.

Because after all, this letter that we call Hebrews was written to fuel our faithful endurance in difficult days. That's the real point of the letter.

So we have to ask, what difference does it make to the church in hard times, in trial, to your life now, and the difficulties that you face?

What difference does it make to know that we have a holy and faithful high priest, not on earth, in an earthly sanctuary, but in heaven? Now, of course, it's hard for us to imagine how strange and how revolutionary the Christian claims would have been in the first century.

[7 : 35] Can't you almost hear certain Jews in the first century asking their fellow Jews who had placed their trust in Christ, well, okay, if Jesus is the ultimate high priest, as you claim, why isn't he ministering in the temple in Jerusalem, offering sacrifices, making prayers?

That's where priests belong, in the temple. And at the same time, you can hear their pagan neighbors too, perhaps a bit confused, asking pretty much the same thing.

Wait, so you follow this Jesus, and he's your priest? Okay, but where's your temple? How does he do me any good if I can't go visit him, and I can't give him my sacrifice to offer to the gods?

What kind of religion is this? Those are some of the questions that the earliest Christians would have been asked almost every single day as others engage them about their faith in Christ.

But you know, isn't it still strange and revolutionary for us today? Because aren't these some of the same sorts of questions that many today have about Christianity?

[8 : 40] Why would you follow someone? Why would you center your life around someone that you can't see, and you can't hear, and you can't touch?

What good does that do? So why is it good news that Jesus is our priest in heaven? I want to look at three reasons this morning.

Why? And the first one is this. If Jesus exercises his priestly ministry in heaven, then that means it's accessible everywhere.

Now get the point that Hebrews is making about the wilderness tabernacle, and by extension, the Jerusalem temple in verses 4 through 5. Do you see it there? He's quoting Exodus 25, 40. And that's the point in the Old Testament story when God first starts telling Moses and Israel to begin building the tabernacle, to start building this mobile sanctuary, this tent that they could tear up and set down as they journeyed toward the promised land.

And eventually, God would allow Israel to build a more permanent temple in Jerusalem, but the tabernacle and temple are basically functionally and theologically the same thing. They're

continuous.

[9 : 55] But notice what Hebrews points out here. Right in the Old Testament scriptures from Exodus 25, that from the very beginning, that tabernacle, that temple wasn't meant to be permanent.

It was, he says, just a copy or a shadow of the heavenly pattern that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. In other words, just like my son's wooden trains are just a small copy of the awesome reality, the tabernacle was just a sketch, just a representation, a symbol of something much, much, much greater.

Now, on the one hand, we should realize that this is saying something really positive about the Old Testament tabernacle, isn't it? I mean, if we have eyes to see it, the tabernacle was a sketch of heaven itself on earth, a glimmer of the unspeakable beauty of God's eternal dwelling place in the midst of his people.

Hebrews isn't trying to sort of denigrate the tabernacle. But he's also saying that for all of that, it wasn't the reality itself.

It was just a shadow. Could it give comfort to Old Testament believers? Could it teach them things, true things about God and about God's redemption and about God's future?

[11 : 27] Absolutely. But it wasn't the thing itself. It was still full of limitations. And one of the limitations of the tabernacle, which is obvious when you think about it, was that it could only be located in one place at one time.

Because it was on earth, you could only get to it in one spot. So if you wanted to participate in what was happening there, if you wanted to be where the spiritual action was, so to say, you had to travel to get there.

And at least three times a year, Israelites were required to travel to the temple to participate in annual festivals. Just think of the cost and the planning that had to go into such a life and such trips. Just think of the sorrow if you couldn't go and couldn't be present. Some of the psalms that we have in the book of Psalms are written by people who, for one reason or another, are distanced from the temple and can't get there.

And their heart longs to be back in God's presence. But you see, what Hebrews is saying here, that now, exalted to heaven, seated at God's right hand, Jesus' high priesthood is exercised in a place that isn't limited to one spot.

[12 : 52] That now it's accessible and available everywhere. And of course, we don't see it that way at first, do we? To our default way of thinking, Jesus' exaltation to heaven makes him less accessible, right?

He's gone away and now we can't see him. What good is that? But that's because we don't have a proper understanding of the relationship between what the Bible calls heaven and earth.

You see, generally speaking, we tend to fall into two broad ways of thinking about these things. On the one hand, there's the broadly sort of materialistic way of viewing heaven and earth, which basically says that heaven doesn't exist.

It isn't real. All that matters is earth. And on the other hand, there's the broadly sort of dualistic way of thinking, which says that heaven is all that really matters. And earth is just either an illusion or basically evil or ultimately irrelevant at the end of the day.

Do you see in your own life how people fall into one of those two categories? And maybe even our own thinking kind of tends towards one or the other. But you see, both of these views are incredibly problematic, aren't they?

[14 : 02] The materialist still has to admit that there are unseen realities. After all, take mathematical principles, right?

They are most certainly true, and they undergird the physical world. And in a sense, they're true independently of the physical world. If everything suddenly vanished in a black hole, two and two would still equal four.

So it seems that reality isn't just matter, just earth, that there are transcendent realities after all. But you know, the other way, the sort of dualist picture of viewing the world is also deeply problematic, isn't it?

To just say that earth is an illusion. Doesn't our deep yearning for justice say loudly that the events of this earthly life matter? And to go a step further, when earthly suffering occurs, who can say that it's just an illusion and isn't worth weeping for?

So this earthly life must be more than just an irrelevant waiting room or an illusion that we're waiting to cast aside. So the materialist view and the dualist view, they're both much too oversimplified and they're much too problematic to be true.

[15 : 20] But there's a third way. There's the biblical view that's actually much more sophisticated and resonates much more deeply with our experience.

You see, in the biblical view, heaven and earth are two dimensions that overlap and interlock to form the whole of reality. You see, when the Bible talks about heaven in the sense used here, it's not talking about outer space, it's talking about the place where God dwells in fullness.

Heaven is God's dimension of reality. That's what Jesus says in the Lord's Prayer, right? Our Father who art in heaven, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So heaven is a way of speaking about that dimension where God dwells and where God reigns.

And that's why Hebrews can say in verse 2 that heaven is, as it were, the true holy place, the true tent, the true tabernacle.

Not because the old one was false or the old one was bad, but because the old one was a symbol of the real thing of God's dwelling. And as I've said, heaven isn't something that's far off.

[16 : 36] You don't need a spaceship to get there. No, it actually presses down and impinges and intersects with our earthly side of reality.

So you see, when Jesus ascends to the Father and takes his seat at God's right hand and becomes our minister in the holy place, this means that our priest is not now limited to one place.

In the place where he ministers, it touches on the rest of reality, on all of it at once. And that's why Hebrews, if you've been following our series, can tell us again and again and again to draw near to God through Jesus.

not because he wants us to pack up and travel to some earthly temple, but because Jesus, our great high priest, has gone into the real and true sanctuary. He's forged a path for us into God's very presence.

Not entering a mere sketch, but the real deal. And so now, no matter where we are, we can draw near. And friends, that means that you don't have to travel to a certain place to be nearer to God.

[18 : 00] There's no such thing after the work of Christ. There's no such thing as sacred space anymore. Because if we have a true and living high priest in heaven, then any space is a space where women and men can draw near to God.

Now think about the implications of that. We've perhaps all visited places that seem more holy or spiritual than others, haven't we? Places that seem to evoke awe. Perhaps an ancient cathedral with high vaulted ceilings and impressive stained glass windows.

Or perhaps a quiet monastery tucked away up in the mountains, far above the chaos of ordinary life. Places that seem special. Places that seem closer to God. But friend, consider what Hebrews is telling us.

That a person praying at the foot of their bed in the name of Jesus, a seemingly commonplace thing, that that is a more holy and all-filled reality than the most impressive cathedral.

That that person is drawing closer to God than if he or she were to travel to the most serene mountaintop monastery. Friends, don't underestimate what Christ has done for you.

[19 : 34] And that means no matter what place you find yourself in, if you turn to God in Christ, your prayers are received in the very throne room of the universe, the very control center of reality.

You can be gathered with a few friends in the basement of your dorm, praying for God to move in the hearts of your friends. friends. You and your spouse can be pacing the floors of your hallway at 2 a.m.

with your sick child, praying for patience and wisdom. You can be in the middle of the office, praying for clarity about your work and praying for graciousness with your colleagues.

You can be on the other side of the world on a short-term mission trips, or you can be walking the halls of your high school. Friends, any of these places, the places where real-life trials come and where endurance is especially needed, any of these places can be a place where heaven and earth meet and you draw near to God through the faithful ministry of our heavenly high priest Jesus.

So friends, don't be embarrassed that Christ is in heaven. Rejoice. Because if he is in heaven, then his priestly ministry is accessible everywhere, at any place, to any need.

[21 : 06] But you see, that's not the only reason why Jesus' heavenly location is good news for us. It's also good news because it means that his priestly ministry on our behalf is always abiding.

As you think about it, the old tabernacle, right, was set up by human hands and made of earthly materials. And as we've said, that doesn't make it inherently bad, but it does mean that it wasn't meant to last forever.

Eventually, the thing was going to wear out. Who knows what it would have looked like before they actually built the temple? Who knows if any of the parts that they originally built it with were still the ones?

You know the old philosophical problem? If you have a boat and you keep replacing the parts, is it still the same boat? Who knows what the tabernacle would have looked like? The thing was probably wearing out perpetually. And even the temple in Jerusalem didn't last forever.

It was torn down. In AD 70, the Romans destroyed it. But you see, friends, Jesus has entered a sanctuary that will never fade and will never crumble.

[22 : 11] No matter what happens on earth, no matter what circumstances arise, our hope and our identity as Christians cannot be shaken. Have you thought about that?

If this building that we meet in tomorrow were to fall into the ground, it wouldn't change one bit the true essence of our church.

We'd have to figure out where to meet next week. That'd probably be kind of tricky. The elders and deacons would have a pretty stressful week. But our worship would continue basically unchanged. And our mission would continue. And our identity would remain the same. Why? Because all those things are rooted in Christ.

And the ministry he's performing for us in heaven isn't blown or tossed or hindered by earthly circumstances. He certainly cares about our earthly circumstances, but none of them could ever change or stop his ministry for us.

[23 : 21] And neither can it change or stop his mission in the world. Now, of course, I realize there's not a great probability that our church will crumble into the ground tomorrow.

Let's hope that doesn't happen. But for some of you here this morning, I wonder if you do feel like things are crumbling down around you. Maybe you're drowning in debt.

Maybe your marriage is lifeless. Maybe you're agonizing over hard decisions that you face. Or maybe you're starting to realize some unsettling things about your own heart.

Maybe the image that you've had of yourself as a good person is starting to crumble down. But friends, earlier in Hebrews, we saw that Christ's entrance into heaven on our behalf was like an anchor for the soul.

Christ is a priest who lives forever in a sanctuary that abides forever. And that means if you've placed your trust in him, if he is your life, and for those communities for whom he is their life, that no trial and no circumstance can ultimately tear you down.

[24 : 38] not because he'll necessarily protect us or shield us from all hardship, but because he endures and abides through all hardship.

That there is a fixed point that will not and cannot change because he's in heaven. And you know, this abiding means not just stability for the present.

Because you see, the idea of heaven in the Bible means not just God's dwelling place in the present, but it also, in a sense, points us to the future that God has in store.

The Old Testament prophets foresaw a day when God's glory would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. And John in Revelation saw a day when heaven would come down to earth.

When God would judge injustice and evil and vindicate his name and dwell in the midst of his people forgiven once and for all. You see, friend, heaven is where the world is headed.

[25 : 55] It points ahead to the certain future that God has in store. And that means that if Jesus is our high priest in heaven, then he'll be our high priest for eternity. And that means we can have a guaranteed place in God's new creation, in the city to come, as Hebrews will call it.

And it also means, friends, do you realize this, that it means that as we live with Jesus as our king and as our priest, that our community becomes a foretaste of the future.

That our life together as Christians, worshiping Christ, relying on his priestly work, following him as our king, friends, that's the future.

Now, in and among us, by his spirit. Don't think that the Christian life is boring. It might be ordinary at times.

But friends, the ordinary life of a believer is more glorious than anything you could imagine. So if Jesus is in heaven, then what he's accomplished is abiding.

[27 : 14] It never fades. The quality of your relationship and access to God is not shaken by circumstances. And he will usher us into God's future. But last reason.

Last reason why Jesus being our priest in heaven is good news for us. It's not just that his ministry is accessible anywhere, not just that it will abide forever, but it also means that his ministry is completely effective.

that it does what it was meant to do. Verse 1 tells us that we have a high priest who's seated in heaven.

Who's seated in heaven. He's sitting down at God's right hand. Now, being seated at the right hand meant typically to be established in authority and in favor.

And this idea of being seated at God's right hand typically points to Jesus' kingly identity, his kingly office. Princes were the ones who sat.

[28 : 23] Kings were the ones who sat. They sat and they ruled. But here, Hebrews wants to make a point about Jesus' priestly ministry, you see. Not just is Jesus seated as our king with all the rights and privileges of a sovereign.

But the one who is seated, what is he doing? He's serving as our priest. He's ministering to us. And as we'll see in chapter 10 by sitting down, Hebrews wants us to see that Christ's work is finished. That it's utterly and totally sufficient and complete.

That when he offered himself, that single sacrifice was enough to cleanse and forgive the sins of everyone who places their trust in him.

And now, in the position of utmost authority and favor at God's right hand, Jesus assures us that he's not only willing to save, but he indeed has the power and the right to save everyone who comes to him.

[29 : 36] You see, because his sacrifice wasn't brought into a mere representation, but it was brought into the reality itself where it really counts. His sacrifice has been brought into the very throne room of the majesty on high.

God's right. And at last, it atones for our sins and takes God's redemptive plan forward and it brings us peace with God.

That's what Revelation 5 was all about that we read earlier in the service. That the Lamb, Jesus, crucified for us, is on the throne, exalted, and is ransoming for himself a people from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Now, friend, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, I realize that there's a lot in this passage that might seem a bit strange. I hope it's a little less strange as we've been talking about it, but in the end, it all comes down to this, knowing peace with God.

If there is a God, then surely to be right with him is what matters most of all. And as Hebrews goes on to show because Christ is in heaven, having effectively atoned for sin, he thereby brings about a new covenant between us and God that is a new basis for relating to God.

[31 : 04] One that's no longer dependent on our performance or our works or our righteousness, but one that stands on better promises, on the rock of a better mediator, and friends, the greatest of those promises is that God will remember our sins no more.

Complete forgiveness for all who admit that they can't save themselves and who take Christ alone as their representative before God.

Now, next week, we're going to talk more about this new covenant and the glory that it is. But for now, here's the main point as we read in verse one.

Not just that there is such a high priest, but that we have such a high priest. So, friends, let me leave us with this.

Can you say that today? Not just that there is such a high priest, but that I have such a high priest. That's the difference between merely knowing about Christianity and having saving faith.

[32 : 21] To be able to say, not just there is, but I have Christ, that I am his and he is mine. And in the Christian life, that's also what produces faithful endurance in the midst of difficult days, not just knowing that there is, but friends that we have, that you have, that I have, such a great high priest.

Such a priest in heaven, who's utterly accessible no matter where you are. Such a priest who is utterly abiding no matter what your circumstances.

Such a priest who's utterly effective no matter what your sin. Friends, in Jesus, we have such a high priest.

Let's pray. Father, by your spirit, would you grant us a deeper vision in faith of our risen and exalted and reigning high priest.

Lord, help us to know the security and the joy that comes from knowing we have a priest not on earth, where things fade and wear out, where they're limited, where the benefits only go so far.

[33 : 53] But, Jesus, that we have you in heaven and that in you we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places where it really counts, where it really matters.

Holy Spirit, would you breathe faith into those who don't quite get it yet, who aren't quite seeing it, help them to see.

God, help us to repent, to turn away from the things that we've been trusting in your place and to cling to you again as our upper and uttermost.

Lord, we pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.