

## The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 21      October 7, 2018    The New Covenant Promise  
Hebrews 8 : 8 - 13

### The Problem With the Old Covenant

vv. 8-10

Verse 8a in the ESV reads; “*For he finds fault with them when he says,...*”. Among Greek scholars, there is a minor dispute over the word order here in the ESV, NASB, KJV and NKJV. The HCSB even words this more strongly, changing “them” to “*his people*”. But the NET Bible says this, “*But showing its fault, God says to them...*” Do you see the difference? The NET bases the word order on a legitimate alternative reading of the Greek, which Philip Hughes agrees with, but most accept the usual order of the Greek.

I only bring this to our attention because, if the OC had a fault serious enough to cut a NC, we have to be aware of what the fault was. Was it the OC itself? Or was it the fault of the people? This of course keys off of the context supplied by v. 7.

One reason that most interpreters accept the majority reading as reflected in the ESV, is found 1 verse down in v. 9. Especially note “*For they [ their fathers ] did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.*” It appears that it was the people who were faulty, but regardless of the direct fault ( & I do agree with the ESV rendering ), the OC had to come to an end, and had to be replaced with God’s prescriptive remedy – the NC. The OC was not effective to save, being ( as per Galatians 3 ), “*a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ*”. As was pointed out in the last lesson, and as we’ll see from the AH’s citation of Jeremiah 31 below, the NC is made “*with the house of Israel*”, and “*with the house of Israel and Judah*”. – Heb. 8:8. We have determined to understand that, although the main benefits of the NC are in fact, reserved as an eschatological blessing for Israel at the time of Jesus’ Millennial reign, the church gains great benefit from the tenets of the NC, since the NC was at least instituted if not ratified by the blood of Jesus Christ, who is described as the Mediator of the NC – cf. Heb. 8:6; 9:15; I Tim. 2:5. Also see Job 9:33; 20:25-27.

So, let’s read vv. 8-10 here, and then read the original from Jeremiah 31:31-34, 35-37. We can see here that without question, the NC is for Israel and vv. 35-37 promise Israel’s continuation as a nation in the strongest possible terms. Verse 37 admits that Israel has sinned, and should be “*cast off*”, yet God has determined ( v. 34b ), “*For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more.*”

Yet, for all this to occur, a sea change is required – God must supply the Mediator, the One who will hold this NC together, and of course, that is Jesus Christ, and this is how the AH applies it.

The Judaism of the first century AD was under censure by God. Note Paul’s take on this in Romans 9:27-28 ( a remnant only ); Romans 10:19-21 ( stubborn, unwilling to

come to Christ – cf. 10:3-4 ); Romans 11:7-11 ( being made jealous ); and finally, Romans 11:25-32 ( shown mercy to receive mercy ). The Judaism that the recipients of Hebrews were trying to go back to – if they renounced Christ – would be a Judaism still under God’s disfavour. The Mediator was there now and he was theirs! Why go back and hope to be part of the remnant, when the salvation blessings promised were so obviously already established and in operation in Christ!?

What Paul says in Romans 9-11 fits with Heb. 8:8b ( citing Jer. 31 ) – “*Behold, the days are coming...*”, which obviously, when Jeremiah wrote them were much farther away than when the AH quoted them here. Yet, he brings this passage from Jeremiah into his central argument in about 65 AD – not in the sense that the fulness of the NC is upon them, because all Israel is not yet saved, and in fact, their ability to worship and serve in the Jerusalem temple is within 5 years or so of being shut down by God via the Roman army in 70 AD. Even to this day, in 2018, the Jews have no access to the Temple mount, so the Millennial Kingdom has not yet arrived for the benefits of the NC to spread across the world. Christ must be on David’s throne for that to happen, and by the way, there must be a new Temple built – such as Ezekiel 40-48 describes.

However, He is on His High Priestly throne at the Father’s right hand, mediating and interceding for His people, the vast majority of which, in 65 AD were Gentiles, but there were also a huge number of Jews who had accepted Christ.

Heb. 8:9a – “*...not like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...*”. The NC is to be distinctly different from the OC. The OC was mediated by the law. It was meant to direct people’s worship and control their sinful natures. It was not evil [ Rom. 7:7-12, 24-25 ], and it had a purpose ( Gal. 3:21-29 ).

