

“The Better Promises of the New Covenant, Part One”
(Hebrews 8:7-13)

Introduction: As we continue in the book of Hebrews this evening, let us not miss the forest for the trees. The book was originally written to point out to those Jewish Christians who were tempted to go back to the Jewish ceremonial system to escape the persecution of Rome, the vast superiority of the New Covenant, and how the bringing in of the New Covenant puts an end to the Old. The New Covenant, after all, is the fulfillment of everything the Old Covenant was pointing to. The Old Covenant, with all of its priests, buildings, furniture, sacrifices and ceremonies was one grand picture of the person and work of the Messiah. Now that the Messiah had come and fulfilled all of those types and images, should the people of God now return to the pictures and forsake Christ? God forbid! No matter what it might cost them, no matter what persecutions they might have to face, they must continue to hold fast to Christ, to the realities of the New Covenant, for it is in these that they have eternal life. To go back to the old priests and the old sacrifices would mean that they would be destroyed along with them when God put an end to it. And this is exactly what happened to the Jews when the Lord sent His judgment upon them in 70 AD to finally put a complete end to the Old Covenant system. As the author says in the end of our passage this evening, “But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (v. 13).

Last week, the author to the Hebrews gave us one more comparison between the Old Covenant priesthood and that of the New Covenant. His main point was this: the Old Covenant priests offered gifts and sacrifices in a mere copy or shadow of the real tabernacle, sacrifices which could never remove sins, because they were only pictures, types of the true sacrifice which could. But Jesus is a minister in the true tabernacle, the one which is in heaven, a tabernacle which was not built by man, but by God. And He offered a better sacrifice, one which can remove sin, once and for all. By His own perfect blood, He entered that heavenly tabernacle, having obtained eternal redemption for all of His people (Heb. 9:11-12), now to appear in the presence of God for us. The sacrifice of Christ is what the animal sacrifices were pointing to. And with the shedding of His own blood, He has established a new covenant. And it is a better covenant. The author tells us that,

The New Covenant is a better covenant than that which was brought in through Moses, primarily because it has better promises than the Old Covenant.

Tonight, we will begin to see what these promises are.

I. But before we do, we need to have a better understanding of what the covenants are that he is contrasting and comparing, if we are to understand what the author says in this passage. This will take up most of our time this evening.

A. Notice verses 8 and 9, “Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect *a new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like *the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt*; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord.”

1. The New Covenant that He is speaking about here is the one that was prophesied by Jeremiah that God would enact in the future. It is the one which has the better promises.
 2. But the Old Covenant, which He speaks of here, is that covenant which God made with the people at Mount Sinai, that covenant which He made with His people on the day He brought them out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.
 3. This is important for us to see, if we are to understand the contrast between the two, and why it is that they differ so much.
- B. What exactly was the nature of that covenant which God made with Israel?
1. I think the simplest way to view it is to see it as a reenactment of the covenant of works, imposed upon or added to the Abrahamic covenant.
 - a. God made a covenant with Abraham. In that covenant, God promised him a land, a seed, and that his seed would be a blessing to all the nations.
 - (i) These promises were all fulfilled in one sense in the posterity of Abraham. They received the land of Canaan, they did become numerous, and it was through them that the Messiah eventually came.
 - (ii) But the New Testament tells us that these promises were really pointing to the New Covenant. They were all fulfilled in Christ, who is Abraham's seed, the One through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And they were fulfilled in the New Heavens and the New Earth, which are also to be brought in through the work of Christ, for in Christ, all things are made new.
 - (iii) The New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. We need to see this or we will miss the whole point.
 - (iv) In the New Covenant, the way of salvation is the same as it was in the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham is called the father of the faithful, because when God gave him this promise, Abraham believed God, and God counted it to him for righteousness. In other words, Abraham, through this covenant, was saved through faith in God. He was saved in the same way that you or I am saved. And when we believe on Christ, as He did, then we are justified, as he was, and are counted to be his seed in Christ.
 - b. But what about the Mosaic covenant, the Old Covenant that is talked about here? What is it, and how does it relate to the Abrahamic Covenant?
 - c. Paul tells us specifically what it is in chapter 3 of the book of Galatians. He writes, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as* crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture,

foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached *the gospel* beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE BLESSED IN YOU." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-- for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"- - in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:1-29).

- d. Here, Paul speaks of a similar contrast between the Old and the New Covenants that we have in Hebrews. He chides the Galatians, "Were you saved through the works of the Law, or were you saved by faith?" The obvious answer is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the only way in which the Spirit is given to any. This is the way that Abraham himself was saved.
- e. He says, "If this is true, then why are you turning back to the Law as a means of salvation? Why will you return to the Old Covenant ordinance of

circumcision to be saved?” Paul says later in this book, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you” (5:2). You cannot have it two ways. You cannot trust in circumcision and in Christ. If you turn to the one you will need to forsake the other. He says further, “And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law” (v. 3). If you should choose to receive circumcision as the path of salvation, then beware, for the Lord will require you to keep all of His holy Law! He says, “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (v 4). There are two ways and only two ways which God has ever held out to man by which he might be saved: it is either the way of works, or it is the way of faith. But there is only one man who has ever received life by the first way, the way of works, and that is Christ. Everyone else has miserably failed.

