

“A New Covenant”

The Eleventh in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 8:1-13; Jeremiah 31:31-37

It was the eminent philosopher and New York Yankee catcher Yogi Berra who once said “when you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Well, the author of Hebrews has brought us to that point in his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ where we must now decide how we will understand the relationship between the old covenant (that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai) and the new covenant (the new era in redemptive history established by Jesus Christ). Is the new covenant an entirely “new” covenant made from scratch? Or is the new covenant the fulfillment of that covenant that God made with Abraham in which promise becomes reality? How you answer these questions determines where you go to church (a Baptist or a paedobaptist church), how you treat your children (as unbelievers, or as members of the covenant whose faith is to be nurtured), as well as your understanding of the end times (do the end-times center around national Israel?). Hebrews 8 is a theological fork in the road and we must take it.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews, and we now take up that section of this book in which the author argues that with the coming of Jesus Christ, God’s people enter the new covenant era foretold by the prophet Jeremiah, making the old covenant obsolete. As we have seen, the author has been using a number of biblical texts to prove that the Old Testament teaches that Jesus is both creator and sustainer of all things, and that Jesus’ eternal priesthood is tied to Melchizadek, that mysterious figure to whom Abraham paid tithes. Now the author makes the case that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is a fundamental shift in the nature and course of redemptive history. The inferior (the types and shadows) must give way to the superior (the reality that is found in Jesus Christ).

Given the fact that the author is writing to a church composed of people who were predominantly Jews, and who had recently become Christians, the author uses terms like “old covenant” assuming that his readers/hearers knew exactly what he meant. Since we are Christians (and predominantly Gentiles) and since we live nearly 2000 years later, we will need to carefully define the terms the author is using so as to make sense of his argument about the obsolescence of the old covenant, the dawn of the new covenant era, and the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood—an argument which runs through the end of chapter 10.

The first thing to consider is when the author speaks of the “old covenant” we should not take him to mean the Old Testament. Rather, when he speaks of the “old covenant” he is referring to that covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai.¹ Old covenant = Sinaitic covenant, not “Old Testament.” This means that the covenant God made with Abraham earlier remains in force throughout the whole time Israel (as a nation) was operating under the Sinaitic covenant. Keep this in mind as we proceed. It also means that the old covenant (i.e., the law, the priesthood, the temple, the land etc.) becomes obsolete once Jesus Christ fulfills everything God promised to Abraham on his sworn oath.

It is important to note that Paul makes this exact point in Galatians 3:15-18. *“To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring*

¹ Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 49.

to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise." Like Paul, the author of Hebrews is making the point that the old covenant is not like the covenant God made with Abraham. The covenant God made with Abraham 430 years before Moses is grounded in God's gracious covenant promise and solemn oath and is fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Sinai covenant, on the other hand, is a national covenant and depends upon Israel's obedience as a nation. The one (the Abrahamic covenant) is a gracious covenant, while the other (the old covenant) is founded upon a works-based principle, i.e., blessings through obedience to God's commandments, with curses threatened for disobedience.

A second thing is that when the author of Hebrews speaks of the new covenant, he is not speaking of the New Testament (as a collection of writings), but he is referring to that period of redemptive history following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (i.e., the New Testament era). Although Paul and the author of Hebrews emphasize different aspects of this gracious covenant, both Paul and the author of Hebrews make the case that the new covenant is grounded in God's promise made to Abraham, and is fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is a "new" covenant because promise has become reality. This is why it is better to think of the new covenant as a "newer" covenant, instead of thinking of it as an entirely (different) new covenant. In the author of Hebrews mind, the new covenant fulfills and supercedes the old covenant. But the new covenant is not a "do-over," a covenant made from scratch with little, if any, connection to the covenant promises God made to Abraham.

So, with these important definitions in mind, we now turn to our passage, Hebrews 8:1-13.

Having made the case that Jesus holds an eternal priesthood after the order of Melchadek, the author has argued that because of this Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant—that gracious covenant of promise, grounded in God's sovereign oath. Not only is Jesus a perfect priest offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) but he, unlike all those who have gone before, renders the people of God perfect. In chapter seven of Hebrews, the author has already introduced that theme that the law is inferior (and could make nothing perfect—v. 19). The law cannot secure the hope that comes through a living high priest who has conquered death and the grave ensuring that we can draw near to God in great confidence.

