

Why Hebrews Was Written (Part One)

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Forerunner, "Personal," November-December 2017

We have reached the point in our progress through the covenants God has made with those He has sanctified for His purposes where it becomes helpful to study significant portions of the epistle to the Hebrews to better understand Christ's and our parts in the New Covenant. In each covenant since He created Adam and Eve, God has been adding depth to our understanding, not merely of mankind's destructive history, but far more importantly, of God's character, giving us a better vision of the leadership qualities He aims to create in us.

In all of the covenants, some responsibilities are always the same—such as the requirement to keep His commandments. However, in each, there are also specific objectives for dealing with the times in which those covenants were made, as well as specific responsibilities for which God is also preparing us to fill after our resurrection to eternal life. Therefore, each covenant is necessary to refine our grasp of the realities of God's creative purposes.

We have just concluded a long series explaining several detailed covenants God made with people, primarily drawn from among Israel, whom He sanctified. The New Covenant introduces a significant addition to their number: God begins adding Gentiles into the mix as He continues to form the church.

His overall intention regarding covenants is to give His called ones specific direction about what He desires of those within His purpose and about living by faith. This truth is essential to us because we are already on the path toward completing His purpose in our lives. Overall, He is not aiming for qualities the world extols and rewards. He seeks to continue developing personal leadership qualities of character and attitude in His image that we are to use within family and local community life.

As we begin this next series expounding important aspects of the epistle to the Hebrews, we need to recall a few basic points about covenants, since much of the Bible's history of the outworking of God's creative purposes revolves around three covenants. Perhaps even more important is that the content of Hebrews and the New Covenant fit together hand in glove. Three covenants impact on us more directly than any of the others: the covenant made with Abraham; the covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai, commonly called the Old Covenant; and "a better covenant" (Hebrews 7:22), made with the elect, most often called the New Covenant.

Using the term's most basic definition, a *covenant* is nothing more than "a formal agreement between parties to accomplish a goal together." Throughout the world, businesses commonly make covenants to state and guide the specific obligations of each party involved in its purpose.

Covenants are thus the primary way in which the Bible formally assigns responsibilities in the relationships between God and His people. To a limited extent, they also serve to guide humanity in general, giving mankind a basic awareness of its obligations to its Creator. For converted church members, having clearly assigned and defined responsibilities within a covenant is a significant advantage. The covenants leave us little doubt about our obligations to God and fellow man as we try to accomplish the purpose for which we have been called and tasked to achieve together.

Formal covenants may not have been necessary if humanity would follow God by keeping His commandments as He does! The most basic fact on this subject is that no covenant with God excludes this absolute obligation; covenants with God always require that we keep His commandments. Despite what many think, this unequivocally includes the New Covenant!

However, even the very best of us fail to do this as well as we should. Mankind as a whole has plainly never shown the willingness to set such high standards as God's covenants require. Only the converted—those genuinely living by faith—will set their minds to accomplish them. Making a covenant with God is an exceptionally arduous undertaking because, since the carnal mind is fixed on earthly aims, the converted person's mind must be set to achieve heavenly goals.

A second ever-present reality is that all covenants made with God are between unequal parties. God is the sovereign Creator who initiates the covenants, makes our obligations clear, and penalizes us when we break them. He is always the principal party and always actively involved. There is no such thing as a person independently setting his own ways and standards under one of God's covenants, including the New Covenant.

Whenever we read the language of any of God's covenants, we receive the distinct impression it is being conferred, almost imposed, on the sanctified. His voice is transcendent; there is no dickering. He sets the obligations, and His promises and rewards for obedience, though always generous, also require earnest, faithful devotion. Why do the obligations seem so demanding? Partly because we are making the agreement with God. He is not a fellow human, which is intimidating. Dealing with Him by faith is daunting because we cannot equivocate on anything. He is always aware.

Directly connected to this fact is the almost overwhelming amazement that prompts us to realize the serious purpose of this relationship. We have literally become part of God's personal Family. Never forget that, though standards seem so incredibly high on occasion, they are never unreasonable and are always within what we can accomplish with the help of Jesus Christ. God is very sensitive about losing any of us!

