

THE NEW COVENANT

HEBREWS 8 AND 9



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The New Covenant: Hebrews 8 and 9

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Hebrews 8 and 9: Introduction

The writer wants his first readers – and us – to understand that Jesus has made the Old Covenant and its sacramental system obsolete and unnecessary. It never was effectual for permanent cleansing, and now that Jesus has come, and has accomplished the sacrifice that takes our sins away, why would anyone want to go back to that which can never save?

Jesus is the way into God's rest. Those first readers who were drifting away from Jesus and back to their roots in Judaism needed to be reminded of all that Jesus accomplished in His sacrifice and suffering, and all that is available to us through Him now. Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant, and in that covenant, through Jesus, God brings us to Himself.

We're pleased to make this resource available for personal or group study at no charge, and we hope you will find this series helpful in realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

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1 Covenant Mediator

Introduction

The priests of ancient Israel *mediated* God's favor to His people through the work they did in the tabernacle and, later, the temple. The people of Israel could not enjoy the favor of God apart from the work of the priests, because by their work God forgave sins and renewed repentant sinners in His covenant. One of the lessons of the book of Leviticus – with its many detailed and bloody sacrifices – is that it's easy to drift from the Lord into disobedience and sin. But there's a cost to endure and a price to be paid in returning to His favor and rest. Those many, continuous, bloody sacrifices and offerings were efficacious to *meditate* God's covenant and favor to His people, but only temporarily. In Jesus our High Priest, we have a "more excellent ministry" at work on our behalf.

Meditate on Psalm 22.

Read Hebrews 8.1-6.

Think it through.

1. What does a mediator do? How did the priests of Israel perform this work of mediation? How effective was their work? How does Jesus' work as our High Priest differ from the work of the priests of Israel? The earthly tabernacle (and, later, temple) was God's chosen place for this work of mediation to occur. Where did, and where does Jesus fulfill His work as our High Priest? What does He mediate to us there? What makes His "a more excellent ministry" than that of the priests?

2. In what ways was the tabernacle/temple a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things"? What can we learn about "heavenly things" by understanding the details of the tabernacle/temple and the work that was conducted there? The writer of Hebrews picked up on God's admonition to Moses in constructing the earthly tabernacle, that everything should be done according to the *pattern* God revealed. Why was this important? Shouldn't the people of Israel have had some say in what they might like to have as a place and forms for worshiping God? Explain. What are the "better promises" Jesus mediates to us? Is there a pattern we should follow for laying hold on those promises? Explain.

Meditate.

"Both in the verse before us, then, and throughout, does he ascribe the word better to the Lord, who is better and other than originated things. For better is the sacrifice through him, better the hope in him and also the promises through him, not merely as great compared with small, but the one differing from the other in nature, because he who conducts this economy, is better than things originated." *Athanasius (295-373 AD)*

For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time... 1 Timothy 2.5, 6

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that in You I have, and through You I can enter, the eternal favor and rest of God! How I rejoice in this gift of Your more excellent ministry, and how this makes me want to...

Pray Psalm 22.1-8.

Here, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, David looks ahead to the sufferings of Jesus. Pray slowly and contemplatively, as you seek to appreciate the depth of Jesus' suffering. Thank God and praise Him for this most excellent ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalm 22.1-8 (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*)

Upon the cross of Cal'vry He suffered 'neath the rod;
Alone, He cried out, "Why have You forsaken Me, My God?"
As day to bitter darkness turned, the Savior of the blessed
Cried, "Father, answer Me, I pray; restore Me to Your rest!"

Despised by men, the Savior was more a worm than man.
They shrieked, "He trusted God, let Him redeem Him if He can.
Let God deliver Him if He indeed delights in Him!"
Thus mocked they Jesus as He died in pain and anguish grim.

2 The New Covenant

Introduction

The Old Covenant was not sufficient to help the people of Israel realize the promised rest of God. Why should the first readers of the book of Hebrews think that had changed? The fault was not in the covenant; it was in the people themselves, who routinely broke God's covenant whenever they thought they might be able to find better "rest" in other religions or their own best ideas concerning what was right for them. But the God of grace and faithfulness would not allow His promises to fail, and He instituted a new and different covenant, mediated by a better High Priest.

Read Jeremiah 31.23-37.

Read Hebrews 8.7-13.

Think it through.

