

Week 6 Devotionary™ Reading

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews

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Better in Every Way

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, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. 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. 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." 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. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. – Hebrews 8:1-7 ESV

A better covenant. A better high priest. A better ministry. A better promise. Everything about Jesus is better. To borrow from an age-old, tried and true advertising slogan, you might say it is "new and improved". Jesus didn't just provide man with another option among many. He provided the one and only option for men to be made right with God. Unlike the priests who served in the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus ministers in the heavenly tabernacle of God, seated at the very side of His Father. His is not an earthly, temporal ministry, but a heavenly, eternal one. He is no longer offering up sacrifices to appease or propitiate God, because His death fully paid the penalty for sin and satisfied the just demands of a righteous God – once for all.

In this section of chapter eight, the author continues to establish Jesus as better. But he does so by contrasting the old covenant with the new covenant. In verses 22-28 of chapter seven, he pointed out that Jesus is "the guarantor of a better covenant". This new covenant only requires one priest: Jesus. Its high priest will never die or need to be replaced. It requires no more daily sacrifices for sin. In chapter eight, we are told that the high priest of the new covenant sits at the right hand of God in a heavenly tabernacle, not an earthly one. It is the real thing, not a replica or poor reflection. The original tabernacle and temple were intended to serve as "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:5 ESV). The millions of animal sacrifices offered in those two structures over the centuries were simply a foreshadowing of what was to come. "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4 ESV). They could provide temporary atonement or relief but were never a permanent fix. That is why the sacrifices were "continually offered every year" (Hebrews 10:1 ESV). In his gospel, Luke records the words of Jesus to His disciples on the night He shared the Passover meal with them for the last time. "After supper he took another cup of wine and said, 'This cup is the new covenant between God and his people – an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for'" (Luke 22:20 NLT). With the death of Jesus, a new covenant was made between God and man. It replaced the old covenant. Why? Because it provided a better way for men to be made right with God. In fact, it provided the *only* way for men to be made right with God. Under the old covenant, the shedding of blood provided a temporary relief from

the condemnation of sin. But with His death, Jesus provided a permanent solution to man's sin problem. Rather than man having to try and earn a right standing with God through his own efforts, Jesus provided the gift of His righteousness. He took on man's sin and gave His righteousness in return. That is why Paul wrote, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT). He further elaborates on this point in his letter to the Romans.

The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit. – Romans 8:3-4 NLT

In chapter nine, the author of Hebrews continues his elaboration on the point that Jesus was the better mediator of a better covenant. "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" (Hebrews 9:15 ESV). It was not that the old covenant was bad. It was simply that it was incomplete. It pointed to something better to come. It was a foreshadowing of something greater to be revealed. It revealed man's sinfulness so that he would understand his desperate need for a Savior. It is interesting to note that when Jesus walked this earth, He made the sad commentary on the spiritual state of man: "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners" (Mark 2:17 NLT). His point? Those who think they are without sin and in no need of a Savior, will never turn to Him. It is those who are "weary and carry heavy burdens" (Matthew 11:29) who will find rest for their souls. The apostle John wrote, "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth" (1 John 1:8 NLT). "If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts" (1 John 1:10 NLT). Jesus offers a better ministry as a better high priest and the mediator of a better covenant based on better promises. But to take advantage of it, men must recognize their sin and their desperate need for a Savior. They must desire something better. They must turn from the old and receive by faith the new that is offered to them through Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV).

Better Promises

For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. – Hebrews 8:8-13 ESV

In this passage, the author of Hebrews uses the Old Testament to prove his point and bolster his case. He quotes from Jeremiah 31:31-34. In this passage, Jeremiah, the prophet, tells the rebellious people of Israel that their day is coming when God will do four things for them. Back in verse six, the author of Hebrews refers to these four things as the "better promises". Each of these four promises fall under the new covenant, that will not be like the old covenant He had made with their fathers in the wilderness. God said that when the new covenant was enacted, He would put His law into their minds and write them on their hearts. In other words, their motivation for obeying God would be internal and not external. They would have the capacity to obey Him willingly and gladly. He also promised that they would be His people and that He would be their God. That speaks of a unique and special relationship, even better than the one they had enjoyed during their days in the wilderness and as His chosen people living in the land of promise. The history of the people of Israel was one marked by blessing and cursing, faithfulness and apostasy. And ultimately, God was forced to give them over into the hands of their enemies, as punishment for their failure to remain obedient and faithful to Him. That is why He says, "they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them" (Hebrews 8:9b ESV).

The third promise God said would come with the new covenant was an intimate relationship with Him – for all Jews. They would no longer need to be taught about God, because they would know Him closely and personally. Finally, God promised that the new covenant would bring complete and permanent forgiveness of their sins. No more sacrifices would be needed. No more threat of punishment, condemnation or death.

When God spoke these words through Jeremiah, He was indicating that the old covenant was on its way out. Not long after this the people of God would find themselves taken captive by the Babylonians and living in exile. There would be no more temple and therefore, no more sacrificial system. Jerusalem, the city of God, would be a wasteland, destroyed by the

Babylonians. And even when they were graciously returned to the land by God 70 years later, the temple they rebuilt would be a shadow of its former self. The great city of Jerusalem would never achieve the glory or status it had once enjoyed in the days of King David and his son, Solomon. Over the following centuries, the Israelites would find themselves a conquered people, living under the heavy yoke of a long line of conquering kings, all the way up to the occupation of Rome in the days of Jesus.

But the promises God gave them in association with the new covenant were fulfilled, in part, with the coming of Jesus. His death, burial and resurrection made them possible. That is why Jesus, on the night He shared His last Passover meal with the disciples, told them, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people – an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you” (Luke 22:20 NLT). The sacrificial death of Jesus made possible the new covenant. And with the coming of the new, the old became obsolete. Even at the time the letter of Hebrews was written, the old covenant, based on the Mosaic law, was passing away. With the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, the sacrificial system was brought to an end. Jesus had predicted this event when He shared with His disciples, “Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!” (Matthew 24:1-2 NLT).

In using the passage from Jeremiah, the author of Hebrews is telling his Jewish readers that God is not yet done with the people of Israel. The promises found in Jeremiah were specifically for the people of Judah and Israel. But Gentile believers have been grafted into the family of God and have become descendants of Abraham. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29 ESV). Paul also wrote that “you Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God’s special olive tree” (Romans 11:17 NLT). But while the Gentiles have been included in the promises of God found in Jeremiah 31, He fully intends to fulfill those promises made to His chosen people. That is the point the author of Hebrews is trying to make. There is no reason for them, as Jewish Christians, to fall back to their reliance on the old covenant with its rules, rituals and regulations. It could not save or sanctify any more than it could back in the days of Moses, David and Solomon. He has been trying to get them to understand that Jesus has ushered in something far greater and better. A better high priest. A better covenant based on better promises. A better sacrifice. A better mediator. A better outcome altogether.

And to those Gentiles who enjoy a restored relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, the new covenant has brought freedom from law-keeping and self-righteousness. Obedience and faithfulness to God is no longer based on external motivators or the keeping of rules and ritual. It is based on the indwelling Spirit of God who encourages and empowers us to live in faithful service to God. We don't have to earn His favor. We already have it. That is why Paul reminds us,

We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old written covenant ends in death; but under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life. – 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 NLT