

SCRIPTURE  SHARED



Jesus: Greater Than

a study of Hebrews

Week 2: Superiority of the New Covenant

Day 1 – Based on Better Promises

Hebrews 8:1-13

Now the main 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 the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’ ⁶But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. ⁷For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

⁸ *God finds fault with them when he says:*

*‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah;*

⁹ *not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,
on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt;
for they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.*

¹⁰ *This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.*

¹¹ *And they shall not teach one another
or say to each other, “Know the Lord”,
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.*

¹² *For I will be merciful towards their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.'*

¹³*In speaking of 'a new covenant', he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.*

Understanding the Passage:

"A better covenant." This week's Scriptures in Hebrews 8-10 will be unpacking this theme of a better covenant.

A covenant is a promise enforced by unconditional trust. Unlike a contract, where multiple parties agree to terms and conditions, a covenant is simply the giving and receiving of promises.

The best things aren't terms and conditions; they're promises. In your marriage vows you make a promise in the presence of God and a congregation that you will love this person, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, until you are parted by death. You make a promise in your baptism that you will live as a disciple of Jesus Christ and serve his church. You make a promise to the people you work with that you will be tolerable, if not pleasant, to work with. You make a promise to the rest of the people in traffic that you will not run them off the road because you're running late. These aren't contracts on paper; they're promises from the heart.

And unlike a contract, a covenant isn't enforced by the terms of the arrangement; it's simply enforced by the trust that each person has in the other. If I violate the terms and conditions of any app on my phone, that app developer has the right to kick me off their platform because I didn't hold up my end of the deal. Contracts are broken when the terms are broken. But that's not the case with covenants, where the scaffolding is made of trust. If I fail to load the dishwasher the right way, or I'm not bearing my share of the parenting load, or I say something sarcastic and hurtful to my spouse, *the promise remains*. Sure, I broke the terms, but the promise isn't that fragile. That person will love me because they promised to love me, and I trust their word. It's my job, then, to be worthy of their trust and live up to my word, too.

So back to Hebrews 13. The new covenant in Jesus Christ is a better covenant because it's made of better promises. In the old covenant, God promised to bless the people as long as they followed the Law; in the new covenant, God promises to bless us all because Christ died for us all. In the old covenant, God promised to be satisfied with sacrifices and right worship; in the new covenant, God promises to be satisfied with the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. In the old, the promise is "do good, get good;" in the new, it's "do bad, get Jesus." In the old, it was, "Follow these commandments and you will be living the good life;" in the new, it's "Jesus *is* the good life. Trust him and follow him."

The author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 to say, "The old covenant with its old promises has run its course. It wasn't all bad, but it's finished. The new has come. Trust in a new catalog of promises."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What other “old promises” are contained in the law of Moses? What other “new promises” are contained in Christ?
2. Besides baptism and marriage, what are other promises you live by?

Day 2 – Based on a Better Sanctuary

Hebrews 9:1-14

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. ²For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. ³Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies. ⁴In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; ⁵above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

⁶Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; ⁷but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. ⁸By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. ⁹This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, ¹⁰but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.

¹¹But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), ¹²he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

Understanding the Passage:

The author of Hebrews uses the spatial imagination of the Tabernacle to explain what Christ has done for us. In summary, Christ himself is a better sanctuary than the one Israel had always known.

The Tabernacle was the sacred tent that travelled with the Israelites in the wilderness. It was supposed to be where God’s presence dwelt among the people, sojourning with them. The people had to sleep in tents, rain or shine; so did God. Per the Book of Exodus, the Tabernacle contained everything the author of Hebrews describes—the rod of Moses, the manna, the ark, the cherubim, the tables of the Ten Commandments.

There were two sections of the Tabernacle. There was an outer sanctuary, where any Jewish man could enter, pray, and offer the appropriate sacrifice for himself and his family. The altar was there, too, and the priests would slaughter the sacrifice right then and there. The author of Hebrews sees this outer sanctuary as “a symbol of the present time;” in other

words, it's the Law itself, which can only notify a person of their sin and prescribe the sufficient penance. The "sanctuary," or the Law, can satisfy a person's guilt before God, but it can't change their heart. It can't make anybody a new creation.

