**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (23): The Book Of Better Things**

**“The New and Better Covenant,” Part Two**

**Hebrews 8:1-13**

**June 9, 2024**

The last half of the eighth chapter of Hebrews is special (vv. 7-13). It contains the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament (vv. 8b-12). But it’s not just any Old Testament citation; it’s Jeremiah’s epic announcement that God would make a new and better covenant with “*the house of Israel*” and “*the house of Judah*” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). And while the prophet had in mind Abraham’s ethnic descendants, the author of Hebrews applies this promise to the church, and claims that we are participants in this new and better covenant, which is “*established on better promises*” (8:6b).

As we saw last week, Jesus is the “mediator” of this New Covenant. When He offered up Himself on the cross and poured out His blood for the forgiveness of our sins, He was inaugurating this Covenant. Jesus Himself announced this when He celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples just before His betrayal and crucifixion. When He offered the cup of blessing at the end of the supper, He said: “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*” (Luke 22:20).

Years later, the Apostle Paul quotes those words of Jesus when he tells the church about the importance of celebrating the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26). So, when we come together and take the Lord’s Supper each and every Sunday, we too are celebrating and experiencing the promised blessings of the New Covenant.

The same was true for the people to whom the book of Hebrews was written. That’s the basis for our author’s argument in this section of his letter. It’s as if he were saying, “You now are participants in the new and better covenant promised in Jeremiah and inaugurated by Christ through His death and resurrection. So why would you ever want to go back to the Old Covenant and its inferior ways?”

That argument unfolds in three stages. First, the author presents the need for the New Covenant (v. 7). Then he offers the Scriptural support for the superiority of the New Covenant to the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 8-12; Jer. 31:31-34). Finally, he tells us that this New Covenant supersedes the earlier one; the Old Covenant is now obsolete (v. 13).

**A. The Need for the New Covenant (8:7):** “*For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another*.” This line of reasoning is similar to the one we have seen in 7:11, where the Levitical priestly order was shown to be inferior because it was replaced by the order of Melchizedek. In the same way, says our author, if the Mosaic covenant were without fault, there would have been no need to replace it with a new covenant.

**B. The Prophetic Announcement of the New Covenant (8:8-9).** “(8) *But God found fault with the people and said: The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judah.* (9) *It 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*” (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

The translation of the opening phrase of verse 8 has been disputed. It’s either “*God found fault with the people and said . . .*” or God “*found fault* (with the first covenant) *and said to the people*” (as in the NIV footnote). This alternative translation would seem to be the more likely, since it would reinforce the point of verse 7; the covenant itself was “faulty.” As our author has previously said, it was “*set aside*” because it was “*weak and useless*.” Why? Because it could not attain “*perfection*,” meaning, it could not provide full redemption from sin and direct access to God (7:11, 18-19). That’s the first fundamental flaw of the Mosaic covenant.

But the second flaw surfaces in verse 9. The Old Covenant was unable to change the hearts of the people. It had no power to enable them to live up to its conditions. That’s why we read that they “*did not remain faithful*” to this covenant; they lacked the perseverance to follow through with their part of the agreement (or “covenant”). Because the covenant was a conditional one, Israel’s departure from it caused the Lord to likewise withdraw from it . . . . “*and I turned away from them*.” That Old Covenant would now be “renewed.”

However, Jeremiah does not say that God will simply patch up the Old Covenant and give it new life. Rather, He will make a completely new covenant with “*the people of Israel*” and the “*people of Judah*.” From the prophet’s point of view, he looks for the unification of “Israel” (the northern kingdom) and “Judah” (the southern kingdom). They had long been separated when he wrote those words. Further, when he announced that this “time is coming,” he doesn’t locate the timeframe with any precision.

But all of this pointed to the Messianic Age. In the words of one noted commentator, “The promise of the reunion of Israel and Judah was symbolical of the healing of every human breach and the reconciliation of all nations and persons in Christ, the seed of Abraham in whom all the people of the earth were blessed and united (Gal. 3:8f, 16; 27-29), because He ‘has broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Eph. 2:14)’” (Philip E. Hughes). This happened when Christ inaugurated the New Covenant with His death and resurrection.

**C. The Promised Blessings of the New Covenant in Christ (vv. 10-12).** There are four “better promises” in the New Covenant. When viewed as a whole, they are perhaps the best summation of the core components of Christianity found anywhere in the New Testament.

1. The Promise of Inward Renewal (v. 10a): “*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*.” The Old Covenant was external; God’s demands were initially written on tablets of stone, and the people had not been able to live up to what they knew was the Word from God. But the New Covenant makes it possible for His Word to be written on our hearts so that an internal transformation takes place; we have a new desire to live in light of these commands.

That’s because every member of the New Covenant has been regenerated or given new life. This is precisely what the prophet Ezekiel was referring to when he wrote these words: “*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 and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

2. The Promise of a Personal Relationship (v. 10b): “*I will be their God, and they will be my people*.” This was true, of course, for the faithful remnant under the Old Covenant (Ex. 6:7). But when God saves a people by redeeming them by the precious blood of Christ, they are the people of God in a way never known before. All of this points to the glorious truth that He will never leave us or forsake us; He will never turn a deaf ear to our prayers; He will never let us go; He will always come to our aid no matter how horrific life may become or no matter how devastating the loss may be.

3. The Promise of an Intimate Knowledge (v.11): “*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*.” Under the Old Covenant, the people of God were a mixed community, composed of both believers and non-believers. But under the New Covenant, we have an entirely different situation. Every member of the New Covenant community is a believer. Every member has been born again. Every member experiences a personal, first-hand, saving knowledge of the living God.

4. The Promise of the Complete Forgiveness of Sins (v. 12): “*For I will forgive their wickedness, and remember their sins no more*.” Under the Old Covenant, forgiveness was never final and forever. Each and every year, one had to return to the temple on the Day of Atonement so that the high priest could slaughter an animal and place the blood of the sacrifice on the altar in the Holy of Holies. But when Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant by the shedding of His blood, our sins were altogether and forever forgiven: past, present, and future (Heb. 7:27; 10:10, 13, 18).

**D. The Passing of the Old Covenant (v. 13):** “*By calling this covenant new, he has made the first one obsolete; and what is aging will soon disappear*.” Some believe this is a reference to what would soon occur in 70AD, when the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple. The sacrifices and the priesthood of the Old Covenant then ceased, since there was no longer a temple in which the priestly ministries of the Old Covenant could be exercised.

But we could just as easily read this from the perspective of Jeremiah (in the 6th century BC). When he prophesied the coming of a new covenant, the Old Covenant “was ready to vanish away.” The Old Covenant was then abolished and rendered “obsolete” at the time of Christ’s death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection from the dead. Since that time, no believer in Christ is under the Old Covenant law. The very words “a new covenant” antiquated the previous one.

As I mentioned earlier, these blessings of the New Covenant in Christ are perhaps the best summation of the Christian faith to be found anywhere in the New Testament. They point us beyond the external rituals and rules and activities that are so often identified with a particular church or its denomination. But the Christian faith can never be externalized, as if it could be reduced to where we go, or who we’re with, or how we dress, or what we listen to or watch on TV.

The *true* essence of the Christian faith is evidenced by the outworking of these new covenant blessings in Christ: Do we have a personal relationship with the God of heaven? Do we know that *all* our sins have been forgiven; past, present, and future? Do we desire to follow the precepts of His Word because we have been born of His Spirit? *This* is what it means to be members of the New Covenant community, which is the Church, the body of Christ. Nothing else really, truly matters!