So, in a simplified sense, the Mosaic Law, which Israel was under ( from the Exodus until Christ ) used the prescribed series of sacrifices and offerings as a means of ‘keeping the law’ and dealing with sin; the priesthood was established to oversee it & to serve God and men – to ensure that all was being done in the prescribed way. But the priesthood quickly became corrupt, thus corrupting not only the people but the understanding of the law itself. Christ’s Sermon on the Mount ( Matt. 5-7 ) was delivered to clarify for Israel the reason for Messiah, and the change of focus required to divert Israel from trying to achieve self-righteousness by keeping the letter of the law, while ignoring the spirit of the law! Note Matt. 5:17-20 & Rom. 10:1-4.

Under the NC, the law, formerly external and accusing, now becomes internal and a godly guiding force. This is an element of being redeemed, being reconciled to God and justified as a result of Christ’s cross-work on behalf of His people. Philip Hughes points out:

“A further point of contact is found in that the promise, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” is the same as the promise that God gave to the Israelites, with the condition that its fulfillment was dependent on their observance of the Mosaic Covenant ( Ex. 6:7; 29:45f; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 26:18f; 29:12f ).

By their repeated acts of apostasy, however, the people cut themselves off from the enjoyment of the blessings of this promise; and it is only now, following the redeeming work of the Son and the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the ascended Lord, that God, in Christ, dwells in the innermost being of His people, who together constitute the temple of the living God ( 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:16f ). But it is only eschatologically, with the introduction of the new heaven and new earth, populated with the multitude of the redeemed, that this covenant promise attains it's ultimate fulfillment. Then, at last, and everlastingly, God “will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” ( Rev. 21:3 ). In this intimate and uninterrupted relationship there will be no need to urge others to “know the Lord”, because all, “from the least of them to the greatest,” will know him. The reason for their being there is, indeed, that they know God; for to know God is itself eternal life ( JN 17:3 ). As the essence of sin is unwillingness to know God and to glorify him as God ( Rom. 1:18ff ), so without forgiveness and removal of sin there can be no knowledge of God and of the blessing of his presence. Hence the promise of mercy with which this quotation ends; and this forgiving and reconciling mercy has been procured for us by the high-priestly mediation of our Savior Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

By the time Jeremiah wrote, it had become obvious that Israel “*did not continue in my covenant.*” The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been exiled to Assyria ( 722 BC ), and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken captive or killed in about 586 BC by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>2</sup>

Both Israel and Judah were responsible for their disobedience which had led to God’s using Assyria and Babylon to chastise them, and yet, their disobedience reflected the inadequacies of the OC. Israel did return from exile ( at least a remnant did ), but their problem still remained – the people disobeyed God and the covenant promises did not come to them. As the NT opens, they are under the dominion of Rome and were not experiencing the joy or freedom promised by covenant if they obeyed, so their dismal, hapless state is caused by their own sin.<sup>3</sup> This concept is spelled out in Heb. 8:9b.

Verse 10 – Now here, the AH begins to elaborate on the nature & characteristics of the NC. In Jeremiah’s view ( v. 10 here cites both Numbers 19:7 & Jer. 31:33 ), this NC would solve the very real problem of Israel’s continual violation of the OC stipulations. If they did not cease their unbelief and rebellion, the promises made to Abraham could never become a reality. “The AH believes the NC has been fulfilled in his day, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

As a New Covenant theologian, Tom Schreiner believes that the church has replaced Israel, so he naturally concurs with the quote above from his commentary, and in fact, on p. 252 of that commentary, he states outright – “In the NT, this promise [ of the NC ] is fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ, which is understood to be the new Israel.”<sup>5</sup> I disagree with

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<sup>1</sup> Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 301-302

<sup>2</sup> Tom Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 250

<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, p. 251

<sup>4</sup> IBID, p. 251

<sup>5</sup> IBID, p. 252

his position here, a position often taken by most Presbyterians, but Schreiner is a Baptist. Although the church receives the benefits of the not-yet fully inaugurated NC, it will not be fully actualized until the return and reign of Jesus Christ. The concept of the NC being fully actualized already is not a theological issue for Covenant and New Covenant theologians, even though many of the prophecies associated with Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 – Micah 4:1-5; Amos 9:11-15; Isaiah 65:17-25 – and many more, are seen at this point not to be fully in effect. Rather, they are coming in the eschaton.

But there is a progression here, seen to start in v. 10, with God's first point, *"I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts."* In Romans 8:3, Paul makes a point to illustrate why this is necessary – *"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."* In II Cor. 3:18, he further points out how this blessing comes about; *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."* These verses are a parallel to Heb. 8:10.

What this law placed in our minds and written on our hearts represents is salvation. Where the OC had the decalogue engraved by God on tablets of stone ( Ex. 24:12 ), the NC boasts of the law written on our hearts. Ezekiel may be making this comparison when he says – Ezek. 36:25-27. God gives us understanding by putting His laws into our hearts and in our minds – thus affecting both our knowledge and our will.

Richard Phillips comments,

"First we have to understand truth, and then we have to embrace it, commit to it, and love it in our hearts. This is how saving faith works. Both the head and the heart are necessary...light shines through the mind and warms the heart. The promise of God's inward work makes the new covenant a better covenant. God promises that he will work faithfulness into us. What the old covenant could not do – give us a heart to obey and glorify God – the new covenant can do. This means that if you have faith in Christ, if you are saved under this new covenant, God is doing this in you. "For it is God who works in you", Paul says, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" ( Phil. 2:13 ). Genuine, saving belief in Christ will always affect our will and our affections, or else it is not the faith that saves us by means of this new covenant."<sup>6</sup>

Verse 10c – "...and I will be their God and they shall be my people." Richard Phillips cites Andrew Murray here;

"The promise has two parts, the first of which is God's promise to be our God. Andrew Murray writes, "Personal, direct fellowship with God: this the crowning blessing of the new covenant." The condition of such fellowship is holiness, for God is holy – and he now promises to write his law on our hearts. The threat to such fellowship is our sin – and he has promised to forgive and forget it completely through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Phillips, Hebrews, P & R Publishing, 2006, p. 280-281

Therefore, this crowning blessing can be given and received. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”<sup>7</sup>

Here is what God desires – our fidelity ( faithfulness ), a commitment to Him as in a marriage vow. But what He requires of us, He gives us by His grace in this new and better covenant. It is said that we know too little of this from our end. Though we’ve been saved, and strive and persevere, we fall short, but God is working in us to make us more like His Son, guiding us by His indwelling Holy Spirit, enlightening us by His Word, and He promises a culmination at the end of time where we read Revelation 21:2-3, 7; “*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.”*” Then verse 7 – “*The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*” He asks us to strive for perfection, although He knows we are not going to be able to achieve it this side of heaven. Paul, In Phil. 3:12, recognizes this of himself.

## Our Sins Forgiven

vv. 11-12

We’ll begin by looking at v. 12, as it is the third blessing of the NC begun in v. 10, with v. 11 acting almost as a parabolic statement. The blessing of v. 12 is forgiveness of sins, a critical aspect of this God-driven covenant as stated by Andrew Murray above.

This promise is placed third in line, or last in this sequence of blessings, because it is the climactic promise – the apex – and is the basis for the NC’s superiority. There are 2 points to this: (1) God will forgive their wickedness ( iniquities ) or heinous sins. Note the phrasing; “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities”, Jeremiah looking forward prophetically to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was, as described by the John the Baptist in JN 1:29 – “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*”

At the Last Supper, in Luke 22:20, Jesus states, “*This cup that is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood.*” It is only ever on the basis of Jesus’ shed blood, received by grace through faith, that God promises, “I will forgive their wickedness.” Notice as well, then, the importance Jesus’ blood in verses such as; Heb. 9:6-8; 9:12-15a; 9:18-22; 10:4, 8-14, 19-23,29; 13:12 and I Pet. 1:2; I JN 1:7; Rev. 1:5, and so on.

And (2) God says “*I will remember their sins no more.*” Since we know that God is omniscient, how is it possible that He could forget anything? But He forgets our sin on the basis of the first point, ‘He forgives.’ There are numerous passages that tell us that God forgets sin, once they’ve been covered by His blood, and are thus paid for or atoned for. Ps. 25:7 – “*Do not remember the sins of my youth.*”; Ps. 79:8 – “*Do not hold against us the sins of past generations.*” Isaiah 43:25 – God declares He “*will remember our*

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Murray, cited in Richard Phillips, p. 284

*sins no more*". Psalm 103:10-12 . Even more distinct but less well known is Micah 7:19 – *"He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."*!

Don McLeod is clear about the basis of God's forgiveness when he comments: "Clearly, God does not forget, any more than he suffers from impaired vision. But the sacrifice of Christ has so covered our sins that they are operationally invisible. Our guilt is no longer a provocation to God. Once we accept the idea of Christ as the 'atonement cover' we can begin to draw other conclusions from Romans 3:25 and its context. Perhaps the most important of these is the expiatory power of Christ lies in his blood. He is a *hilasterion* 'in' or 'by' his blood."<sup>8</sup>

This forgiveness and forgetfulness offered here is the great promise of the NC in Christ. Because of Him, our sin is no more.

Verse 11 – This verse helps us to realize that having the law in our mind and on our heart results in a much different way of living as God's people – vastly different and superior to the OC. In the OC, there was a mixed community but it was a theocratic community, so not all members were actually regenerate. That covenant was both God's people and a political force – a nation. Under the NC, the national and political aspect is gone and can in fact, consist of believers from every tongue, tribe and nation . The genius of the NC is that the Spirit causes all NC members to obey God's will ( at least to desire to do so ). All members of the NC community, from the least to the greatest, know the Lord.

Now, there can certainly be false claimants to the status of 'believer' in the here and now, because the NC has not yet been fully activated, but when it does, literally all will be members and will receive the full blessings of the NC – then this statement of v. 11 will come to complete fruition. *"All will know me"* means all will be saved.

## The Old Covenant is Obsolete

v. 13

This might seem obvious. If the NC is being spoken of, then the OC is obsolete or on its way to being obsolete. It has served its purpose – cf. Gen. 3:15-29. The OC, with its laws, ceremonies, offerings, feasts and symbols, was a picture of God's plan for both the Jews, and ultimately for the world. But, for the Jew, the OC is in the past. It has been replaced by the beginnings ( at least ) of what Jeremiah and Ezekiel had prophesied, and by what the AH is describing here as a NC which has made the OC obsolete.

The AH is not arguing that the OC was not beautiful or useful – in fact – his description of some aspects of the OC in Heb. 9:1-10 argues that it had its own glory ( and we saw a quote by John Piper that argued this in our last lesson ). But then, in 9:11f he contrasts this with( v. 11 ) *"But when Christ appeared..."*, the symbol no longer has valid saving purpose, and so God intended it to be discarded.

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<sup>8</sup> Donald MacLeod, Christ Crucified, IVP, 2014, p. 113

Schreiner says, “The 2 covenants do not co-exist, as they are not complementary to one another in that sense. Rather, they are successive, much as the reign of kings in the OT was successive. One king passed out of the scene and a new king took the throne. So the old order, the OC, has been superseded and is “ready to vanish away”. If it is in force at all when Hebrews was written, it was a shell of its former self, as its whole point had been to introduce the Messiah to the world, yet it utterly failed and instead killed Him! As a legally binding contract, it had ended.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, if we hold to the fairly convincing history that Hebrews was written and delivered in 65 AD or thereabouts ( certainly prior to 70 AD ), proof that the OC was obsolete came in the form of the decimation of Jerusalem and the temple, which occurred historically in 70 AD under Titus and his Roman army assisted by mercenaries.

Consider the history of the earthquake that occurred as Jesus died on the cross, - the Matt. 27:50-51<sup>10</sup> records the veil of the temple being torn in two from top to bottom. Thus, the sacrifice the OC had pointed to was completed and direct access to God was opened up through the Messiah – cf. I Tim. 2:5-6. “The destruction of the Temple completed the closing of the OC – by removing the place of sacrifice that no longer served a purpose.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schreiner, p. 254-255

<sup>10</sup> Pars – MK 15:37-39; LK 23:44-46

<sup>11</sup> John MacArthur, Hebrews, Moody, 1983, p. 217