But then there's the Holy of Holies. That's the place behind the sanctuary, where the High Priest may enter only once a year on Yom Kippur and offer a sacrifice in atonement for all the sin, intentional or not, of all the people. The author of Hebrews sees the Holy of Holies as a symbol, too, this time a symbol of atonement itself. It's as if atonement (being made at-one with God) is a kind of space that Jesus has entered, and only Jesus is allowed to enter. Jesus is a new kind of High Priest who has entered a new kind of Holy of Holies, and he himself is the sacrifice for all sin, intentional or not, of all people.

Therefore, the author of Hebrews has spiritualized the Tabernacle. There's a kind of space that Jesus entered to offer himself as the appropriate sacrifice for everyone. The "outer sanctuary," or the Law, is no longer necessary, because the sacrifices therein aren't necessary. The new High Priest has taken care of us. In the eyes of God, we're all set.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What "law" do you think you have to follow to be "good with God"? Name them and let them go.
2. What's the sin in your life right now that you can give to Jesus, knowing all is forgiven?

Day 3 – The Old Way of Sacrifices

Hebrews 9:15-10:10

¹⁵For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. ¹⁶Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. ¹⁸Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.' ²¹And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²²Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

²³Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. ²⁴For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, ²⁸so

Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? ³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,

but a body you have prepared for me;

*⁶ in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings
you have taken no pleasure.*

*⁷ Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).'*

⁸When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings' (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Understanding the Passage:

Let's take this lengthy passage in four steps. We'll see that Christ is a better sacrifice than the sacrifices of Israel.

"A death has occurred that redeems them" (9:15): Sin is serious business. Sin means to miss the mark, and the mark is love of God and love of neighbor as yourself. To miss that mark throws the created order off balance. There can be no harmony while sin remains. There must be a reckoning, a repairing of the relationships so we can live at peace with God and one another. So the question is, how do you repair a relationship? In the Law of Moses, it's death. The death of an animal, the sacrifice of a living thing laid on the altar, is how you repair your relationships. It's a kind of sacred economics. The failure to hit the love mark incurs a debt, you have red in your ledger, and the sacrifice is how you pay up. The sacrifice is how you make relationships—with God and neighbor—whole again.

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (9:22): Why should an innocent animal die if you were the one who missed the love mark? It's because of the blood. The people of Scripture saw power in blood. Blood contained the life-force; blood was what made a living thing alive. Blood is the most powerful payment you could offer. The author of Hebrews cites Exodus 24:8, where Moses dashes the blood of a sacrifice on the Israelites gathered at Mt. Sinai. The blood is the payment that seals the old covenant, though the point here is that the covenant could not have been sealed, it wouldn't have been official, unless there was blood.

"He entered into heaven itself" (9:24): But Jesus is a new kind of sacrifice. He is the ultimate sacrifice, the last one necessary. The old sacrifices of animals could atone for sins previously committed, but—and this is everything—they *couldn't change a person's heart*. You were still stuck in sin. You can be in prison and someone takes the punishment for you,

but until someone unlocks the door, you're still behind bars. Because Jesus has offered up a sacrifice, the sacrifice of himself, in heaven, and not here on earth, he can do what no animal can do: he can change a person on the inside. He can set us free from bondage to sin and, ultimately, death.

“He abolishes the first in order to establish the second” (10:9): So we see that the sacrifice system in the law of the Law of Moses is rendered redundant. It's not necessary. There's a final sacrifice that restores the created order, achieving harmony with God and neighbor; the blood of this sacrifice is supremely powerful, so much so that all people everywhere, not just Jews, may benefit; and because this sacrifice occurs in heaven, too, it's powerful enough to change a person on the inside, so that real change possible, and the old self can fade away.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When have you felt God's forgiveness for yourself?
2. When have you denied God's forgiveness of yourself?
3. When have you denied God's forgiveness of others?

Day 4 – Jesus is the Greatest Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:11-18

¹¹And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God', ¹³and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

¹⁶'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

*I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds',*

¹⁷he also adds,

'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'

¹⁸Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Understanding the Passage:

Here is the culmination of the author's entire argument. Christ is better than anything a mortal could do to atone for sin.

