

the true north sermon series

November/December 2002



**THREE SERMONS
ON
CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW COVENANT**

by

Pastor John Piper

a resource of the Compass ministry of Camelback Bible Church

True North Sermon #2

Dear brothers and sisters,

Do you remember some of the things you asked for at Christmas when you were little? I'm sure most of us remember asking for a bike for Christmas. What kid didn't, at some point, ask for a bike? But what if when you made this request your parents gave you, not a new bike, or even a working bike, but an old broken down bicycle that was about to lose a wheel and appeared to be the color of rotting rust? What would that say about your parents' love for you?

Every Christmas we, as disciples of Jesus, are called to let those gift-wrapped presents from loved ones remind us of the greatest gift of all time, the gift that was "wrapped in...cloths, and laid...in a manger" (Luke 2:7). As we meditate on the gift of God's Son during this Advent season, may we also remember that God, in His Son, has not given us something "old," but something "new." Jesus' work at the cross brought about a new covenant, replacing the old covenant that God had made with His people at Mount Sinai. Even though it was our failings that made it ineffective, the old covenant might be compared to a broken-down bicycle in the sense that trying to use it would only lead to our eventual ruin. But as a loving Father, God has given us a gift that will help us, and not hurt us. He has given us a new covenant that leads to new life. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God" (I John 3:1), children of a new covenant.

I've chosen a True North sermon for this Christmas season that will hopefully remind us of this precious gift. The following three sermons were preached six years ago, by John Piper, a beloved author and the senior pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Through these sermons, Piper prays "that we would grasp the preciousness of the new covenant as never before," a covenant that "does not leave us in our vaunted self-determination and death," but "sovereignly overcomes our rebellion and resistance and frees us to delight in God and in the will of God written on our hearts."

May this new Christmas fill us with joy because we are "new creatures," in a "new covenant." And may this joy "be for all the people" as our lives are used by God to help others, for the first time, truly celebrate the birth of the Savior.

Seeking with you to walk in His "newness of life,"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bryce", written in a cursive style.

Pastor Bryce

Three Sermons On Christmas and The New Covenant

by

Pastor John Piper*

* used with permission.

Our High Priest is The Son of God Perfect Forever (Hebrews 7:26-8:5)

December 8, 1996
Bethlehem Baptist Church
John Piper, Pastor

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever. 8:1 Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. 4 Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; 5 who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, "SEE," He says, "THAT YOU MAKE all things ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN WHICH WAS SHOWN YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN."

Those last words in Hebrews 8:5 ("See that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain") are a quote from Exodus 25:40. God is speaking to Moses, and the point that this writer draws out is that the furnishings and the actions of the Old Testament tabernacle were copies and shadows (notice those two words in verse 5a: "they serve a *copy* and *shadow* of heavenly things") -- symbols and pointers to a heavenly reality. When God gave Moses a pattern for the priestly, sacrificial system, he didn't just make it up on the

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

spot for the Jewish people, he patterned it after glorious reality in heaven. We get a glimpse into God and his ways when we ponder the priesthood of Israel.

And the point of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has not just come to fit into the earthly system of priestly ministry as the best and final human priest, but he has come **to fulfill and put an end to that system and to orient all our attention on himself ministering for us in heaven.** The Old Testament tabernacle and priests and sacrifices were shadows. Now the reality has come and the shadows pass away.

Kids, suppose you and your mom get separated in the grocery store, and you start to get scared and panic and don't know which way to go, and you run to the end of an aisle, and just before you start to cry, you see a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle that looks just like your mom. It makes you really happy and you feel hope. But which is better? The happiness of seeing the shadow, or having your mom step around the corner and it's really her!?

That's the way it is when Jesus comes to be our High Priest. That's what Christmas is. Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the real thing. Look at Hebrews 8:1-2. This is a kind of summary statement. Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.

The point -- the main point of it all -- is that the one priest who goes between us and God, and makes us right with God, and prays for us to God is *not* an ordinary, weak, sinful, dying, priest like in the Old Testament days. He is the Son of God -- strong, sinless, with an indestructible life. Not only that, he is not ministering in an earthly tabernacle with all its limitations of place and size and wearing out and being moth-eaten and being soaked and burned and torn and stolen. No, verse 2 says that Christ is ministering for us in a "true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man." This is the real thing in heaven. This is what cast on Mount Sinai a shadow that Moses copied.

