

## Sermon 40, The Priest We Have, Hebrews 8:1-6

**Proposition:** Jesus, seated in Heaven and serving as a priest there, is the heavenly priest you have and is all the priest you'll ever need.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have the greatest of great high priests. We have the one who is the best in the whole world at repairing and maintaining our relationship with God. He is ours, our priest, our prophet, our King. He is all the priest we have — and He's all the priest we will ever need.

#### **I. The Point: We Have Jesus Christ as Our Priest, v. 1a**

The Hebrew writer tells us what his main point is: We have Jesus as our high priest. We don't need to look to Pope Francis or to some other priest. We have Jesus.

I am not your priest. I am your pastor — that is, an undershepherd whose job it is to lead you to the good Shepherd. I don't repair and maintain your relationship with God. That's on you. Rather, my job is to feed you. That's on me.

But Jesus' job, or one of His jobs, is to be your priest. He does that regularly, faithfully, and with the hand of the Lord upon Him. He was appointed by the Father to this position with an oath, and the Father does not swear lightly and certainly never takes back what He has once sworn.

This Jesus is yours. You have Him. He belongs to you, and gives Himself to you in the bread and wine each week.

That's the author's point — and the implication from it, of course, is that you must never abandon Jesus, either to return to the old way of worship through the letter and the physical Levitical priesthood, or to go to some “progressive” heresy that leaves Jesus behind entirely. Neither backward to the Levitical system, nor forwards to a Jesus-free faith, but upwards, to Heaven itself, where our Lord sits at the Father's right hand, waiting until His enemies are subdued beneath His footstool.

## **II. The Priest, Jesus, vv. 1-5**

We have Jesus as our priest. Who is Jesus? The Hebrew writer anticipates that question. He repeats some of the things he has already told us about Jesus, and adds further truths about Him.

### **A. He Is Seated**

One very important thing to know about Jesus our priest is that He is a seated priest. He is not standing up to minister. If you could take a time machine back to the Levitical tabernacle, you would see that it had several items of furniture, but one thing it lacked entirely was chairs. There was no provision for the priests to sit down and rest a while. They had to stand for their entire shift. Just as you won't find chairs in the back room of your typical grocery store, you won't find chairs in the Tabernacle or Temple. Nor will you find them on the platform of a contemporary church served by a priest. The Roman Catholics and the Orthodox do not have chairs, for their priests have to be up and doing throughout the service.

Jesus is not like that. His priestly work is done. He is a seated priest, seated on the throne with His Father. His posture tells us emphatically that his work is over. I still remember my first boss, when I was 17 years old, telling me “Never stand, dude. Always find something to do.” But Jesus doesn't have to find something to do. His life work is complete; He has sat down.

#### **1. At God's Majestic Right Hand**

That, of course, is what the writer tells us: He has not only taken a seat, but a very special seat. His seat is at the right hand of heavenly Majesty. Rather than saying “God,” the writer says “the majesty in heaven. Why does he refer to God in this way? To emphasize the status Christ has as one seated. He is next to God, and God is extremely majestic — so majestic that you can simply call Him “the Majesty.” God is so great that you can call Him “The great one,” so wise you can call Him “wisdom,” so powerful that you can call Him “power,” so terrifying that you can call Him “the Fear of Isaac,” and more. God is supreme, Lord in Heaven — and our priest, the one who represents us to God and repairs our relationship to Him — is free to sit down in His presence. Not only does He sit down, but He sits down in the place of honor. He sits down at the Father's right hand!

When you are in the presence of greatness, of Majesty with a capital M, you are not the 800-pound gorilla who sits wherever he wants. You are the shrimp that meekly stands unless you are invited to sit. But Jesus' status is such that He, a man like us, has been invited to sit — not at the far end of the throne room, not at the lowest place at the table, but at the Father's right hand.

## **2. On God's Throne in Heaven**

The writer says, a little vaguely, that Jesus is “on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.” But other passages are clearer: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21 NAS). Jesus is on the Father's right hand, but He is not like Bathsheba was with King Solomon, sitting on a separate chair. He is so close with His Father that He is sitting on His Father's throne. This is not a two-throne arrangement. It is a single throne on which both Father and Son sit, the Father on your right as you face the throne and the Son on your left. This is mind-boggling, glorious, superb and supreme. It is the limit; there is no higher place of honor. No such place exists; no such place is even possible. Jesus has been exalted to the highest place imaginable.

