

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

NEW
COVENANT
WORSHIP

Hebrews

STEPHEN J. BINZ



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“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” HEBREWS 8:8

New Covenant Worship

As we begin to study Hebrews, we ought to imagine ourselves not at a desk reading a book or a letter but with a congregation listening to an eloquent preacher. Although we don't know the identity of the author—speculation has centered from the earliest days on Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, and Priscilla—the homilist is helping the assembly understand a longing that is at the heart of every human being: the desire to draw near to God in worship. All religion, at its root, is an expression of this yearning to approach and encounter God.

Don't we often have the feeling that everything in this world is incomplete? We are continually confronted with the limitations of our human existence. Wouldn't it be true to say that the realities of this life fail to satisfy our deepest longings? No matter how much we have, we are never really satisfied. Possessions, power, and pleasure fail to satisfy the inmost desires of the human heart. Even our experiences of genuine love—the joining of spouses and the truest human friendships—leave a longing for an encounter that is even fuller and more lasting.

Hebrews teaches that Jesus Christ is the one who can take us into the presence of God and fulfill our truest desires. In Christian worship we glimpse the completion of human longing. There we realize that our anxious yearnings can be satisfied. Jesus is the one who is able to remove the barriers between

this world and heaven, between our sinful humanity and God's all-holy presence. Jesus is the bridge, the perfect mediator between us and God.

Although the author of Hebrews is anonymous, we can be certain of two characteristics. First, the author knew the Greek language well. The work contains some of the most polished language in the New Testament. Second, the author knew the Hebrew Scriptures thoroughly. The work contains at least thirty-six quotations and countless references from the Old Testament. Jewish history, traditions, feasts, and heroes form the foundation on which the whole homily is constructed. So Hebrews expresses the truth of Christian worship within the overlapping contexts of Greek philosophy and Jewish tradition.

The Greek style and ideas make the reading challenging, with every passage packed with meaning. The Greek philosopher Plato and his many disciples taught that the present reality in which we live is only a shadow of the real world. This world is only an imperfect reflection of the eternal domain. Every person, then, seeks to get beyond the specters and imperfections of this world in order to experience what is real, eternal, and true. This is exactly what Hebrews claims Jesus Christ enables us to do. In Jesus Christ, the divine world (of the fullest and truest reality) and the earthly world (of transient, shadowy reality) are joined.

The Jewish mindset challenges us to understand the Old Testament background in order to comprehend the truth about Jesus and the consequences of his life for our own. The whole system of covenant, priesthood, and sacrifice brings the people of Israel near to God in worship. The covenant, the expression of their relationship with God, is rooted in God's promises and Israel's obedient response to God's will. Yet, as the prophets testify, God's people continually broke the covenant, creating barriers to the divine presence through their sin. The priesthood mediates between the people and God, offering gifts from the people to God and seeking pardon from God. Sacrifices are offered daily in the temple of Jerusalem to gain access to divine life, and the blood of sacrificed animals is poured out in an attempt to atone for sins. Hebrews makes the bold claim that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of Israel's institutions for worshiping God. He is the new covenant, forming a renewed relationship, enabling us to participate in God's life. In his complete self-giving on the cross, offered in love unto death, he has become

the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. The barrier erected by sin has been broken, and we can draw near to God in the perfect worship of the new covenant.

Reflection and discussion

- How has my human longing for fulfillment led me to worship God?
- How does worshipping through Jesus Christ make worship complete?

Sacrifice at the Heart of Worshiping God

Sacrifice was practiced by almost all ancient religions. In Israel, sacrifice took its own unique form through the centuries but with many parallels to the sacrificial practices of its neighbors in the ancient Middle East. The Bible depicts sacrifice as an element of human worship of God from the beginnings of humanity, as illustrated in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–4). As in all ancient sacrificial worship, the victim becomes a link between the world of those offering sacrifice and the transcendent realm: its body belongs to the physical world and its life belongs to the spiritual domain. The essential purpose of sacrifice is to maintain or reestablish unity with the divine world.

A significant part of Israel's Torah describes its sacrifices. The altar was a focal point for Israel's worship, and priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the whole community of Israel or on behalf of individuals who brought animals or other fruits of their lives for sacrifice. Leviticus describes several types of animal sacrifices, each differing in the purpose and details of its offering. The burnt offering (Lev 1) consisted of a sacrifice to God in which an unblemished animal was ritually slaughtered, its blood dashed at the base of the altar, and its flesh was consumed in the fire on the altar. The sacrifice of well-being or peace (Lev 3) was offered on the altar, and its meat was then shared by the worshipers in a joyful meal.

For the sin offering (Lev 4), the person presenting the sacrifice laid his hand on the head of the animal victim in order to identify with it. The pouring out of the blood, which represents the life of the sacrificed victim, represents the self-offering of the person to God. The blood is sprinkled in the sanctuary, smeared on the horned corners of the altar, or poured out at the base of the altar to purge the effects of sin from the people, creating atonement with God.

Sacrifices were offered every day in the temple, consisting of burnt offerings of one lamb in the morning and one in the evening (Exod 29:38–39). The Torah describes the various types of sacrifices that were to be offered on each of the feasts of Israel: the new moon, Passover, Pentecost, New Year's Day, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths (Num 28—29). In addition, the firstborn son of human families, the first offspring of animals, and the firstfruits of each year's crop were regarded as belonging to God. The firstborn of clean animals had to be sacrificed to God; likewise, the firstfruits of the fields were offered to God. The firstborn sons, however, were not sacrificed; an animal was sacrificed as a substitute for them.