Israel had always known that sin had to be paid for (see yesterday's commentary) and it was the priest's job to accept and offer up the appropriate sacrifices for that sin. And just in case you sinned and didn't know it—say you offended your neighbor but they never told you how much you hurt them, or you purchased products made by children in sweat shops but you just thought you were getting a good deal—there was a special, once a year sacrifice for any and all sin, intentional or not, and that was made by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. So you would think that all the bases are covered. There can't possibly be a sin that isn't accounted for in the old sacrificial system.

But, says the author of Hebrews, that's where you'd be mistaken. A sacrifice that any mortal offers, even if it's the High Priest, can treat the *symptom* of sin, but it can't heal the *disease*. We can pay the price for our actions, but we can't heal ourselves of the illness that led to our actions. We can make amends, but we can't save ourselves from the darkness within us that led us to wound other people. And so the old sacrifices "never take away sins" (10:11), meaning we will sin again and again, hurting other people by our failure to love, and turning our back on the God who is love when it's more convenient for us.

But what if there was a sacrifice, not from human hands, but God's hands, and that sacrifice had the power to heal us of the disease of sin, once and for all? Wouldn't that change everything? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of us *doing anything* to earn our own forgiveness?

Yes, exactly. Christ is the ultimate and final sacrifice because he's God sacrifice, not ours, and he is offered up in heaven, too, or at the "right hand of God" (10:12). In the past, we tried to save ourselves, lifting up sacrifices from earth upward, but that didn't cut it. Now we have a sacrifice that comes from heaven downward, and it achieves a greater effect: the transformation of the heart. We can be "perfected" or transformed from a person in bondage to sin to a new creation free from the need to sin. The author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 for a second time to say, "The old ways are done. God is working at the level of the human heart now. Accept your forgiveness. It's done."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are your earliest memories of Jesus? Who did your teachers say he was? (This is important because Hebrews is trying to get us back to the basics of who Christ is.)
2. How do we overcomplicate Jesus?

Day 5 – So Go Worship!

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Understanding the Passage:

So now we see why the author of Hebrews is preaching this sermon; indeed, the entire letter is one long sermon. He's preaching a sermon on church engagement.

The people are "neglecting to meet together" (10:25), meaning worship attendance is low. People are staying home (or not tuning in online). But it's more than worship. The people aren't reaching out in love to one another, and friendships, for that's all the body of Christ is, an incorporation of friendships modelled after Christ's friendship to us, are failing. People aren't reaching out in "good deeds" (10:24). The outreach ministries of the church

are failing, too. The hungry aren't being fed. Widows aren't being comforted. What we see here is a church, not unlike ours, where members are weary, confused, and giving up on applying their faith to everyday life because it's simply too hard. Too much is changing and too fast, and there is too little time to spare, so what good is this Jesus anymore?

The author of Hebrews might say, he's everything. Because of Jesus, when we gather as a church community, we enter into a new kind of space, a spiritual sanctuary. The old sanctuary of the Tabernacle, where people would offer the sacrifices to the priest, is done; now *we* are the sanctuary. Whenever we gather, we form a sacred geography where the presence of God is real and tangible, and if someone chooses to stay home (or not tune in online), that space is a little less than what it could be.

And when we worship, we have direct access to the wisdom of God. No longer do we need that curtain that divided the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Tabernacle (see Day 2's commentary for a refresher). The body of Jesus *is* that curtain, so when we gather for worship, we can be certain that God's voice is right there, readily available to us, because Jesus has opened the curtain.

Finally, we should engage the church because of Christ's promises. Christ has promised that we *are* good with God, and we *will* see God one day, and the powers of this world *are* ending, and God's ways of love *are* spreading over creation, and nothing *can or will* separate us from God's love. It's when we keep working out our faith that we remember these promises. They make us who we are. Let us not surrender our identity. Let us hold fast. Let us not waver.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How have you held fast to the faith in the pandemic?
2. When have you been tempted to waver?

Video Questions:

1. Where in this week's Scripture lessons can you find Jeremiah 31:31-34?
2. What's the difference between the old Law being written on the heart and the new Law of Jesus?
3. Why did David refer to Jesus' teaching about "things that defile" (see Mark 7:14-23)?
4. Why did Pastors Tom and David talk about the Tabernacle?
5. Who is the "outer sanctuary" of the Tabernacle now?
6. What makes Christ the "once and for all" sacrifice for our sins?
7. From the perspective of Hebrews, why is church engagement, like worship and serving, so important and essential?

Prayer requests and other notes: