



GRACE CHURCH

Shadow and Substance

Hebrews 8:1-13

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While preaching through the book of Ephesians, we noted that the apostle Paul uses strange language to describe the blessings of God in the gospel. When we talk about Christianity, many of our first thoughts are about forgiveness and escape from damnation. But Paul says when we become, as he puts it “in Christ”, found in him, it’s not about what we escape, but what we get: we inherit a whole world of blessing. It’s the same kind of blessings that were promised to Abraham, that were meant to be the inheritance of Israel—namely that we would be *intimate* with God, that “he would be our God and we would be his people”. Instead of escaping hell, we get God. That is a very different perspective.

The interesting thing in Ephesians is that Paul says these blessings of dwelling with God are “in the heavenly places”. In other words, he is imagining a whole different world where the blessings of God, the presence of God, is fully and totally realized. It might be helpful for you to think about this world almost as an entirely different plane of existence, a world that is so full of God that it is not simply “spiritual” and “immaterial”, but actually more real than anything you have ever known.

This world, the world of “heavenly blessings” is more solid—like landing firm on shore after hours on a rocking, swaying boat. It’s more alive—like tasting warm, fresh, buttered bread after only eating stale croutons. It’s more familial—like coming home and sleeping soundly in your own bed after weeks in a hotel room. It’s a world that is completely better and more real than this shadowy one, because it is a world charged with God’s presence.

The same idea of the blessings of the “heavenly places” being available to us now in Christ has been at play in the book of Hebrews. The people of Israel, those people who were promised a land and a kingdom where they would dwell with God, tasted some of these heavenly blessings through the mediation of their priests—who went into the tabernacle, the place of God’s presence on earth. But what Hebrews is teaching us is that way of getting the blessing of Heaven, that way of dwelling with God, is not sustainable. Not only can it never remove our guilt perfectly, as we saw last week, but it can never really bring us truly into God’s presence. Through the mediation of earthly priests, we can dip our toe in the water of God’s presence, but we can’t swim. We can taste a hint, but never really drink in full. As Jesus says to the woman at the well, we will always be thirsty, never satisfied. Unless we get some new water.



That's the main point of Hebrews 8. That only through Jesus, and through the superiority of his new covenant, we move from the shadow of God's blessing to the substance of it. Jesus came to bring us into a whole new relationship with God, infinitely better than the old, where the blessing of the presence of God goes from black and white to color.

So what today consists of is another comparison, since the author of Hebrews loves those. Last week he contrasted the old priesthood to the new priesthood of Jesus. This week he will compare the old covenant to the new covenant, or in more accessible terms, the gospel of Jesus Christ with the shadow of the gospel. Ultimately what we will find is in **verse 13**: the old way of knowing God, the one that is only meant to point us towards the new and better way, is obsolete and vanishing away.

Ultimately what we find before us then is a decision, the decision that has been at the crux of Hebrews since the beginning. We can either embrace the work of Jesus in the gospel, and push all of our chips onto following him, or we can ignore, abandon, or forget Jesus and try to obtain the blessings of God on our own through some other way. My prayer is that today you can once again be reminded that Jesus *is the* way into the blessing of God.

The Shadow: Are You Settling For Less Than The New Covenant? (1-9)

The great thing about the argument on chapter 8 is that **verse 1** makes it really clear. The author of Hebrews wants us to know: I've been trying to tell you this all along! What is it that he has been trying to tell us? That Jesus' ministry is not earthly. The tabernacle, the sanctuary, where he ministers is heavenly. Again notice it is the "true" tent in **verse 2** that is in the presence of God, and that tent is not a tabernacle made by man, but rather a throne room erected by God. So let's consider some of the differences between the earthly tent and the heavenly one, and we will see how the shadowy one, the earthly one, can never really get us the blessings of God. The main point of this entire chapter can really be seen in **verse 9**: Jesus has a better ministry, because his covenant is better. So let's see the differences.

First, we see the difference between **Seated Priest vs Standing Priests**. Notice in Seated Priest **verse 1** Jesus is *seated*. We mentioned this all the way back in chapter 1 of Hebrews. Jesus is the one who has finished his priestly sacrificial work and is sitting down, while Hebrews 10 tells us that "every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." There is a finality here that makes it different. In the throneroom of God, there is no sacrifice, no standing and moving and busying. Instead, as we saw last week, the sacrifice of Christ is final and complete.

The fact that he is at the right hand of God also conveys his kingliness. He is co-ruling with God—something no other priest could dream of. The place where he ministers is not a bloody tent of sacrifice, but the throneroom of the very presence of God. The point of this is quite simple: Were Jesus not seated, his ministry would be ongoing, showing that something better than him



was coming. The Old Covenant priests were always busy, because there were always sins to atone for. But Jesus is not a busybody. How could one who is eternal ever grow tired? No—he is seated and at rest, no matter the work required to save you—it has been finished.

Secondly, we see the comparison of **Heavenly Reality vs Earthly Copy**. This is the main point of this section here, as we saw in **verse 1-2**. The ministry of Jesus is better because, while he is similar to earthly priests in that he offers up a sacrifice, **verse 3**, he is different in that where he ministers is Heaven, not Earth. This is what is meant by **verse 4**. Jesus has ascended, “passed through the heavens” as chapter 4 said. So his ministry is not on earth, but in Heaven. He doesn't plead your case according to how well you uphold the law, as other priests did, but according to his fulfillment of it.

Now if you lived in the time of the original audience, sanctuaries or temples were everywhere, because deities were everywhere. You could not throw a rock downtown in any large Roman city and not hit a few temples. But the unique thing about the Hebrews is that they only recognized *one* temple—the one in Jerusalem. This temple was modeled after the original tent of Mose, the tabernacle. **Verse 5** tells us that Moses was given the instructions for the tabernacle from God himself. It's speculated that God showed Moses models of the tabernacle, not just words—like a visual learning tool—and that is the “pattern shown on the mountain”, that is Sinai, when Moses received the law. So this tabernacle was awe inspiring, as was the temple in Jerusalem, the place where atonement was made, the place designed by divine revelation.

And yet the author says in **verse 5** that it is simply a *copy* and a *shadow*. See, the new temple is far superior, because it is not just an outpost of Heaven, but Heaven itself. Jews have been crying out for a new temple since the destruction of it in 70AD, not long after Hebrews was likely written. But our faith says that we don't await another earthly temple with earthly priests, but rather *Jesus* is our priest and we are the earthly temple filled with God's spirit that is the shadow of the real temple, which is God's heavenly throne room, where Jesus now sits and intercedes for us. To put it very simply, why have the copy when you can have the real thing? There is now no distance between our needs and the ear of God, since Jesus is there at his right hand.

The truth I want you to see this morning is that we are all prone to want to get God's blessings through incomplete, imperfect means. We all want to bridge the gap between the earthly and the heavenly. Even those who say they have no religion have created a religion of no-religion. They may not appeal to a deity to raise them to Heaven, but they appeal to scientific progress, intellectual enlightenment, self-actualization, or whatever other trend is in vogue. We all are prone to desire the copies of heaven rather than the real.

Following Jesus is not about offering up our sacrifices of time, morality, or religious fervor here on earth in order to warrant access to the heavenly blessings of being with God. Following Jesus is about being swallowed up by faith into the one who has offered himself and reached down to bring us to Heaven's blessings.



So the last comparison of the shadow of religion to the real thing is **Flawed People vs Perfect Promises**. Here we dip into the Old Covenant a bit more, since **verse 6-7** shows us that Christ's superior ministry is built on a superior covenant. See, the reason Israelite religion didn't work was not because God created it with a flaw. It didn't work because it depends on the holiness of the people. Remember what a covenant is: it's a binding agreement, far more serious than a contract. It is built on the complete faithfulness of both parties to do whatever they can to hold it together. Covenants do not work unless both parties want them to work (i.e. marriage).

The Old Covenant had some great promises. God promised that if his people obeyed his law, he would usher them into his very presence and bring them back to the New Eden. It wasn't the covenant that was flawed, it wasn't the promises that were bad, rather it was weakened by the people. Israel was a rebellious nation. God sent prophets, full of the Spirit, to lead them back, but far too many of them did not listen. The Spirit of God was ignored, the temple itself became defiled. The Old Covenant said that if it was broken, the justice of God demanded curses—which we see a picture of in **verse 9**. Instead of the blessing of knowing and being welcomed in by God, the Israelites received the curse of God “showing no concern for them”.

This is why Jesus is much better, and his covenant much better. The blessings of the covenant are the same: communion with God, a seat at his table, eternal rest with God. But the promises are no longer conditional on the obedience of the people, but on the obedience of the *guarantor* of the covenant. Remember last week, Jesus is the guarantor of the new covenant? A guarantor is the one who pays when you can't, whose credit becomes your credit. In the old covenant, God said “I promise to uphold my end” and the people of God said “we promise to uphold our end”. But in the new covenant, the promises, like **verse 6** says, are far better. Again God says “I promise to uphold my end”, but the people of God say instead: “Jesus has promised to uphold our end. He is our guarantor.”

So it's not that the old covenant is bad. It's simply that it was only ever meant to be a shadow, to increase our longing for the real thing that is faith. We will meet all sorts of flawed and yet pardoned Old Testament saints in Heaven. But they will be there not because of the strength of their sacrifices, but rather because they trusted by faith that their sacrifices were pointing to a better one to come, that God would uphold his end of the promise even when they failed theirs. Which now, he has. The new is better. How much better? Better enough for the Old to be called “obsolete”. Let's examine some of the substance of this new covenant.

The Substance: A Wealth of Newness (10-13)

The quotation in 8-12 is from Jeremiah 31. The context is important. The boy king Josiah has grown, and he follows God when other kings don't. He stops idol worship in Israel. He discovers the Books of God's Law hidden away and calls all the people to repentance. The people renew their covenant with God. Of Josiah, the Scriptures say: “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the



Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.” But Josiah dies. And his sons are not like him, and the people turn again from the covenant. After such renewal, how could they go back? Surely they are a stiff-necked people! And so are we. But God makes a promise through Jeremiah—even in their failure, something new is coming. Josiah’s reign was simply a taste.

