

Chapter 7

Hebrews and the change of covenants

The book of Hebrews also has much to say about the covenants. Again, we will go through the relevant passages verse by verse to make sure that we are not lifting verses out of context. We want to see the thought-flow of this section in Hebrews.

Let's start in chapter 7, verse 11. The author has just explained that Jesus Christ has been appointed as a priest "after the order of Melchizedek." Although that is an interesting story in itself, we will skip it and get right to the point:

"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come — one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?" (verse 11). In other words, the appointment of Christ as high priest proves that the old priests were not enough.

Note in the middle of verse 11 that the law was given on the basis of the priesthood. The law was designed with the Levitical priesthood in mind — the law and the priesthood went together. But neither the law nor the priests could bring people to perfection. That is why the Scriptures spoke of another priesthood.

A change in the law

The descendants of Aaron would be replaced by a better priesthood and a better priest — and that has enormous consequences: "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (verse 12). What law is changed? The law that said only Levites could be priests. Which law said that? The old covenant. This will become more clear later in this chapter, and in the next few chapters.

But first, the author wants to make certain basic facts clear. "He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe" (verse 13). We are speaking about Jesus, of whom it is said that he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek — but Jesus was not a Levite. He belonged to the tribe of Judah, and no one from that tribe was ever a priest, and Moses did not authorize anyone from Judah to be a priest (verse 14).

"And what we have said" — that is, that the law has been changed — "is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life" (verses 15-16).

Jesus was appointed as priest not by a law that focused on genealogy, but because he lives forever at God's right hand. From this fact alone, we can see that the Law of Moses is no longer in force.

"The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (verses 18-19). The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites was ineffective.

How much was "set aside"? Certainly, it was the regulation restricting the priesthood to Levites. But no one expected that restriction to produce perfection, anyway. There is more involved than just one regulation. It is "the law" as a whole that is under discussion here. The Law of Moses did not have the power to make anyone perfect. The best that the old covenant could offer was not good enough.

Instead of the law, we are given a better hope, and since we have something better than the law, we are now able to draw near to God in a way that was not possible under the Law of Moses.

Guaranteed by an oath

The author then uses a detail from Psalm 110 to emphasize the importance of Jesus' appointment as priest. God himself makes an oath to appoint Jesus as high priest (verse 20). The descendants of Aaron became priests without any oath, but Jesus became priest by a special oath.

The old covenant was given by God, but here is a new word from God — not just an oath, but also a promise of permanence: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever'" (verse 21). The old priesthood is obsolete. The old regulation, the old law, was set aside. A new and better hope is given to bring people to a perfection that the law could not give.

"Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant" (verse 22). Here the word *covenant* is used for the first time in this letter. It will be picked up again in the next three chapters for more detailed comment, but even here it is implied to be a replacement for the inferior, ineffective Law of Moses. The discussion is not just about a minor priestly regulation but an entire covenant, which includes many laws.

The author then contrasts the mortality of the Levitical priests with the immortality of Jesus Christ: "Now there

have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood” (verses 23-24). So the fact that there were many Levitical priests is an illustration of their weakness, not of their effectiveness. The long genealogy that validated them also testified to the weakness of the entire system. Each high priest held office only temporarily, and the entire priesthood itself was temporary.

In contrast, because Jesus lives forever, he will forever continue to be our High Priest, because his priesthood is effective in bringing us to perfection: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (verse 25).

Exactly what we need

Jesus is exactly what we need. He was human, so he knows our needs (2:14-18), and he is now in heaven, in power, so he can effectively intercede for us. We can therefore be confident that we can approach God through him (4:14-16). He gives us access to God in a way that the Levitical priests could only symbolize.

When we have Jesus, we do not need the old covenant. The practices commanded in the old covenant (circumcision, various rituals and worship days) have no spiritual merit for the Christian. All we need is Jesus.

“Such a high priest meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (7:26-27).

