

The New Covenant in Ezekiel

It is in light of this that I want to set out, briefly, the glories of the new covenant as prophesied by Ezekiel. Listen to the prophet:

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek. 11:19-20).

I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God (Ezek. 16:60-63).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in ¹⁷ y m statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25-27).

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered: 'O Lord God, you know'. Then he said to me: 'Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the

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Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord'. So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me: 'Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live'. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off'. Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord' (Ezek. 37:1-14).¹⁷ The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, take a stick and write on it: 'For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him'; then take another stick and write on it: 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him'. And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you: 'Will you not tell us what you mean by these?' say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him.

¹⁷ For my discourse on this passage, see my 'Regeneration'.

¹⁸ For my discourse on this passage, see my 'Dry Bones Made to Live'.

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And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 'My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall

be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore' (Ezek. 37:15-28).

Therefore thus says the Lord God: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid, when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God, because I sent them into exile among the nations and then assembled them into their own land. I will leave none of them remaining among the nations anymore. And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God (Ezek. 39:25-29).

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And that last extract may be regarded as a preface to the glorious vision bringing the prophet's message to a climax. In order not to over-burden this booklet with excessive extracts, I forbear quoting Ezekiel 40 - 48, but those nine chapters represent the culmination of the prophet's setting out of the new-covenant glories under Christ.

Let me summarise them. Christ is the King,¹⁹ Priest and Temple of the new covenant, with believers being spiritual kings and priests in his kingdom.²⁰ Naturally, Ezekiel spoke of all this as taking place in Jerusalem, but the reality in the new covenant, the Jerusalem of the new covenant, is the heavenly or spiritual Jerusalem or Zion (Gal 4:21-31; Heb. 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 3:12; 21:2,10). All is spiritual. Jerusalem, as a place, has no significance whatsoever in the new covenant. It is the heavenly or spiritual Jerusalem that counts.

So many get this wrong. But John Newton got it right. He was certainly not thinking of a city in the Middle East, over which many have fought horrendous wars this past 2000 years, when he penned his hymn. Neither should we be thinking in such terms when we sing it:

¹⁹ Israel's monarchy came in as a rebellion to God, a rejection of God as King, and an aping of the world. In general, it was a disaster. See 1 Sam. 8. Even the reigns of David and Solomon were very seriously flawed. The only true King of Israel is Christ over and among his *ekklēsia*; that is, in the new covenant.

²⁰ See my *The Priesthood of All Believers; Slogan or Substance?*; 'The Place of "Place" in the New Covenant'.

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*Round each habitation hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear!
For a glory and a covering
Showing that the Lord is near.
Thus deriving from our banner
Light by night and shade by day;
Safe they feed upon the manna
Which he gives them when they pray.*

*Blest inhabitants of Zion,
Washed in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,
Makes them kings and priests to God.
'Tis his love his people raises,
Over self to reign as kings,
And as priests, his solemn praises
Each for a thank offering brings.*

*Saviour, if of Zion's city,
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in thy name:
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

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She was in for a surprise, however; a big, big surprise. Jerusalem or Gerizim? Neither! Jesus could not have been more categorical:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

Centuries before, Malachi, the prophet, had predicted this radical change of covenant:

From the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts (Mal. 1:11).

And what a change of covenant it was! 'Radical' is the very word. Imagine how Malachi's words must have sounded to those who first heard the prophet, accustomed as they were to centuries of thinking everything revolved around Jerusalem, the temple mount being the only place on earth where God

²¹ This is not to say the believers may not have treasured life-memories associated with locality. It is the attachment of *spiritual* importance to 'place' that is heinous.

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would meet with his people.²² Now God would meet with his people 'in every place'.

