

# Followers of the Way

## The Covenant and Jesus

Philip Quenby, 9 April 2023

### Hebrews 9:11-28

Covenant was a recurring theme for ancient Israel. The word runs through the Tanakh (Old Testament) like writing through a stick of rock – over 270 references, in 26 out of its 39 books, from Genesis at the start to Malachi at the end. It features in every one of the five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch/Torah), in almost all the history books, many of the prophets and Psalms, and even once in wisdom literature (Proverbs 2:17). Repetition and number of mentions leave no doubt about the importance of God’s covenant with Israel, and the centrality of that covenant to the LORD’s wider redemption purposes. By contrast, outside of the book of Hebrews, the New Testament refers to covenant a mere thirteen times. The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) each record Jesus using the word covenant on only one occasion – when speaking at the Last Supper about “my blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24) or “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The word covenant does not even rate a single appearance in John’s Gospel. And yet, the Bible clearly teaches that the covenant in Jesus represents the culmination of God’s redemptive plan for mankind, and is far beyond every covenant that preceded it in its glory, beauty, and effect.

The writer of Hebrews takes great pains to set the New Covenant within the context of the Old. (By the way, when it speaks of the Old Covenant, the Bible does not mean the whole of the Old Testament: the covenants God made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David are never referred to as “old” by New Testament writers. Rather, only the covenant made with Moses at Mount Sinai – a covenant whose purpose was the administration of detailed written laws given for a season to restrain the sins of the people, and to be a custodian (Galatians 3:24, RSV) to point people to Christ – has this designation. And even then, the moral law that formed part of this covenant has not been superseded, as we know since Jesus specifically affirmed it several times. It is the ceremonial aspects of this Mosaic covenant, and accompanying sacrificial system, that are called “old” and have now been replaced by the New Covenant in Christ: compare 2 Corinthians 3:14 with Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:6, Galatians 3:19 and 3:24, Hebrews 8:8 and 8:13, Hebrews 9:15, Hebrews 12:24. Covenant terms, of course, can be superseded or replaced by a different covenant, but never changed. This is why Jesus says in Matthew 5:18, “until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”)

So, as the writer of Hebrews leads us through human history from Adam and Eve to the present, he shows how “Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here” (Hebrews 9:11) and is taking us on towards “the good things that are coming”

(Hebrews 10:1). In doing so, he is careful to underline that what belonged to the Mosaic system of Tabernacle (later, Temple) sacrifice and worship was just “a shadow” (Hebrews 10:1) of the greater covenant reality Jesus beckons us into.

Hebrews 9:11-14 sets up a series of comparisons and parallels that emphasise the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old – in terms of Tabernacle, offering, sacrifice, and cleansing – and reinforces these in verses 23-28, addressing each of the essential features of the system of animal sacrifice under the Old Covenant in turn:

- **Tabernacle:** Jesus is said to have gone through “the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made ... [and] not a part of this creation ... For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.” (Hebrews 9:11 and 24).
- **Offering:** Jesus is said to have entered the Most Holy Place not “by the blood of goats and calves but ... by his own blood ... Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own” (Hebrews 9:12 and 25). Instead, He “offered himself unblemished to God” (Hebrews 9:14).
- **Sacrifice:** Jesus’ sacrifice is said to have been performed “once and for all ... [obtaining] eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), so not needing to be repeated year by year as Tabernacle and Temple sacrifices used to be. Rather, “he has appeared once and for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Hebrews 9:26).
- **Cleansing:** the sprinkling of Jesus’ blood is said to “cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death” (Hebrews 9:14) instead of merely making the “ceremonially unclean ... outwardly clean” (Hebrews 9:13). Christ came to “take away the sins of many people” (Hebrews 9:28), not simply to cover those sins over, as the Old Covenant sacrifices did. Moses “sprinkled [with the blood of sacrificed animals] the scroll and all the people ... the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies” (Hebrews 9:19 and 21), but the prophet Isaiah foresaw the Messiah would come as a suffering servant to “sprinkle many nations” (Isaiah 52:13),