According to verse 1, another great thing about the reality which is greater than the shadow is that our High Priest is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

No Old Testament priest could ever say that. Jesus deals directly with God the Father. He has a place of honor beside God. He is loved and respected infinitely by God. He is constantly with God. This is not shadow reality like curtains and bowls and tables and candles and robes and tassels and sheep and goats and pigeons. This is final, ultimate reality: God and his Son interacting in love and holiness for our eternal salvation. Ultimate reality is the Persons of the Godhead in relationship, dealing with each other concerning how their majesty and holiness and love and justice and goodness and truth shall be manifest in a redeemed people.

Now add to this the last verses of chapter 7. The writer wants us to marvel at the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over the Old Testament priesthood that he came to replace. Notice five superiorities.

Five Superiorities of the Priesthood of Jesus

First, Jesus is sinless. Verse 26: We have a High Priest who is "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens." No other priest could ever say that. They were all sinful, like you and me. But not Jesus. He was tempted but never yielded to the point of sin.

Second, because he was sinless, he didn't have to offer sacrifices for himself, but instead could offer himself as a sacrifice. Verse 27: "He does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself."

So he was radically different from the previous priests. They had sins of their own that had to be dealt with first, and then never in a million years would it have entered their heads that they could actually *be* the sacrifice for the sins of others. But Jesus changed all that: He needed no sacrifice for himself, but became a sacrifice in himself.

Which leads to the third superiority: his sacrifice of himself was "once for all." You see that at the end of verse 27, "This He did *once for all* when He offered up Himself." This is a great word (*ephapax*) -- "once for all." The effect it has is to make Jesus the center of history. Every work of God's grace in history before the sacrifice of Christ looked forward to the death of Christ for its foundation. And

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

every work of God's grace since the sacrifice of Christ looks back to the death of Christ for its foundation. Christ is the center of the history of grace. There is no grace without him. Grace was planned from all eternity, but not without Jesus Christ at the center and his death as the foundation. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1: 9 that God's "grace . . . was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity."

The fourth superiority of Christ over all other priests is that they were appointed by the Law in their weakness, but he was appointed by a divine oath as a perfect Son. Verse 28: "The Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son." The oath he's referring to is the oath in Psalm 110:4, "The LORD has *sworn* and will not change His mind, Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." The oath comes after the law and, in fact, points already in the Old Testament to the end of the Law as a ritual system.

The oath is spoken to the Messiah. In Psalm 110:1, David says, "The Lord [God] said to my Lord [Messiah], sit at my right hand." So the final High Priest is the Messiah, the Son of God, in the order of Melchizedek, not Levi or Aaron, and is installed by an oath, not by the Law, which is passing away.

The fifth superiority of Christ over all other priests is that his ministry is forever. At the end of verse 28: The oath "*appoints* a Son, made perfect *forever*." Jesus never dies. He never has to be replaced. He has an indestructible life. He will outlive all his foes. He will be there for us long after everyone we depend on is dead. Sometimes children fret that Mommy or Daddy won't live to take care of them. And sometimes we parents fret that we won't be alive to take care of our children (especially when at age 50 we adopt a baby girl). But that is why this truth is so precious. The priesthood of Jesus -- the one who prays for us, as we saw last week, and the one who is sympathetic with us, as we saw in Hebrews 4:15 -- this has been perfected forever. Not for a decade or a century or a millennium. But forever. To that we look when we think about how uncertain our lives are.

The great and overarching point of this text at the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8 is that we have a great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who came into the world as the Son of God, lived a sinless life, offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of his people, rose to everlasting life at the right hand of the

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

majesty of God, and there loves us and prays for us and bids us draw near to God through him. He did not come to fit into the old system of priestly sacrifices. He came to fulfill them and end them.

He is the reality; they were the shadow and the copy of the reality. When the Reality comes, the shadow passes away.

Now let me draw out some implications of this for the life of worship. The High Priesthood of Jesus -- the coming of the reality instead of the shadow -- fulfills and brings to an end the physical center of Old Testament worship, the tabernacle and the temple. It fulfills and brings to an end the official priesthood. It fulfills and brings to an end the sacrificial offerings. It fulfills and brings to an end the dietary laws. It fulfills and brings to an end the priestly vestments. It fulfills and brings to an end the seasonal acts of atonement and reconciliation.