The Old Testament priests had to make sin sacrifices every day, showing that the final solution had not yet arrived. But Jesus was so effective that once was enough. His work did not have to be repeated. The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus did not, because he had no sin. When he offered himself, it was not for himself, but for everyone else. He was the kind of sacrifice we really needed — without blemish, fit even for the holiest place in heaven.

The old covenant appointed imperfect men as priests (7:28), but God promised to appoint another priest, a permanent priest — which implies someone who is perfect in himself and perfect in his work (Psalm 110:4).

Hebrews 8: the superior ministry of Jesus

“The point of what we are saying is this,” the letter says (8:1), drawing attention to its main point. After seven chapters, here is what we should have firmly in mind: “We do have such a high priest.” What humans need, what God has promised, has finally come. We have the priest who is able to save us completely. We need to focus our thoughts on him, hold fast to him and have confidence in him.

He is our priest not only because he lives forever, but because he has been exalted to a position of royal and spiritual power: He “sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and ... serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (verses 1-2). What earthly tabernacles and priests could only picture, Jesus Christ is. He is the reality forever, not a temporary imitation.

The author has capped off seven chapters with a simple summary: Jesus is our high priest. What then? The letter begins to move forward from this by discussing the work of a priest. “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer” (verse 3). What did Jesus offer? The author has already told us in 7:27, and he will develop it more fully in chapter 9, but here he mentions it only briefly. First, he wants to set the scene for chapter 9 by discussing the tabernacle.

If Jesus were on earth, he observes, “he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law” (verse 4). The earthly rituals were being taken care of. The temple work was being done by Levitical priests, as the law required. That is not where Jesus is doing his work. But the earthly temple does teach us something about the priestly work of Jesus.

The earthy imitation

The tabernacle of Moses, and later the temple, was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.” It is therefore important, and “this is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (verse 5). The author is quoting Exodus 25:40 to show that the earthly tabernacle was a copy, not the real thing. The Levitical priests served at a copy, and the rituals they performed were copies, not the spiritual realities.

“But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises” (verse 6). Just as the heavenly sanctuary is better than the earthly one, so also is Jesus’ priestly ministry much better than the Levitical ministry, and so also is the new covenant much better than the old.

How much better? The tabernacle was merely a copy, a cheap imitation, in comparison to the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood, although divinely ordained, was merely an imitation of a heavenly reality fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

How exact is the copy? The Levitical rituals came in great variety: water rituals, grain rituals, special clothing, hand motions, killing of animals and releasing of animals. All these rituals were fulfilled by and superseded by the work of Jesus Christ.

We do not see exact correspondence for every detail, nor do we need to. We cannot insist that the spiritual is

just like the physical. We do not expect that the heavenly sanctuary has wool and linen curtains, bronze basins, acacia framing and red ram skins. Indeed, it does not need curtains, frames and skins at all. Those are merely physical things, part of the imitation of a spiritual reality.

A superior priesthood

Jesus' priestly work is much better than the old priesthood — in quality, not quantity. The work he did *once* was better than millions of rituals done by Levites. Christ's work was so much superior that it did not have to be repeated. It was a different kind of priesthood. We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

In the same way, we should expect the new covenant to be different in quality from the obsolete covenant. Just as every ritual has been superseded, so also is every detail of the law. In some cases we can see how the new covenant modifies or clarifies an old law, but in other cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement.

The new is better than the old, as far as heaven is from earth. The old covenant promised a long life in the land of Israel; the new covenant promises eternal life with God. It is a very different kind of covenant.

Predicted in the Scriptures

The author of Hebrews likes to show that the Old Testament Scriptures contain hints of the dramatic change brought by Christ. There are hints of a "rest" to come, hints of a priesthood to come, hints of a spiritual reality that supersedes the rituals.

Now he shows that a change in covenants was also predicted. "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (verse 7). The fact that a new covenant was predicted implied that something was wrong with the Sinai covenant.