1. How can you see in verses 7 and 8 that the "fault" leading to the inadequacy of the Old Covenant was not in the covenant itself? What was the nature of this "fault"? What does it mean to "continue" in God's covenant? Were the people reading this epistle for the first time in danger of following in the footsteps of those who had failed to continue with God before? Explain. What are the signs today that someone may no longer be continuing with God in His covenant?

2. Verse 10 summarizes the essence of the New Covenant. How would you explain that essence? How does Jesus, as the "Mediator of a better covenant" (v. 6), fulfill all this essence of the New Covenant? The New Covenant is more of an *inward* covenant, while the Old Covenant was more of an *outward* covenant. Explain. How can you see that both of these are "covenants of promise" (Eph. 2.12)? How can we know that we "know the LORD"? The Old Covenant has become "obsolete", but does this mean it no longer has any value? Obsolete airplanes can still help us understand how to build better airplanes. The Old Covenant, though obsolete, has continuity with the New Covenant, especially in its most essential components (v. 10). Explain. Meditate on John 17.3. Should we expect *both* covenants to help us in realizing more of the promise of eternal life? Why?

Meditate.

"[He bestows] on us the truly great, divine and inalienable inheritance of the Father, deifying us by heavenly teaching, putting his laws into our minds and writing them on our hearts. What laws does he inscribe? 'That all shall know God, from small to great'; and, 'I will be merciful to them,' says God, 'and will not remember their sins.' Let us receive the laws of life, let us comply with God's exhortations; let us become acquainted with him, that he may be gracious." *Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD)*

... at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2.12, 13

You have shown me mercy, Father; You have forgiven my sins; and You have written Your Law on my heart so that I...

Pray Psalm 22.9-18.

Continue to meditate on the suffering of Jesus, and to thank God for the price Jesus paid to become the Mediator of God's better covenant with us.

Psalm 22.12-18 (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*)

Like raging bulls they bellowed, like lions set to feast.
Each gaping mouth raged loudly like an all-consuming beast.
Like water slipped His life away, disjointed hanged He high;
His tongue clung to His jaws as He prepared His heart to die.

His foes, like dogs around Him, with glee did gloat and stare.
They pierced His hands and feet; they stole the garments He did wear.
Though not a bone was broken as He promised in His Word,
Yet, wounded for our sins, thus died creation's sov'reign Lord.

3 The Earthly Tabernacle

Introduction

When the apostle John described the earthly sojourn of our Lord Jesus Christ, he used a verb which means “to tabernacle” (Jn. 1.14). He certainly meant to identify the Lord with both the ancient tabernacle of Israel and the temple which replaced it. All that was bound up in the service carried out in those holy places is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus. Why would anyone want to leave Jesus, the new and complete tabernacle, for those rites and ordinances which never could take away sin, and therefore could not bring us into the Lord’s rest? Which is exactly the question our writer is trying to stick in the brains of his first readers. Why, indeed?

Read John 1.1-14; 2.13-22.

Read Hebrews 9.1-10.

Think it through.

1. The writer mentions the layout and furnishings of the ancient tabernacle. Each of these pointed to Christ. Can you see how in each case?

- lampstand:
- table and showbread:
- Holy of Holies (Holies of All):
- golden censer:
- ark of the covenant:
- mercy seat:
- contents of the ark:

2. The priests of Israel functioned in, around, and with all these things, thus engaging sacred mysteries on behalf of the people of God, to restore them to His favor. Yet none of these could “make him who performed the service perfect,” much less the ones on whose behalf they were performed. He mentions the perfecting of the conscience in verse 9. What is the conscience? What is its role in the soul? Outward rites and applications cannot reach to the depths of the soul. They could suffice for a temporary stay of judgment, so to speak, but they had to be repeated over and over again. Once a year, the Atonement was accomplished on behalf of the entire nation, and that “not without blood.” But even this needed to be repeated annually. How does all this priestly activity point forward to Jesus? Why is His office and sacrifice *better*? What is “the time of reformation” mentioned in verse 10? Reformation of what? Why is our writer belaboring these points?

Meditate.

“He begins to say how there were symbols in the law and the types of things in the era of grace and how it was possible to see clearly the things of the new covenant glimpsed beforehand in the things of the old covenant, even as he shows in comparison what sort of preeminence the new covenant things have over those of the old covenant.” *Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428 AD)*

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s. 1 Corinthians 6.19, 20

Lord Jesus, tabernacle in me fully, increasingly, so that You increase and I decrease, for then I...

