

## New Testament Realities

Now *this is* the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore *it is* necessary that this One also have something to offer. 4 For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; 5 who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." (Heb. 8:1-6)

I remember a fellow who used to say goodbye to me by saying, "Keep it real, man". I know I'm not supposed to think too deeply about that, but what exactly does that mean? Does it mean I'm often in danger of being unreal? Are things in my life lapsing into non-reality? Does he mean that left to myself, I keep drowning in phoniness and insincerity? Who knows, but that such a saying could be part of our street slang reveals a lot about us. It reveals people are aware of how much of our lives is built around fiction, and entertainment. So much of our amusement culture is an escape from reality into a world of wishful thinking. In a culture dominated by consumerism, everyone is trying to sell you something, which means most of the messages you hear are not completely honest. Advertisers exaggerate or manipulate to create interest or create desire. Eventually people become jaded, cynical about if anyone is being, in their words, authentic or sincere. They desperately want things to be real, but they just don't know how. They smell phoniness everywhere.

You'll even find a species of this in church. People who either come from very formalist religious backgrounds where there were plenty of smells and bells and robes and cloaks with little reality tend to think religion is phoney.

Too often, such people think anything formal is unreal. Singing hymns with high poetry and stately music, preachers dressed in a tie, from behind an elevated pulpit, architecture that represents classical Christian ideas, following a set order of service, a more formal prayer to God – this can't be real, because it's rehearsed. This is not real, he says, it's not being yourself. That the only way to be real in church is if we sing indie rock songs to Jesus while wearing distressed jeans, and have plenty of spontaneous sharing of our spiritual journeys. He thinks if we did this, and were able to feel our feelings, then worship would be real.

But all you need to do is interview some people from the opposite setup to find that this isn't true. People who have attended churches where everything is supposedly direct and immediate messages from God, and dreams and visions and miracles, also soon experience a lot of phoniness and hypocrisy and conclude that the whole thing is unreal. People are desperate for spiritual reality.

Is that where spiritual reality lies? Stripping away of all form, ceremony, manners, beauty? Does reality lie in pure spontaneity, in being unrehearsed, in being informal, unplanned? There's a lot of people walking around thinking that spiritual unreality or phoniness is connected to whether or not you have organised, formalised religion. They talk about the curse of religiosity or the evil of tradition. They say, I'm all in favour of being spiritual but I hate organised religion. But that approach never brings what people are looking for.

Spiritual reality is not found through abandoning planned worship. Spiritual reality is found through when you encounter the real God. So I actually agree: keep it real. But how do we do that? Hebrews 8 is about Jesus and New Testament realities.

Whatever is real is obviously superior to what is less than real or only an imitation of what is real. Brick by brick, he is building his argument for the superiority of Jesus over the older forms. Jesus the superior king, Jesus the superior prophet, and Jesus the superior priest. He has spent a long section proving that Jesus, even though He was not a Levite, is a priest of legitimate biblical order, Melchizedek. He has shown how this order is the superior and everlasting priesthood. But now having proved that Christ's identity and rank as Melchizedekian priest is superior, he must now turn

to Christ's priestly work. Priests operate *somewhere*, and they offer *something*. Priests operate in a Tabernacle or a Temple, and they offered various sacrifices and offerings. So the natural question that any Hebrew would have would be, if Jesus is the greatest and final priest, where does He operate? What does He offer? It seems almost unreal to say that Jesus is a priest in a Tabernacle offering something when you can't see it.

That's really going to be his focus for all of chapter 9 and half of chapter 10: where Jesus does His priestly work, what He offers, and under what covenant.

Chapter 8 is the bridge to that, to show us where Jesus is, what He offers, and under what covenant He works. The way he does that is by another contrast. The contrast is between what was a shadow and what is the reality.

Let me clear up some confusion over what he is comparing and contrasting.

He is not contrasting physical with spiritual. There is nothing wrong or evil about physical, material creation, and Heaven will include a lot of that.

He is not contrasting visible and invisible. There are plenty of real and important things that are invisible to the retina and brain of a human right now, but that doesn't mean they aren't there: ultra-violet light, infra-red light, germs and bacteria, the air we breathe. So what might be invisible to me now doesn't mean it is not there or less real than what I can see.

No, his contrast is between those things that pointed towards ultimate reality, and the reality itself. He wants us to know that when we embrace Jesus Christ, we are embracing real reality, true truth, ultimate being. If we turn back to the Law, to the Levites, to Moses, to the Temple, to Judaism, we are turning from reality back to symbol, from substance back to shadow.

He's going to develop this argument in three stages. First, he'll show us that our high priest is a reality, then he'll show us that our high priest deals in realities, then he'll show us how the priest's new covenant brings about those realities.

## **I. Our High Priest Is a Reality**

Now *this is* the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,

Hebrews is more a sermon than a letter, and here the preacher tells you what he has been getting at in chapter 7. All that he said about Melchizedek being greater than Levi, about Melchizedek being a priest of a higher law, about Melchizedek being eternal and immortal, and praying forever for those who come to God through Him comes to this point: we have such a High Priest! It is not a painted portrait of the perfect woman who has never existed! No, this is a real-life snapshot of a truly existent priest. We have this priest in Jesus Christ.

This priest is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the Heavens. The reality of our High Priest is not simply that He is this High Priest, but that He is successful. In the days of the earthly High Priest, no High Priest would dare sit down. His work was to offer incense and blood and animals on different altars at different places and keep moving. It would have been blasphemy to sit down.

But our High priest's position and work is so complete and final and so successful that He is seated. He is seated in the place of honour – the right hand of Majesty, meaning He is the King-Priest. Our High Priest is a reality.

But now he needs to move on to his second idea. Priests work in a place, usually a Temple, and they offer something. Where does Jesus do his High Priestly work? What does Jesus offer?

When this was written, it was before A.D. 70 and the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing. You

can imagine a Jew who held to Judaism saying to a Jewish Christian: “Your religion is not real! It is all invisible! Where's your Temple? Where's your altar? Look at the incredible Temple standing in Jerusalem! Now that's real religion!”

So the next thing he shows is this:

## II. Our High Priest Deals With Realities

2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the **true** tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore *it is* necessary that this One also have something to offer. 4 For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; 5 who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."

Jesus is a minister, the word is where we get our word liturgy from, a worship-servant. Where does He serve? He serves in the sanctuary, or the Holy Place, and the true tabernacle, which the Lord built and not man.

Here we encounter one of the most fascinating truths in the book of Hebrews. We learn here that there is a True Tabernacle built directly by God in Heaven.

Verse 3 tells us that High Priests offer sacrifices, therefore Jesus also needs to offer something, and He needs to offer it somewhere. And in the year the book of Hebrews was written, Jesus could not offer sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, because only Levitical priests were allowed in there. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, He attended the Temple several times, He even cleansed the Temple, but He always remained in those areas where non-Levites were allowed to go. Verse 4 tells us that if Jesus were restricted to the world here and now, He couldn't offer anything, and He couldn't be priest. Not because the law wasn't over – we remember when the veil was torn, the Law was done, and the new had begun. But from a human point of view, the Jews of the day were following the Law of Moses, and at least according to the rules of the Judaism of the day, Jesus could not be a priest.

But in fact, Jesus does serve in a Temple, a Holy Place. The writer of Hebrews calls it the true Tabernacle. What does he mean by *true* tabernacle? Does he mean the Tabernacle in Moses' day was false? No, the first tabernacle was not a false tabernacle. The word true here is the idea of not truth vs error, but of real vs less real. We learn here that Moses' tabernacle was actually a replica, a copy of the True Tabernacle.

who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." (Heb. 8:5)

The Temple was based upon the Tabernacle, so the priests serving in the Temple of the time were, according to this verse, serving in a copy and a shadow of the Heavenly things. This word for copy means an imitation, a version of an original, a pattern. Israel's Tabernacle and its Temple were not the original. They were earthly miniatures, earthly versions of something more ultimate, more real, more permanent.

He says the Tabernacle or Temple was a shadow of the Heavenly things. A shadow has no existence of its own. It must have the thing it is a shadow of to even exist. Shadows contain the outline of the thing, but what do they lack? They lack the full three-dimensional, colour embodiment of the substance. He says, the earthly tabernacle, the earthly Temple is like a shadow to substance, like a copy to an original.

How do we know this? He quotes Exodus 25:40 : "And see to it that you make *them* according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.

This is amazing. Before Moses set about making the Tabernacle, God did more than simply give him the dimensions and the materials and the colours. He actually showed Moses a pattern of the true Tabernacle. Whether he saw a kind of blueprint or architectural schema, or whether he saw a vision of something in Heaven, God said to Moses, when you build yours, you need to copy what I showed you on the mountain.

Now whatever stands in Heaven we don't know, but the writer's point is that the tabernacle in heaven is the true One – the Real One. What is in Heaven is real reality, ultimate reality. Jesus is not the a priest of a copy of the Tabernacle, of a shadow of the Tabernacle. He is the priest in the Tabernacle that those are copies and shadows of!

The priests of the Law were dealing with signposts that pointed, but our High Priest is the destination. The priests of the Law were mimicking and copying something, but Jesus is the original. The priests of the Law were working with shadows, but Jesus is the full-colour substance and body.

He deals with realities.

Now as you can see the problem was not that the priests were busy with religion. The problem was not that what they did was planned or formal. The problem was not that what they did was physical and material. In fact, all they did was good and necessary in itself. The problem was simply that they only symbolised the ultimate reality, they could never embody it. They could only picture the real, they couldn't be it themselves. They could only point to and prepare for and mimic the Real, but they couldn't actually be it. They couldn't bring those worshippers into the actual Holy Place of God's presence.

Our High Priest deals with realities. He is the fullness. He is the embodiment. This is why Paul warned people about going back in Colossians 2:16-17 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. It is irrational to return to shadows when you have the body. It is needless to go back to maps when you have the destination. It is crazy to turn to signs and symbols when you have the reality.

Now why couldn't there have been those realities under Moses? That leads us to his third point.

### **III. Our High Priest's Covenant Brings About These Realities**

As we've been seeing, the Law, the Mosaic Covenant was never meant to be final. The covenant that would bring about spiritual realities was always going to be the new covenant. 7 For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.

You don't talk about a new covenant if what you presently have is sufficient. But it wasn't faultless because it wasn't the Reality and couldn't produce the reality.

He repeats this idea in verse 13:

13 In that He says, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant,

which was established on better promises.

Our High Priest has obtained a far more excellent ministry than those who serve copies and shadows. He is the Mediator of a better covenant established on better promises.

The reason He deals with the realities and not shadows is that He is a Mediator of an agreement that does not simply announce blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. He is the mediator of a covenant that creates and enables from within all the things it demands. The Law described holiness, but it could never make it a reality. But this new covenant has totally different promises:

In fact, the promises are given in the extended quote that he gives from verse 8 to 12, which is an exact quote of Jeremiah 31

8 Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah-- 9 "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. 10 "For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 11 "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. 12 "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." 13 In that He says, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. (Heb. 8:7-13)

Notice, God found fault not with the old covenant, but with Israel. They did not have the capacity to fulfil the righteousness of the Law. So what does God promise the new covenant will do? Three promises here show us why the new covenant brings about the realities it describes.

First, it changes the heart.

10 "For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

The Law of Moses commanded men from the outside. It could show you God's holiness, but it could never give you a love for it. It could describe righteousness, but never impart it to you. But the new covenant brings about regeneration: a new life making all things new. God now works in you to will and to do of His good pleasure. You desire to love God, you want to know Him, you desire to see Him, you believe He is your highest joy and deepest satisfaction. This is reality. You are not just following outward rules for conscience sake, but you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

Second, it has a universal effect.

and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 11 "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

Some of those under the law were saved. They placed their faith in God's promises, trusted in Him, and were made new. But many others under the Law of Moses were unbelievers. Just read the book of Judges and you will see the terrible wickedness taking place in Israel, Israel already under the covenant of Moses. Read of the terrible kings of Israel and Judah, of the awful idolatry and child sacrifice taking place.

But what the new covenant promises is that everyone who comes under it will be truly saved and know God.

Here is the third promise of this new covenant.

Third, complete atonement.

12 "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.

Under the old covenant, you had the promise that God would not remember your sins for one year. Next year, at the day of Atonement, you were reminded that this whole system was partial, and annual, and ongoing.

But here in the new covenant we have the promise of complete forgiveness. As we saw in Hebrews 7, He saves us to the uttermost. It is complete, whole, 100% forgiveness of past, present, and future sins. Nothing is left undone, no sins are left unatoned for, as Colossians 2:13 puts it, He forgives us of all our trespasses.

The reality of inner regeneration. The reality of everyone in the new covenant knowing God. The reality of complete and full forgiveness.

I wonder what the state is of your experience of spiritual reality. There are a lot of things you can blame for it. Maybe the honeymoon period you had with this church is over, and you are bored, looking for something that will return that sense of spiritual reality. It won't come if we sing pop songs every week. It won't come if we convert from sober hymns to scrunchy-face choruses. It won't come if we preach about self-esteem and parenting your hurt inner child. It won't come if I turn this pulpit into a cage-fight with the false teacher of the week. It won't come if we make it all about prophecy, or all about creationism, or apologetics, or end-times. Stop looking for artificial stimulants for your Christianity. Stop looking for some problem or solution outside yourself that will bring spiritual caffeine to your Christianity. If you truly are in the new covenant, then you need to by faith become what you are. If you are a new covenant, new testament believer, then your sins are forgiven, you have an internal love for God, and you do know Him.

The reality is right in front of you, if you will do what Hebrews keeps telling you to do: draw near with true faith. Draw near in worship with this church. Draw near in private worship on your own. Draw near in family worship. Draw near in perpetual worship while you work or study or rest. That's how you "keep it real". Keep drawing near to ultimate reality in loving faith.