

June 21, 2015

A Covenant of Better Promises

HEBREWS 8:1-13

Last week we saw that our great need in life is a high priest who will intercede for us before the bench. Much of what we do in life is because we have this deep need for some kind of affirmation, some kind of approval from outside. We're looking for someone to validate us. We are either consciously or unconsciously looking for a high priest, an intercessor, someone to plead on our behalf before the bench we know is there. Because we all have a sense that life is a trial with the verdict sure to come in the end and we are desperate to know that the verdict will come down on our side. And the writer of Hebrews tells us that the only way to know for sure that will happen, the only way to have a lasting assurance of your worth and value is to know this high priest who is Jesus. The only way to be able to live with courage and confidence and absolute joy is to embrace the gospel and quit trying to be your own attorney and let your representative in heaven speak for you. Jesus has an eternal priesthood, therefore He is able to save to the uttermost, He is able to save completely, those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. He is our intercessor, our high priest.

And then the writer drives his point home: *The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. 3 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. 4 If He were on earth, He would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 5 They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. 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."*

The writer tells us up front that there is one main point here, and that is that Jesus is the high priest we need, because He is the reality to which everything points. There is a real high priest and there is a real place of worship and it's all about Jesus. He has made a New Covenant with His people because the Old Covenant was never meant to be a substitute for the real thing. You see he's talking to 1st century Jewish believers who were brought up in the Old Covenant with all of its rituals and sacrifices and ceremonies, which were always meant to point to the reality. They had trusted in Christ, but they were still thinking they had to do stuff to be accepted. They had come to rely on the trappings of worship instead of the object of worship. He's telling them that mere religion won't cut it. Real worship is not about following a code of behavior or sacrificing more bulls. He's telling them to stop worshiping the copy and start worshiping the real thing.

In other words, the reality of all things is Christ – not rituals, or forms, or mantras or special days, or certain foods – they are all shadows of the real things in heaven. All of the priestly ritual, all of the sacrifices and offerings, all of the forms of religion were not meant to be the center – they were meant to point to Christ as the fulfillment of all things. We have a great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who came as the Son of God, lived a perfect and sinless life, fulfilled all of the prophecies concerning Him in detail, offered Himself as the consummate sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God, rose again on the third day to ascend to Heaven where He sits now at the Father's right hand, and ministers as High Priest interceding for us, calling us to draw near to God through Him. He did not come to work through the old system of priestly sacrifice – or to abolish the law – He came to fulfill all of their promises by means of a better covenant made with better promises.

What this means is that all of worship is focused on Jesus, and not the outward observance of religious things. Worship is spiritual and not that concerned with the external trappings we often associate with worship. Jesus tells the woman in Samaria, that *'...the time is coming and is already here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in reality. The Father is looking for those who will worship that way.'* All the old system of earthly priests was meant to point us to the true worship of God from the heart and not the head. And so with this view, **all of life becomes an expression of worship**. There really should be no dichotomy of secular and sacred. That is, we act one way on Sunday, or around church people, and another way everywhere else.

That is why the New Testament is silent on issues like church buildings, worship dress, worship times, worship music, or all of the means we use to worship God. Worship is comprehensive – it involves all our body, soul and spirit. In fact we probably do damage to the Biblical concept of worship when we talk about ‘coming to a worship service’ – as though we were only meant to worship at a certain time and place. The New Covenant tells us that *‘...whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, you must do all for the glory of God.’* That is all of life – everywhere, all the time – not just on Sundays. John Piper wrote a little monograph some time ago on this idea which he entitled, ***How to Drink Orange Juice to the Glory of God.*** And in it he said, *‘It is sin to eat or drink or do anything NOT for the glory of God. In other words, sin is not just a list of harmful things...Sin is leaving God out of account in the ordinary affairs of your life. Sin is anything you do that you don’t do for the glory of God.’* That is, leaving God out of account in the ordinary affairs of your life, not considering Him apart from mealtimes and Sunday mornings, is to not worship Him, is to not give Him the adoration and honor that is His due.

And I think, when you boil it down to the essentials – worship is simply the grand enjoyment of God Himself in all of life. A.W.Tozer said that ***‘Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, that Majesty which philosophers call the First Cause, but which we call Our Father Which Are in Heaven.’*** And you cannot put a strait jacket on that. Since worship is the enjoyment of who God is, the delight in His promises, the satisfaction of His person, then worship breaks out in many forms and is found in all places. And it is this worship of the reality of all things, Christ, that is the fuel of missions. The Old Covenant was mainly a ***‘come and see’*** religion. The New Covenant is mainly a ***‘go and tell’*** religion. And it is culturally relevant for every people, tribe and tongue and nation – which is why worshipping God cannot be boxed and sold in merely one form or package as though you can worship God only one way and not another.

I am fed up with the worship wars Christians engage in as though each group has a definitive handle on the right expression of worship. I think that is because we do not know and treasure this Christ who is the reality of our worship, and we confine our ‘worship’ to a particular building and particular music and particular dress. Our gracious Creator made us in His image and that image is expressed in a multitude of languages and cultures around the world. And wherever you go in the world where the children of God congregate – there is a beautiful variety of expressions of the worship of God. We were meant to worship God with every fiber of our being in everything we do and every place we go.