The New Covenant Is Not New

God says in Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. . . . But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put My law in the minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

Most people associate the New Covenant with the New Testament, unaware that Scripture's first mention of the New Covenant is in the Old Testament. God reveals it as a prophecy of what will happen far in the future from Jeremiah's time. Yet, the New Covenant was not truly "brand new" even then; it was new only in terms of being publicly prophesied then. Regardless of when He chose to announce it, the New Covenant reflects God's unchanging and eternal standards of judgment and fulfilling His creative purposes, as well as His standards on how we should live.

Even in Jesus' time, nothing changes about God's purpose. He is still reproducing Himself and creating man in His image. How can He change what He is? Any change in Himself would be damaging to His purpose, and God unmistakably proclaims, "I do not change" (Malachi 3:6). God is Himself the model toward which we are being transformed. When Jesus came to live as a human, He kept the law flawlessly, and so must we strive to do likewise. The New Covenant does away with no standards of godly behavior.

He is always the faithful God (Deuteronomy 7:9; I Corinthians 1:9; 10:13; II Corinthians 1:18), a truth we must always keep in mind. He is ever faithful to the covenants He enacts and the purpose He continues to work out.

A Brief Overview

Hebrews 8:1-6 reads:

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

The author directly states that this idea is the primary reason for all he has written so far. Christianity is earth's only religion that is led by a spiritual High Priest sitting at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. Within the material the author has written are two major points:

First, the qualifications of this towering Figure, who holds such an important office, make Him indispensable to the salvation of all God's sanctified ones. Indispensable? Absolutely! Jesus tells us Himself in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing" in terms of producing fruit that glorifies God. He has *much* to offer. The epistle to the Hebrews identifies these qualities.

The second major reason is not named here. Some may consider it unimportant in comparison to the first. However, God, who knows precisely where His creation is headed and who sovereignly controls its direction and speed of advancement, never intended the Old Covenant to last forever.

Remember, God Himself publicly introduced the New Covenant six centuries before the writing of the book of Hebrews. Its introduction within the flow of the history of the church and the world began to force key cultural changes to take place within Judea especially, but also in majority Gentile areas of the Middle East. Many Jews were being converted. Within the church itself, both the leadership and membership were asking many questions about what they needed to do to adjust to this new way of life. Those converts required direction from on high to secure them in living by faith in Jesus Christ.

The transition from Judaism to Christianity following Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and the church's receipt of the Holy Spirit—all in the early AD 30s—needed purposeful instruction from heaven to confirm to the church the direction that Christ wanted the daily, spiritual operations of Christianity to proceed. Just as the book of Leviticus contains detailed instruction for daily functions under the Old Covenant, so similar education was necessary under the New Covenant because of what God was working in the church—and is still working today.

A Tragic Misunderstanding

The epistle to the Hebrews contains such instruction, enabling those who have entered the New Covenant with God to make the necessary adjustments to maintain their lives by faith and grow spiritually. In this way, they can glorify God by maintaining their relationship with Christ while preparing for the Kingdom of God.

Many hold the mistaken belief that the New Covenant transforms living by faith and glorifying God into a far easier task than under the Old Covenant. "Easier" is an erroneous descriptor. Even though a convert is forgiven of past sins and receives wonderful gifts from God, including the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant also requires him or her to become a living sacrifice. Sacrificing one's life in humble submission to God is not easy, as the New Testament attests. Jesus lists some requirements in Luke 14:25-27:

Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Almost all who call themselves Christian today hold the opinion that, through the New Covenant, God has made salvation much easier to obtain. The central pillar in their belief seems to be that since Jesus kept the laws perfectly, and since He paid for the forgiveness of our sins through His sacrifice, when one accepts Him as Savior, the convert's obligation to meet the New Covenant's demands is somehow magically reduced or even eliminated. People carelessly say, "Jesus did it all for me."

In plain language, a high percentage of professing Christians accept as true that God's law is essentially done away. They believe that Jesus kept it for us. While that idea contains truth, it has been twisted into a misleading concept: that we need not be as concerned about keeping it as those who lived under the Old Covenant. Nothing could be further from the truth! Why? Our willing, devoted, and careful participation in keeping His law is absolutely necessary to be created in God's image!