"God found fault with the people" (verse 8), but it is also correct to say that there was something wrong with the covenant, as verse 7 implies. The author has already said that the old covenant could not make anyone perfect (7:11, 19). It could point toward perfection, but it could not bring it. Many Jews thought it was good enough, but it was not, and that is why God predicted a new covenant:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (8:8). This is quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, which is one of many prophecies of a new relationship between God and humans. The prophets described it as a new spirit, a new heart, a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant. This covenant would be made with Israelites, but would also be open to Gentiles.

Different in quality

The new covenant, God says, "will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them

by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord" (Hebrews 8:9). Because the Israelites broke the old covenant, the new covenant will be different.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (verse 10). The Israelites had some of God's laws in their minds, and they often wanted to obey them. But this prophecy implies that the new covenant will have a different level of internalization. The relationship will be characterized by attitude, not rituals.

"No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (verse 11). All humans will have equal access to God; no longer will one tribe have special status. Jeremiah's prophecy does not spell out all the details, but the hint is here of a very different covenant.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (verse 12). The covenant does not predict perfect people — it predicts perfect forgiveness, a forgiveness available to everyone based on God's grace, without any priests or rituals.

This prophecy implied that the old covenant was ineffective and soon to be replaced. "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (verse 13).

Even in Jeremiah's day, the old covenant's days were numbered. Israel's history had already shown that this covenant could not bring the people toward perfection. God's plan required a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness, a more spiritual covenant, a covenant with a perfect priest, who made a perfect offering for all sin. That is the subject of Hebrews 9.

Hebrews 9: the superior sacrifice of Jesus

Hebrews 9 begins by describing the old covenant ritual: "The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary" (verse 1). The author does not write about the covenants made with Noah or Abraham, even though they came first. Rather, by "first" he means the covenant made at Sinai, because it is the covenant replaced by Jesus' new covenant. The Sinai covenant had laws about how people could approach God.

"A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place" (verse 2; see Exodus 25:23-40). The author describes the tabernacle rather than the temple, perhaps because the tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals were familiar to all who read the Torah.

"Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense

and the gold-covered ark of the covenant” (9:2-4, see Exodus 25:10-22; 30:1-6). “This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now” (9:4-5; for details see Exodus 16:33-34; 25:18; Numbers 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:1-5).

What the rituals could not do

“When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance” (Hebrews 9:6-7). The high priest entered the Most Holy Place only on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he sacrificed a bull for his own sins, and later, a goat for the people (Leviticus 16:1-17).

What is the spiritual significance of this symbolism? “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” (Hebrews 9:8). In the tabernacle symbolism, God was *near* but *not accessible*. The symbolism hinted that there was a way to approach God, but that way was not yet revealed.

“This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper” (verse 9). Despite the sacrifices, the people were unable to go to God’s throne, unable to enter his presence. The rituals could not complete the work that they symbolized.

“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (9:10). Rituals are external actions, and they cannot change the heart. They do not cleanse the conscience. They were valid only until Christ came.

Our author does not list all the obsolete regulations. It was enough to mention the Levitical rituals. But we can follow the logic to see much more. Worship details no longer apply. External rituals like circumcision are no longer required. The entire covenant is obsolete.

Christ’s work in heaven

Now, in contrast to the ritual works of the old covenant, we are told about the superior ministry of Christ: “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation” (9:11). The better blessings have already begun, the author reminds us. We already have forgiveness and direct access to God, because Christ went through the heavenly holy place.

Jesus Christ entered the reality, not the imitation, and he did it by a better sacrifice: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption” (verse 12).

By dying for us, the Son of God was able to redeem us once for all. It was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, presented in the heavenly holy place, fully effective, never needing to be done again. This was a sharp contrast with the Levitical rituals, which were repeated continually yet never bringing the people any closer to God.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean” (verse 13; see Numbers 19:1-22). Here the author refers to the ashes of a heifer. Like the other rituals, it had obscure details that had nothing to do with a person’s conscience.