So there is your high priest, sitting on the throne of God Almighty because He is also the divine King who rules right alongside God.

Let's just say that Aaron can't come anywhere close to this. The pope, in all his regalia, can't come anywhere close to this. No earthly priest has ever had or could ever have this glory, for it is a heavenly glory.

### **B. He Is Serving**

Yet though Jesus is seated, proclaiming that His priestly work of sacrifice is done, he is still serving. The writer calls him a “minister,” one who performs the work of worship. The Greek word has come into English as “the liturgist,” the one who performs the work of leading public worship. That is who Jesus is. He is the liturgist in the heavenly sanctuary, the one who is leading public worship there. The writer describes the location of Christ's priestly liturgical work in two ways.

#### **1. In the Holy Place**

He says first that Jesus is performing this work in the holy place. What does this mean? Well, in the previous verse he told us that he is referring to heaven. Heaven is above all the place dedicated to the worship of God, the true place set apart for the Almighty. Thus, this term “holy place,” though it resonates with the earthly tabernacle and its first room — “the holy place” — is not a reference to a temple built within heaven, but simply a reference to all of heaven. The whole place is God's dwelling, and thus the whole place exists for Him and is completely holy. The whole of heaven is the dwelling place of God. Yes, Jesus is on the throne with His Father. He is in the holiest spot in heaven. But He is doing liturgical work in heaven, leading worship as a priest.

#### **2. In the True Tabernacle**

The writer goes on to tell us that all of heaven is the true tabernacle. The earthly tabernacle was a copy of the heavenly original. This does not mean that there is a portable tent shrine in heaven, one like the one Moses built on earth but nicer because it's heavenly. No. Rather, the tabernacle was a place for God to dwell with His people; Heaven is the true tabernacle because it is God's original and proper home. Jesus is leading worship there, in heaven. Heaven is a holy place and

is the true tabernacle because it is the location where God lives permanently and where worship takes place in its fullness.

### **C. He Had to Sacrifice, v. 3**

Jesus is in heaven. That's what the writer is saying, and he's telling it to us over and over, and in a variety of ways. But now he takes a moment to say that this heavenly residence, this role as heavenly liturgist, is not the only part of Jesus' priesthood. In fact, it is not the most important part. The *sine qua non* of a priest is that he must offer gifts and sacrifices. Jesus is doing priestly work in heaven, but that's because He first did the ultimate priestly work of sacrifice here on earth. He had to sacrifice. He is indeed seated at the Father's right hand, but it's because He first came to earth, suffered, and died in our place. He had to sacrifice to be our true priest.

### **D. He Serves the Reality, not the Copy, vv. 4-5**

Thus, know that Jesus serves the reality in heaven and that He does so because He sacrificed His own life on earth to save us. But the writer now contrasts the Levitical system with the worship Jesus leads in Heaven. He contrasts them using this key term "copy." Now, you are familiar with copies. You probably think of copying as a mechanical process, as I do. You place a document into the copy machine, and then you hit a button and the machine copies it. That is, the machine makes another document exactly like the first. We think of copying as primarily applying to text and images. Or, perhaps, a non-mechanical copy might be like the Leaning Tower of Niles in Niles, Illinois. That's right — there is a tower there built to look just like the leaning tower of Pisa, but only half as big. The Niles tower is a copy of the Pisa tower.

Well, as we will discuss at greater length next week, the Hebrew writer deploys this category of "copy" to capture what is significant about the old covenant's worship. It was, he says, a copy of the true worship taking place in the true sanctuary in heaven. In other words, the whole heavenly worship of God was copied down into an earthly, physical form in the Levitical system. As Origen of Alexandria put it, "There were some models made from clay, as it were, through which true images were represented" (*Homilies on Leviticus* 10.1.4).<sup>1</sup> The tabernacle worship was a clay model of the heavenly worship.