This covenant gives **New Desires**. 2 Peter 1:4 calls us now in Christ “partakers of the divine nature”. No longer do we have to search the letter of the law. No longer do we have to follow religious rituals to save us. Instead, we have the promised Holy Spirit in us—shaping and changing our hearts to truly love God and truly desire to obey him. You are a new creation. Nothing can give us a new heart except the gospel, no amount of self-help or sacrificial lambs.

Do you see how this changes everything? No longer does the world have to appear to you as dim, cold, and lifeless. Instead, you can be full of zeal for the glory of God, a heavenly desire to please him, a desire that makes everything: from food, to sunsets, to relationships, to your work, suddenly ripe with potential to glorify God.

I just finished C.S. Lewis’ book *That Hideous Strength*, which is all about a comparison between the demonic and the angelic. It’s sci-fi, but the main plot is simple. A scientific organization means to advance mankind by stripping away everything that is natural. No trees, no birds, no bodies even. The mind is what will take us into the next phase of human development. To ascend to “heaven” as it were, is to strip away every silly thing of earth and ascend on the power of objective scientific progress. But there is another organization in the book, more like a family, one far more attune to the beautiful things. Instead of throwing off nature, they embrace it: animals living in the house, gardens flourishing in the back. Lewis is teaching us: instead of casting off the heart, the solution to true progress towards heaven is to allow God to write into our hearts whispers of heaven. When Jesus comes back, everything will be more real and more alive than ever. That is the true Law of God—the law of harmony, of unity, of peace, of Eden. And God has put that eternity in our hearts and minds through the new covenant. Jesus lived and died and rose so that you could learn to see following him and obeying God not as a religious ritual or law-keeping but as a beautiful response of the transformed heart.

The new covenant also gives **New Access**. Forgive my overuse of the story, but again in *That Hideous Strength* we see that the book is also about community and the desire to be in. One character desperately wants to be accepted into the new world scientific organization. He wants to be in what Lewis calls “The Inner Ring”. It’s a play on that desire we all have to be accepted, to not be left out of the huddle, to be in the know. And eventually, he is accepted into this organization, only to find that he is used instead of valued. There is no true equality, no true community, when we see each other as commodities. In contrast, the other community in the book which his wife finds herself in is full of welcome, rest, and intimacy. No one is used for their gifts, but all contribute in small ways.

So look at the difference in the new covenant in **verse 10-11**. “I will be there God, and they shall be my people”. There is a community there—an inner ring—the ring of “God’s people”. And yet that



ring is not about God *using* us, but instead God *knowing* us. God doesn't save us to utilize us, he saves us because he loves us, he is *our God* and we are *his people*. And neither are there distinctions or classes in this inner ring. "Each one shall know me, from the least to the greatest" says the text!

One of the most prevalent ways we settle for less than the real thing is through our pursuit of experts and teachers. Getting to God and his blessing, we easily assume, is all about knowledge to gain. What could be more different than **verse 11**? No longer shall we have to teach one another, but God himself, Jesus himself, will be our teacher. This doesn't mean we don't have teachers in our life, examples and models, it means that the subject of their teaching is not how to ascend in knowledge in order to know the Lord, but rather that the Lord has descended to know us! There is no nirvana in the New Covenant, no gurus. Only the least and the greatest together being taught in the school of Christ.

The beauty of the New Covenant is God is never far. You are welcomed in, if you come by way of Jesus. You do not need to be an expert. You do not need to be great. You only need to trust that Jesus' way and Jesus' covenant is better than any other way.

Lastly, the new covenant brings **New Mercy**. In **verse 12** we find the ultimate difference in the covenants. I was listening recently to Tim Keller and I loved the way he put it. Remember in the Old Covenant, when you sinned against God, his response was to turn his face away. This is the exile of Israel and Judah, the periods of darkness. God's just discipline was to turn away. In the Old Covenant, God sees our sin and turns his face from us. But in the New Covenant, again **verse 12**, God sees us and turns his face from our sins, he "remembers them no more".¹ God's position towards his people in the new covenant is a complete 180.

What could be better than that? You cannot out-sin this covenant. God will never bring back the ledger of your past sins, requiring that you pay. Jesus has paid, and through his eternal intercession the Father welcomes you in by the Spirit.

So how do you, an earthly, sinful, creature, come to partake in the divine and heavenly blessings of God's presence? How do you taste and inherit what is truly real, both in this life and the one to come? How do you move from black and white to color? It is very simple—you embrace Jesus and his New Covenant. All other ways, even good ones, like the Old Covenant, are old and obsolete. But Jesus and his New Covenant is forever. Following him will never grow outdated. Bring that longing for a different, better world, to Jesus, and he will bring you into that world with him, with all of its blessings.

¹ I am pulling this language from a sermon by Tim Keller on this text. His sermon series on Hebrews is a masterclass in taking difficult texts and showing the heart of the gospel.

