

“NEW AND IMPROVED”

I. Introduction

- A. We are all familiar with the phrase ‘new and improved.’
 - 1. We also know from experience that not everything that is new is always an improvement.
 - 2. I am reminded of this whenever I download updates to programs on my computer, which often create more problems than they fix.
 - 3. While we certainly benefit from our society’s commitment to constant innovation, we also know that there is truth in the saying, ‘They don’t make ‘em like they used to.’

- B. In Hebrews 8, we learn about something new that truly is a vast improvement upon that which preceded it.
 - 1. The writer continues to focus upon the priestly ministry of Jesus, showing how his ministry stands in contrast to that of the Levitical priests under the Mosaic covenant.
 - 2. This chapter explains two more ways in which Jesus’ new covenant ministry is an improvement over that old covenant ministry.
 - 3. First, while the old covenant ministry had to do with an earthly copy, the new covenant ministry has to do with the heavenly reality.
 - 4. Second, while the old covenant contained a works-element, the new covenant is established on God’s unilateral promise.

II. Earthly Copy vs. Heavenly Reality (vv. 1-6)

- A. We begin by looking at verses 1 through 6, where the writer contrasts the old covenant’s focus upon an earthly copy with the new covenant’s focus

upon the heavenly reality.

1. The writer of Hebrews was a skilled rhetorician, and one of the marks of this skill is the ability to ensure that your audience understands the main point of your discourse.
 2. As one of my preaching professors used to tell us, good pulpit communication consists of three basic things: first, tell them what you are going to tell them; second, tell them; and third, tell them what you've just told them.
 3. The matters that are dealt with in this letter are difficult to explain, as the writer admitted back in chapter 5.
 4. This is why he pauses here to make sure that his readers are following what he is saying.
 5. He tells them in verse 1 that the point of what he is saying is that we have a high priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.
- B. The details contained in that statement are of great significance.
1. First, the fact that our high priest is seated sets him in contrast to the Levitical priests.
 2. The priests of the old covenant were never seated in the sanctuary because their work was of a perpetual nature.
 3. They had to offer sacrifices over and over again.
 4. But Jesus is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly sanctuary, which means that he has completed his priestly work once and for all.
 5. His sacrifice on the cross secured forgiveness for all who look to him in faith.

- C. It is also significant that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God's throne.
1. The seat at the right side of a king's throne is the place of power and authority.
 2. Jesus was in an estate of humiliation during the period of his earthly ministry, but now he is in an estate of exaltation on the basis of his finished work.
 3. He has been glorified in his office as the only Redeemer of God's elect.
- D. It is also significant that Jesus is seated in heaven.
1. This is another sharp contrast with the Levitical priesthood under the Mosaic law.
 2. Those priests served in an earthly sanctuary, but Jesus serves in the heavenly sanctuary.
 3. The writer refers to the heavenly sanctuary as "the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."
 4. The tent (or tabernacle) that was built under Moses was not the real thing but a mere copy.
 5. It served its purpose for a time, but that time is now passed.
 6. Israel's tabernacle/temple was like an architect's model of a building.
 7. It was imperfect because it was symbolical in nature.
 8. It was not the reality, but only a shadow that pointed to it.
- E. Another area of contrast is that the heavenly sanctuary was set up by the Lord, while the earthly one was set up by man.

1. This underscores the fact that redemption is the Lord's work, not man's.
 2. It has to be the Lord's work, because man and his works are unstable and impermanent.
 3. Paul even uses this 'tent' terminology in reference to our physical bodies in 2 Corinthians 5, where he writes, "For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (v. 1)
 4. The fact that Jesus ministers on our behalf in the transcendent heavenly realm means that our salvation is based on a reality that will never change or fade away.
- F. The writer says that the earthly tabernacle was built "according to the pattern" that was shown to Moses on Mount Sinai.
1. This is a citation from Exodus 25:40, where the Lord instructs Moses about the construction of the tabernacle.
 2. The term 'pattern' calls our attention to the typological nature of the old covenant and its ministry.
 3. Heaven is the place where God's presence dwells in unveiled glory, but for a time God caused his presence to dwell in an earthly sanctuary in order to point his people to the heavenly reality that it symbolized.
 4. There was spiritual meaning in the details of the Old Testament tabernacle/temple, even though it was not the real thing.
- G. In verse 6, the writer says that Christ's ministry is more excellent than the old because the covenant that he mediates is enacted on better promises.
1. This doesn't mean that Old Testament saints didn't have the same hope that we have as believers today.

2. They too had the hope of eternal life through faith in God's gracious provision for the forgiveness of their sins.
 3. They were saved by faith in Christ alone just as we are, even though they knew far less than we know about how God would provide for his people's justification.
 4. What the writer means when he says that the new covenant was enacted on better promises is that the old covenant promised temporal blessings on condition of obedience.
 5. In other words, the old covenant had a works-element in it.
 6. Of course, the works of the Israelites could not in any way secure their salvation, but their national faithfulness to the covenant would have enabled them to continue as a holy nation in the Promised Land.
 7. Israel failed to live up to that, and in doing so they demonstrated their need for a better covenant, a covenant that promises spiritual blessings through faith in Christ alone.
 8. As we will see in a moment, the writer further illustrates this point in verses 7 through 13 by citing God's promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31.
- H. If we understand what the writer is saying in verses 1 through 6, we will have a clear sense of why going back to the old covenant is so utterly unthinkable.
1. The new covenant has to do with the reality.
 2. The old was only a shadow.
 3. Going back to the old would be like going to a restaurant, reading the menu description of a delicious-sounding entree, ordering it, and then, when it arrives, pushing it aside so that you can keep salivating over the description in the menu.