In chapter 8, the author builds upon the foundation he has already established in the earlier chapters, demonstrating why Jesus Christ's superior priesthood matters so much to the people of God. In verses 1-2 the author summarizes his case so far. *"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, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."* Jesus is the great high priest because he has conquered death and the grave. Jesus has ascended on high and has none of the limitations of human priests. Jesus need not offer sacrifices for himself because he alone is without sin. Jesus neither sleeps nor slumbers. His death turns aside the wrath of God, and since he himself is truly human and was tempted in all ways as we are tempted, yet without sin, our high priest truly sympathizes with us in all our human weakness and frailty. Unlike the priests of Israel who must continually repeat the sacrifices for themselves and for the people, Jesus is now in heaven where he is seated at God's right hand. His sacrifice was once and for all. This is the author's point, so far.

In affirming this as he does, we learn a great deal about how to understand the overall course of redemptive history, as well as how to read our Bibles. The reality is the heavenly temple where Jesus now sits at God's right hand. The tabernacle of the exodus is a copy (or a type) of the heavenly reality.

The tent (tabernacle) put up by the Israelites was designed by God to represent the heavenly reality that already is. The same is true of the Jerusalem temple built by Solomon, which was rebuilt when Israel returned to the land after captivity in Babylon, and which was renewed in its glory by Herod just before the coming of Jesus. The tabernacle and the temple were never intended to be ends in themselves—the temple and the tabernacle were designed to teach God’s people about the true temple, the true tent, i.e., the heavenly temple where Jesus has taken his place at God’s right hand. This what the Jewish people did not understand, and why they were so offended when Jesus spoke of himself as the true temple! The Jews saw themselves as God’s people because they had the law, the priesthood, and the temple! What more was needed except a return to national greatness? The Messiah will come and restore the nation. But what the Jews could not see is that all these things were given to Israel by God because they pointed ahead to Jesus Christ (the reality).

In verse 3 of chapter 8, the author of Hebrews turns to the nature of the sacrifices offered by the great high priest in the heavenly temple. *“For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.”* As he’s told us back in Hebrews 7:27, this priest *“offered up himself.”* The author will go on to spell this out with precision in Hebrews 9:11-14, *“but when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”* Jesus offered himself, once for all, a point which is emphasized in the original language.² The better priest has a much better sacrifice (perfect) which *has been* offered once for all.

The reason why it is so important to understand that Jesus’ eternal priesthood is tied to Melchizadek is because Jesus would never have been qualified to serve as one of the Israel’s priests, since his human genealogy is traced through Judah and not through Aaron and Levi. And so as we read in verse 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.”* The Levitical priesthood was tied to one biological line and one family. When viewed from an earthly perspective, Jesus was not a priest, and could not sacrifice. This is why the author has spent so much time establishing his case that Jesus’ priesthood is not an earthly, but a heavenly priesthood conducted in the heavenly temple. His point is that everything revealed under the old covenant was designed to teach God’s people to expect a great priest from the order of Melchizadek yet to come.

In verse 5, we are once again given a lesson as to how to read the Old Testament—as it is interpreted by Jesus and his apostles as revealed in the New Testament. The author writes, *“they [the earthly tabernacle and temple] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”* So, as we read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ, we see that all along these people and events were revealed to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah. We work from the types and shadows to the reality and fulfillment. This explains, for example, why God was so concerned that the temple be constructed with certain materials, and was laid out according to a precise blueprint. The same holds for the priests and their garments. As the author of Hebrews informs us, *“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.’”* The earthly type was to reflect the heavenly reality so that the tabernacle, and then the

² Bruce, *Hebrews*, 182-183.

temple later on, were graphic visual models and illustrations, as it were, of the unseen heavenly temple.

Because this is the case, Jesus the great high priest does not perform his duties in those earthly structures (the types and shadows) which merely pointed to the reality. Jesus fulfills his priestly duties in the heavenly temple. As we read in verse 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.”* The inferior pointed ahead to the superior. Jesus is the great high priest who offers the perfect sacrifice. His priestly office is heavenly and tied to Melchizadek’s, not earthly and tied to the Levites. Jesus’ work supercedes the type and shadow because his priestly work in the heavenly temple is the reality.

