

Hebrews 8:1-13

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the significance of the High Priest's ministry and the differences between the Old and New Covenants, highlighting the New Covenant's better promises and spiritual privileges.

Scripture: Psalm 45:11, Psalm 63:6, Isaiah 43:26, Acts 15:10, Romans 8:3, Hebrews 8

Topics: "New Covenant", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the superiority of Jesus as the High Priest who sits at the right hand of God, emphasizing His role as the Minister of the sanctuary and the true Tabernacle established by the Lord. He contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant, highlighting the better promises and the covenant written in the hearts of believers. Chrysostom urges the congregation to remember God continually, to repent of old ways, and to strive for spiritual renewal, likening life to a constant contest where vigilance and prayer are essential for success in the eyes of the heavenly Judge.

Transcript

Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an High Priest; who is set down on the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens: a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man.

1. Paul mixes the lowly things with the lofty, ever imitating his Master, so that the lowly become the path to the lofty, and through the former we are led to the latter, and when we are amid the great things we learn that these [lowly ones] were a condescension. This accordingly he does here also. After declaring that He offered up Himself, and showing Him to be a High Priest, what does he say? Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: we have such an High Priest who is set down on the right hand of the throne of the majesty. And yet this is not [the office] of a Priest, but of Him whom the Priest should serve.

A minister of the sanctuary, not simply a minister, but a minister of the sanctuary. And of the true Tabernacle, which the Lord pitched and not man. You see the condescension. Did he not a little before make a separation, saying: Are they not all ministering spirits? Hebrews 1:14 and therefore (he says) it is not said to them, Sit on my right hand, Hebrews 1:13 for He that sits is not a minister. How is it then that it is here said, a minister, and a minister of the Sanctuary? For he means here the Tabernacle.

See how he raised up the minds of the believing Jews. For as they would be apt to imagine that we have no such tabernacle [as they had], see here (he says) is the Priest, Great, yea, much greater than the

other, and who has offered a more wonderful sacrifice. But is not all this mere talk? Is it not a boast, and merely said to win over our minds? On this account he established it first from the oath, and afterwards also from the tabernacle. For this difference too was manifest: but the Apostle thinks of another also, which (he says) the Lord pitched [or made firm] and not man. Where are they who say that the heaven whirls around? where are they who declare that it is spherical? For both of these notions are overthrown here.

Now (he says) of the things which we have spoken this is the sum. By the sum is always meant what is most important. Again he brings down his discourse; having said what is lofty, henceforward he speaks fearlessly.

Hebrews 8:3-5

2. In the next place that you may understand that he used the word minister of the manhood, observe how he again indicates it: For Hebrews 8:3 (he says) every high priest is ordained to offer both gifts and sacrifices, wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer.

Do not now, because you hear that He sits, suppose that His being called High Priest is mere idle talk. For the former, viz. His sitting, belongs to the dignity of the Godhead, but this to His great lovingkindness, and His tender care for us. On this account he repeatedly urges this very thing, and dwells more upon it: for he feared lest the other [truth] should overthrow it. Therefore he again brings down his discourse to this: since some were enquiring why He died. He was a Priest. But there is no Priest without a sacrifice. It is necessary then that He also should have a sacrifice.

And in another way; Having said that He is on high, he affirms and proves that He is a Priest from every consideration, from Melchisedec, from the oath, from offering sacrifice. From this he also frames another and necessary syllogism. For if (he says) He had been on earth, He would not be a Priest, seeing that there are priests who offer the gifts according to the Law. If then He is a Priest (as He really is), we must seek some other place for Him. For if He were indeed on earth, He should not be a priest. For how [could He be]? He offered no sacrifice, He ministered not in the Priest's office. And with good reason, for there were the priests. Moreover he shows, that it was impossible that [He] should be a priest upon earth. For how [could He be]? There was no rising up against [the appointed Priests], he means.

3. Here we must apply our minds attentively, and consider the Apostolic wisdom; for again he shows the difference of the Priesthood. Who (he says) serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things.