For God’s redemption plan to work – for man to be reconciled to God, death conquered, and sin dealt with – there were three unavoidable necessities: the necessity of Jesus’ death (Hebrews 9:16-17); the necessity of blood sacrifice, since “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22); and the necessity of the Son pleading for us before the Father: “Christ ... entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Hebrews 9:24) because we need a mediator between us and a holy God. Jesus was both the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrifice. There was a fashion in which we might say Moses (and later Aaron and his descendants in their role as high priests) acted as mediators between God and the people of Israel, yet this was but a pale reflection of the function Christ now performs. Since we were alienated from God by sin, we needed

someone to come between God and ourselves and bring us back to Him – a mediator who could represent us to God and who could represent God to us. There is only one person who has ever fulfilled this requirement: “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5). In order to perform this role as mediator, Jesus had to be fully man as well as fully God.

Explaining how Jesus’ death links to the setting up of the New Covenant – giving the example that, “In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died.” (Hebrews 9:16-17) – the writer of Hebrews deliberately chooses the Greek word *diatheke* (meaning a will or testament), not *syntheke* (a mere contract). He goes on to say, “It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these [Old Covenant animal] sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.” (Hebrews 9:23). In this and in other ways, we see how closely the New Covenant parallels the Old, by employing the established covenant formulae used throughout the ancient Near East. (Think back to the things we explored in the first sermon in this series on covenant):

**Sacrifice:** both Old and New Covenants were accompanied by blood sacrifice. “The first covenant was not put into effect without ... the blood of calves” (Hebrews 9:18-19), and Moses told the people, “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” (Hebrews 9:20). Likewise, for the New Covenant, Jesus “entered the Most Holy Place once and for all by his own blood” (Hebrews 9:12,) and He specifically linked this with covenant sacrifice at the Last Supper.

**Proclamation of covenant terms, blessings, and curses:** on Mount Sinai “Moses ... proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people” (Hebrews 9:19), while through the Sermon on the Mount and its associated teaching (Matthew 5-7), Jesus proclaimed the New Covenant terms and conditions.

**Parties to the covenant:** Moses proclaimed the Old Covenant’s terms to “all the people” (Hebrews 9:19), meaning the nation of ancient Israel. But the New Covenant is for people of every nation: “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of *many* people” (Hebrews 9:28), and “God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:34-35).

**Exchanging names:** Old Testament Israel was a nation that bore the name of God (*El*) and whose God was known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Under the New Covenant, believers have Jesus’ name by virtue of being known as Christians (Acts 11:26) and the LORD says, “I have engraved you on the palm of my hands.” (Isaiah 49:16). The palms of His hands bear the marks of being nailed to the cross, and these wounds will be on Him for all eternity.

**Covenant meal:** After the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, a covenant meal took place when “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up [the mountain] and saw the God of Israel ... they saw God, and they ate and drank.” (Exodus 24:9-11). Similarly, the Last Supper saw the breaking of bread (Matthew 26:26, Mark

14:22, Luke 22:19) and drinking of wine: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 21:22).

**Covenant sign:** the sign of entering the Old Covenant is circumcision and the sign of continuing in it is observance of all the festivals and ceremonial laws God gave His covenant people Israel. The sign of entering the New Covenant is baptism and the sign of continuing in it is the Lord's Supper.

**Requirement for participation:** the condition (or requirement) of participation in the New Covenant is faith in the work of Christ the redeemer (Romans 1:17, 5:1). And this was also the condition of obtaining the blessings of the Old Testament covenants, as Paul demonstrates in Romans 4:1-15 using the examples of Abraham and David. They, like other Old Testament believers, were saved by looking forward to the redemptive work of the Messiah who was to come, and putting their faith in Him. At root, the essential features of Old and New Covenants are the same: in each, the LORD declares, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33, 2 Corinthians 6:16). But under the New Covenant, Jesus addresses human inability to meet the terms of the Old Covenant by putting in place a mechanism which enables us to access all the covenant blessings in a new fashion.