4. The old covenant ministry certainly had its place.
5. It pointed forward to the reality that would eventually come in Christ.
6. But now that Christ has come, the old has become obsolete.

III. Works-Element vs. Unilateral Promise (vv. 7-13)

- A. We turn now to verses 7 through 13, where the writer explains another way in which Jesus' new covenant ministry is an improvement over the old covenant ministry.
 1. The writer uses God's promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 to show that while the old covenant contained a works-element, the new covenant is established on God's unilateral promise.
 2. In a general sense, a covenant is any kind of commitment, promise, or oath that binds two or more parties together.
 3. Or as the authors of the book *Sacred Bond* explain, "a covenant is a solemn agreement with oaths and/or promises, which imply certain sanctions or legality." [17]
 4. The passage cited from Jeremiah talks about two covenants.
 5. God promises that a day is coming when he will establish a new covenant with his people, a covenant that will be different than the covenant that he made with their fathers when he brought them out of Egypt.
 6. In other words, this new covenant is new in relation to what we refer to as either the Mosaic or Sinai covenant.
- B. This passage shows us that the thing that makes the new covenant new is that old covenant had a works-element in it.

1. The Israelites did not continue in the Sinai covenant, and this resulted in their failure to obtain what it promised.
 2. While Sinai was ultimately an administration of God's gracious promise to save his people from their sins, the temporal blessings that were promised at Sinai were conditional in nature.
 3. Those temporal blessings were based upon the people's performance of the law.
 4. We see this in Leviticus 20, where God says this to his people: "You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land may not vomit you out." (v. 22)
 5. This leads John Owen to conclude that "'The old [covenant], absolutely considered, had no promise of grace to communicate spiritual strength, or to assist us in obedience.' What it promised had to do with 'temporal things in the land of Canaan.'" [cited in Brown and Keele, 138]
 6. The conditionality of the Sinai covenant rendered it weak and precarious, not because of any inherent flaw in God's law but because of our inability to fulfill what the law requires.
 7. Israel's failure to abide by the law meant that they could not remain as God's holy nation in the land of Palestine.
- C. The weakness of the old covenant pointed to the need for another covenant, one that was not conditional in nature but instead rested upon God's unilateral promise.
1. This is the covenant that is set forth in Jeremiah 31.
 2. In this covenant, God promises to implant his law in his people's hearts.
 3. In other words, he promises to give us new hearts, hearts that desire to obey God and that have the ability to do so.

4. We begin to experience this renewal of the heart as soon as we place our trust in Christ.
 5. We are born again, set free from slavery to sin, and given a renewed will that seeks to please God out of gratitude for his grace.
 6. And while our obedience as Christians will always fall far short of perfection in this life, a day is coming when it will be perfect.
 7. When we are with Christ in glory, we will live in full conformity to God's will.
- D. The passage in Jeremiah also says that the new covenant brings about a change with reference to our knowledge of the Lord.
1. It says that God's people "shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."
 2. Of course, this does not mean that there is no longer a need for teachers in the new covenant.
 3. Other passages in the New Testament make it clear that Christ continues to work through the church's teaching and ruling offices to bring his people to maturity in the faith.
 4. It would go directly against God's Word for someone to conclude that Jeremiah 31 means that Christians have no need of teachers.
 5. As Calvin puts it, "As then Christians, as long as they live, ought to make progress, it cannot surely be said, that any one is so wise that he needs not to be taught; so that no small part of our wisdom is a teachable spirit. And what is the way of making progress if we desire to be the disciples of Christ? This is shewn to us by Paul when he says [in Ephesians 4], that Christ gave pastors and teachers."

6. What is being expressed in Jeremiah's prophecy is the goal of this new covenant, a goal whose fulfillment has yet to be fully realized
 7. The new covenant describes the age to come.
 8. And while this future age has already broken into this present evil age, it has not yet reached its point of consummation.
 9. There will come a time when we don't need teachers anymore, but that time has not yet come.
- E. The other thing that sets the new covenant apart from the Sinai covenant is that it provides forgiveness of sins.
1. God promises, "I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."
 2. Notice how this stands in such sharp contrast to what God said about Israel's failure to keep the Sinai covenant up in verse 9: "For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them."
 3. Under the old covenant, unfaithfulness resulted in the loss of God's favor as far as the temporal blessings that that covenant promised were concerned.
 4. Of course, the sacrifices offered under that covenant did point to God's provision of forgiveness through Christ, but those sacrifices did not actually secure forgiveness.
 5. If they had, they would not have been offered over and over again.
 6. The promise of forgiveness in the new covenant rests upon Christ's perfect once for all sacrifice on the cross.
- F. It is on the basis of Christ's sacrifice that God promises that he will remember our sins no more.

1. And this promise is not just in reference to the sins that we have committed in the past.
2. It is in reference to all of our sins, whether past, present, or future.
3. This leads Calvin to say this: "And it must be observed that this pardon is promised to them, not for one day only, but to the very end of life, so that they have a daily reconciliation with God... And doubtless this is the only true asylum of our faith, to which if we flee not, constant despair must be our lot. For we are all of us guilty; nor can we be otherwise released than by fleeing to God's mercy, which alone can pardon us."
4. This is the crux of what makes the new covenant superior to the old covenant, what makes the gospel superior to the law.
5. As long as our standing with God is based upon how we measure up to what he requires of us, we have no hope.
6. But when our standing with God is based upon his free promise to forgive all of our sins, to remake us after his image, and to bring us into communion with himself, then we have a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls.
7. Because we have Christ as our great high priest, we have a hope that enters into the true tent and is able to save us to the uttermost.