What are the heavenly things he speaks of here? The spiritual things. For although they are done on earth, yet nevertheless they are worthy of the Heavens. For when our Lord Jesus Christ lies slain [as a sacrifice], when the Spirit is with us, when He who sits on the right hand of the Father is here, when sons are made by the Washing, when they are fellow citizens of those in Heaven, when we have a country, and a city, and citizenship there, when we are strangers to things here, how can all these be other than heavenly things? But what! Are not our Hymns heavenly? Do not we also who are below utter in concert with them the same things which the divine choirs of bodiless powers sing above? Is not the altar also heavenly? How? It has nothing carnal, all spiritual things become the offerings. The sacrifice does not disperse into ashes, or into smoke, or into steamy savor, it makes the things placed there bright and splendid. How again can the rites which we celebrate be other than heavenly? For when He says, Whose soever sins ye retain they are retained, whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted John 20:23 when they have the keys of heaven, how can all be other than heavenly?

Who (he says) serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God, when he was about to make the tabernacle, for see, says He, that you make all things according to the pattern showed to you in the mount. Inasmuch as our hearing is less ready of apprehension than our sight (for the things which we hear we do not in such wise lay up in our soul, as those which we see with our very eyes), He showed him all. Either then he means this by the example and shadow, or else he [speaks] of the Temple. For, he went on to say, See (His words are), that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to you in the mount. Was it then only what concerned the furniture of the temple that he saw, or was it also what related to the sacrifices, and all the rest? Nay, one would not be wrong in saying even this; for The Church is heavenly, and is nothing else than Heaven.

Hebrew 8:6

4. But now has He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also He is the Mediator of a better covenant. You see (he means) how much better is the one ministration than the other, if one be an example and type, and the other truth [reality]. But this did not profit the hearers, nor cheer them. Therefore he says what especially cheered them: Which was established upon better promises. Having raised them up by speaking of the place, and the priest, and the sacrifice, he then sets forth also the wide difference of the covenant, having also said before that it was weak and unprofitable. See Hebrews 7:18

And observe what safeguards he lays down, when intending to find fault with it. For in the former place after saying, according to the power of an endless life Hebrews 7:16, he then said that there is a disannulling of the commandment going before Hebrews 7:18; and then after that, he set forth something great, saying, by which we draw near unto God. Hebrews 7:19 And in this place, after leading us up into Heaven, and showing that instead of the temple, we have Heaven, and that those things were types of ours, and having by these means exalted the Ministration [of the New Covenant], he then proceeds suitably to exalt the priesthood.

Hebrews 8:7-9

But (as I said) he sets down that which especially cheers them, in the words, Which was established upon better promises. Whence does appear? In that this the one was cast out, and the other introduced in its place: for it is therefore of force because it is better. For as he says, If perfection were by it, what further need was there, that another priest should rise, after the order of Melchisedec? Hebrews 7:11; so also here he used the same syllogism, saying Hebrews 8:7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second; that is, if it made men faultless. For it is because he is speaking of this that he did not say, But finding fault with it, but ver. 8, 9 But finding fault with them, He says, Behold, the days come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: 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 continued not in My covenant, and I regarded them not, says the Lord.

Yea, verily. And whence does it appear that [the first Covenant] came to an end? He showed it indeed also from the Priest, but now he shows more clearly by express words that it has been cast out.

But how is it upon better promises? For how, tell me, can earth and heaven be equal? But do thou consider, how he speaks of promises there [in that other covenant] also, that you may not bring this charge against it. For there also, he says a better hope, by which we draw near unto God Hebrews 7:19, showing that a Hope was there also; and in this place better promises, hinting that there also He had

made promises.

But inasmuch as they were forever making objections, he says, Behold! The days come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. He is not speaking of any old Covenant: for, that they might not assert this, he determined the time also. Thus he did not say simply, according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, lest you should say [it was] the one made with Abraham, or that with Noah: but he declares what [covenant it was], not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers in the Exodus. Wherefore he added also, in the day that I took them by the hand, to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in My covenant, and I regarded them not, says the Lord. You see that the evils begin first from ourselves (they themselves first, says he, continued not in [the covenant]) and the negligence is from ourselves, but the good things from Him; I mean the [acts] of bounty. He here introduces, as it were, an apology showing the cause why He forsakes them.

Hebrews 8:10

5. Hebrews 8:10 For this, he says, 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 mind, and write them in their hearts, and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people. Thus He says this concerning the New [covenant] because His words are not according to the covenant which I covenanted.