Pray Psalm 22.19-25.

As you pray, ask the Lord to remind you of everything Jesus accomplished through His suffering and blood, and give Him thanks for all of it.

Psalm 22.23-25 (*Darvall: Rejoice, the Lord is King*)

All you who fear the Lord, now praise His holy Name!
You children of His glorious Word, declare His fame!
We stand in awe of our eternal God, and on His mercy call.

For He has not despised the anguish of our King,
Nor from Him hid His eyes, Who knew such suffering.
Let praise arise from all who love and serve the Ruler of the skies!

4 The Heavenly Tabernacle

Introduction

The inward and renewing power of Christ's sacrifice is the focus in these verses. The old system of sacrifices and offerings only accomplished a temporary forgiveness. Christ's sacrifice reaches all the way to the soul, cleansing us from dead works and putting us on track for the eternal inheritance of God. The good things Christ has accomplished are ours to enjoy, now and forever – if, that is, we hold fast to Him and do not drift away.

Read Isaiah 53.4-11.

Read Hebrews 9.11-15.

Think it through.

1. At some point following His death and burial, Jesus entered “the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands” – the spiritual sanctuary of heaven – and presented His offering – Himself – before the mercy seat of God. Zechariah 3 seems to speak of this scene. What was Christ wearing? What did that represent? What happened to Him? What are the implications of this for those who believe in and hold fast to Him? Why was His offering a “once for all” offering (vv. 12, 14)?

2. Christ's offering reaches beyond outward and temporary propitiations to a new, inward, and utterly transforming work. What does it mean that Christ offered Himself to “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God”? Explain the two reasons for Christ's sacrifice mentioned in these words. What does Christ do to “cleanse your conscience from dead works” (cf. Ezek. 36.26, 27)? The reference here to “the promise of eternal inheritance” probably indicates the promised rest of God, which the writer focused on earlier in Hebrews. This promise is not only of “good things to come” (v. 11) but of good things to know and enjoy here and now. Explain.

Meditate.

“Our Lord did not enter yearly like their high priest. After his coming he entered only once, not into the shrine which ceases, like their priesthood, but ‘into the Holy’ of Holies of eternity, and he made a propitiation through his blood for all nations.” *Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 AD)*

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5.21

Cleanse me today, Lord Jesus, and fit me for service to God, so that I might...

Pray Psalm 22.29-31.

Those whom Jesus saves are called to serve Him. As you pray these verses, meditate on the many opportunities you will have to serve God this day.

Psalm 22.29-31 (*Dix: For the Beauty of the Earth*)

All the prosperous of the earth shall before His mercy fall;
Bending low before His worth, hear them humbly on Him call.
Even those low in the grave He will by His mercy save.

Let the generations all witness to His saving grace;

The New Covenant: Hebrews 8 and 9

Let them to all nations call, "Bow before His holy face!"
Let the children of the earth hear of Jesus' saving worth!

5 The Blood of the Covenant

Introduction

Blood plays a large role in God's covenant, in both its Old and New dispensations. The shedding of blood is both a real sacrifice and a symbolic one. Since "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17.9-11), the shedding of blood offers the payment due for sin (Rom. 6.23). At the same time, it symbolizes the yielding of one's life in obedience to God. In the Old Covenant, the blood of spotless animals *covered* the sins of God's people for a season, and both reminded them that they would need to do this again soon enough, and instilled in them a longing for more permanent atonement. In the New Covenant, the blood of the eternal spotless Son of God *removes* the sins of all who believe in Him, and thus provides the final blood sacrifice. In thinking about returning to Judaism, the first readers of this epistle were turning away from the New Covenant, hoping to find rest in the Old Covenant. Not a good idea.

Read Psalm 50.

Read Hebrews 9.16-22.

Think it through.

1. In our passage, the writer uses the language of *testament* rather than *covenant*, because he wants to put God's dealings with us in more familiar terms. When one writes a *testament* – we would say a *will* – he includes in it promises of what is to take place upon his death. According to Jeremiah 31.31-34, what are the promises of the new covenant? Who made that *testament*? According to Hebrews 9.16, 17, when would those promises begin to be in effect? How can you see that this covenant is in view even as early as Genesis 15.8-20? So if Christ died to fulfill the promises given through Abraham and Jeremiah, why does it not make sense for the first readers of this epistle to be seeking rest somewhere *other* than in Christ?