We must get this right. The prophet was not predicting the burning of literal incense. God does not want *that* under the new covenant!²³ Malachi's words must be understood spiritually. The prophet was stating that in the new covenant there would be no special places, but that true spiritual worship would be offered to God - and received by him - 'in every place'. Whenever two or three - *wherever* two or three - would be gathered in the name of Christ for spiritual purposes, God would be there by his Spirit (Matt. 18:20). That is what Malachi was speaking of. And God delights in the spiritual conversation his people engage in when they meet (Mal. 3:16-18). This, too, is a vital part of worship. The sum and substance of 'worship' does not consist in 'church attendance', listening to sermons, singing hymns, and such like.²⁴ Hebrews 10:25 must not be thought of in terms of the meeting house, but, rather, the people of God. It is not place, but people. Above all, it is Christ's presence among his people.

It is surely unnecessary to point out that, when Jesus disabused the woman at the well, he was not *forbidding* worship in Samaria or Jerusalem in the time of the new covenant, or declaring that men would *not* worship at those places. No! Rather, he was making it clear that new-covenant worship would not be *restricted* to those places, that there would be nothing special about those places; indeed, *that in the days of the new covenant 'place' would be utterly*

²² See my 'The Place of "Place" in the New Covenant'.

²³ Holy sites have no place in the believer's vocabulary. But here is another way in which misunderstanding - or deliberate breaking - of the scriptural revelation of the new covenant, or going to the old covenant, leads to disastrous consequences for believers and the *ekklēsia*. Look at the abominable corruption that incense burning (and associated practices) has brought about in the church of God.

See my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*

²⁴ I am not dismissing these things, but we must not confuse Christendom's institutionalised religion and the life of the *ekklēsia*.

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irrelevant. That is what he was stating, and stating loud and clear. What is more, speaking of the time of his inauguration of the new covenant - in his death and resurrection - Jesus announced that 'the hour' for this momentous change was very close, after which time all talk of Samaria or Jerusalem would be out of the question.

Or should be. In the new covenant, God has no interest in 'place'. From the time of Christ's death and resurrection, the clear scriptural requirement is for 'true worshippers [who] will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for', Jesus declared, 'the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:23-24). Consequently, since that time all thought of 'place', as special in a spiritual sense, should be anathema to every true believer.

Alas, Christendom has ignored Christ's teaching on this explicit point. Worse still, it has worked directly against it. While Christendom has little to say about what Christ meant by 'spirit and truth', it has an endless amount to say about what men have attributed to 'place', doing so by drawing on both paganism and the old covenant for its doctrine. And many believers today have become grievously tainted in the process. 'Place', for most professing believers today, carries religious old-covenant overtones, heavy ones at that. 'Where do you worship these days?' - that oft-repeated question - demands the retort: 'Where and when don't I worship?'

Let me illustrate. Take the meeting house. How many believers virtually reverence the meeting house, calling it 'the sanctuary', 'the house of God'! How many believers think in terms of 'the house of God' when they speak about worship, confining worship to what goes on in that 'sacred space'! And by the phrase, 'the house of God', they mean a building, even though, when it talks in new-covenant terms of 'the house of God', Scripture means the *ekklēsia*, the people of God (both individual and corporate):

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God

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will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

We are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (2 Cor. 6:16).

Through [Christ] we both [that is, believing Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-21).

...you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Heb. 3:6).

We have a great priest over the house of God (Heb. 10:21).

As you come to [Christ] a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Pet. 4:17).

All talk of a literal building as 'God's house' by believers, therefore, is nothing but a return to the old covenant, abhorrent to God. And it should cease. At once. Believers do not 'go to church' in the sense of travelling to a building; in assembly, they are the church. William Cowper put it this way:

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*Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy seat;
Where'er they seek thee, thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.*

*For thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring thee where they come,
And going, take thee to their home.*

Does it matter? Of course it does. Anything and everything which undermines the new covenant should be out of the question for believers. Anything and everything which contradicts the teaching of Christ, and the desire of the Father, however trivial such things may appear in themselves,²⁵ must be rejected, root and branch, not least because the consequences of disobedience are devastating. In particular, I am referring to the wrongness of importing old-covenant principles and practices (not to say, pagan principles and practices) into the life of the believer and the *ekklēsia*.²⁶ I must leave it there, though I would like to develop it further. The truth is, the ripples from this error spread far and wide.