But what other difference is there beside this? Now if any person should say that the difference is not in this respect, but in respect to its being put into their hearts; He makes no mention of any difference of ordinances, but points out the mode of its being given: for no longer (he says) shall the covenant be in writings, but in hearts; let the Jew in that case show that this was ever carried into effect; but he could not, for it was made a second time in writings after the return from Babylon. But I show that the Apostles received nothing in writing, but received [it] in their hearts through the Holy Ghost. Wherefore also Christ said, When He comes, He will bring all things to your remembrance, and He shall teach you. John 14:26

Hebrews 8:11-12

6. And they shall not teach (he says) every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know Me from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. Behold also another sign. From the least even to the greatest of them (he says) they shall know Me, and they shall not say, Know the Lord. When has this been fulfilled save now? For our [religion] is manifest: but theirs [i.e. the Jews'] was not manifest, but had been shut up in a corner.

[A covenant] is then said to be new, when it is different and shows some advantage over the old. Nay surely, says one, it is new also when part of it has been taken away, and part not. For instance, when an old house is ready to fall down, if a person leaving the whole, has patched up the foundation, straightway we say, he has made it new, when he has taken some parts away, and brought others into their place. For even the heaven also is thus called 'new,' when it is no longer 'of brass,' but gives rain; and the earth likewise is new when it is not unfruitful, not when it has been changed; and the house is likewise new, when portions of it have been taken away, and portions remain. And thus, he says, he has well termed it 'a New Covenant.'

If then I show that that covenant had become Old in this respect, that it yielded no fruit? And that you may know this exactly, read what Haggai says, what Zechariah, what the Messenger, when the return from the Captivity had not yet fully taken place; and what Esdras charges. How then did [the people] receive him? And how no man enquired of the Lord, inasmuch as they [the priests] themselves also transgressed, and knew it not even themselves? Do you see how your [interpretation] is broken down, while I maintain my own: that this [covenant] must be called New in the proper sense of the word?

And besides, I do not concede that the words the heaven shall be new Isaiah 65:17, were spoken concerning this. For why, when saying in Deuteronomy the heaven shall be of brass, did he not set down this in the contrasted passage, but if you hearken, it shall be new.

And further on this account He says that He will give another Covenant, because they did not continue in the first. This I show by what he says (For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, Romans 8:3; and again, Why do you tempt God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Acts 15:10) But they did not continue therein, he says.

Here he shows that [God] counts us worthy of greater and of spiritual [privileges]: for it is said their sound went out into all the earth and their words unto the ends of the world. Psalm 19:5; Romans 10:18 That is [the meaning of] they shall not say each man to his neighbor, Know the Lord. And again, the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as much water to cover the seas. Isaiah 11:9

Hebrews 8:13

7. In calling it new (he says), He has made the first old: but that which decays and waxes old is ready to vanish away. See what was hidden, how he has laid open the very mind of the prophet! He honored the law, and was not willing to call it old in express terms: but nevertheless, this he did call it. For if the former had been new, he would not have called this which came afterwards new also. So that by granting something more and different, he declares that it was waxen old. Therefore it is done away and is perishing, and no longer exists.

Having taken boldness from the prophet, he attacks it more suitably, showing that our [dispensation] is now flourishing. That is, he showed that [the other] was old: then taking up the word old, and adding of himself another [circumstance], the [characteristic] of old age, he took up what was omitted by the others, and says ready to vanish away.

The New then has not simply caused the old to cease, but because it had become aged, as it was not [any longer] useful. On this account he said, for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof Hebrews 7:18, and, the law made nothing perfect Hebrews 7:19; and that if the first had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. Hebrews 8:7 And faultless; that is, useful; not as though it [the old Covenant] was obnoxious to any charges, but as not being sufficient. He used a familiar form of speech. As if one should say, the house is not faultless, that is, it has some defect, it is decayed: the garment is not faultless, that is, it is coming to pieces. He does not therefore here speak of it as evil, but only as having some fault and deficiency.

8. So then we also are new, or rather we were made new, but now have become old; therefore we are near to vanishing away, and to destruction. Let us scrape off this old age. It is indeed no longer possible to do it by Washing, but by repentance it is possible here [in this life]. If there be in us anything old, let us cast it off; if any wrinkle, if any stain, if any spot, let us wash it away and become fair Ephesians 5:27: that the

King may desire our beauty. Psalm 45:11

It is possible even for him who has fallen into the extremest deformity to recover that beauty of which David says that the King shall desire your beauty. Hearken, O daughter, and consider; forget also your own people and your father's house: so shall the King greatly desire your beauty. Psalm 45:10-11 And yet forgetting does not produce beauty. Yea, beauty is of the soul. What sort of forgetting? That of sins. For he is speaking about the Church from among the Gentiles, exhorting her not to remember the things of her fathers, that is [of] those that sacrificed to idols; for from such was it gathered.