2. The administration of the Old Covenant involved a good deal of blood, even from the beginning, as we see in verses 18-22. Why was this necessary? What did it say about Israel's role in the covenant? Blood symbolized both death and life in the Old Covenant. Explain. Importantly, the blood of the Old Covenant was not *Israel's* blood, but that of animals. More importantly, the blood of the *New* Covenant *was* Israel's blood, and *for all* human beings, and all creation. Explain.

Meditate.

"How did he become mediator? He brought words from God and brought them to us, conveying what came from the Father and adding his own death. We had offended; we ought to have died. He died for us and made us worthy of the covenant. By this is the covenant secure, in that henceforward it is not made for the unworthy." *John Chrysostom (344-407 AD)*

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3.23-26

Thank You, Jesus, that Your blood, shed on the cross, has fulfilled God's covenant so that I...

Pray Psalm 22.22-26.

As you pray, remember Jesus' "affliction," and thank and praise the Lord for His shed blood.

Psalm 22.23-27 (*Darwall: Rejoice, the Lord is King*)

All you who fear the Lord, now praise His holy Name!

The New Covenant: Hebrews 8 and 9

You children of His glorious Word, declare His fame!
We stand in awe of our eternal God, and on His mercy call.

For He has not despised the anguish of our King,
Nor from Him hid His eyes, Who knew such suffering.
Let praise arise from all who love and serve the Ruler of the skies!

The suffering King shall eat and praise with us the Lord.
Forever we His praise repeat and trust His Word.
Praise God above, all you who keep His vows and who His mercies love!

6 In the Presence of God for Us!

Introduction

The sacrifice Jesus made of His own life has “put away sin” once and for all. Here is reason to rejoice. What better *rest* could we want than to have the burden of guilt, shame, and judgment lifted from us once and forever? Jesus paid a terrible price to secure this *rest*. We must make sure that the *rest* we seek is that which God offers through the better sacrifice of Jesus.

Meditate on Psalm 22.1-21.

Read Hebrews 9.23-28.

Think it through.

1. The sacrifices carried out under the Old Covenant (“these”, v. 23), were effective to cleanse both the furnishings of the tabernacle and those who offered the sacrifices. But they could only *cover* sin and its consequences; they could not *remove* it. It was necessary to repeat “these” over and over. But Jesus, our great High Priest has appeared not in an earthly tabernacle, but in the very throne room of God (Zech. 3), bringing “better sacrifices than these.” He did this “for us” (v. 24). He did this “once at the end of the ages.” What was the effect of this (v. 26)? What does this mean? Why is this Good News? How does this relate to the *rest* God has prepared?

2. The writer reminds his readers indirectly that they will die and face the judgment of God one day (v. 27). Why does he mention this at this point? Why was it important to remind his readers that everyone must face the judgment of God? What happens at the judgment? How does this relate to the *rest* God has prepared and the sacrifice Jesus accomplished? What does it mean to “eagerly wait” for Jesus? The writer says that when Jesus appears “a second time,” it will be “for salvation.” Does this mean we can only know whether we are saved when Jesus comes again? What *does* it mean, and how should it admonish and encourage us who believe?

Meditate.

“For also Christ became as if a sinner, inasmuch as he took on the sins of the whole world and claimed them as his own. But then he paid the penalty that was owed, the punishment belonging to sinners. At last he will come with his Father’s glory, no longer as a sinner, no longer ‘reckoned among the lawless.’” *Oecumenius (sixth century AD)*

“It should be noted, of course, that he bore the sins of many, not of all: not all came to faith, so he removed the sins of the believers only.” *Theodoret of Cyr (393-466 AD)*

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6.9-11

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for bearing my sins in Your own Body, and for putting away sin from me so that I...

Pray Psalm 22.1-18.

As you pray, enter into the suffering of Jesus so that you experience in Him the greatness of His suffering and the power of His sacrifice to put away sin from you. Give thanks to God for such an indescribable gift!

Psalm 22.1-8, 12-18 (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*)

Upon the cross of Cal'vry He suffered 'neath the rod;
Alone, He cried out, "Why have You forsaken Me, My God?"
As day to bitter darkness turned, the Savior of the blessed
Cried, "Father, answer Me, I pray; restore Me to Your rest!"

Despised by men, the Savior was more a worm than man.
They shrieked, "He trusted God, let Him redeem Him if He can.
Let God deliver Him if He indeed delights in Him!"
Thus mocked they Jesus as He died in pain and anguish grim.