This is why we as Christians don’t sacrifice animals on Sunday, it is why we have ministers (who speak the words of Christ and administer his sacraments) and not priests (who seek to mimic what Christ has already done, once and for all). This is why we have a communion table and not an altar. Jesus shed his blood once for all, turning aside the wrath of God. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness by obeying the law perfectly (fulfilling it). Jesus has ascended on high and presently interceding for us, his people. This means the reality is now in heaven, not on earth. And yet because Christ is a better mediator of a better covenant we do indeed participate in his priestly work and office through his word and sacraments in the power of the Holy Spirit, who unites us our ascended Savior and high priest.

It is not as though the law (or the Sinaitic covenant) has failed, or is merely some sort of after thought. No. The law is holy, righteous, and good. The problem is not with the law. The problem is with us. We are sinful, and because we are, the law cannot give life, it gives us no power to obey its demands, and it cannot undo the effects of our sin. Therefore, the law punishes us by inflicting the covenant curse. The law exposes us for what we are—sinners. The law crushes us, and shows us that we cannot save ourselves. The law was given to drive us to Christ. As the author puts it in verse 7, *“for if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.”* The law does exactly what God intended it to do—it points us to Christ. If the law could remove our guilt in Adam, and if we could keep it perfectly, then there would be no need for a newer covenant—note: second here means coming after (i.e., later—first *then* second), and not does not mean that God does something entirely different—something of one kind (apples), followed by something of entirely different kind (oranges).

And so in verses 8-12, the author once again turns to the Old Testament to explain why the law cannot save—human sin. The author now cites the well-known prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31-34 (a portion of our Old Testament lesson) which does indeed foretell of a new and better covenant yet to come, a covenant which will not be like the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai (the old covenant). The reason why the old covenant will be superceded by a new and better covenant is found in the way in which the author introduces the citation from Jeremiah 31. *“For he finds fault with them.”* The Israelites did not and indeed could not obey the old covenant. Because the Abrahamic promise remains, and because the law cannot give life, God must restore Israel through the means of a new and better covenant.

And so he cites the words of Jeremiah 31:31-34. *“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, 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. 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. 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. For I will be*

merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

There are four important issues raised in Jeremiah’s prophecy and addressed by the author of Hebrews. **First**, Jeremiah foretells that because of human sinfulness (God found fault with the Israelites), the new covenant will be instituted by God. Jeremiah told the Israelites to expect this new covenant. “*Behold, the days are coming.*” The messianic mission of Jesus Christ should have been expected, and the Jews should have seen in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth the very thing Jeremiah foretold in this prophecy. Indeed, this new covenant will be established during the messianic age when God restores Israel and renews the tribe of Judah. Although the Jews saw this restoration in nationalistic terms (Israel will be a great nation again and free from Gentile oppression), the New Testament writers see this restoration in terms of the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ. We not only find this spelled out throughout the Book of Hebrews, but Jesus himself refers to this when he institutes the sacrament of his body and blood, at least in part, as a fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. In Luke 22:20, Jesus states “*this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*”

Second, the fact that God himself establishes the new covenant means it is a gracious covenant in which God will do everything necessary to affirm its ratification. Jeremiah is clear that the old covenant failed because Israel did not obey (i.e., continue) in the old covenant. So, if there is to be a new and better covenant, it must fulfill God’s earlier promise to Abraham, and this “newer” covenant must be grounded in God’s solemn oath, because God’s oath and promises cannot fail. It falls to the author of Hebrews to point out that the new covenant will have a perfect high priest (Jesus), who is the guarantor of a new and better covenant. This is why the author has been so adamant in affirming that God kept his covenant promise to Abraham in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The fact that the old covenant now has been superseded by the coming of Christ is another point emphasized throughout Hebrews.

Third, this new covenant will not be like that old—it will be established on much better promises with a much better mediator. The old covenant was a national covenant made with Israel as a nation at Mount Sinai. It was recorded on two stone tablets through a sinful human mediator (Moses) with a fading glory. But as Jeremiah declares in his prophecy, the new covenant will be written on the hearts of God’s people through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, its glory will not fade, since the indwelling Holy Spirit is elsewhere said to serve as a deposit guaranteeing the redemption of our bodies (cf. Ephesians 1:13-14). The old covenant was external and written on stone tablets. The new will be internalized, and written on both our minds and hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit, so that we truly know Jesus as our creator and redeemer. This point can be seen in Paul’s contrast between the letter and Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:6, when Paul says ministers of the gospel like himself are “*sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*”

