

Faith Reformed Church
Stevensville, Ontario
July 20, 2008
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 8:7-13
Sermon: The New Covenant of Christ

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

Our author has been outlining the various ways in which the ministry of Jesus is superior to the ministry of earthly priests. First, he has lifted up Christ as the perfect high priest. He is perfect, unlike other priests, because he himself is holy before his Father, blameless before men and pure in himself. He is also perfect in his priestly work, for in his incarnation he lived a perfect and sinless life, fulfilling all righteousness by obeying the Law—loving his Father with his whole heart and his neighbour as himself. It was this life, made perfect through obedience, that he offered up on the cross for the salvation of his people. A perfect priest and a perfect sacrifice.

Second, his ministry is superior because not only is he high priest, he is also the King who will rule forever. Think of what that means: We need never fear that a bad king will ascend to his throne; Jesus rules today in justice and in equity and will rule forever.

Third, the ministry of Jesus is superior in that his atoning work is completed. That is what our author is getting at when he said that after ascending to heaven Jesus “sat down.” Earthly priests never sat down in the tabernacle or temple because their work was never done; Jesus sat down

because his atoning sacrifice fully and forever satisfied the holy requirements of God's perfect justice. After the death of Christ at Calvary, no more bloody sacrifice for sin would ever be required.

Fourth, Jesus ministry is superior because Jesus reigns powerfully and presently from heaven. That is to say, Jesus is in exactly the right spot to carry out his ministry of intercession. At the right hand of the Majesty in heaven he intercedes on our behalf before the Father, he sends his Spirit to live in our hearts, he prepares a place for us that we may be with him after our lives here are over and done, and he guides, guards and protects us from on high. What confidence and assurance this gives to all those who spend time pondering its truth.

And, fifth, our author says that the ministry of Jesus is superior to earthly ministries because he serves in the true tabernacle—the heavenly tabernacle—made not by man, but by God himself. The earthly tabernacle and temple are mere models or pictures or shadows of this eternal tabernacle. To put it simply, with Jesus you get the real thing.

Well, in our lesson today our author turns from the superior ministry of Jesus to the superior covenant of Jesus. When we talk about covenants

we have to go back, all the way back, to before the creation of the world. In eternity past, when there was only God, for he had not yet called the creation into being, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the eternal Trinity—agreed to create a people who would be in intimate communion with them, loving and serving them throughout eternity. This agreement between the three persons of the Godhead is called the “eternal decree of God.” Sometimes it is also called the “Counsel of Peace.” This “decree” or “counsel” included the plan not only create the world and all of its people, but to redeem them when they fell into sin as well. When Adam fell into sin it did not surprise God; he did not have to hastily think up some “Plan B.” It had all been ordained. That is why, for example, the Bible talks about Jesus as the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. The plan for Jesus to offer up his life as a sacrifice for sin was in place before an atom of created matter was called into being. The whole scope of human history, from the beginning to the end, was laid out in God’s eternal decree.

Following the creation, as the decrees of God were put into effect in history, God graciously entered into a covenant with Adam, who served as a representative of the whole human race. God promised Adam blessed communion and eternal life on the condition of obedience. Adam was given freedom to eat of all of the fruit in the Garden of Eden but one. If he were to

disobey this injunction, he and his posterity would be subject to the curse and wrath of God; they would die. As you know Adam rebelled against God and broke the commandment, subjecting himself and all his descendants to death. Yet immediately after the fall into sin God displayed his grace by promising our first parents that one from woman born would come and crush the serpent's deceiving head. The serpent—Satan—and his people would be in constant warfare against the people of God, but the people of God would triumph in the end through the work of the promised conqueror.

Soon after the fall into sin man's rebellion grew to the point where the thoughts and deeds of the people were only wicked all the time. In judgement God sent a devastating flood upon the earth, saving only one family. After the deluge the Lord made a promise not to destroy the world again through a flood so a stage would be preserved for the working out of the history of salvation. Soon after God called a man named Abram out from all the peoples of the world as the chosen vessel through whom he would redeem a people to serve him. He promised Abraham a land and many descendants through whom the people of the world would be blessed. This line of descendants followed from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob whose name was changed to Israel.

When members of Israel's family were enslaved in Egypt, God remembered them and sent a man named Moses to lead them out of Egypt. The Lord renewed his promises to them and provided them a greater revelation of himself by giving them the Law and the Tabernacle.

Next, the promises of the Lord given to Abraham and expanded through Moses were amplified once more. God set a shepherd-poet-warrior named David upon the throne of Israel. He promised David all that faithless Israel desired but could not achieve: peace, stability and an eternal kingdom in which the Lord would be their Lord and they would be his people. But David died, as did his son Solomon. The kingdom was torn in two. The northern half was taken away into exile. The southern half was taken into exile too. But in their exile the Lord continued to remember them and to remember his promises of salvation given through Abraham, Moses and David. He sent prophets to bless and chastise and encourage the people—and to tell them of a “new” way in which the Spirit of the Lord would be poured out and the people of God would be empowered to live faithfully according to the Lord's commands. A Messiah would come and redeem his people from their sin by taking their bitter curse upon himself.

Years passed and, in the fullness of time God confirmed his promises in the incarnation of Christ who

1. filled the eternal throne, as promised to David
2. showed himself to be the unblemished Lamb of God as pictured in the tabernacle of Moses
3. secured a people and blessed the nations of the world as promised to Abraham
4. overcame in a world preserved from destruction as promised to Noah
5. and was without sin, doing as the Second Adam what the first Adam had failed to do.

Now in our lesson today our author looks at the history of his people and God's dealing with them and says, in effect, while there were rich blessings under Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, all of these blessings fade in comparison to the blessing of Jesus Christ. Yes, God entered into a covenant with Israel—a covenant of grace and redemption—but the advances that have taken place with the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus are so glorious that it is fair to speak of a new covenant in Christ. The promises given through Christ are superior in every way to anything that has gone on before. Let's look at our lesson.

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of

Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them,” declares the Lord.

Our lesson talks about the first covenant—one that was flawed—and a new covenant which makes the old obsolete. What is our author getting at? He is pointing out the fact that while the Old Covenant gave the people God’s law it did not give them the ability to receive it, love it or keep it. Now in saying that he is not saying that there was something wrong with the Old Covenant; with Paul he would happily declare that “the law is holy... righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). The problem was not with the law but with the sinful nature of the people. They did not remain faithful and so, as Paul said, the Law was “weakened by the sinful nature of the people” (Romans 8:3). The Old Covenant, written on tablets of stone, had no power to regenerate and make the heart new. It could not make a person love the Law or even love the Lord. Although it was in a different context, Dale Davis gave this illustration that is pertinent:

When our oldest son was a mere one year old we had a problem with his splashing and playing in the toilet bowl. Granted, it’s not a moral issue, and (usually) it was only water. But then parents have the mess as well as certain hygienic standards. So we forbade him to play in the potty. And he knew he should not—he received some muffled whumps through his diaper to move him toward compliance. One day I caught him exiting the bathroom, hands deliciously wet, shaking his head from side to side, saying to himself, “No, no, no!” He knew what was verboten but that did not change his action. There is a difference between having the truth and loving the truth (II Thessalonians 2:10); only the latter leads to obeying the truth.

They had the truth, but they could not obey the truth because they did not love the truth. But when Jesus came, things changed. Here is the first great promise of the New Covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah and given through the work of Christ:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.

At this new stage of the covenant God makes provision for human weakness and sin. He places the law in us. How? There is only one way. He does it by sending the Spirit of Christ to live in us. It is only such supernatural intervention that can turn us from hating the law of God to loving it. Look how it works. It begins with the mind. By the Spirit God gives us an understanding of his word. He gives us ears to hear and eyes to see. But this is not enough. There is a difference between understanding God's word and loving it, and so God gives us a love for his word by writing it on our hearts. God changes us from the inside so now we find his word attractive, compelling and altogether lovely.

If you are a believer you have experienced this. When you first came to Christ, you started to do things you never wanted to do before. You began to find that going to church was something you desired and that you missed

it when you couldn't attend. You began to read the Bible, attend Sunday School or Bible study, pray and serve others. You did things you never thought to do previously. And, on the other hand, things you used to enjoy seemed not so much fun anymore. You began to wonder what it was about them that had attracted you in the first place. Your wants and desires changed because you were changed.