**A lasting solution, not a temporary fix:** The new Covenant also differed from the Old in that it was a lasting solution to the problem of human sin and disobedience, for "Nor did [Jesus] enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world." (Hebrews 9:25-26). Jesus has overcome sin and death once and for all.

**Memorial:** under the Old Covenant, the atonement money each Israelite paid "the LORD [as] a ransom for his life at the time he is counted [in a census]" (Exodus 30:11, and compare "ransom" in Hebrews 9:15) was "a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for [their] lives." (Exodus 30:16). In the same way, Jesus set up a memorial for the New Covenant when he commanded his disciples to eat bread and drink wine "in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

The message is this: the earthly tabernacle was imperfect, whereas the heavenly tabernacle is not; all the Old Covenant offerings were blemished and temporary, whereas the New Covenant offering is perfect and eternal; the Old Covenant sacrifices could only touch outward forms and left humanity still subject to death, whereas the New Covenant deals with the underlying spiritual reality and brings those who accept it eternal life. And the purpose of it all – what ultimately lies behind the sacrifice of Jesus and His bringing in of the New Covenant in His blood – is summed up in one simple phrase: "so that we may serve the living God!" (Hebrews 9:14). The service of God – our ability to know Him and be known by Him, to stand in His presence and minister to Him, to enjoy Him and be in relationship with Him – is what the whole of life in this world and the next is (or should be) about. It is the goal of our journey and the end point of our searching. It brings to completion all our strivings, marks the end of all our yearnings, and gathers to glorious fruition the fullness of our intended destiny. These are the amazing things the New

Covenant makes possible. No wonder Jesus told his closest friends he had “eagerly desired” (Luke 22:15) to eat with them the Passover meal at which this covenant was sealed.

The fact our purpose is to “serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14) bears repetition. This statement at the end of verse 14 is picked up and built upon in the immediately following verse, and this sentence forms the lynchpin and centre point of the whole passage – we can tell it is the pivot because (as noted above) of the balancing statements before and after this verse about tabernacle, offering, sacrifice and cleansing. The writer drives home his point about godly service by saying, “For this reason [so that we may serve the living God] Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” (Hebrews 9:15). Everything before and after this central statement either leads up to or provides evidence for that basic proposition.

The question we should ask ourselves, therefore, is what it means to serve the living God? And our answer to that question should be set in the context of being His covenant partner. Again, think back to our first session – to how covenant partners would give their lives for each other, how all they were and everything they had was at the disposal of the other, how they would bear any burden and make any sacrifice to redeem their partner or his family from slavery or poverty. Christ gave Himself as our ransom, and “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13, KJV). Jesus has performed His side of the bargain at every turn. He might with justification ask what His Church is doing to perform theirs.

So, there is a challenge in this Scripture. Yet there is also a wonderful hope. It tells us, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that anyone who chooses to participate in the New Covenant in Christ’s blood by putting their faith in Jesus as redeemer, Lord and Saviour can face this prospect with calm assurance. We have been ransomed – bought back with a price from sin, death, and everlasting damnation – and so we can look forward to receiving the eternal inheritance promised to believers. If you do not already have this assurance and have not already taken advantage of this covenant promise, why not do so today?

The New Covenant in Jesus brings far greater blessings than the Old. *Yeshua haMeschiach* (Jesus the Messiah, *vemelech haYehudim*, King of the Jews) has lived, died, and risen among us, atoning once and for all for all the sins of all humanity (Hebrews 9:24-28). He has revealed God more fully to us (John 1:14, Hebrews 1:1-3), has poured out the Holy Spirit on all his people in New Covenant power (Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 12:13, 2 Corinthians 3:4-18) and has written His law on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10). This New Covenant is the “eternal covenant” (Hebrews 13:20) in Christ, through which we shall forever have fellowship with God – He shall be our God and we shall be His people. Hallelujah!