



#18: *Hebrews (part 1): A Better Covenant*

Bible Readings: **Hebrews 8:1-13**

by **Revd Trevor Thomas**

Series editor: Andy Murphy

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

We have reached **Hebrews**, a book written by a Christian leader who does not give us an authorial name. He addresses Jewish converts who are very familiar with the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). In their time of growing uncertainty and unrest, they were being tempted to turn back to the ancient Jewish faith, and to the priesthood and sacrificial system which were at its heart, as described in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. This is part of the old covenant, the covenant of which Moses was the mediator. The prophet Jeremiah made it clear that this covenant had not worked. In **Jeremiah 11**, he explains that the people's repeated 'disobedience' had caused the breakdown. In **Jeremiah 31**, however, he foresees the coming of a new covenant, made by Israel's ever-faithful God. The author of Hebrews draws on this promise, pointing to Christ: the mediator of this new covenant. From **Psalms 110**, he finds scriptural authority for the central place of Jesus, and his work, in bringing this new covenant into effect.

In studying **Chapters 8 to 10** of this challenging and important text, over two sessions, we shall explore how God's 'second plan' is essential and all-sufficient for salvation.

Please read the Bible passages mentioned here before you embark on leading your group members carefully and sensitively through the material. Please pray for your group as they prepare for this session.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

We are about to move from Paul's letter to a largely Gentile church (Galatians – see **#17**), to the work of an unnamed Christian leader. **Hebrews**, as its title suggests, was addressed to Jewish converts who were in danger of drifting away from their newly-discovered Christian faith. In the dangerous and deeply uncertain times through which they lived, they probably experienced both fear and confusion. Some, despite the faithful leadership they had been offered (see **Hebrews 13, verse 7**), may have been on the verge of giving up. Hebrews does two things: (1) it warns its readers of the seriousness of that decision, and (2) it explains how Jesus truly fulfils all that the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) had promised.

Consider the pressures we, and our fellow human beings, face today. *What helps us to hold fast to our Christian commitment? Do we need to re-centre on Christ: who he is, and what he has done, and continues to do, for us?* Two verses to encourage us are **Hebrews 7:25**, and **Hebrews 13:8**.

STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, loving Saviour and ascended Lord,
thank you that you are able to save absolutely those who approach God through you.
You are the same yesterday, today, and forever.
May nothing sweep us away from the Christian course
to which we are committed by our Covenant faith. **Amen.**

FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore in small groups

What are today's 'gusts', threatening to sweep us off course with our faith?

Jesus is described as the strong centre of our faith. *How is he important to you? - who he is; what he has done; and what he continues to do?*

We are often relieved when someone offers to 'mediate' when a dispute is hard to resolve. *How does our experience of mediation help us understand Christ's role as 'mediator' of a new covenant? (Hebrews 8:6)*

READING THE SCRIPTURES with background information

The author of Hebrews carefully develops his teaching, quoting key passages from the Old Testament. But this is no dry academic essay. He is at great pains to stress the 'life and death' importance of 'not drifting away', and not ignoring 'such a great salvation' (Hebrews 2:1-4). The faith his readers had embraced is not an alien creed, but the **glorious fulfilment** of what God had always intended for his people. Because the Old Testament story had included the people's rebellion in the desert, following the escape from Egypt, it had dire consequences (Hebrews 3:7-11). The prophet Jeremiah brought the promise of a 'new covenant' (Jeremiah 31: 31-34) precisely because the terms of the *old* covenant had been *broken*

Notice how the argument of Hebrews flows on, throughout the letter: **Christ is central**. He is superior to the angels of God, to Moses (mediator of the old covenant), to Aaron and the priests who followed him. Christ's work is superior to the regular, year-in-year-out, round of sacrificial worship, including the **Day of Atonement**. For Jesus is *himself* the perfect offering, opening up the way to God, **AND** the Great High Priest who serves in the *heavenly* sanctuary, the true tabernacle, 'set up by the Lord, not by men' (chapter 8, verse 2). There he dwells eternally as our 'intercessor' (Hebrews 7:25), the One who always lives 'to plead on our behalf' (*Revised English Bible*).

Read together the Bible passage: Hebrews chapter 8

Because Jesus has received from God himself his priestly ministry, he can be the mediator of a **superior covenant**. The long quotation from Jeremiah underlines the 'better promises' the prophet foresaw. It is these better promises that Christ has brought to fulfilment (Hebrews 8: verses 10 and 12).

DIGGING DEEPER – some questions for you to consider in your group:

Do you experience Christian faith as a series of demands coming to you from God in all his holiness, or a profound and deepening inner reality encouraged by Spirit-inspired fellowship within your faith community? Which is truer to the 'new covenant' Jesus came to open up? Read again Hebrews 8:10-12.

Think of the 'sacred spaces' or 'thin places' where you might feel closer to God. Does it help to think of them of 'copies' of what is in heaven? (See Hebrews 8:5, and also Exodus:25:40.)

The original tabernacle built by Moses in the years of exodus was a portable tent, rather than an imposing temple. Does that help you to see earthly 'sanctuaries' in a different light?

Commentator Robert Davidson suggests that if Jeremiah were alive today, in our midst, might he still be 'looking forward to a new covenant, for precisely the same reasons' that one was so urgently needed then [Robert Davidson, *Jeremiah 21 to 52, and Lamentations*, St Andrews Press, 1985]. *What do you think?*

Should we have left behind the language of 'superior' and 'inferior' pathways to faith, or is Hebrews bringing us back to the essential heart of the Christian gospel? How does our answer influence the relationships we have with peoples of other faith? Consider, in particular, how you might answer a devout Jewish or Muslim friend who expressed a desire to worship God without the need for a 'middle man' to open up the way.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Sing or read 'I know that my Redeemer lives' (*Singing the Faith*, 303), echoing Hebrews 7:25.

Pray for all those who are exploring the Christian faith in awareness of their personal need. Pray also for those who have made a faith commitment, but are tempted to give up. Pray for each other that one source of assurance from your session today will strengthen you to grow as covenant people.

Finish with **The Lord's Prayer** together.

COVENANT LIVING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE (to think about afterwards)

How might you find encouragement when the challenge of 'covenant living' seems too daunting? Is there an experienced Christian guide, or 'soul mate', who might provide the help you need?