Christ is the Mediator of a New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-9:10

Key Verse: 8:6 “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.”

Last week I bought a new laptop computer because the old one was broken. The new computer has more capacity and a better program than the old one even though I bought both at the same price. When I began to use the new one, the old one was obsolete and discarded. In today’s passage the author of Hebrews describes Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant. When God established a new covenant, the old covenant became obsolete and outdated. In this way Jesus’ ministry and his priesthood are proven to be superior to the other priestly ministry and priesthood. Let’s study why and how Jesus became the mediator of the new covenant and what this means to us.

Look at verses 1-2. “Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.” Last week we studied that Jesus is our permanent high priest who is always with us and intercedes for us. Other high priests in the order of Aaron and the Levites served the Lord, died, and were buried. Their priestly term and duty were gone with their death. But Jesus, our permanent high priest, died for our sins, but rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. Here the words, ‘he sat down’ implies ‘he completed his duty and mission.’ Jesus completed our salvation through his death and resurrection.

In heaven Jesus continues to serve in the sanctuary as our permanent high priest. Look at verses 3-4. “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. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.” When we read Exodus 25-27, the Lord instructed Moses how to build the tabernacle and how to serve him in detail through the law. According to this law high priests offered their gifts and sacrifices to the Lord at the sanctuary. We believe this law and instruction as the first covenant.

But in verse 5 the author of Hebrews says that the sanctuary in the tabernacle is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. Look at verse 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.” In Exodus 25:40 God told Moses to build the tabernacle according to God’s design. God’s design is what is in heaven. What is in heaven is original and real, while what is on the earth is a copy and shadow. The original one and the copied one look similar, but people value them differently. Immigration and other public offices require original documents, not copied ones, because of their authenticity and credibility. The original one is real and the copy is a shadow. In the Allegory of the Cave by Plato a man is chained in the cave and fixed his head to see only his shadow cast on the wall of the cave. He believed that his shadow cast on the wall was his real self until he came out of the cave and found his real self in the light. Like this caveman, people on this earth seek their shadow thinking that it is their real self. What is in heaven is real and what is on the earth is the shadow. But people in this world spend too much money, time, and energy for their shadow. Their real self is the heavenly figure, spiritual form, who has the image of God. The real one is essence and its shadow is a phenomenon. We need a spiritual discernment to tell the essence from the phenomenon.

In verse 6 the author explains the superiority of Jesus’ ministry to the other priestly ministry. Look at verse 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 superior to other priestly ministries because his is the original while others are copied. Jesus’ ministry is superior because he is the mediator of the new covenant which is superior to the old covenant. Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant whereas Moses is the mediator of the old covenant. In chapter 3 we already studied why and how Jesus is superior to Moses as a mediator.

In verses 7-9 the author says the limitation and weakness of the old covenant. Don’t get me wrong! The old or first covenant itself is not wrong. The Lord’s covenant is absolutely good and right, but there was a problem with his people. Verse 7 says “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 days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 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.” In these verses God explains why he had to make a new covenant. The reason was the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. They did not remain faithful to the first covenant. So God turned away from them and made a new covenant, which is superior to the first one.

What is the new covenant? Look at verses 10-12. “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. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” These verses are quoted from Jeremiah 31:31-34. Through the prophet Jeremiah God revealed the picture of a new covenant, which would be written in their hearts and minds. The first and old covenant were written on the stone tablets. The new covenant would be written in the hearts of his people. The old covenant requires an outward obligation, but the new covenant requires an inward transformation and devotion.

Writing God’s law in hearts and minds is very meaningful. If God judges us based on our outward appearance or visible activities, we may cheat God. The Israelites offered numerous animals as burnt offerings and sin offerings. But Jesus said that their hearts were far from God. God looks at our heart while people look at outward appearances. We cannot cheat God who looks at our heart and judges our motivation. God inscribed the first covenant in the two stone tablets and gave them to Moses. Moses broke these two tablets by throwing them to the Israelites who were worshiping idols. God provided another two tablets of the first covenant. Even though God made two more sets of the stone covenant, they didn’t keep them. They are like some believers who leave from their faith and follow their fleshly desire. But those who have God’s law in their hearts are different from them. They write God’s words in their hearts. They memorize, meditate and follow God’s word. God’s word is a lamp for their feet and a light on their path. (Ps119:105)

Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” Jesus said in Mt 15:11&18, “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what come out of their mouth…the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” Guarding our heart and keeping it pure is important and difficult. Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Which is easier to keep between the first covenant and the new covenant? God wrote his covenant in our hearts so that we may not make excuses for our sinfulness. God writes his law into our hearts so that our conscience may be pricked when we sin in our hearts. Jesus explained this in John 15:8-11 that the Holy Spirit convicts our conscience when we sin in our hearts.

What is the content of the new covenant? It is “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (10) This is not new content, but everlasting content for all God’s covenants. The Lord will be our God and we will be his people. This covenant is like a marriage vow between husband and wife. “I will be your husband and you will be my wife”. Like this marriage vow the covenant cannot be broken or revoked. The covenant written in the stone tablets may be broken, but the covenant written in their hearts cannot be broken. No matter what happens to the couple, as long as they hold their marriage vow in their hearts, they protect their family. No matter what happens to us, as long as we hold God’s covenant in our hearts, we protect our faith and live as people of God.

Verse 11 implies world salvation through the gospel. “No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” In the past God wanted to save the world through the Israelites by making them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But the Israelites failed to keep God’s covenant. Now God will save the world through the gospel. The people of the world will hear the gospel through the gentiles. They will know the God of heaven and earth through the apostles and teachers. They will accept God’s new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ.

8:6 says that the new covenant is superior to the old one because the new one is established on better promises. The old covenant is established by God’s law. But the new covenant is established on better promises which is God’s grace. Look at verse 12. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” God promised to forgive sinners and not to remember their sins any more. God’s law demanded their obedience. But God’s grace provides the forgiveness of sin. Whoever believes in God’s grace can be saved. Now the era of the law with Moses is gone, and the new era of grace has come with Jesus Christ. Look at verse 13. “By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.”

Chapter 9:1-10 illustrates how the old priestly system is limited and not perfect compared to the new one which is performed and completed by Jesus. The first covenant had regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary. The tabernacle had two rooms divided by a curtain, the outer room called the Holy Place and the inner room called the Most Holy Place. In the Holy Place there were the golden tables with 12 consecrated breads, the golden lampstand, and the golden altar of incense. In the Most Holy Place there was the Ark of the Lord which contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. (3-4) Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. (5) But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

Look at verses 6-7. “When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.” This is the picture of the priestly duty in the tabernacle and the temple. Still this old picture of the tabernacle and high priests are nothing but a copy and shadow of the new tabernacle and new high priest. Look at verse 8-10. “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.” The big difference between the old and the new is the efficacy of washing their sins, called ‘atonement of sins.’ The old sacrificial system is ceremonial washing only for outward cleansing based on external regulations. They are only a matter of food, drink, and various ceremonial washings. They didn’t wash the conscience from acts that lead to death. But the new covenant is able to clear the conscience of the worshipers because it is established in the blood of Jesus. This new covenant is established on better promises which is the grace of forgiveness of sin. Verse 14 says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our conscience from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” Amen!

Colossians 3:2 says, “Set our minds on things above, not on earthly things.” Things above are original and real ones which we seek for. Things on earth are copied and shadows of the things above. Let us set our minds and hearts on the things above. Do not sin against our conscience. God wrote his law in our hearts. When we sin against our conscience, repent and come to the throne of God’s grace for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus, our merciful and faithful high priest and the mediator of the new covenant, will intercede for us and help us. Above all let us give our hearts and minds to serve the living God! Amen!