Of course, Christ is much better than a heifer, and we should expect that his sacrifice achieves a much better kind of cleansing. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).

He offered a perfect sacrifice, willingly, and through faith in him, this cleanses us on the inside and enables us to worship God. We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence.

We have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ — all sins are removed. If a burned-up heifer could ritually cleanse an Israelite, we can be sure that the sacrifice of Jesus is more than enough for us.

Since Christ brings us complete forgiveness, he “is the mediator of a new covenant” (verse 15). He gives us a relationship with God on a completely new basis — not the old covenant, but the new. And the result is “that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

This was achieved, the author reminds us, because “he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Under the first covenant, many external regulations defined sin. Christ set us free from that. The old covenant is no longer the standard of righteousness and sin. Christ forgives sin, but he *sets us free* from the rituals that were so important under the old covenant. We are not obligated to perform those rituals.

Covenant enacted by blood

But this new covenant could come about only through a better sacrifice — something far superior to animals. The author begins by using an illustration from the legal customs of the day. He uses the example of a will, because the Greek word for *covenant* could also mean

will. It was a contract that became effective only when someone died (verses 16-17).

The Sinai covenant also involved death — the death of animals (verses 18-20; Exodus 24:5-8). The Law of Moses required blood in its rituals of cleansing (Hebrews 9:21-22). Obviously, drops of blood do not make anything physically clean. What the Israelites needed was a spiritual cleansing — an elimination of spiritual defilement, imperfection, sin, guilt and anything that separated them from God. They needed forgiveness.

Physical blood cannot change spiritual realities, and animal sacrifices cannot eliminate sin (Hebrews 10:4), but the old covenant nevertheless prescribed animal sacrifices for forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22). Just as the tabernacle itself pictured a heavenly reality, these animal sacrifices pictured a death that would be effective in removing sin. They did not do it — they only symbolized it.

The earthly tabernacle had to be ritually purified by animal sacrifices, but the heavenly holy place required a far better sacrifice (verse 23). The spiritual barrier between God and humans required a spiritual sacrifice — someone with a perfect conscience, totally without sin. Jesus was not dealing with a physical, symbolic copy (verse 24). He was not working with external rituals. Rather, he was dealing with the real spiritual problem, and he did his work in heaven. It was a better place, and a better sacrifice.

Humans are both matter and spirit; Christ's work was both physical and spiritual. He became fully human, mortal and physical, in order to redeem humans. But his redemption had to be on the spiritual level as well: a conscience untainted by sin, a life willingly offered on behalf of others, a being worthy of entering heaven itself to intercede for humans. He offered himself, both body and spirit.

Jesus Christ now appears for us in heaven to help us (verse 24). He is the God-man who bridges the gap between God and humans. His work is fully effective — for all time.

Once was enough, unlike the work of the Levitical priests, who had to repeat the same rituals over and over again (verse 25). By this the Holy Spirit was showing that their work was not effective. True cleansing was possible only through a better sacrifice, a better priest, a better covenant.

The decisive sacrifice

Jesus did not go to heaven to perform endless rituals. He is not copying the old covenant, because the old covenant had only temporary substitutes (verse 25). Jesus does not have to suffer forever to rescue us from sin (verse 26). He gave himself once, and that was enough. "He has appeared once for all." When? "At the end of the ages." Why? "To do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (verse 26). Even 1,950 years ago, believers were living in the "end of the ages" — "in these last days"

(Hebrews 1:2). The old era was fading away; a new age had begun with Jesus Christ. The spiritual world was radically different. The sacrifice of all time had been given.

But the story is not yet done. Just as ordinary humans appear once, and then will appear again in the judgment, so also with Christ. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:27-28).

