

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Christ seated: The High Priest Sitting Down - Hebrews 8:1

As far as I know, we do not read in the Old Testament of priests sitting down. There was no provision, of seats either in the tabernacle or the temple. The reason for this was that the priest's work was never done. They had to offer sacrifices every day and to attend to the service of God in the holy place. We read in Hebrews 10:11, "And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins."

There is one occasion in the beginning of 1 Samuel where we do read of an old priest who was nearly blind and was very heavy, who was sitting down, but this was in neglect of his duty. In 1 Samuel 3:1 we read, "And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision," and again in verse 3, "And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord." The candlestick should have been tended every evening so that the lamp never went out, but Eli had neglected this service and as a result there was no open vision from the Lord. It was one of the darkest days in Israel's history; they were soon to lose the ark to the Philistines.

By contrast to this we read in 8:1, "We have such an high priest, who has sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." This verse and the second are a brief summary of the previous chapters, "A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man." We should note four things:

1. The Lord Jesus is "such an High Priest" that is such an One as chapter 7 has shown Him to be.
2. He has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty on high.
3. His priesthood is concerned with the immediate presence of God in heaven, not with any earthly sanctuary, great as that may have been as instituted by God.
4. This High Priest is ours, "we have such an High Priest."

1. The Lord Jesus is "such an High Priest"

The greater part of the previous chapters of this epistle have been bringing before us the greatness of the person of the Lord Jesus, and His superiority over any other person in the Old Testament.

- In chapter 1 He is the Son. He is greater in being than any other created being as He is the One who created all things. He is greater than any angel, as God had never addressed one of these as He had the Son.
- He is seen to be greater than Moses in chapter 3.
- In chapter 4 He is greater than Aaron.
- In chapter 7 the mysterious person of Melchisedec is brought before us as one who was a picture of the Lord Jesus.

It says in 7:3, "Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually." We know that these things could not be true historically of Melchisedec, but this is the way he is presented in Scripture to illustrate that the priesthood of the Lord Jesus can never be cut off by death, and so will never be passed on to another. We read in verses 16 and 17 about the Lord Jesus, "who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. For He testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec." Melchisedec is said to be great than Abraham, so by implication the Lord Jesus is great than Abraham.

The ability of the Lord Jesus is stated in verse 25, "Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." How wonderful to know that we have a High Priest, who is gone into heaven, into the very presence of God, who is able to carry us through every circumstance of life until we are safely there in the glory of God!

The last three verses of chapter 7 sum up the whole situation: "For such an High Priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the people's: for this He did once, when He offered up Himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore." What an extraordinary statement this is that this High Priest is suited to us! Surely we should have thought that it was the other way round, but no, as the Holy Ghost sees things,

the many sons being led to glory, the Christian company, bear such a character that no less an High Priest becomes them, i.e. Is suitable for them.

Holy, harmless, and undefiled

This High Priest is presented to us in a seven-fold way. The first three items present no difficulty. He is holy, harmless, and undefiled. None of these three things could have been said absolutely of Aaron of old. But of the Lord Jesus, because of who He is as being equal with God, He is holy. His character of love and kindness to sinners was seen perfectly in His life when down here. Did He ever harm anyone? Never, His whole life was to bring blessing to men. He is also undefiled. Even though He could embrace the leper, yet He was never defiled by those whom He met because He had a nature that was pure.

Separated from sinners

The fourth thing stated in this verse is that He is “separated from sinners” (JN Darby translation). Not only was He separated to God while He moved amongst publicans and sinners but now, in resurrection He is altogether apart from the whole scene where sin exists. The Lord Jesus says in John 17:19, “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.” The meaning of the word ‘sanctify’ is to set apart to God. The Lord Jesus was alluding to the fact that He was about to go back to heaven as a man, in order that the Holy Spirit might be sent down to be in the believers.

Made higher than the heavens

Then He is said to be “made higher than the heavens.” Not only is He a risen man but also God has set Him far above every other creature. Again this could never have been said of Aaron or any priest on earth.

The glory of the One who is our High Priest

This brings before us the glory of the One who is our High Priest. As to those priests they had to offer up sacrifices every day, firstly for their own sins and then for the people’s, because none of those sacrifices could take away sins and clear the conscience before God. But the Lord Jesus, when He offered Himself, once, completely dealt with the matter of sin in the sight of God. Because of it every believer is free for ever from the judgement of God against our sins.

The perfection of the work of the Lord Jesus is upheld by the greatness of His person

The perfection of the work of the Lord Jesus is upheld by the greatness of His person. He is the Son but He has been consecrated our High Priest for evermore by God.

So in 8:1 we read, “We have such an High Priest.” We need to consider all that has been said before in order to grasp the character and greatness of this priest.

2. He has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty on high

The next point in this verse is that God has set Him “on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.” It is God’s throne that is in the heavens and this priest has been set down on its right hand side, that is, in the place where all the executive functions are vested in Him. There is no weakness or infirmity in Him and the place He fills indicates that He wields all power. In chapter 1 we saw Him seated in glory as the answer to His finished work in purging of sins. Here it is as the Priest that He is crowned with glory.

3. His priesthood is concerned with the immediate presence of God in heaven, not with any earthly sanctuary

Thirdly, the priesthood of the Lord Jesus is not connected to any earthly sanctuary such as was set up by Moses in the wilderness where Aaron and his descendants were the high priests. The real sanctuary, which figuratively the Lord pitched, is a heavenly one and so requires a heavenly priest. This sanctuary has God as its centre but its circumference embraces the whole of God’s creation.

