

Sermon 42, New and Improved, Hebrews 8:6-13

Proposition: Jesus' new covenant ministry is superior to the Levitical ministry in at least seven ways, as enumerated by Jeremiah in his prophecy of the new covenant.

- I. Jesus Has a More Excellent Ministry than the Levitical Priests, v. 6a
 - A. He Is Mediator, v. 6b
 - B. He Serves a Better Covenant, v. 6b
 1. Its Promises Are Better, v. 6c
 2. It's Not Like the Sinai Covenant, vv. 9-10
 - a) It Won't Be Broken, v. 9c
 - b) It Won't Write the Law (only) on Stone Tablets, v. 10
 3. It Writes God's Law on the Heart, v. 10b
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 - a) God Does More to Bring People to Know Him
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- II. Jesus' More Excellent Ministry Renders the Sinai Covenant Obsolete, v. 13

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to Jeremiah's magnificent prophecy of the new covenant. As I told you last week, the new covenant actually existed before the old, for the old covenant is a copy of the new covenant. But though the new covenant as to substance existed prior to the old covenant, the name "new covenant" was first revealed in the prophecy of Jeremiah around the year 600 B.C., very close to the time when Israel was carried away into exile. At this time, as part of a larger series on the restoration that God would bring to Israel after the exile, Jeremiah prophesied about the new covenant that the LORD was going to make with the house of Judah and also with the long-vanished house of Israel. In other words, this covenant is going to be with all the people of God. The Hebrew writer quotes this prophecy in order to show us that Christ's new covenant ministry is superior to the Levitical ministry in at least seven ways. So let's dive in.

I. Jesus Has a More Excellent Ministry than the Levitical Priests, v. 6a

The point the author is making is stated clearly in the beginning of v. 6: Now, with the full establishment of the new covenant, Jesus has obtained a more excellent ministry. The heavenly worship that He leads, and the salvation He brings to us on earth, is far more excellent than the ministry of the Levitical priesthood under the old covenant. That ministry is excellent in a couple of key respects.

A. He Is Mediator, v. 6b

First, His ministry is better because He is the Mediator of a better covenant. The physical copy that Scripture calls the old covenant was not as good. The shadow was not as detailed. And so Jesus' ministry as mediator, standing between us and God, is better because He is fully one of us and fully divine as well. Aaron was not fully God. He could not mediate between Israel and God the same way that Jesus can mediate between us and God. Jesus is a perfect mediator of a better, spiritual, original, substantial covenant.

B. He Serves a Better Covenant, v. 6b

Now, in what respects precisely is this covenant better? The writer, quoting Jeremiah, gives us a list of at least seven ways in which the new covenant is better than the old covenant. Obviously, his application of this is to encourage us to relate to God through the new covenant, and not to attempt to relate to Him through the old covenant. Let's talk about the seven ways in which the new covenant is superior.

1. Its Promises Are Better, v. 6c

First, its promises are better. The promises of the old covenant were physical copies of the spiritual promises of the new covenant. I listed some of them for you last week. Let me tell them to you again.

Heaven copied into earthly terms looks like land. Christ copied into earthly terms looks like Aaron. Heaven as God's dwelling place looks in earthly terms like a small portable tent shrine. The moral-spiritual law of God that reaches the heart and commands the mind looks in earthly terms like static letters engraved on obsidian. The prophetic ministry of Jesus, who reveals the Father, looks in earthly terms like Isaiah taking his son to the highway to the Fuller's Field. And the kingly ministry of Jesus looks like David sitting in a palace in Jerusalem and ruling a few thousand square miles.

The promises of the new covenant are God with us, the fullness of God in human flesh, God not just living next door in a tent but God actually being one of us. The new covenant promises eternal life in heaven instead of long life on earth. The new covenant promises living water and living bread instead of milk and honey. The new covenant promises — well, let's look at Jeremiah's summary.

2. It's Not Like the Sinai Covenant, vv. 9-10

The first promise that the Lord includes is the promise that the new covenant won't be like its physical copy, the Sinai covenant. He lists two points of difference between the Sinai covenant and the new covenant.

a) It Won't Be Broken, v. 9c

The first, and perhaps in one sense the greatest of all these promises, is that the new covenant endures! The people broke the Sinai covenant and God stopped caring for them. After all, once the covenant was shattered, in a certain sense the relationship was over. God had promised to be their God by covenant, and the covenant was a two-way street. At Sinai, they had promised to do all that the Lord had spoken. Then they didn't. Indeed, within a few days they were worshipping

the Golden Calf. The Sinai covenant was broken almost before the blood was dry on the base of the altar.

In that respect, then, the new covenant is clearly infinitely superior to the old. The old covenant was fragile. The old covenant could be destroyed by sinful human beings. And as we know, anything that can be destroyed by sinful human beings eventually will be. That's why we constantly hear about climate change. If we can break the earth by our foolishness, then guess what is bound to happen at some point. That's right: We're going to break the earth.

Well, the old covenant was fragile and subject to being broken. And sure enough, Israel broke it to the point where God no longer was able to relate to them through that covenant. As the writer will say at the end of this chapter, the Sinai covenant is about to be obliterated. That happened, as I mentioned last week, when the Romans entered and tore the temple down stone by stone.

