

The New Covenant

SERMON

By

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TEXT: Hebrews 8

PROP: Since God has graciously covenanted to be our God and since he has secured his covenant with his own Son we must seek to please him in our obedience and faithfulness.

Hebrews 8:1–13 (ESV)

¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” ⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. ⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ And they 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. ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” ¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

The Covenant of Grace was made -

Genesis 17:1–8 (ESV) — 1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, **“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,** **2** that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may

multiply you greatly.” But even though Abraham was a great example of faith he was not blameless.

There is a great distance between God and man. God is completely and absolutely separate from sin. Man on the other hand is totally depraved. We will not and cannot by nature do what is morally right. God is holy and we are not. God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in all his attributes and we are just the opposite, finite, temporal and changeable. If God had not acted in our behalf, if he had not condescended to set his love on us no one would be saved. No one would ever know the blessedness of fellowship God or enjoy the blessed hope of eternal life. But God, in his infinite mercy and love was pleased to covenant with us to deliver us from the bondage of our sin.

The covenant given to Moses reminds us that the covenant promises were administered sovereignly. The line of Christ proceeded in the most unlikely manner through history. It was not the great and mighty or the oldest son, or the most righteous and holy through whom the promised Messiah came but through sinful people saved by grace. And again God demanded perfect obedience. Moses was to be intolerant of evil but like all of us he often failed to obey God. Because God loves us with ardent love, because he is jealous for his people, he saves us even though we sin against him so dreadfully. Therefore we are to be singular in our commitment to God and in our worship of him. The covenant promises depend on Christ. He is the one whose perfect obedience fulfills the laws demands.

Now we come to a text that informs us of a new covenant which is much better than the one given to Abraham and Moses. In a sense it renders the old covenant obsolete. The old covenant was administered by types and shadows of things to come to use the terminology of our text. And the old covenant had certain faults but we must remember that the old covenant was still wonderful.

I. The wonderful old covenant.

Hebrews 8:3–5 (ESV) — 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. **4** Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. **5** They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”

God did many wonderful things for his people. Though a comparison is made here between the old covenant and the new one we must not think the old covenant was worthless. It may be inferior to the new but it is certainly not without merit. We notice here that the priests offer both gifts and sacrifices. How great a thing this is that God almighty would stoop to receive the worship of sinners as they bring gifts to him. Was it not a wonderful thing for Abraham to be blessed by God along with all his descendants? We all long for the blessing of our God and we pray to him daily for his grace but here YAHWEH appeared to Abram and promised to bless him and to establish himself as God to him and to his descendants after him. Can we say that this was worthless?

God blessed Abraham with a son named Isaac through whom the Messiah came. Surely this was a blessing beyond compare. God has never appeared to any of us the way he did to Abraham. What rich and deep covenantal blessings indeed! Not only to Abraham did God give his grace but to the whole world. Notice how this is put in

Hebrews 6:13–20 (ESV) — 13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, **14** saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” **15** And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. **16** For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. **17** So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, **18** so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. **19** We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, **20** where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Why did God go to such lengths to confirm his covenant oath? Was it not for our own consolation and hope as well as the consolation and hope of Abraham? What a wonderful thing. It is to the sure promises of God that we flee for refuge. It is to these wonderful promises of God that we anchor our souls. True, it is Christ who makes our salvation certain through his death for us on the cross but the death of Christ rendered certain the covenant given to Abraham and Moses as well. Here is the great YAHWEH God who is jealous for us as he was for the fathers of old. Obsolete? Worthless? Well compared to the new covenant and in a limited sense yes, but in fact no, not at all.

Christians look forward with a sure hope to the eternal blessings of being with Jesus forever in glory. Paul calls this the blessed hope. And the point is that this was Abraham's hope as well as ours. To Israel of old God provided Priests to represent them before the God's presence in the glory that dwelt in the cloud. He gave Moses instructions to build the beautiful tabernacle or "tent of Meeting" where he was pleased to meet with his people through their representatives. Can we see the wonderful grace of God here. All of this was done for the salvation of Israel. Every part of the tabernacle was a type of Christ, Israel's Savior. How is it possible to comprehend the mercy of God in providing such a wonderful means of salvation.

Hebrews 9:19–23 (ESV) — 19 For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, **20** saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." **21** And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. **22** Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. **23** Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

The point again is that the sins of Israel **were** remitted through the blood of the sacrifices. And these shadows and copies **were** in fact purified with the blood of the sacrifice. We will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David and all the rest in heaven because God was pleased to save them. Thus we see that the old covenant was in fact far from being worthless and obsolete. But when we compare it to the new covenant it is as if the old were but a mere shadow of the glories of the new. How can the tongue express such glories?

II. The better new covenant.

Hebrews 8:7–13 (ESV) — 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. **8** For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, **9** not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. **10** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their

hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **11** And they 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. **12** For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." **13** In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

The substance of this part of Hebrews 8 is a quote of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in which God promises to make a new covenant with his people. As we consider this passage in Jeremiah we must not forget Paul's teaching in

Ephesians 2:11–13 (ESV) — 11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— **12** remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:19–22 (ESV) — 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Therefore what God said to Jeremiah applies to all, Jews and Gentiles alike, who are covered by the blood of Christ. Although Jeremiah mentions only the house of Israel and the house of Judah, this promise belongs to all who by faith belong to Christ. It is very important that we understand this. That having been said, let us take notice of the substance of the new covenant. Look again at verse 10

Hebrews 8:10 (ESV) — 10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, **and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

This is precisely the substance of the old covenant given to Abraham and Moses so what is new?