What this means, in essence, is that the entire worship life of the Old Testament has been radically refocused onto Jesus himself and has become a radically *spiritual* thing, as opposed to an *external* thing. The external is still important, but now the spiritual is so radically pervasive that virtually all of external life, not just church life, is the expression of worship. "Present your bodies as living sacrifices which is your reasonable service of worship" (Romans 12:1). That's all the time and everywhere. "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31) -- all the time, everywhere. The money that the Philippians sent to Paul he says in 4:18 was "a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God."

In the New Testament, all the focus is on the reality of the glory of Christ, not the shadow and copy of religious objects and forms. It is stunning how indifferent the New Testament is to such things: there is no authorization in the New Testament for worship buildings, or worship dress, or worship times, or worship music, or worship liturgy or worship size or thirty-five-minute sermons, or Advent poems or choirs or instruments or candles. In fact, the act of getting together as Christians in the New Testament to sing or pray or hear the word of God is never even called worship. I wonder if we do not distort the Biblical meaning of "worship" by using the word almost entirely for an event for which the New Testament *never* uses the word.

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

But all of this makes us very free and, perhaps, very frightened. Free to find place and time and dress and size and music and elements and objects that help us orient radically toward the supremacy of God in Christ. And frightened, perhaps, because almost every worship tradition we have is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded. The command is a radical connection of love and trust and obedience to Jesus Christ in all of life.

There's a reason for this radical spirituality of worship in the New Testament. And the reason is this. The New Testament is a missionary document. The message of this book is meant to be carried to every people on earth and incarnated in every culture in the world. And that is why our High Priest came and ended tabernacle, and sacrifices and feasts and vestments and dietary laws and circumcision and priesthood. The Old Testament was mainly a come-and-see religion. The New Testament is mainly a go-and-tell religion. And to make that possible, the Son of God has not abolished worship, but made it the kind of radically spiritual engagement with God in Christ that can and must happen in every culture on the earth. Worship is not trivialized in the New Testament, but intensified, deepened, and made the radical fuel and goal of all missions.

The frightening freedom of worship in the New Testament is a missionary mandate. We must not lock this gospel treasure in any cultural straitjacket. Rather let us find the place, the time, the dress, the forms, the music that kindles and carries a passion for the supremacy of God in all things. And may our communion with the living God be so real and the Spirit of God so powerfully present that the heart of what we do becomes the joy of all the peoples we are called to reach.

Jesus: Mediator of a Better Covenant (pt.1) **(Hebrews 8:6-13)**

December 15, 1996

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

Bethlehem Baptist Church

John Piper, Pastor

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the Mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. 8 For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; 9 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and I did not care for 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 into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11 And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest of them. 12 For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." 13 When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

Replacement of Shadows with the Reality

Last week we saw that Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the Reality that casts the shadow. Remember from Hebrews 8:5 that the priests serve a *copy and a shadow* of heavenly things. The tabernacle and temple were a shadow; the official priesthood was a shadow; the animal sacrifices were a shadow; the feasts and dietary laws were a shadow. And when Christ came, the shadows began to fall away, because Christ himself is the Reality. He is our temple and tabernacle, our focus and place of worship. He is our High Priest and Mediator and Intercessor. He is our atoning sacrifice. He is our Passover feast and spiritual food. He is our purity and holiness that sets us off from other people.

And we saw last week that there's a reason why the worship and focus of the New Testament is so radically spiritual, rather than ritualistic and traditionalistic. The reason is that Christianity is a missionary faith. That is, the message of the New Testament is meant to be preached to all peoples, and the radical worship of the

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

New Testament is meant to be incarnated in all cultures. That was impossible in the Old Testament. The tabernacle, priesthood, sacrifices, feasts and dietary laws could not be transferred to other peoples and cultures. It was a come-see religion. Christianity is a go-tell religion. That is why Christianity is radically spiritual. Radically internal. Radically personal. And we could add radically ethical, lest anyone misunderstand "internal" to mean "private." It is meant for all peoples, tribes, tongues and nations. So almost all the mandated ritualistic, formal, external aspects of worship life are gone. What remains is a radically spiritual, internal, personal joyful dependence on all that God is for us in Jesus, and the outworking of love and justice in community.

Now this week, the writer takes us down this same path a little further. He says that this radically spiritual, internal, personal way of relating to God is, in fact the fulfillment of the promised New Covenant. That's what today's text is about. And we are going to spend two weeks on it.

Simply Replacing Shadows with the Reality is not Enough

It wouldn't work if God simply took away the shadows. It wouldn't work if God even set Christ before us as the great Reality and left us to ourselves to know him and love him. If that's all God did, our worship and our lives would not become radically spiritual and internal and personal. On the contrary, we would construct as fast as possible a manageable, man-made, external religion. No, if God is going to take away the shadows of external, ritualistic, will-power religion, then he is going to have to do something powerful and dramatic *in* us and not just outside of us. Because as sinners we are wired to another way.

And what God promised to do, with the coming of Christ, was the New Covenant. To see this, let's begin with verse 6:

But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry [that is, more excellent than the Old Testament priests who mediated God's grace through the sacrificial system], by as much as He is also the Mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

Better promises build a better covenant relationship between us and God and this

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

relationship is what Christ obtains and takes care of as Mediator. What those better promises are we will see in a minute.

Verses 7-8: For if that first covenant [this is a reference to the law with all of its shadows and, in general, without divine spiritual enablement to keep it] -- if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second [which is what Jesus is now bringing]. (8) For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant"

Now notice carefully where the fault lies in the first covenant. Verse 7 says that the first covenant was not faultless. But then verse 8 explains this by saying, "*For* in finding fault with *THEM* . . ." -- not "it" but "them." The fault with the first covenant was with "them." Well, who was "them," and what was their fault, and what was this covenant anyway. All those questions are answered in verses 8-9:

For finding fault with them, He says [now he quotes Jeremiah 31:31ff, the prophecy of the New Covenant], "Behold, days are coming," says the Lord, "when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; (9) not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and I did not care for them," says the Lord.

So here you can see that the old covenant was made with the people of God (Israel); it was made with them as they came out of Egypt, which I think means in that general time period, a few months later at Mount Sinai as Moses received the law; and it was an arrangement of how God and man were to relate that they failed to keep: "they did not continue in my covenant;" and so God looked away from them and they suffered judgment again and again.

The faultiness of the first covenant -- the Mosaic law -- was not that God gave bad commands, but that the people had bad hearts. There was divine forgiveness and patience in the first covenant (Exodus 34:6-7). There was the call for faith in the first covenant (Numbers 14:11; Hebrews 3:19; 4:6). There were promises of God's love in the first covenant (Exodus 34:7). But, by and large, these things did not get into the people's hearts. It was mainly external rather than internal. Obedience by

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

will-power rather than by reliance on the Spirit; and ritualistic rather than personal.

What Was the Flaw in the Old Covenant?

What was wrong? What was the flaw? There are two ways to answer that question. From the human side and from God's side. From the human side the problem was unbelief and hard-heartedness (Hebrews 3:8,15,19; 4:7). From God's side the problem was that God withheld the sovereign enablement of his Spirit.

Listen to Deuteronomy 29:4. Moses is speaking as he looks back over forty years of rebellion in the wilderness: "To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear." That was the ultimate reason why the old covenant was inadequate. God had lessons he meant to teach in the Old Testament and they involved enduring generations of stubbornness and rebellion and hard-heartedness until the time the new covenant should come.

But now it comes with Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a new covenant. Let's read the description of it in verses 10 and 11 (and save verses 12-13 for next week):

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 into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest of them.

He says three things about this new covenant: First, the will of God is going to be written not just on stone tablets or white Bible paper, but in the mind and on the heart. Second, the new covenant will establish a relationship of ownership of us by God: "I will be their God and they will be my people." And finally, the new covenant will be personal and intimate. When it is perfected we won't have to exhort each other to know the Lord, because we will know him intimately and personally. "All shall know me from the least to the greatest."

We Need God's Will Written on our Hearts

So you can see the new covenant is exactly what we need if God is going to replace

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

shadows with Reality. If God's will is that we be free from externalism and formalism and ritualism and traditionalism, so that our faith and our corporate worship and our life can be radically spiritual and personal and internal, then we need more than the blowing away of the shadows of the Old Testament. We need for God to write his will on our hearts. We need for him to assert himself powerfully in our lives as our God. We need for him to see to it not just that he is knowable, but that we know him.

And so my prayer for us this morning and in this Advent season is that we would grasp the preciousness of the new covenant as never before. Christ is the Mediator of a new and better covenant for us. What's new about it is that it does not leave us in our bondage to sin. It does not leave us in our so-called free will -- which is only a code word for slavery to self and sin. The new covenant does not leave us in our vaunted self-determination and death. It sovereignly overcomes our rebellion and resistance and frees us to delight in God and in the will of God written on our hearts.