For example, Exodus 30:1-10, 34-38 contains detailed instruction on the maintenance and use of the incense altar and of the incense itself. It required a high level of careful dedication by the appointed Levites to maintain the purity of each element. To those of us living now, the incense offering may seem to have been a rather minor affair, but it was not trivial to God. With Jesus Christ as our Guide, *spiritual* maturity is our goal. How much more important is the creation of godly character in human beings? Jesus admonishes us in Matthew 5:48: "You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

The reality is that the New Covenant establishes what we might call graduate-level requirements of keeping God's law. However, God compensates for our weaknesses by providing the spiritual tools to reach those levels. Jesus *did* keep the commandments for our benefit, in that God is mercifully willing to accept His righteous life and death to pay our debt to Him for our sins because we do not have sufficient righteousness to pay the cost to have the death penalty removed.

But something is missing in people's misunderstanding of this reality, so their trust in it is also skewed. What is missing is what radio broadcaster Paul Harvey called "the rest of the story": the truth that godly character is not imposed but built, created, with the willing and dedicated assistance of the person being transformed. The world's flawed conclusion dismisses the fact that God's creation of each person into His image is only *just beginning* at the individual's forgiveness and baptism into the church and the Family of God.

The Law Continues On

Anyone thinking of baptism should consider—if we have little need to be concerned about sin—why Jesus is so solemn and stern in His admonition in Luke 14:25-27 about His disciples following such high standards. Not being discussed at this point is that, despite Christ's wonderful gift in sacrificing Himself to pay our indebtedness to God, the reality is that the wages of sin, death, remain because the existence of the laws continues.

What we find is that God not only forgives us, but in our calling He also gives us the spiritual tools to fight and win the spiritual battles we engage in to keep sin from re-enslaving us. The fight against sin continues. God provides the tools for us to go on to perfection (Hebrews 6:1-2) if we will believe in them and use them. Colossians 2:13-14 helps to clarify this:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

When we choose to be baptized, we come to Christ physically alive but spiritually dead because the death penalty still hangs over our heads. Our sins have been recorded, but this spiritual death, paying the penalty for sins, has not yet been paid by means of Christ's blood. Following our repentance, God accepts Christ's death as the means of redemption, paying the debt in our stead. This act of justification erases from existence the death penalty against us. Even so, that erasure does not remove from the book the laws we broke, only the *penalty* for breaking those laws.

Notice this clear New Testament—New Covenant—illustration in I Corinthians 15:55-58, where Paul writes to Christians:

O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Is it still possible for us to sin and experience sin's sting? As long as the laws that define sin exist, the possibility of death remains because it is possible for us to break those laws. This is why verse 58

urges us so strongly to be steadfast and immovable in the work of the Lord. His work in us as individuals is to refine our character so that we never sin. We are in training to be in God's image, and God does not sin.

The term "sting" illustrates what is painful about sin. The most painful element involved in sin is death, and with death, all hope is lost. Sin kills. Do we believe that? Sin is the cause of death. The function of the laws of God is to provide knowledge of sin. God's laws give us knowledge of what to do and what not to do. Sin is still to be feared!

We must be careful, though, because our carnal nature is so deceitful that by giving us knowledge of what not to do, sin can actually play a role in arousing us to desire a taste of it, to experience its excitement. And so we can give in to sin. We must fight this desire with all our being. After God commanded her not to eat of the tree in the midst of the Garden of Eden, Eve failed to fight the intriguing desire, and she ended up sinning! God's laws have never been against us. They continue to give us guidance about what is right.

Recall the family relationships Jesus lists in Luke 14:26. They are the people with whom we tend to spend the most time and generally want to please to the highest degree—and who also prove to be the most influential in attracting us to follow their patterns of living. We tend to let our guard down while in their company.

Our sins imposed the death penalty on us—and ultimately on our Savior—in the first place and still do if we continue sinning after He pays the debt. God's laws have not changed, and the penalty for breaking them remains the same despite Jesus' merciful payment on our behalf. Irrespective of the New Covenant, the laws continue to define sin. If we continue sinning, His death for our benefit is absolutely wasted. Specifically, at our baptism, His death pays only for sins committed in the *past*.