All this plays into Ezekiel's prophecy. Yes, he spoke of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Nevertheless, the

²⁵ It is 'the little foxes that spoil the vineyards' (Song 2:15).

²⁶ See my *Pastor*. But did the apostles not refer to the old covenant when writing to believers? Certainly! But every time the apostles quoted the law, the old covenant, they always drew *spiritual* lessons and paradigms. They never imported old-covenant practice into the life of the believer or the churches. Take one example, the Passover: 'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (1 Cor. 5:6-8). Observation of the Passover today should be unthinkable to members of the new covenant. Indeed, it should be repugnant to them. Rather, they should be thinking in terms of their spiritual cleanliness and consecration to God. And this is just one example of scores which would make the point.

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fulfilment of what he was predicting is not to be sought in physical terms but in the spiritual Jerusalem and its temple, the heavenly Jerusalem. Believers are not to set their minds and hearts on a city in the Middle East, but on Christ and the glories of his covenant.

It was Ezekiel's privilege to prophesy these things, and set them out in great detail, his message of hope reaching its ultimate with 'THE LORD IS THERE' (Ezek. 48:35). How crowning a word is that! As he predicted, during the days of the new covenant, believers are able to say that 'the glory of the Lord [has] entered the temple... and behold, the glory of the Lord [has] filled the temple' (Ezek. 43:4-5), and thus they enjoy the assurance of God's declaration: 'This is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever' (Ezek. 43:7). This reference to Israel, it must be understood, refers to the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16; see also, Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Gal. 3:7,29; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:9-10); that is, true believers.²⁷ The members of the new-covenant, the *ekklēsia*, are all believers, and none else: 'No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary' (Ezek. 44:9). Above all, I repeat, speaking of the people of God in the days of the new covenant, it can be said: 'THE LORD IS THERE'. Christ is now among his people. As he declared:

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here (Matt. 12:42).

Yes, indeed! 'Something greater than Solomon is here' because *Someone* greater than Solomon is among his people now (Matt. 18:20). And the Lord Jesus Christ is here, not, as God dwelt in the temple in the old covenant in figurative shadow as in Solomon's day (1 Kings 8:27), but in reality and truth. Solomon *taught* wisdom to the people of Israel, but

²⁷ See my 'The Israel of God'; *Christ* pp314-320,552-555.

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Christ is his people's wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30). Solomon offered bulls, sheep and goats in ineffectual sacrifice, thousands of them; Christ offered his own blood once, and thereby accomplished everlasting redemption for his people (Heb. 9:11-15; 10:10,14). The people that Solomon ruled over dwelt in lands that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates (2 Chron. 9:26); Christ has all power, and in his covenant's consummation all the kingdoms of the world will be his, every knee will bow before him, and every tongue confess his lordship (Matt 28:18; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 11:15). And so on, and on.

Let me say a little more on Christ with his people. Christ is present among his people by his Spirit, as he promised:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out: 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"'. Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

And now that Christ has been glorified, the Spirit has been poured out. See John 12:23; 13:31-32; 16:14; 17:1; 20:22; Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4,14-36. Thus, Christ, by his Spirit, dwells among his people in the new covenant. Ezekiel prophesied it. As did Isaiah (Isa. 32:15; 44:3) and Joel (Joel 2:28-29). And so it is today (Matt. 1:23; 18:20; 28:20; John 14:16-23; Acts 18:10; Rom. 8:10;²⁸ 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; Heb. 13:5).

Such is a brief outline of the glories of the new covenant as predicted by Ezekiel.

²⁸ For 'if' read 'since'.