Christ is the Mediator of this new covenant, according to Hebrews 8:6. What does that mean? It means that his blood -- the blood of the covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 13:20) -- purchased the fulfillment of these promises for us. It means that God brings about this inner transformation by the Spirit of Christ. And it means that God works all this transformation in us through faith in all that God is for us in Christ. The new covenant is purchased by the blood of Christ, effected by the Spirit of Christ and appropriated by faith in Christ.

The best place to see Christ working as the Mediator of the new covenant is in Hebrews 13: 20-21:

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant [this is the purchase of the new covenant], even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, *through Jesus Christ*, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The words, "working in us that which is pleasing in his sight," describe what happens when God writes the law on our hearts in the new covenant. And the

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

words, "through Jesus Christ" describe Jesus as the Mediator of this glorious work of sovereign grace.

So the meaning of Christmas is not only that God replaces shadows with Reality, but also that he takes the reality and makes it real to his people. He writes it on our hearts. He does not lay his Christmas gift of salvation and transformation down for you to pick up in your own strength. He picks it up and puts in your heart and in your mind, and seals to you that you are a child of God.

Jesus: Mediator of a Better Covenant (pt.2)

December 22, 1996
Bethlehem Baptist Church
John Piper, Pastor

What does he have in mind? This old covenant is “ready to disappear”? For those whose whole way of life was defined by this “first” covenant, this predicted disappearance would have been threatening.

Let me give you a background that will help you hear this the way I think he meant it to be heard.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of what happened in A. D. 70 in Jerusalem. It was an event that, for Jews and Christians, was critical in defining their faith for the next 2,000 years. God had been at work for 2,000 years since Abraham, calling, preserving, judging, forgiving and blessing his people Israel. He had commanded an elaborate system of sacrifices and priestly ministries and feasts and rituals to define Israel among the nations and to make himself known to them and to point them to the future fulfillment.

Christianity Threatened the Jewish Way of Life

Now Christians claimed that the Messiah had come, Jesus of Nazareth. The great mass of Israel rejected this claim. The rejection resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution of the early Christians. The claims of the Christians raised a huge question for the Jewish people as a whole. What would become of their way

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

of life? The new faith seemed incredibly radical. For example, in Acts 6 Stephen is proving to be an irresistible witness for the truth of the Christian faith. To stop him, false witnesses are brought in. And what is their charge? Acts 6:13-14:

They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

There you have the meaning of Christianity for the Jewish leaders. It meant the destruction of the old ways. The "vanishing" of the first covenant. They could sense it. He speaks against this place (Jerusalem) and the Law; and they really believed that Christianity threatened the existence of the Temple itself. And if the Temple falls, then what will become of all the "customs" of the Old Testament and the whole religious life of Judaism? The issue was so sharp they killed Stephen over it.

And they did indeed have reason to be afraid. Not only had Jesus actually said that the Temple would be destroyed, he had predicted the entire destruction of Jerusalem. For example, in Luke 19:43-44 he said,

The days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.

In other words, the Jewish people had reason to fear these early Christians. Even though they were a meek and peaceful band that would rather die than live by the sword, nevertheless at the very heart of their faith was the implicit end of the Jewish way of life as they knew it. So much so that the end of that way of life (not by Christian violence, but by God's hand) would be a partial vindication of the Christian's claim to truth.

The Roman Destruction of Jerusalem

For decades before and after the birth of Jesus the atmosphere in the land of Israel was tense with the spirit of rebellion against Rome. The Jewish people chafed

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

under this godless power, and dreamed of deliverance. In September A. D. 66, Florus, the Roman governor of Judea, provoked the Jews by raiding the Temple treasury and taking what he thought the Jews were withholding in taxes.

This provoked a riot, and he ruthlessly crucified some of the citizens and allowed his troops to plunder part of the city. This enraged the people. Eleazar, the Jewish Captain of the Temple, persuaded the priests no longer to offer daily sacrifices for the welfare of the Roman emperor. This was an ominous sign of open revolt against Rome by a tiny vassal nation.

In a surge of courage and folly, the Jewish forces stormed the fortress of Antonius in the city and took it and wiped out the Roman soldiers. So the die was cast, and there was no turning back. Vespasian, the Roman general, came to put down the revolt in 67 and took all of Israel except Jerusalem. He returned to Rome to become emperor and left the finishing of the work to his son, the general Titus. After a five-month siege, he broke through and burned the Temple to the ground in August of 70. A few Jewish groups held out for a while, but all eventually collapsed, including the force at Masada, who committed mass suicide in 73 rather than be handed over as captives.

The End of Judaism as it Was

That was the end of Judaism as it had been known for hundreds of years. The priesthood was at an end. The animal sacrifices were at an end. The worship life that centered on Jerusalem and the Temple was at an end. And it has never been restored to our own day. Judaism as we know it today in Minneapolis and New York and Tel Aviv is not the same way of life practiced before AD 70.

What is the meaning of this cataclysmic event for Judaism?

It was a witness to the truth of Christianity. Jesus predicted it. And it came to pass. Christians did not fight against Israel in this revolt. In fact, Christians suffered in Jerusalem *with* Israel because of the revolt. As far as Rome was concerned Judaism was the tree and Christianity was the branch. If they could destroy the tree of Judaism, they could wipe out Christianity as well. Jews and Christians suffered together in AD 70.

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

So the destruction of AD 70 was not an act of anti-Semitism. Rather it was an act of divine judgment. That is what Jesus says in Luke 19:43-44: these things happened“ because you did not recognize the time of your visitation,” -- that is, you did not recognize the coming of the Messiah. It was God’s testimony that the coming of Jesus was in fact what the book of Hebrews says it was -- the replacement of shadows with Reality -- Christ himself.

One of the early church fathers, Athenasius (born A. D. 373), put it like this,

It is a sign, and an important proof, of the coming of the Word of God, that Jerusalem no longer stands. . . . For . . . when the truth was there, what need any more of the shadow? And this was why Jerusalem stood till then -- namely, that [the Jews] might be exercised in the types as a preparation for the reality.

In other words, one might say, the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem was God’s way of saying: “*Wake up to the meaning of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament.*”

Now we come back to Hebrews 8:13 with a new sense of what was at stake in these words: “When He said [in Jeremiah 31:31], ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.”

Christmas Means Two Things

What we saw in the last two Sundays looking at Hebrews 8 is that Christmas means two things.

1) It means the replacement of Old Testament shadows with reality. The temple and tabernacle and sacrifices and priesthood and feasts and dietary laws were all shadows and copies of the Reality in heaven, namely, Jesus Christ and his work as our High Priest and our Sacrifice and our focus of worship. Jesus fulfills and replaces the shadows of the Old Testament.

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

2) And the second meaning of Christmas that we saw in this chapter is that God makes the Reality of Christ real to us personally by the work of the new covenant when he writes the will of God on our hearts (v. 10).

So Christmas means shadows are replaced with Reality: Old Testament copies give way to the Original, Jesus Christ. And it means that God goes beyond that, and moves powerfully into our hearts and minds to overcome our resistance to this Reality. He writes the will of God -- the truth of the Reality of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6) -- on our hearts, so that we are willing and eager to trust him and follow him -- from the inside out freely, not under constraint from rules outside.

A Third Meaning -- God is Merciful

Before we connect these two meanings of Christmas with Hebrews 8:13 and the destruction of Jerusalem, let's add one more from verse 12: "For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." This is the end of the quote from Jeremiah 31. It begins with "for" or "because." So it is the ground or basis for the other promises of the new covenant (in verses 10-11).

God said, I will write the my will on your hearts, and be your God, and cause you to know me personally . . . *For* I will be merciful to your iniquities and remember your sins no more." In other words, the death of Jesus for our sins is the foundation of the new covenant (Hebrews 7:27; 9:28; 10:12). It's the basis of the other promises. If Christ had not died for our sins, God could not be our God or write the law on our hearts or cause us to know him personally. All that mercy was obtained by the blood of Jesus. This is why Jesus called the cup of the Lord's supper, "the new covenant *in my blood*" (Luke 22:20).

Here's what the writer wants us to understand. God is just and holy and separated from sinners like us. No fingerpointing here -- like *us*! This is our main problem at Christmas and every other season. How shall we get right with a just and holy God? Nevertheless God is merciful and has promised in Jeremiah 31 (five hundred years before Christ) that someday he would do something new. He would replace shadows with the Reality of the Messiah. And he would powerfully move into our lives and write his will on our hearts so that we are not constrained from outside but are willing from inside to love him and trust him and follow him.

A Christmas Gift Worth Singing About!