You can think of it this way: The Old covenant was an outward work, written on tablets of stone. The new covenant is an inward work giving us what the Old couldn't—a heart to obey and glorify God. If you have a love for Christ and his ways, it is because God himself is at work in you. Think about that. Your desire to love and obey God gives evidence that he himself is at work in you. That should be a wonderful source of encouragement and blessing to you. It means that you can come before God with this prayer:

Lord, I believe in Jesus, but as I look at my life I find that I am lacking in faith. I am not trustworthy. But you have promised that if I trust in him, if I walk by the blood of Christ, you will make me faithful. You will work faithfulness in me and engrave it on my heart. Lord, I love things that are wicked; I am too little attracted to the holy and the good. But I have a great promise here. Christ will reveal the law to my mind. He will give me understanding and write those laws on my heart. He will change me so I will become more and more like him, hating what is evil and loving the good. Let me receive this promise more and more, to the glory and praise of your holy name.

Such a prayer God will answer.

Let's turn to our lesson again and pick things up at verse 12. Here we find the second promise. (It comes third in the passage, but is second logically.) "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." This promise has two parts. The first part is the forgiveness of our sins. Now the word for "forgive" here is interesting. In the Greek it is *hileos* and means "merciful." It is the root work used to describe the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant—*hilasterion*. The mercy seat was where the priest sprinkled the blood of the lamb on the Day of Atonement. We could translate our verse, "I will be merciful towards your wickedness," or "I will be mercy-seated towards your wickedness." Here is the point: When God forgives our sin he doesn't wave a magic wand and pretend the offence never happened; he pays for the sins by inflicting the full penalty of his Son. In Psalm 51 when David cried out, "Wash me with hyssop and I will be clean," he was saying to God, "Sprinkle me with the blood of the sacrifice that can truly atone for my sins; let the Messiah pay for me." When the publican went up to the temple to pray and could only stand a way off, head bowed, crying from his heart, "Lord be merciful to me a sinner," he was saying, "Lord, mercy-seat me. Let Jesus pay the penalty for the sins I have done. Let his blood be shed in my place, or I will be forever lost." Nothing less than that blood can bring forgiveness.

The second part of this promise is this: “I will remember their sins no more.” How can God know all things and yet forget our sins? It is not that God absentmindedly forgets something that has happened; it is that God does not remember our sins against us. You can think of it this way. You owe a debt to someone and you haven’t paid it. You can count on him not to forget it; he will remind you of it every time he sees you. But someone comes and pays the bill for you. When that happens, the man you owed the money to no longer bothers you. When he sees you he simply says, “Hello.” There is no reason for him to remember your debt because it has been cancelled. That is what God has done in Jesus Christ. He has paid our debt. It has been marked cancelled. There is no reason for God to bring the matter up again. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). This is the promise our lesson delights in.

Let me make an application here. If you want to poison a marriage relationship or a friendship, be sure always to remember every slight and offense that has come your way. And when you get into a disagreement with your spouse, be sure to bring up the old hurts. Let your friend know that you will never forget the times he has let you down, that you will never get past

it, that you will always take the opportunity to drag it up again. That will cut the heart out of a marriage or out of a friendship. We need to guard our hearts and tongues from such thoughts and words. We need to put those words aside by remembering how fully Christ has forgiven us. As he never dredges up past offenses to throw in the face of penitent sinners, so are we never to bring up again those offenses we have forgiven.

Let's look to the third promise of the New Covenant, picking things up part way through verse 10:

I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

This promise also has two parts. This is the first: "I will be their God." As Andrew Murray put it, "Personal, direct fellowship with God: This is the crowning blessing of the New Covenant." Now think of what we have seen so far. The condition of personal fellowship with God is holiness, and God has promised to put his laws in our minds and write them on our hearts so that we will love and obey his word. The threat to personal fellowship with God is sin, and God has promised to forgive our sins and remember them no more. And so this blessing of personal fellowship with God can be received

by those who trust in the Lord. “I will be their God; they will be my people.” Glory to his name!

The second part of this promise has to do with our response to God’s vow. “They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Knowledge, fidelity, commitment, intimacy, love: all these things will fill the hearts of God’s people and one day they will come to know him even as he knows them now. We’re not there yet, but we will get there one day; our God has promised it and our faith rests upon his promise.

We have in Christ a superior priest. He brings with him a superior covenant. It changes us from the inside out and establishes an unshakable relationship in which God will be our God and he will be our people, not and throughout all eternity. Rejoice in so great a salvation and give glory to his name. In Christ’s name. AMEN.