- f. The law can only bring cursing and not life. Why is this? It is not because there is anything wrong with the Law. It’s because there is something wrong with us. We can’t keep it. Paul writes, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them’” (3:10). The curse only comes when the Law is broken. But everyone who is of the works of the Law is under the curse. Therefore, everyone who is of the works of the Law has broken it. They have broken it not only in Adam, but also in their own lives. No one can be justified by law-keeping.
- g. If that is the case, then why was the Law given?
 - (i) Paul tells us in verse 19, “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made.”
 - (ii) Notice first that the Law was added. It was an addition. But an addition to what?
 - (iii) It was an addition to the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was the administration of the Covenant of Grace that I was speaking about earlier. The Law was added to it. The Old Covenant was a mixture of law and grace.
 - (iv) But these two things are opposed to one another. How can they be put together in one covenant? They are actually meant to work together. The Law was meant to show us our sins. It was added because of transgressions. It was a teacher, which was designed to lead us to Christ. It shows us our sins so that we will run to Jesus to be justified by His righteousness, once we realize that our own is bankrupt. Paul writes, “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (vv. 24-25).
 - (v) In the Old Covenant, the Law was meant to drive God’s people down to the foundation of the covenant in the Abrahamic promise, that they might receive the righteousness of faith. They were to seek the seed of Abraham through the types and shadows, that they might be justified through Him.

The problem for many of them was that they stopped seeking Messiah through the types, and began to live only with the types. They began to seek righteousness through the keeping of the Law.

- (vi) But Paul says that this could never be. This was not the reason the Law was given in the first place. He writes in verse 21-22, “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”
 - (vii) Does this mean that Adam could not have received everlasting life from God even if he had kept the covenant of works? No. Adam was an innocent and holy man. He had the ability to keep the law which the Lord had given to him. But those who were at Mount Sinai were of an entirely different nature. They were sinners. They could not keep the covenant of works. But again, the problem was not with the Law, it was with them!
- h. The main point that you need to see is this: that when the author to the Hebrews contrasts the New Covenant with the Old, he is not comparing the grace of the New Covenant with the grace of the Old. He is comparing the grace of the New with the legal and typological elements of the Old. He is comparing the New Covenant with the law which was added to the Abrahamic covenant. He is comparing the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise with the covenant of works. If you don't see this, then you will become confused when you see the list of promises.
- (i) Ask yourself these questions: Did the believers of the Old Covenant have the Law of God written on their minds and hearts? If they didn't, then how could the psalmist write this, “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; His steps do not slip” (Psalm 37:29-30). Or how could the psalmist pray this, “Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, and keep it with all *my* heart” (119:34)? This shows the work of the law already written in his heart.
 - (ii) Did the Old Covenant believers have God as their God, and were they His people? God told Moses to tell the people, who were in bondage in Egypt, “Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. *Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God*; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians’” (Ex. 6:6-7).
 - (iii) It is true that there is more than one way in which a people may be called the people of God, and He their God. We are not to assume from this that they were all saved, although they were all His covenant people. But surely this was true of Moses, and David, and Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and Daniel and many others.
 - (iv) Were there any under the Old Covenant who knew God in a saving relationship? Certainly those I just named were in that kind of a

relationship with God.

- (v) And were there any who had their iniquities and sins removed? If there weren't, then what did the psalmist mean where he wrote, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:10-12)?
 - (vi) We would not be able to make any sense of this comparison unless we see that the author is comparing the legal and typological elements of the Old Covenant with the New.
 - (vii) The Old Covenant promised life on the keeping of the Law. Paul writes in Galatians 3:12, "However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them.'" Just as the Lord said in Leviticus 18:4-5, "You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD." But it also condemned all men, because no one could keep it.
 - (viii) And every time they broke it, they had a picture of Christ held out before them in the sacrifices, the priests, the tabernacle and Temple, as they brought their animals to make an atonement. These things were not the blessings themselves, but they were pointing beyond themselves to the blessings, which those who would believe would receive at the hands of their merciful God.
 - (ix) John Owen writes, "The instructive ministry of the old testament, as it was such only, and with respect unto the carnal rites thereof, was a ministry of the letter, and not of the Spirit, which did not really effect in the hearts of men the things which it taught. -- The spiritual benefit which was obtained under it proceeded from the promise, and not from the efficacy of the law, or the covenant made at Sinai" (6:164).
2. This is the first covenant. And the author argues again concerning it as he did with the Levitical priesthood, "If it had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second."
- a. If the covenant at Sinai could have brought in righteousness, it would have. But it could not. And so it must move aside for the better covenant, the covenant which Christ inaugurated with His blood.
 - b. Next week, we will look more closely at the better promises which the new covenant has over those of the old.