The implication in this letter is that these guys were believers in Jesus, but trying to hold on to a form of worship, namely the trappings of the Old Covenant, as salvation insurance. But the writer is telling them ‘Let go of that. The New Covenant is better’. ***6 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. 7 For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.*** The Old Covenant was made by God with the nation of Israel when He led them out of Egypt into the wilderness. And it was there that He gave them the terms and conditions of that covenant. Essentially it was God promising blessing in return for their obedience to its terms. He promised of length of days; of increase of numbers; of seed time and harvest; of national privileges, and of extraordinary peace, abundance and prosperity as long as they would obey Him. It was what we call a bilateral agreement – God says, ***‘I will do this if you will do that.’***

But there was a problem. The problem with the Old Covenant was that it was ***wholly external*** and carried with it ***no internal*** power to meet the agreement. It set up the objective standard of holiness, but supplied no power to measure up to it. It gave the command but did not supply the energy to fulfill it. It provided a sacrifice for sin, but that sacrifice was ineffective in actually putting away sin and securing redemption. The fault was not the commands of God, but the hearts of the people. Every work of God is perfect, when looked at in connection with the purpose which He means it to serve. In this point of view, the ‘first covenant’ was faultless, it was meant to expose sin, and it did. But when viewed in the light in which the Jews generally considered it, as ***salvation***, in all the meaning and extent of that word, it was not ‘faultless.’ It could not take away moral guilt; it could not wash away moral pollution; it could not justify, it could not sanctify, it could not save. Its priesthood were not perfected—they were weak and inefficient; its sacrifices ‘could not take away sin,’ It made nothing perfect.

The writer says as much: *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 house of Israel and with the house 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.* And the fact is, the fault was not that God gave bad commands – it was that the people had bad hearts. Literally it says, '*But God Himself found fault with them...*' And **them** refers to the rebellious and hard-hearted Israelites who time and again failed to honor their part of the covenant. So God said, 'I'm going to make them an offer they can't refuse.'

10 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. Here is a completely different language from the Old Covenant – that was bilateral, this is unilateral. The old one said, 'If you obey the Lord your God to keep His commandments and His statutes...if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul...if you love the Lord your God...if you walk in all His ways...if, if, if you will – Then I will!' But the new covenant is better because there is no if involved. Instead God says, 'I will... *I will put My laws in their minds so they will understand them, and I will write them on their hearts so they will obey them. I will be their God, and they will be My people... I will forgive their wrongdoings, and I will never again remember their sins.*' No longer 'if you will' but only 'I will.' This is what led Augustine to pray – '**O Lord, command what You will, but will what You command.**' He understood that without a supernatural empowering by God, he was helpless to obey even the simplest command.

The promises of this New Covenant are better because they do not depend on us but on God. All the things that are promised are empowered by this new life in Christ, and the text lays out four great promises to those who believe. ***We get a new wanter; we get a new identity; we get a new relationship; and we are finally released from the crushing weight of the guilt of sin.*** First of all God says; *I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.* You see the Old Covenant gave us the Law to read and do. And the problem with that is that our hearts were not affected. They were still rebellious. They still wanted to do what they wanted to do. The real problem with the Law under the Old Covenant is that it had no power to change our wants. What we needed was a new wanter.

But here God says, 'I'll give you a new wanter because I'll write it on your heart. I'll give you new desires and transform your thinking'. Christianity is not simply moral improvement or behavior modification. Two farmers were discussing Christianity. One of them said to his friend, "I hear that you're a Christian." "That's right," the other replied. "Well, what does it mean to be a Christian?" the curious farmer asked. "Well, I don't drink, smoke, play cards or run around with women." "Neither does my pig" the friend responded, "And I'm pretty sure he's not a Christian." Being a Christian is not simply that you no longer do bad stuff. It means that your whole focus in life has changed. It involves a radical transformation of your thinking and your desires. It means that grace has come.

Henry Ironside, a well-respected Bible teacher, had a little school for young Indian men and women, in his home in Oakland, California. One Sunday evening they were discussing the matter of law and grace and finding it a difficult concept to grasp, until one young Indian man stood up and gave this illustration: "Well, my friends, I have been listening very carefully, because I am here to learn all I can in order to take it back to my people. I do not understand all that you are talking about, and I do not think you do yourselves. But concerning this law and grace business, let me see if I can make it clear. I think it is like this. When Mr. Ironside brought me from my home we took the longest railroad journey I ever took. We got out at Barstow, and there I saw the most beautiful railroad station and hotel I have ever seen. I walked all around and saw at one end a sign, 'Do not spit here.' I looked at that sign and then looked down at the ground and saw many had spitted there, and before I think what I am doing I have spitted myself. Isn't that strange when the sign say, 'Do not spit here'?