4. This High Priest is ours

Then fourthly our verse emphasises that ‘we have’ such an High Priest. This one fact shows us how far in advance of Judaism is Christianity. The Hebrews, to whom this epistle was written, were in danger of going back to something that had been superseded. They are exhorted therefore to consider the greatness of the High Priest that was truly theirs as believers on the Lord Jesus and although they now had nothing that they could see naturally. In any case the temple was soon to be destroyed, yet by faith they had a sanctuary that was far better because it was a heavenly one.

In verse 3 we read of part of the function of this priest. "For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat to offer." While the Lord Jesus is not a priest after the order of Aaron, Aaron was however a pattern of His priesthood. It was always necessary for those priests of the Mosaic order to continually offer up sacrifices, but they were dependent on the people bringing their gifts and sacrifices for that service to continue. We know from Israel's history that it very soon broke down and failed. The fact that it failed does not mean that the picture was a faulty one. Here the apostle shows that it looked forward to One who could take up this service in a perfect way, without human failure, and this is what this verse is alluding to.

It does not refer to the matter of atonement. That had been completely settled by the one offering of the Lord Jesus as we saw in verse 27 of the last chapter. It does not actually say what these offerings are in this verse, but I think 13:15 does "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name." The Hebrew believers had just been exhorted to "go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." Here at almost the end of this wonderful epistle they are called to answer to all that they had come into as believers and leave forever all that they had been used to in Judaism. It would have been a hard thing to do considering all the pomp and ceremony that went on in the camp. But it was all finished as far as God was concerned. It was all empty and dead because it had rejected and crucified the Lord Jesus and was soon to disappear.

It may be asked, "How can a Christian today answer to this exhortation, as we were never in the Jewish camp?" Certainly that is a valid question, but sadly a profession that is based on Judaism surrounds us, and we have to ask the question, "Is it Bible based?" or is it of man's idea. True service to God today does not consist in ceremonies and investments, organs, choirs and great cathedrals, but in "the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name." Is it not reasonable to suggest that every day of our lives there should be a testimony being rendered to God because of what the Lord Jesus has done for us? Then in an attitude of thankfulness seeking "to do good and to communicate," we are assured in verse 16 that, "with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

There is another side to the priesthood of the Lord Jesus. We have thought of what is God-ward. There is also a service of the Lord Jesus as our great High Priest going on now that is very much towards us. This is referred to at the end of Hebrews 4. In verse 14 we read, "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." Again we see the concern the writer of this letter had for these Jewish believers. He exhorts them "to hold fast," not to turn back to what they have left and emphasises that they had a great High Priest who was able to sustain them in the all circumstances that they were finding themselves in. We have already considered that He is able "to save to the uttermost" but here we find that He is also able to sympathise.

4:15 begins with a double negative which emphasises the positive fact, "For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." The expression "cannot be touched," means that He can sympathise. In the perfect pathway of the Lord Jesus He experienced every feeling, emotion or sorrow that you and I can ever feel and in a far greater degree because He was without sin. All our feelings and emotions have been affected by sin; His never were. So He is able to enter into everything that I may feel and to sympathise with me in it. We may find ourselves in circumstances where we have no friend that we can turn to who will understand how we feel. This verse assures us that we have One who is in heaven, in the presence of God to whom we can always turn and find all we need to sustain us. Verse 16 goes on to say, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

In 8:1 we read of His being "set down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." We now read that we can boldly approach to this throne, because of the One who sits on it, to receive mercy and grace in all our need. What a wonderful thing to realise that there is available to each one of us all the resources of the Majesty in the heavens!

Not only can He save and sympathise, but in 2:18 we read, "For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted." He is able to supply that help that we need every hour to sustain us through every trial just as He was sustained during His pathway in this world. So great is our High Priest that He is able to save, sympathise, and succour us every moment of every day that we are in this world. This epistle assures us that this is the character of our priest and He is available to every believer.

Twice in chapter 9 we have the expression 'not made with hands.' In verse 11 we read, "But Christ being come an High Priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say not of this building." The writer is again contrasting the present portion of the believer with that which Moses set up under God, but which has now been set aside and was soon to perish away. We can assume that God has made anything that is not made with human hands. This is why it is this more perfect and abiding. Reference is made to the blood of the Lord Jesus in contrast to that of beasts, because the blood of those animals could never take away sins. So it says in verse 14, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" So the believer today stands before God in all

the eternal perfection of the blood of Christ. He is thus able to serve God with a conscience set completely free from the judgement of sin.

Then in verse 24 we read, "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." This verse makes it clear that the tabernacle was just a picture of what was in the mind of God from eternity. This awaited the coming of Christ to do that work which would be the basis for men entering into the presence of God to serve Him. The assurance that that work has been completed is testified to by the fact that the Lord Jesus is now in the presence of God as a man, and He is there for us! We are told in verse 26, "but now once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." His coming into this world as a man and then His death on the cross has closed up forever that system by which man could ceremonially draw near to God, in ordinances and sacrifices. By His death He has dealt once and for all with the matter of sin before God. We come into this by faith in Him and stand as acceptable to God as He is.

You may have noticed that we have had the word 'appear' twice in these verses. Firstly He appears for us in the presence of God. Secondly, He appeared once in this world to do that work of redemption. But we read a third time in verse 28 of an appearance, which is yet still future. "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation." We must notice that it does not say that He bore the sins of everybody, but of many. Are you my dear listener one of the many? This refers to those who have believed on Him and have trusted Him as their Saviour. To such He will come again the second time. Surely those who love Him will be looking for Him to come to take us out of this world to be forever with Him in heaven. The verse assures us that to such He will appear and we shall hear His voice and see His face, be like Him, and in His presence for eternity. What a wonderful thing it is to have such a High Priest and to be waiting and watching for Him to return.

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