Like raging bulls they bellowed, like lions set to feast.
Each gaping mouth raged loudly like an all-consuming beast.
Like water slipped His life away, disjointed hanged He high;
His tongue clung to His jaws as He prepared His heart to die.

His foes, like dogs around Him, with glee did gloat and stare.
They pierced His hands and feet; they stole the garments He did wear.
Though not a bone was broken as He promised in His Word,
Yet, wounded for our sins, thus died creation's sov'reign Lord.

7 The Good Things to Come

Introduction

In chapters 8 and 9, the writer labors to help his readers understand how the sacrifice of Christ makes Him the only way to know the *rest* God is preparing. As beautiful, sophisticated, and venerable as the Old Covenant sacramental system was – with its washings, blood sacrifices, priests, and tabernacle – it was only a temporary arrangement, and could never satisfy the need for final and forever cleansing that only Jesus provides. The writer wanted his readers to understand that only “those who eagerly wait for Him” (Heb. 9.28) will know the better sacrifice, better covenant, and better *rest* of God.

Read Acts 4.8-12.

Read and Meditate on Hebrews 8 and 9.

Think it through.

1. The first readers of this epistle were drifting from their commitment to Christ, seeking “rest” from the harassment they were receiving from Jewish friends and relatives by turning back to Judaism as their best hope. But they were making a mistake in two ways: First, in the rest they were seeking, and second, within the framework of religious life to which they were returning. Explain. How many different ways, thus far, has the writer of Hebrews sought to arrest that drift?

2. To this point, the writer has made Jesus – front and center – the only hope of finding God’s *rest*. He has said we must “look to” Jesus, “consider” Him, “hold fast our confidence” in Him, come to Him in prayer, learn obedience with Him, mature in Him, hope in Him and “come to God through Him.” Explain each of these ideas. How do they apply to your own life as a follower of Jesus Christ? Does it make sense to seek rest – or any of “the good things to come” – anywhere other than in Jesus? Explain.

Meditate.

“So then we also are new, or rather we were made new, but now have become old; therefore we are ‘near to vanishing away,’ and to destruction. Let us scrape off this old age. It is indeed no longer possible to do it by washing, but by repentance it is possible here in this life. If there be in us anything old, let us cast it off; if any ‘wrinkle,’ if any stain, if any ‘spot,’ let us wash it away and become fair, that ‘the king may desire our beauty.’”
John Chrysostom (344-407 AD)

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. Romans 3.19-22

Father, thank You for the rest You have provided in and through Jesus! Today, let me know that rest more completely, so that...

Pray Psalm 22.22-31.

In these verses, the victorious Servant looks beyond His suffering to consequences and joy that have been set down before Him (cf. Heb. 12.1, 2). Meditate on what Jesus accomplished through His better sacrifice, better covenant, better priesthood, better promises, and better hope. Give God abundant thanks and praise!

Psalm 22.23-28 (*Darwall: Rejoice, the Lord is King*)

All you who fear the Lord, now praise His holy Name!
You children of His glorious Word, declare His fame!
We stand in awe of our eternal God, and on His mercy call.

For He has not despised the anguish of our King,
Nor from Him hid His eyes, Who knew such suffering.
Let praise arise from all who love and serve the Ruler of the skies!

The suffering King shall eat and praise with us the Lord.
Forever we His praise repeat and trust His Word.
Praise God above, all you who keep His vows and who His mercies love!

All nations shall repent and hasten to the Lord;
All those to whom His truth is sent shall praise His Word.
The Lord is King! His sovereign rule on high now we His people sing!

Psalm 22.29-31 (*Dix: For the Beauty of the Earth*)

All the prosp'rous of the earth shall before His mercy fall;
Bending low before His worth, hear them humbly on Him call.
Even those low in the grave He will by His mercy save.

Let the generations all witness to His saving grace;
Let them to all nations call, "Bow before His holy face!"
Let the children of the earth hear of Jesus' saving worth!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Jesus is better in every way than the sacramental and religious system of the Old Covenant. Explain.
2. What makes Jesus' sacrifice a better and final sacrifice? How does someone benefit from that sacrifice?
3. The writer has moved from talking about the *rest* of God (chapter 3) to the "good things to come" in chapter 9. Of what do these consist? Can a person find these apart from Jesus? Why not?
4. The New Covenant does not so much do away with the Old Covenant as fulfill it. Explain.
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

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