The new covenant can't be broken by sinful human beings, because Jesus is the surety. Whatever we do wrong, Jesus will pay the bill. However we sin, He will pick up the tab. That's why the new covenant is not a china vase. It's an unbreakable tank. It's stronger than steel, more lasting than the mountains, more capacious than the sea. That's because it is underwritten on both sides by the inexhaustible riches of the Almighty.

In some ways, we could simply stop the sermon right here. The new covenant can't be broken! That alone makes it infinitely superior to the old one.

b) It Won't Write the Law (only) on Stone Tablets, v. 10

But of course there's more — far more. The old covenant featured the law written on stone tablets. This is an image that, for the apostles as well as Jeremiah, sums up the nature of the old covenant as a physical copy of the heavenly reality summed up in the new covenant. The Dutch churches in the Reformation era used to have the Ten Commandments painted on the wall in gold letters on black stone tablets. It is a pretty cool sight, and I hope you've had the privilege of seeing it reproduced in Dutch art from the period.

But far better than this writing of the law on stone is the writing of the law on the heart. What does this refer to? It means that the new covenant restores to us what we had by creation. The Gentiles by nature do the things in the law because the law is written on their hearts. So says Paul in Rom 1. Are Gentiles already members of the new covenant? No. Rather, the apostle is saying that every human being is born with knowledge of the law. It is implanted in us by creation. When God moves to save us, He rewrites the law in our hearts. He restores to us what we had by creation and lost by sin, and He restores it to us better — just as Heaven is better than Eden.

The old covenant did not write God's laws on the heart. It wrote them on the stone and said to the people, "If you want to know the law, go look at the stone." In other words, God did not operate so directly on the heart in the old covenant. The new covenant is different. The great symbol of Sinai is the two tablets of the law, written with the finger of God and broken by Moses before he could even get them off the mountain. But the great symbol of the new covenant is something else.

3. It Writes God's Law on the Heart, v. 10b

It is, in fact, a living human being whose heart is full of the law of God, and in whose life that heart law comes to full expression. The heart is the source of everything you do. And so if it is shaped by God's law directly, then in the new covenant you will be able to obey God more directly and intuitively, from the heart and not just from an external knowledge of His will.

In short, God promises to conform your heart to His law in the new covenant. He will not just renew your knowledge of what He wants, but also your ability to keep it. This writing the law in the heart refers not to giving you better knowledge of how you're not measuring up, but rather to shaping your heart so that you love and obey the law.

In other words, God takes a more active role in the new covenant. Rather than copying the heavenly realities into physical and institutional forms, He does far, far more to implant those heavenly realities into the heart and life of the individual believer.

4. It Makes God Ours and Us His, v. 10c

The central promise of the new covenant is, however, identical with the central promise of the old: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." That promise appears in the preface to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God." And it appears in the declaration in Ex. 19, "if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine" (Exo 19:5 NAS). Even there, though, notice that in the Sinai covenant God included a condition: "If you obey my voice, you will be my people." In other words, knowing the human proclivity to sin, "You won't be my people."

But the new covenant does not include that conditional aspect. Because of Jesus' work to purchase us, we are simply His. Now, as I said last week, the new covenant already existed in the days of the old covenant. That's why Psalm 100 (for instance) can simply affirm "We are His people and the sheep of His pasture." That's why God already promised in Gen 17 that He would be God to Abraham and his seed. But the new covenant makes this permanent. The possibility of breaking the covenant, of being disregarded by God or rejected as covenant-breakers, is in a certain sense gone. Now, as the rest of Hebrews says clearly, apostasy is still a thing. You can still walk away, and if you do, look out. You will be more harshly condemned than anyone under the old covenant, for you are leaving behind much better promises. But one of the ways in which those promises are better is that apostasy is harder because God has written His law in your heart, shaping your heart to be more like His Son's.

5. It Grants a More Extensive and Intensive Knowledge of God, v. 11

In addition to the law — the moral knowledge, we could say, of how to obey everything Jesus commanded — God also promises that the new covenant will bring with it a far more extensive and intensive knowledge of God.

The knowledge is far more extensive. This is the simpler point in the verse. From the least to the greatest, everyone included in the new covenant will know God. The knowledge of God is universal under the new covenant. Apparently, Jeremiah is implying that not every member of the old covenant knew God. Not everyone who could call himself an Israelite knew God. Certainly that's the impression we get from texts like Judges 19. The Levite doesn't seem

to know the first thing about the character of Yahweh. Micah knows even less. The knowledge of God seems to be absent both from the plan to wipe out Benjamin and then from the equally foolish plan to rehabilitate Benjamin. And of course, a lot of the kings both of Israel and Judah clearly did not know God.

But in the new covenant, every member of the covenant will know God. Now, we are not going to get here into the question of who, exactly, is a member of the new covenant. That question has vexed the church for centuries, for there seems to be a certain complexity or ambiguity in the biblical data. But we will stick to the writer's point: Those who are included in the new covenant will all know God, for the knowledge of the Holy One will be far more extensive under the new covenant.