That would be the greatest salvation imaginable -- if God should offer us the greatest Reality in the universe to enjoy and then move in us to see to it that we could enjoy it with the greatest freedom and joy possible. That would be a Christmas gift worth singing about.

That is, in fact, what he promised. But there was a huge obstacle. Our sin. Our separation from God because of our unrighteousness. How shall a holy and just God treat us sinners with so much kindness as to give us the greatest Reality in the universe (his Son) to enjoy with the greatest joy possible? The answer is that God put our sins on his Son, and judged them there, so that he could put them out of his mind, and deal with us mercifully and remain just and holy at the same time. Hebrews 9:28 says, "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many."

This is what verse 12 means: Christ bore our sins in his own body when he died. He took our judgment. He canceled our guilt. And that means the sins are gone. They do not remain in God's mind as a basis for condemnation. In that sense he "forgets" them. They are consumed in the death of Christ. Which means that God is now free, in his justice, to lavish us with the new covenant. He gives us Christ, the greatest Reality in the universe, for our enjoyment. And he writes his own will -- his own heart -- on our hearts so that we can love Christ and trust Christ and follow Christ from the inside out, with freedom and joy.

Jesus Christ is the Goal, the Reality

When Jerusalem fell to the Romans in A. D. 70, and the Temple was burned, and the sacrifices stopped being offered in Judaism, and the Levitical priesthood came to an end, God was saying with his power and providence: Christ was the goal of it all. Christ was the Reality; the rest was shadows. Christianity is a faith woven into history. It is not a mere set of ideas. It is about a person, Jesus, who came into history and died and rose again. And it is about a God who intervenes in history to bear witness to the reality of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And look around today. Is it not astonishing that God has preserved the Jewish

Three Sermons on Christmas and The New Covenant

people to this day. And there is yet a future for them in Christ according to Scripture. But what do we see? Are they meeting at the Temple? Are they offering animal sacrifices? Do they look to the Levitical priesthood for their mediation with God? No. Why? Because Jesus said, “they did not recognize the time of their visitation” (Luke 19:44). The existence of the Jewish people today and the transformed version of Judaism that they follow is a constant witness to the world that the first covenant is vanishing away. That the Messiah, Jesus Christ, has come. That he has inaugurated the new covenant. That the shadows have been replaced by Reality. And that the Spirit has written the will of God on our hearts.

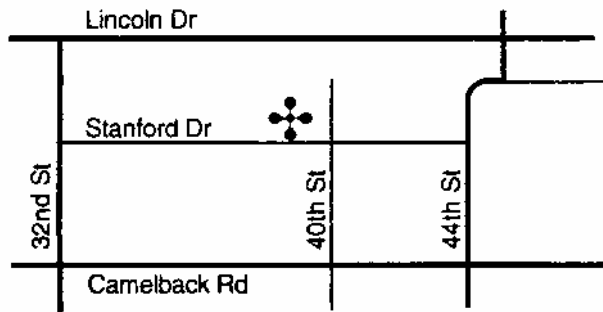
So let us look to the great final reality of Christ, and put our hope in him, and love him and worship this Christmas.

By John Piper. ©Desiring God Ministries. Website: www.desiringGOD.org. Email: mail@desiringGOD.org. Toll Free: 888-346-4700.

Date I Finished Reading This Sermon: _____

PERSONAL NOTES & APPLICATION

PERSONAL NOTES & APPLICATION



Camelback Bible Church

3900 East Stanford Drive
Paradise Valley, Arizona 85253
Telephone (602) 955-6370

Sunday School Classes for all ages – 9:00 a.m.
Sunday Morning Worship – 10:40 a.m.
Sunday Evening Worship – 6:00 p.m.

God-glorifying ...
Cross-centered ...
Life-transforming ...
... serving in our world
as Christ served in His.

In navigation, discovering 'true north' is about orienting one's self towards what is certain. In the journey of life, human beings find themselves doing this very thing: searching for a fixed point of reference that will guide them through the 'uncharted waters' of their existence. The Scriptures have revealed that God himself is our only certainty in an uncertain world. In all things, He desires that we look to Him, to Jesus Christ, in order to 'get our bearings'. The *True North Sermon Series* is intended to be a resource in pointing men and women towards the unchanging truths of God's word. May the message you hold in your hands, whether it comes from ten years ago or a thousand years ago, be used by God's Spirit to lead you towards life's only True North.