Ten times in these chapters the writer of Hebrews uses the word better to refer to the administration of the new covenant. Consider, for example, what a great man was Melchizedek, priest of אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן God Most High, king of righteousness, king of peace. Abraham paid tithes to him. Yet Jesus is a better High Priest because unlike Melchizedek-

Hebrews 7:22–25 (ESV) — 22 This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. **23** The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, **24** but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. **25** Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

The new covenant is not better in substance but it is better because its High Priest is Jesus. Human priests died and the priesthood changed as the result. But Jesus is infinite and eternal therefore, as Aaron could never do, Jesus saves surely and completely, perfecting what he has begun, and always lives to make intercession for his people. Because Jesus is our high priest the new covenant is infinitely better than the old. When something infinite is compared to something that is finite or earthly that which is earthly appears to be obsolete, faulty and worthless. But looking at it from our viewpoint even that which is worthless by comparison is marvelous and wonderful.

In chapter 10 of Hebrews Paul shows us that the sacrifice of Christ is infinitely greater than the sacrifice of animals.

Hebrews 10:1–4 (ESV) — 1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. **2** Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? **3** But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. **4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**

Hebrews 10:8–10 (ESV) — 8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), **9** then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the

second. **10** And by that will **we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.**

The old covenant was administered by animal sacrifice and these sacrifices had to be made every day through every year. The shedding of blood had to be made continually to make an atonement for our sins. But the death of Christ, the shedding of his blood, was done only once. "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Not only that but all the previous sacrifices were made efficacious by the death of Christ. As Paul points out, "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins." That is to say, without the blood of Christ, all the blood of animals shed for those thousands of years would be worthless. Can we not understand the infinite worth of the blood of Christ? The blood of Christ is infinitely better than the blood of bulls and goats and that is what makes the new covenant so much better than the old.

Instead of promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover lamb, the tabernacle and all the rest, the new covenant is administered with the preaching of the word, baptism and the Lord's Supper. These ordinances are fewer in number and far more simple. However, these ordinances are far more glorious, far deeper and richer in meaning and they apply to all nations not just Israel and Judah. In this manner the covenant of grace is new but its substance remains the same. God establishes himself as God to all his people throughout all of human history. **"I will be a God to you and to you descendants after you."**

III. Application.

What does all this mean to us? The sheer magnitude of the sacrifices requires that we take our sin seriously. Consider what was necessary to effect the atonement for your sin. Millions of animals were put to death over the years to deal with the problem of sin. On the occasion of the dedication of the temple alone Solomon sacrificed 22,000 bulls and 120,000 sheep.

John writes, "... he (Jesus) went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron" (John 18:1). In commenting on this verse L. Kent Hughes wrote: "A drain ran from the temple altar down to the Kidron ravine to take away the blood of sacrifice. Since it was the Passover, more than 200,000 lambs would be slain in the next day. When Jesus and His band crossed the Kidron, it was red with the blood of the lambs prepared for sacrifice."

Then there was all the purification ritual of the priest before he could perform the sacrifice. Do you really have trouble with the declaration that every sin deserves. The wrath and curse of God? Do you think our sin is a small matter to God? Well consider that all of the ritual and all the millions of animals sacrificed was not sufficient to atone for our sin. It was necessary that God's beloved Son be taken by wicked hands and be crucified and slain in order to take away our sin and the sin of all who have gone before. We need to constantly come to God for forgiveness and repent of the sins that so easily beset us.

At the Soldiers' Cemetery in Nashville, Tennessee, a stranger was once seen planting a flower upon a grave. When asked if some relative was buried there, he replied: "No; when the war broke out, I was too poor to enlist, as I had a wife and seven children to support. I was drafted, but had no money to hire a substitute, and made up my mind to go. After I was all ready to start, a young man came to me."

"You have a large family," he said, "which your wife cannot take care of. I will go for you."

"He did go in my place, and at the battle of Chickamauga he was wounded and taken to Nashville, where he died. Ever since I have wished to come and see his grave. So I have saved up all the spare money I could, and came and found my friend's grave." He then took the head-board and fixed it into the ground at the head of the grave. It bore the soldier's name, and underneath were the words, "He died for me."

How we should thank God for his mercy in covenanting to be God to us and sealing the covenant with the blood of his dear Son. When we understand the new covenant and the strength of God's oath we have the strongest possible basis for hope that we shall be with Christ when we die. The problems and discouragements of this life drive us to take refuge in this great hope. As Paul says,

Hebrews 6:19–20 (ESV) — 19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, **20** where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Then there is the matter of our obedience, of our striving for perfection. It should be our constant goal to please God by our pursuit of holiness. God forbid that we should not continue in the Covenant of Grace given to us so freely and secured for us at so great a cost, the very blood of God. If the Ephesian elders

were to take heed to themselves surely all of us need to do the same. Let us not set our minds on earthly things but let us stand fast in the Lord.