The knowledge of God will also be more intensive. That is communicated through this enigmatic image of a man no longer teaching his neighbor and brother, saying, "Know the Lord." What is that image supposed to convey?

Well, first let's talk about what it doesn't imply. The promise that they will not teach others to know the LORD under the new covenant does not mean that you and I should stop encouraging one another to know the Lord. It does not mean that it will cease to be a moral duty to encourage others to know God. It does not mean that we can say "At last! No need for family worship, no need to train my children, no need to donate to missionaries or even go myself should I feel God's call. This is the new covenant era, bro, and now a man no longer needs to teach his neighbor and brother to know the Lord. What a relief!"

Clearly that's not what the passage means. That meaning is so obviously ungodly that I can't say anyone has attempted to advocate for it and find it in the passage. But another reading is undoubtedly popular and widely defended. That reading says we should no longer seek human teachers in the new covenant. Since we have all been taught by God, it is inevitably a step down — and an illegitimate step down — to listen to (say) R.C. Sproul or Charles Spurgeon, because to listen to their teaching is to stop listening to the Holy Spirit.

This interpretation, by which the teaching of the church is essentially obsolete because the Holy Spirit has now taken over the job of teaching the individual Christian, is absolute nonsense. Let me present to you three reasons why it can't possibly be true.

First of all, the passage is simply not referring to the public teaching ministry of the church. It describes informal, private conversations between a man and his neighbor, a man and his brother. It is not talking about how pastors will no longer gather the people and explain God's word to them, nor does it describe such a situation. It very much describes informal, private teaching from charity — not public teaching from authority within the church.

Secondly, if the passage does indeed forbid private teaching, then the advocates of such a view are not allowed to spread it. The passage forbids them to do so. They may not teach every man his neighbor and every man his brother. This is what they teach: "Stop going to church; stop listening to the teaching of men." But they are not allowed to do this, for this teaching is itself a teaching of men. So one cannot spread such a teaching without contradicting himself.

Third and finally, this interpretation is radically incompatible with passages like the one where Paul urges Timothy to work with his congregation “with all patience and teaching.” If the public teaching ministry of the church ceases in the new covenant, the apostle Paul seems to have missed the memo.

So we can say with certainty that this enigmatic statement does not mean that we no longer need to urge one another to know God, and that it does not mean that the public teaching ministry of the church is obsolete.

So what does it mean? Well, it means that the knowledge of God will be more intensive in the new covenant. From the least to the greatest we will all know God. Essentially, the metaphor tells us that there will be less need for private evangelism in the new covenant than there was in the old, because God will do more to bring people to know Himself.

6. It Makes Evangelism Better, v. 11

I term this “making evangelism better.” God makes it better in two ways — one right now, and the other at the end of history, when the new covenant is consummated.

a) God Does More to Bring People to Know Him

In the new covenant, there is less need for men to exhort their brothers and neighbors to know God because God Himself has done more to reveal Himself and to teach us to know Him. I can and should still exhort my brother and neighbor to know God, but He is bringing people to the knowledge of Himself by His word and Spirit in all kinds of ways. This does not render evangelism obsolete, but it does make it better. I would look to the transition from Acts 1 to Acts 2 as an illustration. In Acts 1 there are 120 disciples of Jesus, and they are terrified. In Acts 2, God works (through Peter’s public preaching) and 3000 more join them — and the disciples grow in confidence through seeing God work.

They didn’t stop evangelizing; rather, their evangelism got better.

b) At the Consummation, All Will Know God

We should also note that the ultimate fulfillment of this promise, as with the rest of God’s promises, will be at the second coming. When Jesus returns and finishes setting the world right, all those in the covenant will know God. In heaven, there will be no evangelism, just unending love and praise.

This will come about when the new covenant reaches its consummation at the return of the Christ. Until then, this is the situation we labor for — the time when no one else will need to hear about Jesus, because everyone already knows Him.

7. It Truly Removes Our Sin, v. 12

Finally, the seventh way in which the new covenant is superior to the old is that it truly removes our sin. The old covenant, as a physical copy of the heavenly realities, could not truly remove sin. It could remove a physical copy of sin, as it were. It could cleanse ritual defilement. But the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. The new covenant, and specifically the death of Jesus Christ the testator, pays for our sins and takes them away.

II. Jesus' More Excellent Ministry Requires the Obsolescence of the Sinai Covenant, v. 13

So those are seven ways in which the new covenant is superior to the old. As with the promise of a new priesthood, the very promise of a new covenant renders the old superannuated and ready to vanish away. And yes, the old covenant did finish vanishing away when the Levitical institutions and their physical structures were thoroughly demolished by the Romans in 70 A.D. Jesus' more excellent ministry requires the obsolescence of the Sinai covenant. Just as cars have made horses and buggies obsolete, so Jesus' priestly covenant work has made the Mosaic-Levitical system obsolete. He can do what the Levitical system never could.

So know Him, in the new way of the Spirit and not the old way of the letter. The copy and shadow is very valuable as a teaching aid, but the substance belongs to Christ. Amen.