"I come to Oakland and go to the home of the lady who invited me to dinner today and I am in the nicest home I have been in. Such beautiful furniture and carpets, I hate to step on them. I sank into a comfortable chair, and the lady said, 'Now, John, you sit there while I go out and see whether the maid has dinner ready.' I look around at the beautiful pictures, at the grand piano, and I walk all around those rooms. I am looking for a sign; and the sign I am looking for is, 'Do not spit here,' but I look around those two beautiful drawing rooms, and cannot find a sign like this.

I think 'What a pity when this is such a beautiful home to have people spitting all over it—too bad they don't put up a sign!' So I look all over that carpet, but cannot find that anybody have spitted there. What a queer thing! Where the sign says, 'Do not spit,' a lot of people spitted. Where there was no sign at all, in that beautiful home, nobody spitted. Now I understand! That sign is law, but inside the home it is grace. They love their beautiful home, and they want to keep it clean. They do not need a sign to tell them so." You see, the New Covenant promise is that the law of God is now on our minds and in our hearts. That's grace, and grace changes everything. It means that God is at work in us. That is what Paul tells us in Philippians 2: *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*. I like the way the NLT puts it: *'For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey Him and the power to do what pleases Him.'* With the old covenant, there may have sometimes been the desire, but the power to do was missing. That is why this is a better covenant.

We have the promise of a new identity in God. *I will be their God, and they will be My people.* We are unsure about who we are because we use people or position or other things as our point of reference. We allow someone or something else to dictate to us how we think about ourselves and then make those perceptions our own. What we do is often measured and judged by others—either as acceptable or unacceptable—and we allow our performance to define us. But here God says, 'I will be their God and they will be My people'. To have a new identity in God means that you're no longer looking to other people or other things to define you or to judge you. God Himself is now your definition and He says, *'There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'* and *'Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'* and *'in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith'*.

We have the promise of a new relationship with God. Not just knowing about God – but a relationship with God. *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.* This is not saying that evangelism is unnecessary. Rather it means that those who belong to God don't have to be taught what He requires of us and why. It means that we have an intimacy with Him that we didn't have before. We know Him because He has now written Himself our hearts and transformed our thinking so we automatically know what pleases God. You see, back in the garden, we lost that intimacy with Him. And He has been working to bring us back to that. The reason God came to this fallen world was to win His creation back into this relationship. Every religion in the world is an attempt to find our way back to the God we know is there. Only Christianity says that the God we long to know has come down to us to bring us back to Himself.

And finally we have the promise of the freedom from the crushing weight of the guilt of sin. *And I will forgive their wrongdoings, and I will never again remember their sins.* The whole world labors under a heavy load of guilt. One prominent psychiatrist reckoned that 80% of those confined to mental institutions could be released, healed and whole, if they could only have the sense that they were forgiven. People instinctively know that they have an outstanding debt that needs to be paid, they have an uneasy suspicion that they have not lived a good life and at the heart they are **not** good. And most people either try to kill their guilt with things that deaden the conscience, or spend their lives in a futile attempt to atone for their sins. In the movie *The Mission*, Rodrigo is a slave trader who kills his brother in a fit of rage. He's filled with such terrible remorse and guilt that, to pay penance and get rid of his guilt he carries his armor and weapons in a huge bag through the jungle for miles as a symbol of the crushing burden of his guilt. But it is at the end of his journey, when he has inch by painful inch carried that burden to the top of a huge cliff, that he learns the lesson of forgiveness as one of the Indians that he used to hunt like animals, comes up to him as he lays gasping and wracked with pain, and cuts that burden from his back and lets it fall down hundreds of feet to the river below.

On the cross Jesus saw those who had stripped Him naked, beat Him bloody, and nailed Him to the tree and said, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing'. He cut the burden of sin from our backs and forgave us, and threw the remembrance of our treason against Him into the ocean of forgetfulness. It is our sin that separates us from our Father, and so He sent His Son into the world to live the life we should have lived and died the death that we should have died to deal with our sin and our guilt and bring us to Himself. ***Sent of heaven God's own Son to purchase and redeem and reconcile the very ones who nailed Him to that tree. 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...And I will forgive their wrongdoings, and I will never again remember their sins.***

Heavenly Father and gracious God,

We thank You this morning for Your great and precious promises of the New Covenant that draw our hearts back to You and entice us to remain faithful and fill us with anticipation of Your coming and cause our hearts to overflow with hope. Your word promises that with You there is unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation; Your word promises that You will not let any who are Yours fall away; Your word says that all who are Yours have reserved for them in heaven a priceless inheritance and that in Your mighty power You will protect those who trust in You until they receive it. Fill us with a deep desire to do Your will, and free us from the bondage of our own will. Cause us to trade all our little pleasures for the overwhelming joy of knowing You. Deliver us from our crushing load of guilt and into the safe haven of Your family. May all of our life be the sphere of our worship. Let Your goodness and greatness wean us from the dangerous and foolish delights of this world, and engage our affections for Your glory and Your majesty, we pray in the precious and powerful name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.