Christ's death is the means, the way, that opens the door for completing the perfection of our character into the image of Jesus Christ in preparation for the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit God gives us through the laying on of hands is the means of keeping His laws far more perfectly than before our calling. Sins committed after accepting His shed blood can put one on the road to the Lake of Fire because His death did not remove our obligation to obey the law. We must repent of sins committed following baptism so they do not produce more severe consequences.

God's laws still exist and are still in force, guiding us in living God's way. To confirm this, we will look closely at what Christ stated when beginning His ministry. It is basic instruction directly from Jesus as He laid the foundation for more expanded teachings that followed.

According to the Spirit

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus admonishes His listeners:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the

kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

My New King James Bible titles this paragraph, “Jesus Fulfills the Law.” The sense in which many professing Christians use the term “fulfills” is not inspired Scripture. In this case, it does not mean “accomplishes by keeping” or “does away with,” as judged against what He taught in what immediately follows. *Fulfills*, in this case, means “fills to the full,” “fully exemplifies the conduct it covers,” or “expands to its fullest intent.” Consider His subsequent illustrations carefully:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:21-26)

His teaching shows Him raising the acceptable level of obedience far higher than what people ordinarily considered as satisfactory behavior. Jesus expands the scope of sin in the sixth commandment from outright murder to also include a high level of anger in certain situations! Matthew 5:27-30 shows the same pattern in this teaching on the seventh commandment:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

The same conclusion is true of this commandment and also for each of the others He expands during His Sermon on the Mount. Far from doing away with God’s commandments, He raises the standards of acceptable behavior far higher.

Revelation 12:9 asserts that the great Dragon has deceived the whole world. What a cruel joke Satan has played on the masses and even on those unconverted who are sincerely striving to obey God to the best of their present understanding.

Sacrificing Has Not Ended

The reality of the New Testament’s teaching is that becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ obligates a person to a great deal of sacrifice—even to the point of becoming what the apostle Paul calls being

“a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). The disciple of Christ is clearly the sacrifice. Why do the sanctified ones make these sacrifices since the price they pay for forgiveness is dedicated, obedient devotion to the leadership of Jesus Christ?

This price requires the sacrifice of every function of a Christian’s body, mind, and spirit to the way of God. It can be very costly. It may cost the Christian His employment because of Sabbath work requirements. He may lose his family attachments because the family may not accept his membership with this strange group. He may lose his general acceptance within a community for the same reason.

We commit to Christ for two primary reasons. The first is personal and somewhat self-centered: We want to be delivered from the burden of the death penalty, and we desire the awesome rewards God promises like everlasting life and sharing eternity with our Creator and Savior. The second is generally slower to grow within us but proves far more critical in the end: We love God and desire the completion of His purpose in us. Through baptism, we want the means to express that love for God and for others as He continues with His creative purposes, preparing us for active participation in His Family in the Kingdom of God.

We should never let the encouraging Romans 5:1-5 slip from our minds:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts, by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

These verses, naming gifts God gives us upon our agreeing to the New Covenant, remain as a brief but constant reminder of how the New Covenant enables us. They inspire and empower our faith in ways no prior covenant, even with God, has. But the New Covenant does not erase God’s laws, just the penalty we have incurred by breaking them. Even the sacrificial laws involving animals, though they no longer have to be physically made, remain part of the Word of God because we can learn so much from them. They deepen and broaden our understanding of the sacrifices we must make under the New Covenant to show love to both God and men.

The author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 8:7-13:

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For 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 mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” In that He says, “a new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

These verses outline some major objectives within the workings of the New Covenant. Merciful forgiveness for breaking God's laws is a major one. The author provides an intriguing overview of God's objectives using the means of the New Covenant as His tools. This overview provides a clear statement that God will be an even more hands-on Creator, working in His people's behalf more than ever before. It clearly states that law-keeping and sinlessness are major objectives in its institution, giving no indication of any kind that moral laws are being "done away."

The excitement is building toward seeing what He will lead each of us to become in our lives. It should be abundantly clear that God's law will be a primary tool in creating us into the image of Jesus Christ so that throughout eternity we are prepared to follow Him wherever He goes. He kept God's laws perfectly.

With this as a foundation, we are better prepared to search into the epistle to the Hebrews in more detail.