#### **1. The Levitical System Serves the Copy, vv. 4-5a**

To put it simply, the Levitical system serves the copy. The Levitical priests serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. That is, the tabernacle and its furniture are related to heaven and the worship conducted there in the same way that the leaning tower of Niles is related to the leaning tower of Pisa. The earthly worship is a copy; the heavenly worship is the original. The earthly worship is a shadow; the heavenly realities are what casts that shadow in the form of the Levitical priestly work and institutions. Again, we will talk about this at length next week.

#### **2. Moses Saw the Reality, v. 5b**

But an important point when talking about the superiority of Jesus' priesthood is that Moses did not think that the system he instituted was the ultimate, irreplaceable reality. He knew better. He saw the reality, and thus he knew that the Mosaic-Levitical system he was charged with

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* New Testament vol 10, Hebrews, ed. Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 136.

instituting was a copy and shadow of the heavenly reality! Moses did not think that he was legislating an eternal, irreplaceable system of worship. He knew that this was a copy and shadow. Jesus' ministry is not a copy and shadow; it is the original and the substantial reality.

### **3. The Torah Acknowledges that the Levitical System is a Copy, v. 5b**

But the Hebrew writer goes out of his way to remind us that the Torah acknowledges that the Levitical system is a copy. It does not use the word "copy," but it tells us that the Levitical system was constructed according to the heavenly "model" or "pattern" that Moses saw on top of Sinai. What was that pattern? Moses doesn't tell us, nor does the Hebrew writer. It was presumably not a physical copy of the heavenly realities which Moses then copied. It was, in some way beyond our present capacity to guess, a genuine look at the heavenly reality that he was copying into an earthly form. Moses saw that reality. And Moses wrote down that he saw it so that it would be clear to everyone that his Levitical system was not and had never pretended to be God's ultimate way of worship.

Why does the Hebrew writer bring all this up? To exalt the priesthood of Christ as it deserves. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, and he is not a Levitical priest offering animals in an institution that is an earthly shadow and copy of the preexisting heavenly reality. He is not that sort of priest.

### **III. The Promise, v. 6**

Rather, He is a priest in heaven.

#### **A. Jesus Serves as Priest in Heaven, v. 6**

We have this priest, and this priest ministers in Heaven itself. What does that look like? What does that entail? We do not know any more than what we read in the book of Revelation about the ongoing worship service where the 24 elders and the four living creatures and the souls under the altar and the multitude which no man can number praise and bless God with glorious songs of Moses and of the Lamb.

#### **1. His Heavenly Service Is More Excellent than any Earthly Service, v. 6a**

But the writer spells out what his point entails: Jesus' heavenly service is more excellent than any earthly service. His ministry is more excellent. He is a better liturgist than Aaron; He understands worship better, for the simple reason that He is on both ends of it. He gives it and He receives it. Someone who is teaching one class and enrolled in another is a better teacher, for he is a student at the same time that he is a teacher. Jesus is a better worshiper, for He worships His Father and leads us in worship while simultaneously receiving our worship. That service, then, is the most excellent service of worship that the Almighty has ever received or could ever receive. The heavenly reality is purified with the best sacrifices!

#### **2. He Mediates a Better Covenant**

The other application about Jesus' superior ministry is that He mediates a better covenant. The superiority of this covenant is equivalent to the superiority of Jesus' ministry. That's what the writer tells us. The more excellent ministry he exercises in heaven is as much more excellent than that Levitical ministry as the new covenant is better. Of course, that superiority is the

superiority the writer has just mentioned: The new covenant is reality, not shadow. It is original, not copy. Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant, just as He leads perfect worship in the heavenly sanctuary.

### **B. Through Jesus, We Have Better Promises**

Thus, through Jesus, we have better promises. We have the promise that God will be our God and we His people, that our sins will be forgiven, and more. Indeed, the writer goes on to quote a detailed passage from Jeremiah that spells out more about the promises of the new covenant—promises that are better than the promises of the earthly copy of the heavenly reality. Instead of Canaan, for instance, we are promised heaven. Instead of the law written on stone, we are promised the law written on our hearts. Instead of being taught by our neighbors and brothers, we will be taught by God. These promises are better — and they are yours because Christ is yours. Go to Him as your priest, your savior, the one who leads the heavenly worship and who will bring you into heaven to worship His Father alongside Him. He is mediator, minister, and savior. Adore Him, and be saved. Amen.