Finally, the new covenant is grounded in God’s mercy and in the forgiveness of sin. God will remember our sin no more. All of this, of course, was fulfilled by the life and death of Jesus Christ the great high priest offering a sacrifice for sin which renders perfect the people of God. Although the old covenant was essentially founded upon the works principle of blessing and obedience, because God is merciful to his people, the Sinai covenant was administered as part of the unfolding covenant of grace which God had made previously with Abraham. The law (the ten commandments) promised blessings for obedience and threaten curses for disobedience, but God also gave the Israelites a priesthood, a tabernacle, and a temple so as to offer sacrifices for sin. These sacrifices were provisional and temporary. They pointed ahead to the death of the coming Messiah, Jesus. This is a theme to which the author turns in chapters 9 and 10. But the prophecy of Jeremiah revealed to Israel that when the restoration finally came, the problem of human sin would be dealt with in such a way that God himself will declare “*I will remember*

their sins no more.” Forgiveness comes through the promise given to Abraham, not through the law given to Moses.

After citing Jeremiah’s prophecy the author concludes in verse 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 law and the prophets belong to an age now gone. The age of types and shadows has given way to the reality that is Jesus Christ. When Jesus steps from eternity onto the redemptive historical stage, everything is fulfilled. Once the new covenant is established once and for all in the shed blood of Jesus Christ the time has come for the old covenant to vanish and like an old soldier, just “fade way.”

What, then, do we take with us from Hebrews 8 and the prophecy of a new covenant?

When the author of Hebrews speaks of the old covenant as obsolete, he does not mean that when Jesus appeared on the scene, God tore up everything that went before and then started over. He does not replace apples with oranges. It is not like replacing a Windows computer with a Mac. Nor does the author of Hebrews mean that the New Testament replaces the Old Testament (a common misreading of this redemptive-historical shift). What he does mean is that with coming of Jesus Christ all of God’s covenant promises are now fulfilled. Promise is now reality. God swore on his oath, and now he has accomplished everything he promised to Abraham through the dawn of the new covenant with its perfect priest and better promise. For those in the church receiving this letter this means that the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is now superceded and should vanish. It is time to let go of the inferior.

But there are very important ramifications for us as well. Those who come down on the side of continuity (as the Reformed do)—who see the Abrahamic covenant as still in force throughout the entire time the Sinai covenant was in existence, believe that the new covenant should be understood as a “newer” covenant of fulfilled promises, not a completely different covenant arrangement (apples and oranges). The old covenant was temporary and in force only from the time God gave Israel the law until the coming of Jesus Christ. The old covenant has been superceded, yet God’s gracious covenant based on his promise to save his people remains. From the moment Adam sinned in Eden and God promised to save him (Genesis 3:15), until the covenant with Abraham, until the covenant promise was reaffirmed to David (of a messianic king), until the time of Jeremiah’s prophecy, that original covenant promise stands because it is grounded in God’s oath, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the mediator of a new and better covenant (the covenant of grace).

This is why we, who are Gentiles and believing Jews, are together the spiritual children of Abraham—the descendants promised to the man of faith in Genesis 15. This is a huge point, and we must understand it correctly so we view the old covenant as superceded (rendered obsolete and null and void), and the Abrahamic covenant as fulfilled by Jesus Christ so that we live in the new covenant era (which is better covenant, with a better mediator, and with better promises).

Those Christians who come down on the side of discontinuity (as do many evangelicals, all dispensationalists, and most Baptists) see the new covenant as an entirely new (*de novo*) covenant with little or no connection to the promise God made to Abraham. When they speak of the Abrahamic covenant as fulfilled, they mean it too is no longer in force, and that we are now under an entirely new (different) covenant arrangement. Those who interpret the relationship of the old covenant to the new in this manner, naturally tend toward believer’s baptism (only professing believers can be baptized, baptism having no connection to circumcision), they tend to see children of Christian believers as unbelievers who need to be converted (not as members of the covenant to be baptized, and who then must profess

their faith in Christ when mature enough), and this leads many of them (especially the dispensationalists) to believe that God will deal with national Israel again at time of the end, since they do not believe that all of the promises (i.e., the land and the temple) are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

Beloved, we live in the new covenant era with much better promises and a much better mediator. We are children of Abraham because God always keeps his covenant promises, sworn on his sovereign oath, and now accomplished through the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. There has always been one gospel and one covenant of grace. We know this to be true because everything in the Old Testament points us ahead to a new and better covenant. And looking back we see that the promise has been fulfilled. The types and shadows have become reality. The old covenant is gone, replaced by that new covenant, ratified in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.