

Hebrews 8 The supremacy of Jesus

Introduction

Years ago when I was the youth leader at Partick Baptist Church we had a highly memorable evening service at the church. Back then the tiny mainly elderly congregation experienced the form of service that had been offered in that building for a substantial number of years. However, it had been agreed on one occasion that we would have a youth-led service and that I could ask a group of young people from Kirkintilloch Baptist Church to come and take our Sunday evening service. It was a most encouraging event. Not only did the fact of more than twenty teenagers reduce the average age of the congregation, but the gifting they displayed as they took the different parts of the service was inspirational to our own half a dozen young people. In particular, some of us will not forget the young leader aged 21 who played our 'out of tune' piano in accompaniment of the songs that evening. That instrument should have been either retuned or replaced as it was certainly not fit for purpose, but in the hands of one so gifted at playing that instrument he could adapt the tune to make it sound okay for our service. In Hebrews 8 on a much more significant matter our author develops further his discussion of the ministry and calling of Jesus and His supremacy as our high priest. He will speak about the better sanctuary in which Jesus ministers – compared to the Jerusalem Temple, the focus point of Jewish religious worship. He will also by quoting a foundational passage from Jeremiah 31:31-34 draw attention to the better covenant on which our relationship with God is based in Christ. His intention is to convince his Jewish readers, who are followers of Jesus, concerning the rightness of the choice they made to follow Him, despite the serious cost through persecution that they have experienced in recent years. He wants them all to be in no doubt about the supremacy of Jesus. Unlike our guest pianist from Kirkintilloch Jesus was not making the best of the situation He faced here on earth, instead He was the best mediator between God and man; He now ministers in the best place of worship in the universe – in heaven, and on the personal basis of the New Covenant between God and His people. In Hebrews 8 our author wants us to see very clearly the supremacy of Jesus.

1. The Better Sanctuary (Hebrews 8:1-6)

(a) The perfect high priest (Hebrews 8:1-8:2) (i) His moral perfection Our author refers back to Hebrews 7:26: *Such a high priest truly meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* The exciting fact of the matter is declared in Hebrews 8:1a: *Now the main point of what we are saying is this: we do have such a high priest...* The best priests of the tribe of Levi, even at their best were sinners who needed to offer sacrifices for their own sins, prior to offering those on behalf of the people of Israel. We may say with Paul possibly: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ* (I Corinthians 11:1). However, like me you might utter those words with a degree of discomfort because we are acutely aware of our own shortcomings that we would not want other people to copy! Jesus alone perfectly represents the Father's way of living. He alone could fully represent the perfect model of a God-centred holy life. Yet He calls us as His disciples to follow Him in our journey of faith. Yet one who has never sinned is still sympathetic to our struggles and fears as this author has made plain earlier in the book. Therefore, he argues, why would anyone want to go back to a form of faith / religion that was based on endless law-keeping and sinful flawed priests offering repeated sacrifices? Surely there is no comparison with Jesus –the perfect sinless Saviour from sin. The supremacy of

Jesus compared to Levitical priests is so clear –no-one should want to go back to Old Testament forms of worship and practice.

(ii) **His finished work** *We do have such a high priest, who sat down...* (Hebrews 8:1b); our Lord in heaven today is pictured seated because His atoning work in our place has been completed. Remember His words on the cross: *It is finished* (John 19:30). In the language Jesus spoke it was only a one-word declaration of triumph. The devil had done his worst to distract and divert Jesus from obeying the Father's will for Him to die in our place, but without any success. Jesus kept His eyes on the goal to which He was focussed throughout His earthly life. The devil with the temptations in the desert could not distract Him (Matthew 4); the disciples of Jesus, in particular Peter, moments after His wonderful declaration of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, sought to persuade Jesus to change direction. In Matthew 16:21-23 it states: *From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.* ²² *Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to You!'* ²³ *Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'* Jesus's supremacy was demonstrated by His constant awareness of the things of God. He was not diverted from the calling entrusted to Him. Our author in Hebrews in the light of who Jesus is and what He did urges us to be faithful in our calling; In Hebrews 12:2-3, it states: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* ³ *Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Are you keeping on faithful, to the calling entrusted to you? I have always been deeply moved by Paul's powerful testimony at the end of His life, recorded in II Timothy 4:6-8: For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing. Will you / Will I be able to say the same at the end of our lives on earth? I hope so.*

(iii) **His enthronement** Where is Jesus seated? Hebrews 8:1 states: *...who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty...* There was no greater honour than this. The honours system in our country no longer carries quite the same prestige as it once did because too many honours are given out to politicians for loyalty to their political parties or awarded to their friends and of course to donors of significant amounts of money to political parties. The book of Hebrews emphasises this honour to Jesus for His service in obedience to the Father on earth, by mentioning it several times. Hebrews 1:3-5 states: *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.* ⁴ *So He became as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is superior to theirs.* Here His enthronement is directly linked to His perfect sufficient sacrifice for sin on the cross. Hebrews 10:12-14 states: *But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God,* ¹³ *and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool.* ¹⁴ *For by one sacrifice He has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.* The same point is emphasised ever more strongly in this second citation. The third citation already quoted in this message is Hebrews 12:3, where again it is explicitly linked to what Jesus endured in our place on the cross. However, it is the fulfilment of the prophetic message of Psalm 110:1: *The Lord [God the Father] says to My lord [Jesus the Messiah]: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'* A High Priest in Israel continued to stand as his work was never finished! There was certainly no offer of enthronement for any of the Levitical High Priests.

