

The Problems with the Old Covenant

Hebrews 9:8-10³

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Nearly all of us have come to a point where we find ourselves needing to do something about our current mode of transportation. We might have had a recent close encounter with guardrail, tree or perhaps another vehicle! Or, we may just have accumulated enough miles that the sputters, drips and shakes have led to the point where we wonder if our car or truck will start in the morning or even get us to our intended destination. Now the alternatives are sometimes daunting! Repair or replace? There is a local, multi-location mechanic shop that in the past specialized in transmission repair whose current slogan is “we’re cheaper than new car payments!” When things get old and wear out we have to decide, repair or replace. So we ask the questions, what is the cost, what is the benefit?

The astute Bible reader finds him or herself confronted with a similar quandary. We work through the story of the Bible and learn of characters such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and Solomon. We read and rehearse events such as creation, fall, exodus and exile. We read of great, even fantastic events surrounding Jacob, Samson, and Elijah. There are episodes of great faith and faithfulness and seeming greater sin and failure. Even the heroes of the text often are shown with their weaknesses not only exposed but also often highlighted. We read of great promises in the poetic speeches of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah. We wrestle with the disclosure of God’s purposes and plans and then we find ourselves suddenly confronted with... Jesus. Now what do we do?

As we have suggested many times in many areas of ministry, this is *not* an unimportant question. What do we do with the appearance of this “Jesus thing” in the Bible? There are attempts to answer this question that either create division in ways that makes the Scripture too disjunctive and others that create a blurring of distinctives. Our text (actually, “texts”) this morning lets us in on some of the backdrop to building a “better” answer to this question. It will point out the “problem” with the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant had its purpose and intention. It accomplished this without fail. It was a temporary provision that supplied some protection against sin for Israel until Jesus came. As such it was functioning as a temporary guardian or tutor. The Law provided the knowledge of sin so that all human beings are accountable and guilty before God. But even

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in the fulfillment of its purposes it had a definite and yet determined problem. Yet it was a problem that had its solution inherent in its very establishment. This “problem” did not catch God off-guard, nor did the Biblical authors find themselves needing to force ideas upon earlier texts and events. Rather, the unfolding of the storyline of the Scriptures leads us to the glory of the cross, the eventual consummation of God’s full and final plan. The apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus tells us that this purpose was established “before the foundation of the world”. Indeed this plan of redemption was “lavished on us, in all wisdom and insight, making known the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

But to keep our thinking orderly and logical lets go back to our original assertion, that the “Old Covenant” indeed is “old” in that it has inherent “problems” requiring correction and change. To do this lets go back to the book of Hebrews once again and read through some texts with an eye to this recurring theme. We are going to read excerpts from a section of this book from chapter 6 all the way to chapter 10. Again, the entire book “To the Hebrews” is a call to see the radical newness in Jesus of Nazareth’s gospel ministry, masterfully showing how the ministry of the Son is the fulfillment of all that has come before in particular its connection to the temple ministry of sacrifice and priesthood. Embedded in this presentation are some important statements regarding God’s plans and purposes that allow the work of the Son to be the natural understanding of what God is doing as he unfolds the story of redemptive history.

Let’s first begin reading in chapter six and verse thirteen.

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.

The author of Hebrews begins this larger section of the book with a sobering challenge for his reader/hearers to persist, pursue, and even persevere in the promise of the Gospel of the Son. This lends itself to the transition that points out that God’s purposes in the Son are intimately connected to his previously announced promises. Let’s say that again, God’s purposes in the Son are intimately connected to his previously announced promises. He transitions this by pointing out a promise to Abraham, a “covenant” to use a different word for this event. Note the phrase “unchangeable character of his purpose” in verse seventeen. This “purpose” extends at least back to Abraham and I think even before. A promise was made. How do we know that God will not “change his mind”? The text tells

us God himself confirmed this reiteration of His promise with an oath that was recorded “to the heirs” of this promise by the Psalmist in the 110th Psalm and verse 4. We can rely on this “oath” because “it is impossible for God to lie.” This text then goes on to elaborate on the implications of the “change” that appears to have occurred in this “unchangeable purpose”, because Jesus has functioned as a priest that is not in accordance with the old covenant’s instructions for a priesthood from the descendants of Levi and Aaron. What we want to point out here today is that the promises were all part of something considered “unchangeable” and yet some element of change is occurring. A change that we will eventually explain in later passages this morning.

In chapter seven the author explains the relationship of Abraham to this obscure character, Melchizedek. Later you can read for yourself the account found in Genesis fourteen. But in Hebrews we are brought to an important statement in chapter seven and verse eleven. Beginning here we are informed of the weakness and failure of this “older covenant.” There is language of obvious change, but this must be kept in some tension with the idea that we just read that that this promise was “unchangeable”.

¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³ For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

¹⁵ This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸ For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰ And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, ²¹ but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him:

“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,
‘You are a priest forever.’ ”

²² This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

The Law (and all its trappings of sacrifice, priesthood, tabernacle/temple) could not accomplish completion or perfection. In verses eighteen and nineteen we read that the “*former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness* ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect).”

The author goes on to explain the ways that Jesus is better (we will save this part of the conversation for a later time but read this passage carefully). We did read however that the former commandment (involving law, sacrifice and priesthood) was weak and useless. That is rather strong language, but not if this weakness and uselessness was its intent. The author goes on to explain his declaration. The former commandment was weak and useless because it did not and indeed could not make "perfect." It had an inherent (and planned) inadequacy.

We come to chapter eight and we are told that this "Jesus improvement" is not because the old is worn out, needing an overhaul or because it is prohibitively expensive. It is not that God is just "buying a new one, with its "new car payments". Let's read on in chapter eight and verse one.

8 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.

The nature of Old Covenant's imperfection had to do with its intent to serve as a copy and shadow of the reality. The first covenant was intentionally designed to be a picture, shadow. This is another of the purposes of this older covenant. From its beginning it was to be a copy with what one commentator calls a "limited validity" since it is in the realm of change and will indeed must pass away. This heavenly dimension is not to be thought of in a philosophical way but rather an eschatological way. The contrast is not "simply between an earthly copy and a heavenly archetype but between a historical situation in the past and one that has succeeded it in time...achieved with the life and redemptive accomplishment of Jesus."

That brings us to chapter nine. The argument continues to present the continuity and completion of God's plan in the work of the Son. Let's begin reading in verse 6 and continue down to verse fifteen.

⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. ⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first

section is still standing ⁹ (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

¹¹ 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) ¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant

The old covenant priest entered the most holy place just once a year and with a special sacrifice that temporarily allowed his admittance. In verse eight we see this was intended to show that access to God was still obstructed in that present age. Every year the Israelite's lack of access to God's presence was highlighted. They were allowed around but not "near". Note this is true even with the presence of sacrifice. This is because access to God requires "heart change". Those sacrifices did not "perfect the conscience of the worshiper." This is language familiar to those at Clearcreek Chapel. The text clearly states that the externals only figuratively "sanctified" the people. These sacrifices, rituals and laws did not cleanse the conscience of the worshippers but were in place for a defined time and setting. The setting is..."when Christ appeared!"

Summary

Each installment of this New Covenant Primer will have significant overlap from one week to the next. The intent is to make each presentation/sermon a complete thought. Yet each week will bring allusions to a previous sermon and significantly anticipate others. We have seen that the Gospel, the work and revelation of the Son, Jesus Christ, has inaugurated a new and better way. A complete and fulfilled "speech of God." God has indeed spoken in the past in events, speeches, rituals and law that now find their true and complete meaning in the power of the Gospel. The Old Covenant, the laws, rituals and ceremony given through Moses had a real but symbolic and temporary purpose. Its value is not lost, but must be re-visioned in light of the new vision given by the Spirit in the coming of the Gospel. The Old Covenant cannot and was never intended to bring one to God or keep one in a "right relationship" with Him. This relationship has always been in and through faith, even if an anticipatory faith. This faith now has substance that has been realized, made real, in history in the coming of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. Hearts are cleansed and lives restored in a way only pictured before. The problem with the Old Covenant was it could not (and was never

intended to) change the heart/conscience of those under it. More questions will be answered as we move into other texts and ideas.

Reflect and Respond

But that brings us to some implications. Let's use the text itself as the application. Verse nineteen of chapter ten begins a new section with the conjunction "therefore". This therefore is referring to the power of the New Covenant (an idea we have alluded to but not completely described as yet). The author of Hebrews goes on to say:

*Therefore, brothers,
since we have confidence to enter the holy places
by the blood of Jesus,
by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain,
that is, through his flesh,
and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
let us draw near
with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.
Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who promised is faithful.
And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...*

Because we no longer are limited by the problems with the Old Covenant, in the power of the Gospel we should:

1. Draw near...in faith...

Make every effort to learn and think about God, His character and His plans. We should view each aspect of our lives in the context of God's working and have faith that He knows and holds the details working in His wisdom, power and goodness to bring His glory and our good.

2. Hold fast...our hope...

In the face to the many distractions to this truth, we must avoid the counterfeit gospels that compete for our lives. Rituals, prayers, diets, "medications" and efforts all can subvert the power of God in the Gospel; even Biblically derived and theologically sound plans can undermine the work of the Spirit. The hope of the Gospel (God's work for us), keep it in the forefront of our thinking every day.

3. Consider...our love and good works...

Since the Gospel of this New Covenant is the orienting principle of God's work, think on how this should continually be changing us, conforming us to the image of God, seen perfectly in Jesus. Grow in our love and good works, because of God's work in and through us!