Each person dies for his or her own sins, but Jesus died for others. Each person will face the judgment for his or her sins, but Jesus will be the judge. His death took away the sins of all who believe in him, and when he appears again, he will not be bringing their sins against them. Rather, he will be bringing eternal salvation for all who trust in him.

Hebrews 10: the perfect results of Jesus

Hebrews 10 concludes this section of the epistle by discussing the perfect *results* of Jesus' priestly work. Verse 1 begins with a conclusion: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves." This conclusion follows chapter 9, which sketched the rituals of the Levitical high priest and stated that Jesus did far better, offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) in a perfect place (heaven). The Levitical rituals had to be continually repeated, but Jesus' sacrifice was fully effective and therefore did not have to be done again.

Just as the tabernacle was a copy of the true holy place in heaven (Hebrews 8:5), so also the rituals were copies or shadows of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle and its rituals (all included in the word "law") *represented* good things, but could not bring them about. The law talked about cleansing and forgiveness, but could not cleanse or forgive.

Are the "good things" already here, or are they yet future? The grammar in this verse could be understood in either way, but Hebrews 9:11 makes it clear: Christ is the "high priest of the good things that are already here." Forgiveness and cleansing and relationship with God are already possible through Jesus Christ, and the old covenant is obsolete because the new covenant has already been established (Hebrews 8:6). There are better things yet to come (Hebrews 9:28), but the author's stress in chapter 10 is on things that Christ has already brought.

Law cannot finish the job

The law is only a shadow, not the spiritual reality. "For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship" (Hebrews 10:1). No matter how many animals were killed, no matter how much

water was used, the law could never achieve the forgiveness that the new covenant now offers.

The word “perfect” can create unrealistic ideas. Faith in Christ does not make people morally perfect. We still sin, and we still fall short of what we ought to be. The Greek word could also be translated as “complete,” and this may be a better translation. We are completely forgiven by Christ, completely cleansed, and therefore perfectly qualified to worship God, perfectly able to have a relationship with him.

The context shows what the author has in mind: the removal of sin and a cleansed conscience, so we can approach God to worship him (verses 1-2, 4). The author views these as the same basic concept. The old covenant could picture forgiveness, but could not achieve it.

If the law could qualify the people for worship, then there would be no more need for sacrifices. If the sacrifices could achieve what they pictured, “would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins” (verse 2).

The logic is this: If the sacrifices completely prepared people for worship, then further sacrifices would not be needed. The people would no longer have a guilty conscience, and would not feel any need to offer sacrifices (at least not sin sacrifices).

The law was inadequate, and the author implies that the new covenant gives what the old could not: a cleansed conscience. Through faith in the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice, we do not feel guilty. Rather, we feel forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God. Rather than being excluded from the holy place, we are invited in.

The author then summarizes the argument against the old covenant system: The sacrifices, instead of cleansing the people, “are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (verses 3-4). A physical substance, such as blood, cannot remove a spiritual stain. The old covenant was designed to *picture* forgiveness, not to actually bring it.

The Old Testament saints were forgiven on the basis of faith and God’s grace, not because they had paid a big enough price or earned it. Forgiveness was available, but it was not through the details of the old covenant. The sacrifices had a shadow of forgiveness — they spoke about forgiveness and they pictured forgiveness — but they were not the way that forgiveness actually comes.

Christ is the answer

The author begins verse 5 with the word “therefore,” meaning “because of what I have just said.” In this case, we might paraphrase it like this: “Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ came into the world and said...” and then follows a quote from the Greek version of Psalm 40:6-8:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin

offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am-it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God’” (Hebrews 10:5-7). In this psalm, our author has found one of several Old Testament passages that foreshadow the end of the sacrificial system. He rephrases the psalm to emphasize his point, and he begins by giving the label “first” to a point that he will come back to shortly: “First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them.’”

And to make another point, he inserts an additional comment: “although the law required them to be made” (verse 8). The author is making a contrast between what the law required, and what God ultimately wanted. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 has a similar contrast.) God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system that would prepare the way for the reality, which is Christ. The old covenant law was not the final word on what God wanted.

