

SERMON 5
BY COY ROPER

A BETTER COVENANT

(7:11—8:13)

We are interested in what is better. Some of us want better jobs, better houses, or better clothes. Since we appreciate things that are better, we should be interested in what Hebrews 8 has to say. (Read the chapter.) Notice especially 8:6:

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

Jesus has a “more excellent,” or “better,” ministry. Because of Him we have a “better covenant” which provides us with “better promises.”

The key word in Hebrews 8, and an important idea throughout the Book of Hebrews, is “better.” Everything about Christ’s way is better than the law of Moses. The message of Hebrews is that the New Testament presents a better covenant. What does that statement mean, and what does it mean for the way we live?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A BETTER COVENANT?

What It Does Not Mean

To understand what the Bible means when it says that the New Testament is a better covenant, we need to understand what it does not mean.

Not a bad law. The new covenant is better, but that does not mean that the old covenant was bad. “Better” is the comparative form of the adjective “good.” To say that the new covenant is better implies that the old covenant was good. Elsewhere Paul said that “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). The old law was not a bad law; it was a good law.

Given by God. The fact that the new covenant is better does not mean that the old covenant was not given by God (see Exodus 20). God is the author of the old covenant. It, too, was given by divine revelation.

Better than other contemporary laws. Again, saying that the new covenant is better does not mean that the old covenant was no better than other laws of its day. Other laws existed, and some of them predated the time of Moses. They contained some laws similar to those found in the Old Testament. However, Moses’ law was better than any contemporary law code.

Fulfilled its purpose. Further, the fact that the new covenant is better does not mean that the old covenant did not fulfill its purpose. The law of Moses had a purpose—Paul said that it was “our tutor to lead us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24)—and it accomplished that purpose before it was taken away. Paul went on to write, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:25).

Not inferior in moral laws. In addition, to say that the new covenant is better does not mean that the moral law of the old covenant was distinctly inferior to that of the new. In fact, there is little difference between the moral requirements of the Old Testament and those of the New. We sometimes misunderstand what the New Testament says on this point. The Old Testament, for instance, is not solely concerned about externals: Think, for instance, of the command “You shall not covet . . .” (Exodus 20:17).¹ It is true that Jesus in Matthew 5 contrasted what He said with what

¹Consider, also, that the Law forbade hating a brother or holding a grudge against him. (See Leviticus 19:17, 18.)

His audience had heard, but He was not contrasting His teachings with the law of Moses. Rather, He was contrasting what He taught with what the rabbis taught and with what the people had come to believe.

What It Does Mean

To appreciate what it means to have a better covenant, consider all the characteristics of the new covenant which Hebrews says are better.

Better High Priest. In the Christian Age, we have a better High Priest. That fact is the emphasis of the first part of Hebrews 8. In Jesus Christ “we have such a high priest” (8:1) who is at the right hand of God, serving in the “true tabernacle.” He is different from the priests of the old covenant (8:1–5). His priestly ministry is “a more excellent ministry” (8:6), so He is a better High Priest (see also 7:7–12).

Why is Christ a better High Priest? Because He is holy and undefiled (7:26, 27; see also 4:15). He offered one efficacious sacrifice for all time (7:27). He was made our High Priest by the administration of a divine oath (7:28), and He holds His Priesthood permanently (7:23–25).

*Better covenant.*² Today we live under a better covenant (8:6; 7:22). The Book of Hebrews insists that the new covenant is better than the old. In 8:7, 8, the writer argued that it was necessary for us to have a new covenant because the old covenant was faulty. How was it faulty? Its laws were not faulty, but its sacrifices could not truly take away sins. Therefore, in 8:8–12, the writer quoted a prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31–34 which predicted the coming of the new covenant. Under that new covenant, laws would be written on the hearts of men rather than on stones. People under the covenant would not need to teach one another to know God, for everyone under that covenant would already know Him. However, the primary advantage for those under the new covenant would be that God would “be merciful to their iniquities, and . . . remember their sins no more” (8:12).