When we imagine the rituals of ancient Israel—animals slaughtered, the smoke of sacrifice rising every day from the altar, specific offerings required for every time and season—we may be tempted to think of Israel's religion as overly external and ritualistic. Yet we must remember that the sacrificial laws are rooted in the personal, covenantal bond between God and Israel. Sacrifice is an expression of that primary relationship, either deepening or renewing that bond. While the elements of sacrifice are symbolic—the animal, the blood, the altar, the burning, the eating—nevertheless, according to the faith

of Israel, the ritual elements actually bring about the deepened and renewed bond they symbolize. The covenant between God and Israel presupposes that the underlying disposition beneath the act of sacrifice is a pure heart seeking God. External rituals of sacrifice outwardly express the internal desires within individuals to worship God, repent of sin, and celebrate the covenant.

The prophets and priests of Israel played different roles in the covenantal life of the people, and they were continually in tension because they emphasized different aspects of the covenant bond. The priests were naturally concerned with carrying out the prescribed rituals and thus emphasized the external aspects of sacrifice. The prophets, however, were concerned with the heart. They criticized the status quo in Israel and were continually calling the people to reform and renewal—to return to the heart of the covenant. In matters of sacrifice, the prophets often challenged the ritualistic and external aspects and emphasized the everyday life of the people in relationship to God and their neighbors. They taught that external sacrifice could never substitute for justice and compassion and that leading a just life was necessary for offering sacrifice. Genuine worship was a matter of the heart as well as external actions.

In the writings of Micah the people ask how they are to worship God, and they propose various forms of sacrifice: holocausts, thousands of rams, offering the firstborn. The prophet replies that the people have already been told what God requires: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:6–8). The prophecies of Amos might sound like a rejection of ritual but are actually highly charged rhetoric proclaiming that exterior rites must be accompanied by right conduct and the practice of justice. The prophet speaks the word of the Lord: “Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:22–24). Hosea expresses what must be at the heart of ritual offerings: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).



He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. HEBREWS 1:3

God Has Spoken through His Son

HEBREWS 1:1–4 *¹Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*

The homily begins by affirming what is foundational for the Christian faith: God has spoken. God has not remained silent, hidden in darkness; rather, God has revealed himself to the world, bringing the light of truth to people longing for deliverance and purpose. This divine revelation has been given in two stages: the past and the present, corresponding to the old and new covenants respectively. In ages past, God spoke in a variety of ways through prophets, priests, kings, and sages. God spoke in storm and thunder to Moses, and in a small whisper to Elijah. Yet all these divine acts and varying modes of revelation did not add up to the fullness of what God had to say. “But in these last days,” the time described in the prophets as the

age of fulfillment, God has spoken through his Son, Jesus Christ. In him, God has now spoken his climactic, definitive, decisive word. In the past, God's revelation had been a series of progressive promises, but now, God has completed the plan, fulfilling all promises in the Son. Through the long biblical story, we can now see how wisely and carefully God had been preparing his people for the final gift of Jesus Christ.

Although God had been speaking in the past through servants, messengers, prophets, visions, and oracles, God's self-revelation through the Son is the fullest he can offer the world. The preacher now expresses a series of qualities, spelling out several distinct aspects of the Son's nature and saving work, showing why he is God's final and most complete self-communication.

First, the Son has been appointed by God as "heir of all things" (verse 2). This inheritance includes not only the bequest God gave to Abraham and his descendants but also what God promised to his Son in Psalm 2: "I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps 2:7–8). Yet the Son is also the one through whom God "created the worlds" and the one who "sustains all things by his powerful word" (verses 2–3). The truth that God brought the whole universe of space and time into being through the agency of his Son is confirmed by other writers: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3) and "All things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). But the creative word that calls the universe into being requires also a sustaining utterance by which it is maintained in being. So the Son, who was with God from the beginning of creation, is with God now in sustaining all things in existence, and in the future he will inherit the universe in its perfection.

As "the reflection of God's glory" (verse 3), the Son is the radiance that shines forth from the inner being of God into the world. He is God made visible, shining God's light into the hearts of God's people. As "the exact imprint of God's very being," the Son is the precise representation and embodiment of the Father. Like a stamp or seal makes an impression on a soft surface, what God essentially is, is made manifest in Christ. To encounter Jesus is to know in the fullest sense what God is like.

The preacher moves from describing the eternal and cosmic being of the Son to his personal relationship with humanity as our sacrifice and high priest. In Christ's saving death and resurrection, he has "made purification for sins."

The one through whom and for whom the universe was created is the one who has saved us from the defilement of sin by freely offering his life to the Father on our behalf. Now he is seated “at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” an image that denotes the position of highest honor and authority in the kingdom. At his Passion, Jesus applied Psalm 110 to himself in which God says to his anointed one, “Sit at my right hand” (Ps 110:1; Luke 22:69). He is now exalted in glory and intercedes for us eternally before the Father, holding a position and a name that is far superior to even God’s highest creatures, the angels.

Reflection and discussion

- What are some of the ways I have experienced God “speaking” to me?
- How attentively do I listen to God’s voice as it comes to me in the Scriptures?
- Which of the Son’s unique qualities listed in these verses is most helpful to me in understanding why he is God’s most complete revelation?

Prayer

Creator God, you have spoken throughout the history of salvation in partial and various ways. Speak to me now through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help me to marvel at how he who sustains the entire universe also forgives my sins and those of each person in the world.