What did he want? Verse 9 says, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” God wanted the people to obey him — but only Christ did it perfectly. The early church apparently understood this psalm as a messianic psalm because Jesus fulfilled it in a way that no psalm-writer could. He did the will of God in a way that no one else did.

Then comes a powerful conclusion: “He sets aside the first to establish the second” (verse 9). What is the “first”? In the immediate context, it is sacrifices and offerings, but our writer has also used the word “first” five times to refer to the old covenant. The covenant with its sacrifices and rituals has been set aside.

And what has been established? The doing of God’s will. The word “establish” was also used for covenants, and the word “second” was also used for the new covenant (8:7). Our author is making a literary parallel here, using Psalm 40 as a miniature picture of the change in covenants. Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ said, Out with the old, and in with the new! The new covenant has been established by the obedience of Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the deficiency of the old covenant.

Made holy by Christ

Verse 10 begins, “And by that will...” It is by God’s choice, and by Christ’s obedience, that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. We have been made holy — this is another way of describing the results of the new covenant. Our sins are removed, our conscience is cleared, and we are made holy, so we can approach God to worship. How is it done? Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ — a sacrifice that involved both his will and his body, both his mind and his flesh. Further, we do God’s will when we accept this as our means of sanctification.

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth,

between spirit and matter, in a way that nothing else could. Only he could make an offering on earth that was acceptable in heaven. The flesh and blood of his body was no different than the flesh and blood of any other crucified man, but it was effective for our sanctification and our forgiveness because Jesus was perfectly obedient, because there was a perfect will in him.

Humans are both physical and spiritual, and we sin in the flesh and in the mind. The salvation Christ gives us redeems our bodies and our minds, sanctifying all of us for true worship of God. We are not saved by a purely physical sacrifice, nor by a purely spiritual one. A physical body had to be willingly given, because the spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world. In Christ, we are assured that we have been completely redeemed. His will and his body were given for us, and it was fully effective, once for all time.

Perfect forever

Our acceptance by God does not depend on the performance of rituals (either ancient or modern) — it depends on what Christ has already done, and it is therefore guaranteed. This is contrasted with the ineffective work of the old covenant priests: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (verse 11). Was it an exercise in futility? No, it was a picture, a drama that was worth repeating until Christ fulfilled it.

“But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (verse 12). The Levitical priests stood while they worked; Christ is able to sit (figuratively speaking, of course) because his work is now done. There will be more work in the future (verse 13), but for now he rests, “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (verse 14).

The work of sanctification is done (verse 10), and it is still being done (verse 14). Christ is still working in our lives, but the work is based on the sacrifice that was done once for all time. He has completely cleansed us, made us qualified to be in God’s presence. That does not change.

As evidence, he quotes Jeremiah 31:33 again, the prophecy of the new covenant: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Hebrews 10:16). This is the work now being done as we “are being made holy.”

The grand finale

Then our author skips down to the last part of Jeremiah 31:34: “Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more’” (Hebrews 10:17). And he draws this conclusion: “And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (v. 18).

This is the grand finale: Our sins are forgiven; there is

no need for sin sacrifices. To us, this may seem a minor point, an anticlimax, something we take for granted. But to our author, this is a major point, the point he has been driving toward for four chapters. The sacrificial system is not needed any more. The old covenant has been set aside. It never was effective, and Christ has set us free from it.

Apparently the audience of Hebrews found the sacrificial system attractive. It was a God-given pattern of worship, and the people saw no reason to give it up. Even if God allowed other forms of worship, wouldn’t it be better to stick to the original plan? Wouldn’t this assure us that we were doing something that God likes?

No, our author is explaining. God does not necessarily like now what he commanded centuries ago. He didn’t like it in Jeremiah’s day, or when Psalm 40 was written. The law was good for a time, but its time is past.

