



21: Better Ministry, Better Covenant, Better Promises

Since chapter 4 the writer of the book of Hebrews has been proving, explaining and expanding his assertion that in Jesus we have a great high priest. He's been showing us that as our high priest Jesus is perfectly suited to our needs in every way and way better than any Old Testament priests could ever have been. In chapter 8 he continues along the same line. He's devoting a lot of space to it: clearly the point is important.

"Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.

For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah —
not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers
in the day when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of the land of Egypt;
because they did not continue in My covenant,
and I disregarded them, says the LORD.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the LORD:

I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
None of them shall teach his neighbour, and none his brother,
saying, 'Know the LORD,'
for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.
For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness,
and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."

In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

Hebrews 8:1 – 13

Jesus Ministry Is Better (Verses 1 – 6)

Jesus *ministry* on our behalf is far superior to the service that was performed by the priests of Old Testament times. The writer points out three ways in which it is.

1. Jesus is seated at the right hand of God (verse 1). No Old Testament priest ever sat in God's presence; he was merely allowed to approach at certain intervals.
2. Jesus is a minister of the true sanctuary (verses 2 – 5). In verses 3 and 4 the writer reasons that if He is a priest Jesus has to have something to offer and He has to have somewhere to offer it. He couldn't make His offering in the earthly tabernacle because there were priests who were already appointed to do that and He wasn't one of them. So, whilst they served in what was never anything more than a symbol — a copy and shadow — of heavenly things; Jesus serves in the true tabernacle that the Lord pitched. By the way, don't take this to mean that there is a literal tabernacle in heaven.
3. Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant based upon better promises (verse 6). The rest of the chapter is all about that better covenant, here the fact is just baldly stated: Jesus is seated in the very presence of God, the mediator of a better covenant.

- ◆ *What do you understand the word "mediator" to mean?*
- ◆ *What do you understand the words, "copy and shadow of the heavenly things" to mean?*
- ◆ *Jesus is a minister of the true tabernacle. How would you describe His ministry? What is it that He's doing?*

Covenant

The word that's translated covenant here is much broader in meaning than our English word. A covenant is a binding agreement, but it's more than that: it's a system or an order of things. A covenant is an agreement that governs the relationship between the parties involved by laying out their obligations to each other. But when you think of a covenant between God and men don't think in terms of a treaty between nations or a political agreement. To help us understand what He means by a covenant God has given us marriage: He has told us about the kind of relationship that ought to exist between a husband and his wife and described that as a covenant (Malachi 2:14). Bear in mind too that, whilst covenants between people are two-way agreements, in any covenant that binds God He alone must be the prime-mover: God can never be bound by anything that originates from sinful people.

- ◆ *What does the Bible's teaching about marriage add to your understanding of what the word covenant means?*

Covenants New And Old (Verse 7)

The system under which the children of Israel were placed by God when He gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai is what the writer calls the first covenant (verse 7). The obligation that covenant placed on Israel and the promise that went with it are summed up in the words of Exodus 19:3:

"If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples."

It was that system that the Old Testament priests served as mediators between God and the people. They offered sacrifices and made intercession to God on behalf of the people so that they could receive the benefits promised under the covenant.

What the writer calls the second covenant is the agreement that came into effect with Jesus. He is the mediator of that one and it's by His sacrifice and intercession that the benefits promised under it are

secured . The writer will show us that this second covenant is better on two counts: it's promises are better and, unlike the first covenant, it is without fault.

A Faulty Covenant?

Before telling us about those better promises the writer turns our thoughts to the faults of the first covenant. He tells us in verse 7 that if the first covenant had been without fault there would have been no need for it to be replaced. That thought leads him to quote Jeremiah 31:31 – 34, where God announces His new covenant.

But before we look at the new covenant we should ask, in what sense was the first covenant faulty? Everything that originates with God, as the first covenant did, is perfect in so far as the purpose God means it to serve is concerned. In that regard the first covenant was faultless. But seen as the Jews generally saw it it wasn't faultless for no one was able to keep the law and there was nothing in it's provisions that could deal with guilt and bring sinners near to God.

- ◆ *How would you answer someone who asks what was wrong with the old covenant?*
- ◆ *Why do you think, God introduced the first covenant when He knew all along that it couldn't and wouldn't work?*

The New Covenant — Who It's For (Verse 8)

God, though Jeremiah, points to a time to come when a new covenant with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" will be put into effect. Does this mean it will only apply to Jews? Perhaps not, but we will not find the answer to that question in Hebrews 8. The writer was addressing Jews so he had no need to answer it but I believe that "house of Israel," refers to the true Israel — all those from every generation who have faith like Abraham's from whatever nation they come. However, to reach that conclusion you have to look elsewhere, for example to Galatians 3:6 – 9.

The New Covenant — It's New (Verse 9)

Under the first covenant God had agreed with the children of Israel, "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples." but they did not keep to that covenant — they did not continue in it — and God turned away from them. This new covenant will be of a different kind entirely, not like that one entered into at Sinai, when God led the children of Israel out of Egypt.

The New Covenant — What It Is (Verses 10 – 12)

The writer to the Hebrews, still quoting Jeremiah, now tells us what this new covenant is. In it God makes three promises.

1. God promises to put His law in your heart (Verse 10). God's first promise is that His law will be put into the minds of His people: written on their hearts. This is not about them simply being able to remember God's law, it's what was promised by God through Ezekiel.

"I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God."

Ezekiel 11:19 – 20

It's about God giving His people a new nature: hearts that are free from sin and that not only spontaneously know and love to do God's will but also have the power to do it.

- ◆ *How does the fulfilment of this promise square with your experience as one of God's people living under the new covenant?*
2. God promises that you will know Him (Verse 11). Under the old covenant God said "I will be their God, and they shall be My people," and that promise remains but now it will no longer depend on His people keeping His law: it is no longer conditional. Now all His people will know Him. The promise is not merely that they will know about Him; it is a promise of personal knowledge and intimate relationship. The words, "they shall not teach," are emphasised and the idea behind them is that for all of God's people the personal knowledge and experience of God that's promised to them will be rooted in their hearts in such a way that reaching out to Him and loving Him will be natural and instinctive.

- ◆ *Describe, from your own experience, what it means to know God.*

3. God promises that your sins will be forgiven (Verse 12). This third promise of the new covenant is a promise of full, free, irreversible, forgiveness of sins and not only will the penalty for those sins be lifted; God will never again call them to mind.

The Old Is Finished (Verse 13)

Calling this covenant "new" implies that what went before has become old. It has served its purpose and it's gone: obsolete.

"In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

Hebrews 8:13

In the days when this was written it's likely that the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem and sacrifices were still being made and priests were still doing their thing but that system — the Old Testament system — was all done with and it was on its way out. Actually, within a few years, in 70AD, God saw to it that an end was put to it forever when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The Old Testament system and the rituals that went with it have never been revived, and they never will be.

- ◆ *Why is the first covenant now obsolete?*
- ◆ *What would you say to those who say that at some stage in the future God's people will again live under the old covenant, having to keep the law and observe the temple rituals?*
- ◆ *What does knowing that the first covenant is obsolete mean practically for you as someone who lives under the new covenant?*