The old covenant sacrifices could not take away sins (10:4); the new covenant sacrifice could! The inability of those sacrifices to remove sin made the old covenant a “ministry of death”

(2 Corinthians 3:7) and made it possible to speak of its “weakness and uselessness” (7:18, 19). The new covenant is a better covenant because those under it can, through the sacrifice of Christ, be forgiven.

Better promises. The new covenant is a better covenant because it was founded on better promises (8:6). Those who lived in Old Testament times did not live to see the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises (11:13; 11:39, 40). They saw the promises dimly but had no way of receiving them; we, on the other hand, can see the promises clearly and are able to receive them. What promises in particular do we enjoy that make the new covenant better? For one thing, according to Hebrews 8:12, we have assurance of forgiveness not available to those under the old covenant. For another, because of Christ’s death, we have the promise of an “eternal inheritance” (9:15).

Better spokesman. In this age, there is a better spokesman. Hebrews 1:1, 2 contrasts the prophets who spoke for God in Old Testament times with Christ, God’s Son, who is God’s spokesman today. He is a better spokesman than the angels (1:4), through whom the law of Moses was mediated (2:2); and He is greater than Moses, the giver of the Law (3:3–6).

Better hope. In this age we have a better hope (7:19). Why is our hope better? Perhaps because it “enters within the veil” (6:18–20). Our hope is related to our heavenly reward. What hope did those under the old covenant have? Basically, their hope was based on earthly promises, not on a heavenly reward. They sometimes saw the possibility of an eternal life with God (see 11:16, 35), but only dimly; we, in contrast, have clear promises of heaven. We can look forward to a “better possession” (10:34)—a reward in heaven.

Better sacrifice. Perhaps the most important element that makes the new covenant better is its better sacrifice (9:23). Hebrews 9:13, 14 says that the sacrifice of animals accomplished the sanctification of the flesh—in other words, ritual cleansing. However, the blood of Christ accomplishes much more: It cleanses the conscience and forgives sins. The new covenant sacrifice of Christ was better in that it was efficacious; it took away sins (see 9:13, 14; 10:4, 14) and was therefore offered only once (7:27; 9:25, 26; see also 12:24).

²For a contrast which suggests the superiority of the new covenant over the old, see Hebrews 12:18–24.

Better sanctuary. In the Christian Age, there is a better sanctuary, the “true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (8:2, 5; see also 9:11, 24; 10:1). The Scriptures suggest that the old sanctuary, the tabernacle, was merely a copy or a shadow of the “true tabernacle.” The better sanctuary is the church in which God’s people worship Him today.

WHAT DOES THE BETTER COVENANT MEAN FOR OUR LIVES?

Abolition of the old covenant. Because we have the new, better covenant, the old covenant has been taken away. The writer of Hebrews concluded his comparison of the two covenants in 8:13 with these words: “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.” Even when Jeremiah wrote, more than five hundred years before Christ, the old covenant was becoming obsolete and “ready to disappear.” By New Testament times, the inspired writers understood that it had been taken away (see, for example, Hebrews 7:11, 12). Therefore, we should not look to the Old Testament for commands that apply directly to us, nor should we try to justify our religious practices by what was done in Old Testament times.

Encouragement to faithfulness. We should be grateful that we live under a better covenant. The writer of Hebrews intended to motivate his readers to be faithful, to hold on to their confession, by reminding them of the blessings they enjoyed because they lived under a better covenant. We, too, should be encouraged to remain faithful to the Lord because we are under that better covenant. Perhaps our gratitude should lead us to do even more than was required under the old covenant.

Possibility of greater punishment. We must remember that our greater blessings place on us greater responsibilities. If we fail to obey the new covenant, we will be worthy of even greater punishment than that which the disobedient received under the old covenant (10:26–29; 2:2, 3).

CONCLUSION

The law of Moses inspired its adherents to great dedication and devotion; many of the Israelites died because they refused to deny the God of the covenant or disobey the Law He had given to Israel (see 11:32–38). If an inferior law could inspire that kind of dedication, how much greater devotion should the new, better covenant under which we live inspire in us!

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