However, the supremacy of Jesus is revealed in that He, following in the footsteps of Melchizedek was both a king and a priest (Hebrews 7:1). Why follow a lesser leader when The Leader, the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament has completed the work entrusted to Him and this is demonstrated by the awarding of this privileged position of honour.

(iv) **His exaltation** Where is Jesus seated? Hebrews 8:1 states: ...*who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven*. Again this is not a statement of something new. In Hebrews 4:14 the author declared: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess*. The ascension into heaven from the Mount of Olives, outside Jerusalem is recorded in Acts 1:9-11. After a challenge to prayer and the fulfilling of the Great Commission Jesus was taken from them. *After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.* ¹⁰ *They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.* ¹¹ *'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.'* Paul in two of his letters declares the significance of the exaltation of Jesus. The most familiar passage is the early Christian song quoted in Philippians 2:9-11, immediately after the reference to Jesus' death for us on the cross: ***Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name,*** ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. Was any Levitical High Priest honoured in such a way? Absolutely not! This passage doesn't give the location where Jesus is exalted, unlike Hebrews 8:1, but the fact of it taking place is abundantly clear. In Ephesians 1:20-23 Paul spells it out more clearly in his own divinely inspired words: *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people,* ¹⁹ *and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength* ²⁰ ***He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms,*** ²¹ *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.* ²² *And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church,* ²³ *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way*. In this passage Paul was highlighting the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through God's people who have been baptised with the same Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13). Do you grasp what Paul is saying here? We marvel at the miracle of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We are amazed at His glorious ascension into heaven and exaltation to the right-hand of the Father. The very same power, through the Holy Spirit is available today for Christ's church, wherever it is located on earth. Would you swap such a blessing for a return to endless animal sacrifices in partnership with Levitical priests? There is no contest! The supremacy of Jesus is abundantly clear for all to see – if they want to see it.

(b) **The perfect location** (Hebrews 8:3-6) *Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer.* ⁴ ***If He were on earth, He would not be a priest,*** *for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.* ⁵ *They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'* ⁶ ***But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which He is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.*** Jesus' ministry is quite different to that of the Levitical priesthood. There is no comparison between the two. Jesus was not eligible to serve as a Levitical priest as He was born into a different tribe. The appointed place for Levitical sacrifices was Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 12:13-14 states: *Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please.* ¹⁴ *Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your*

tribes, and **there observe everything I command you.** Jesus too engages in His ministry in heaven, the superior sanctuary, on behalf of the Church for whom He died, that innumerable number who will one day join Him in heaven (Revelation 7:9). In heaven Jesus has no need to offer animal sacrifices because they have been rendered unnecessary by His perfect once-for-all time sacrifice on the cross. ...and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer Hebrews 8:3). Or it might be better to translate it as the New English Bible marginal reading: *this one too must have had something to offer* (R. Brown, *Christ Above All*, p. 145). This is because the author of Hebrews uses the Greek aorist tense of the verb *to offer* indicating that Christ's offering was once for all and not something He repeated. It was an act completed in the past. In the next chapter Hebrews 9:24-28 he will spell out the implications of this once-for-all-time sacrifice for sin. Therefore, Jesus' work in heaven now is one of intercessory prayer for us. I John 2:1 reminds us of this fact: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* However, the hearer or reader of this letter could not fail to be aware of this because as recently as Hebrews 7:23-26a we have been reminded of this heavenly calling of Jesus. It states: *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives for ever, He has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. ²⁶ Such a high priest truly meets our need...* In summary Jesus is a superior priest ministering in a superior or better sanctuary. But if there were any doubters as to the case presented, our author adds another piece of evidence to support His claim regarding the supremacy of Jesus. Our Christian faith is also based on a better covenant. The remaining verses of Hebrews 8 address this point.