Is the original plan better?

In the early church, when Jewish people first believed in Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to participate in the temple rituals, either in person or through the offerings collected in the synagogues. At first this seemed harmless, and the people were allowed to continue their customs.

However, as time went on, it became clear that the rituals were a competitor to Christ. They were an enemy of faith. People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ. In their minds, their relationship with God was based partly on their participation in the rituals. They probably thought, Doesn’t this make us more obedient, more pleasing to God? Even if the laws were optional, wouldn’t it be better to continue them? And, aren’t those who continue better than those who don’t? The rituals could easily lead to judgmentalism.

So our author argues, chapter after chapter, that the rituals are obsolete imitations. This is not the better way — this is the inferior way. Rituals do not achieve anything. Our standing with God is based on what Christ has done, and he has set aside the old covenant. The old covenant was once the best system around, but now that Christ has come, Christ is far better, and the old covenant is inferior.

Throughout the book, Christ is compared to various aspects of the old covenant, and Christ is always better. Does our author want his people to participate in the sacrifices and rituals? Probably not. Does he command them to quit? No, not directly, but he probably wants them to come to that decision themselves.

What he commands them is to look to Jesus. Old covenant rituals are ineffective. They are shadows — copies. Jesus is the reality, and he is fully effective. There is no need for obsolete rituals. They are not a badge of better Christianity — they are an unnecessary burden that can block our view of Christ. It would be wrong to insist on old covenant practices.

Practical exhortations

Hebrews is a practical book. After each chapter or so of doctrinal explanation, the author puts in a “therefore,” and points out how the believers should respond to the truth about Christ. At several points in the book, the author says, “Therefore, let us do such and such.”

At Hebrews 10:19, after several chapters of doctrine, the author comes to an exhortation passage. This one is a climactic point in the book. It has five exhortations. Since the old covenant is done away, and since we are forgiven by Christ, what are we supposed to do?

The author begins these exhortations by reminding us that we have two major benefits in Christ: 1) “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” and 2) “We have a great priest over the house of God” (verses 19-21). Since we have these two benefits, he says, we should respond in five ways:

1. “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (verse 22). We should accept the cleansing that Christ has given us, and use it for its purpose: that we draw closer to God. The rituals of the old covenant symbolized separation; the coming of Jesus Christ emphasizes the approachability of God.

2. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (verse 23). Christ is faithful toward us, so we must be faithful toward him, keeping him central in our thoughts.

3. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Notice the focus. It is not that each person should do good. That is true, but the focus here is on encouraging *others* to do good. And not just exhorting others, but *thinking* about how we might do it better. In this way, the good deeds will be multiplied. Our relationship with God will have results in the way we interact with each other.

4. “Let us not give up meeting together” (verse 25). It seems that some first-century Jewish Christians were no longer meeting together. Perhaps they were pressured by the Jewish community. Perhaps they were disappointed that Christ had not yet returned. Perhaps they felt that Christianity was a “Gentile” religion. They were more interested in their Jewish distinctives than they were in Christ. So the author urges, Don’t drop out! If you don’t meet with one another, you can’t show love.

5. “Let us encourage one another” (verse 25). Repetition emphasizes. The first-century Jewish Christians needed to encourage one another. Mutual encouragement helps everyone stay in the faith.

This advice is still true today. We need to encourage one another in the faith, and in doing good — “all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Christ will return, and we will be called into account for how we responded to his message, for what our focus was. He will “bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28) — and not just waiting, but working in faith as well.

Review

- There has been an important change in the law.
- We are to look to Jesus, not to ritual laws.
- We should not expect the new covenant to be just like the old.
- The new covenant offers real forgiveness, not rituals.
- Jesus gives us complete forgiveness and therefore makes us perfectly acceptable to God.
- Question: Jesus is better than the rituals, but couldn’t we have both? What spiritual problems might we have if we tried to observe ritual laws?

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