

Hebrews 8:1-13
(Ezekiel 36:25-27)
“A Perfect Covenant”

Introduction

Over the next two chapters, the author of Hebrews will write of our perfect priest offering us a perfect covenant, as he serves in a perfect sanctuary, having offered a perfect sacrifice on our behalf. He wants his readers to stand strong in the truth of Christ whatever opposition may arise, whatever difficulties might tempt them to turn back from the gospel of grace. Because he weaves these themes together, we will unthread them one at a time and try to understand and appreciate the lesson of each.

This morning, we will follow what is the dominant theme of chapter 8, the theme of covenant. As we pointed out a few weeks ago, ancient covenants between a great king and his subjects were not “made” but rather were “cut,” in that they involved the sacrificing and displaying of animals. Only in Genesis 15 is there an account of a king making a covenant with his subjects and passing between the pieces himself, taking upon himself the responsibility of keeping the covenant, and pledging to bear in himself the consequences of the covenant being broken: thus, a covenant of grace.

All those covenantal pictures pointed toward fulfillment in a more perfect covenant, one pictured implicitly in the entire history of cutting covenants, and promised explicitly by the prophets of Israel. In our OT lesson, Ezekiel promised this new covenant, and in our text for study, the author of Hebrews quotes a parallel text where Jeremiah also makes explicit the promise of a new and gracious covenant.

The author first introduced this idea in chapter 7: “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (7:22). Now he writes, “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” (8:6). But how is the new covenant better than the old? Why should his original readers – why should anyone, for that matter – be willing to endure hardship and suffering in order to relate to God through this new covenant?

The author answers that question by quoting Jeremiah’s description of the new covenant, and three aspects of Jeremiah’s words to Israel especially show the superiority of the new covenant over the old. At the heart of the answer is this: In the new covenant we begin to possess as our own all that is promised in the old.

An example is found in the covenant of marriage. Engagement can be a wonderful, enjoyable thing between two people deeply in love and well suited to each other. But engagement is meant to find its fulfillment in marriage. Married couples do not go back to engagement. So, too, the Scriptures emphasize the preparatory nature of the old covenant and the fulfillment of old covenant promises found in the new.

Body

1. The new covenant brings us into a new relationship with God's law.

- Under the old covenant, the law is contrary to our desires, external, a schoolmaster to teach us and a rule of law to convict us.
- But under the new covenant, we have been born anew, God's Spirit is in us, and while the old flesh within resists, our new nature desires the things of God. The law is no longer external, but internal, written on our hearts, and our joy comes when we live in harmony with the law. We have a transformed mind that knows and approves God's law, and a new heart that loves and desires joyful obedience to God's law.

2. The new covenant brings us into a new relationship with God's family.

- Under the old, God was approached only through priests, sacrifices, types and shadows of what the new covenant would bring. Only the High Priest, and only on the Day of Atonement, could enter into the Holy of Holies and offer sacrifice for the people. The family was divided into tribes with their own inheritance and bloodlines.
- Under the new, we are all one in Christ, "from the least to the greatest," the barriers are down, and we have intimate access into the very presence of the One who invites us to call him Father.

3. The new covenant brings us into a new relationship with God's grace.

- Under the old covenant, only "unintentional" sins are forgiven, and even those are constantly remembered, through daily sacrifices of atonement that can only point ahead to what God has promised to do, some day in the future, to finally deal with our rebellion. Meanwhile, the sacrificial system perpetually reminds us of how deeply we have offended our holy God. And our acts of overt rebellion, when we do what we know is wrong, have no atoning sacrifice under the old covenant. Sin and guilt offerings are only for those who sin "unintentionally" (e.g., Leviticus 4:2 & 5:15).
- Under the new covenant, all our sin is forgiven, and all our sins – even those committed intentionally – are also forgiven *and forgotten*, because the perfect atoning sacrifice has been offered once and for all, and "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). We confess our sins and move on in the confidence that they have been dealt with once for all on the cross and that God has chosen to look on us in Christ as bearers of his righteousness.

Conclusion

Why would anyone want to go back to a covenant that left one in perpetual guilt and shame, promised that one day things would work out, but meanwhile, living with a perpetual burden of an external and seemingly incongruous set of rules and requirements, and the nagging realization that one regularly committed, not only unintentional, but intentional sins, for which there was no sacrifice at present, and for which judgment was promised?

The question is for us, as well, because every religion calls us to some form of self-salvation that requires of us what we know we cannot give. Why would anyone not flee to the grace of the gospel, that fulfills the longings of religion, and that does for us what we can never do and yet what we most need? In the covenant of grace we are made new, our minds approve and embrace God's law because we now have the mind of Christ, and our hearts desire and delight in it. We are no longer strangers to God and to one another, but he is our beloved Father and we are his family, brothers and sisters bound together in love. And we live kept safe within his grace, our sins forgiven and forgotten, his righteousness ours. This is the life for which we were created, God's gospel gift to those who are in Christ Jesus.

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