And he said not, Go not after them, but what is more, Do not admit them into your mind; which he says also in another place, I will not mention their names through my lips. Psalm 16:4 And again, That my mouth may not talk of the deeds of men. Psalm 17:3-4 As yet is this no great virtue; nay, rather, it is indeed great, but not such as this [which is here spoken of]. For what does he say there? He says not; Talk not of the things of men, neither speak of the things of your fathers; but, neither remember them, nor admit them into your mind. You see to how great a distance he would have us keep away from wickedness. For he that remembers not [a matter] will not think of it, and he that does not think, will not speak of it: and he that does not speak of it, will not do it. Do you see from how many paths he has walled us off? By what great intervals he has removed us, even to a very great [distance]?

9. Let us then also hearken and forget our own evils. I do not say our sins, for (He says) Remember first, and I will not remember. Isaiah 43:26 Septuagint I mean for instance, Let us no longer remember rapacity, but even restore the former [plunder]. This is to forget wickedness, and to cast out the thought of rapacity, and never at any time to admit it, but to wipe away also the things already done amiss.

Whence may the forgetfulness of wickedness come to us? From the remembrance of good things, from the remembrance of God. If we continually remember God, we cannot remember those things also. For (he says) When I remembered You upon my bed, I thought upon You in the morning dawn. Psalm 63:6 We ought then to have God always in remembrance, but then especially, when thought is undisturbed, when by means of that remembrance [a man] is able to condemn himself, when he can retain [things] in memory. For in the daytime indeed, if we do remember, other cares and troubles entering in, drive the thought out again: but in the night it is possible to remember continually, when the soul is calm and at rest; when it is in the haven, and under a serene sky. The things which you say in your hearts be ye grieved for on your beds, he says. Psalm 4:4, Septuagint For it were indeed right to retain this remembrance through the day also. But inasmuch as you are always full of cares, and distracted amidst the things of this life, at least then remember God on your bed; at the morning dawn meditate upon Him.

If at the morning dawn we meditate on these things, we shall go forth to our business with much security. If we have first made God propitious by prayer and supplication, going forth thus we shall have no enemy. Or if you should, you will laugh him to scorn, having God propitious. There is war in the market place; the affairs of every day are a fight, they are a tempest and a storm. We therefore need arms: and prayer is a great weapon. We need favorable winds; we need to learn everything, so as to go through the length of the day without shipwrecks and without wounds. For every single day the rocks are many, and oftentimes the boat strikes and is sunk. Therefore have we especially need of prayer early and by night.

10. Many of you have often beheld the Olympic games: and not only have beheld but have been zealous partisans and admirers of the combatants, one of this [combatant], one of that. You know then that both during the days of the contests, and during those nights, all night long the herald thinks of nothing else,

has no other anxiety, than that the combatant should not disgrace himself when he goes forth. For those who sit by the trumpeter admonish him not to speak to any one, that he may not spend his breath and get laughed at. If therefore he who is about to strive before men, uses such forethought, much more will it befit us to be continually thoughtful, and careful, since our whole life is a contest. Let every night then be a vigil, and let us be careful that when we go out in the day we do not make ourselves ridiculous. And would it were only making ourselves ridiculous. But now the Judge of the contest is seated on the right hand of the Father, hearkening diligently that we utter not any false note, anything out of tune. For He is not the Judge of actions only, but of words also. Let us keep our vigil, beloved; we also have those that are eager for our success, if we will. Near each one of us Angels are sitting; and yet we snore through the whole night. And would it were only this. But many do even many licentious things, some indeed going to the very brothels, and others making their own houses places of whoredom by taking courtesans there. Yes most certainly. For is it not so? They care well for their contest. Others are drunken and speak amiss; others make an uproar. Others keep evil vigil through the night weaving, and worse than those who sleep, schemes of deceit; others by calculating usury; others by bruising themselves with cares, and doing anything rather than what is suited to the contest. Wherefore, I exhort you, let us lay aside all [other] things, and look to one only, how we may obtain the prize, [how we may] be crowned with the Chaplet; let us do all by which we shall be able to attain to the promised blessings. Which may we all attain in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father and also to the Holy Ghost be glory, might, honor, now and for ever and world without end. Amen.

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