2. The Better Covenant (Hebrews 8:7-13)

The Bible contains God's revelation of Himself accommodated to our limited human capacity to understand our amazing creator and redeemer. It is a progressive revelation because the God revealed in the Bible meets with us where we are. In the Old Testament God revealed Himself to Abraham to call this man and his family to found a nation that would follow Him. A big further step was the constituting of the nation of Israel under Moses' leadership when they came out of Egypt and entered the Promised Land. At Sinai the revelation of God's identity and His guidance for His people as to how they should worship Him and live for Him was set out in Exodus and Leviticus, in particular. It was solemn collective revelation from God, but very consciously with Moses acting as a mediator between the people and God. Exodus 20:18-21 records how the people felt at that time. *When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.'* ²⁰ *Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.'* ²¹ *The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.* In the Old Testament era Israelites offered sacrifices through Levitical priests. It was not done directly with God. However, God wanted His people to see that this good practice was not His long-term plan for His relationship with His people. He had a better covenant that would be brought into being through the ultimate mediator between God and His people. In I Timothy 2:5 it states: *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus...* We can come to God in no other name and through no other mediator than Jesus. The new covenant was spelled out in an amazing passage of God's Word in Jeremiah 31:31-34, a passage quoted in its entirety in Hebrews 8. This new covenant offers four promised blessings to God's people. What are they?

(a) **The promise of God's grace** (Hebrews 8:7-9) ⁷*For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.* ⁸*But God found fault with the people and said: 'The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.* ⁹*It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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* (Hebrews 8:7-9). The Old Testament records many instances when the Israelites were unfaithful to God worshipping false gods and breaking His commandments. However, praise God that was not the end of the matter. He determined that our salvation would not be based on the perfect keeping of the law, but on the amazing gift of His grace. This was a message given first to the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. Jesus at the Last Supper brought in this new covenant and explained that entry to it is through His sacrifice for us on the cross, the benefits of which we receive by faith. Remember His words of institution recorded in Luke 22:20: *In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.* What was amazing to the first Jewish followers of Jesus was that this grace was equally available for Gentiles as well as Jews. In Romans 4:16 Paul explained this point. *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* Have you received this gift of grace through Jesus, offered by God the Father through the new covenant? What is the different with the Old Covenant?

(b) **The promise of internal change** (Hebrews 8:10) *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people.* It is individual salvation and requires spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit in the inner person. A person cannot inherit their faith from their parents or a friend, but must own it for themselves. In Ezekiel 36:26-27 the prophet declared these words from God: *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* ²⁷***And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws.*** The prophet Joel in the memorable prophecy quoted by Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian Church, stated that God: *will pour out His Spirit on all people... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved;* (Joel 2:28,32a; see also Acts 2:16-21). Have you responded to God's call on your life to acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? God wants to do a new work in your life and mine, but we have a duty to respond to His call to follow Him. The Old Covenant approach was a constant repetition of the same sacrifices that were a temporary solution for sin, but the supremacy of Jesus is revealed in the sufficiency of His sacrifice once for all time. As Christians the wonderful message about God's work in us was stated by Paul in Philippians 1:6: *being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* Only through Jesus can this be accomplished for our good and for God's glory.

(c) **The promise of forgiveness for all** (Hebrews 8:11-12) *No longer will they teach their neighbours, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest.* ¹²*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'* The gift of forgiveness is one of the most precious gifts we have received from God and can offer in the light of His giving of this gift first of all to us through Jesus. First of all when we become Christians our record of past sins and failures before God is wiped clean. Psalm 103:12 contains these amazing words: *as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.* This is what God has done for you and me and does repeatedly when we sincerely ask for His forgiveness. The challenge as Christians is this: am I willing to wipe the slate clean and begin again in my relationship with other people when they have apologised for past failings. Do we say 'I will forgive but not forget'? if we mean by that we

are always on the lookout for the next time and act accordingly then we are falling short of how God treats us and desires us to treat other people. Sometimes we need an extraordinary enabling from the Holy Spirit to help us forgive past wrongs. Although we cannot erase past events from our minds –even when we want to- what God desires is that as far as we can we treat people as if the past failings had not happened. That is, that relationships can be restored; this may take time, but the radical nature of forgiveness means that we can spare ourselves and other people a lot of heartache and grief by keeping short accounts with one another and with the Lord. The supremacy of the gospel of Jesus includes the freedom that comes in Christ from being controlled or our lives overshadowed by the past failings of others towards us or our own short-comings. Have you received this forgiveness from Jesus? Are you exercising this ministry in relation to other believers who have wronged you and me in the past? We need to gain the victory in this area of our lives.

(d) **The promise of eternal blessing** (Hebrews 8:13) *By calling this covenant 'new', He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.* The new covenant is eternal. At the time of writing the Jerusalem Temple was still in operation and the Old Covenant forms of worship and witness were being carried on as before. Yet within a few years the temple was gone and the forms of Judaism known for centuries had been changed irrevocably. By contrast the new covenant through Jesus brings what the author of Hebrews describes as *eternal salvation* (Hebrews 5:9) and *eternal redemption* (Hebrews 9:12); surely there can be no doubt that the era of the old covenant was coming to a close and the supremacy of Jesus revealed through the launching of the new covenant. May each one of us have received it for ourselves and then enjoy its blessings both now and into eternity, for Jesus' sake, Amen.