

The New Covenant Part 2: "A More Excellent Ministry"

Scripture Readings: *Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:1-7; 11:16, 34*

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Dear Congregation of Christ: In his bestselling book *Your Best Life Now*, prosperity gospel preacher Joel Osteen writes, "The Bible clearly states, 'God has crowned us with glory and honor.'" This is his spin on Psalm 8:5, where the psalmist says of God, "*You have... crowned [man] with glory and honor.*" But Osteen says, "The word honor could also be translated as 'favor,' and favor means 'to assist, to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment.' In other words, God wants to make your life easier." The problem is that no other Bible translation substitutes "favor" for "honor."

Osteen goes on to say, "God wants to pour out 'His far and beyond favor.'" He again twists God's word in Ephesians 2:7, "*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*" For this heretic, God's promise of "immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness" is about God's "far and beyond favor," which for him means lots and lots of money in this life, not in "the coming ages." Sadly, these false teachings are endorsed by such popular figures like Max Lucado, Pat Robertson, and even karate-kid Chuck Norris.

But in our church, we do not preach this false prosperity gospel. We preach the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: his perfect righteousness, his sacrificial death, and his glorious resurrection from the dead, all to save us from sin and God's wrath. As we say in our bulletin, we don't have a worship team, special effects, or a hip and funny pastor. Instead, we worship God with reverence and joy (Heb 12:28-29) only as God has commanded in Scripture (Deut 4:2; 12:32), and to the glory of God alone.

We only preach Christ and him crucified. This morning, we will end our series on God's covenants with man with Part 2 of The New Covenant. In Part 1, we learned that the new covenant is grounded in the shed blood of Christ. The Holy Spirit will give believers new hearts and write God's laws on their hearts. We still sin, but the blood of Christ covers all our sins. Here in Part 2, we will meditate on the theme, "**The New Covenant Part 2: 'A More Excellent Ministry.'**" In the original Greek, "ministry" is *leitourgia*, which means "service": military service, service done by priests, or worship service. Our text says that Christ's new covenant ministry or service is much more excellent than that of the old covenant. So, we have three headings: first, "**A Better Covenant**"; second, "**Better Promises**"; and third, "**A Better High Priest.**"

"A Better Covenant"

This first point will be a rehash of last Sunday's sermon. Why is the new covenant better than the old? From our previous text in Jeremiah 31:31-34, I cited four things.

First, the old covenant is narrow in terms of extent. The recipients of its benefits are only the Israelites. No other nation is included, because God chose Israel alone as his "*treasured possession among all peoples... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exo 19:5-6). They alone received God's laws concerning their worship and civil society. They alone were given instructions to build God's

sanctuary. The only laws that were not exclusively given to Israel were the moral laws summarized in the Ten Commandments, because God hardwired these moral laws into the mind of every human being. However, in the new covenant, God's chosen people will come from every nation, language and tribe in the world. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ would be proclaimed in all the world. Therefore, without the new covenant, we will all still be wallowing in our pagan religions.

Second, the old covenant was, for the most part, only an external, ritualistic religion as practiced by Israel. Therefore, the old covenant was broken by the Israelites all throughout their history until God punished them through the Babylonians who destroyed their nation and their temple and exiled them as slaves. Their hearts were not circumcised, or in other words, renewed by the Holy Spirit. In the new covenant, God promises that his commandments will be internalized by his people. He will write his law on their hearts; in fact, he will give them new hearts that are soft and pliable, hearts that can be molded according to God's laws. His people would not merely go through the motions of obeying his laws. Rather, they would cherish the law, love the law, and live the law, meditating on it day and night. Therefore, without the new covenant, we will all still hate God's moral laws and commandments like all unbelievers.

Third, because of this love for God's law, all of his chosen people will have intimate knowledge of God. In the old covenant, only a relatively few Israelites had a saving knowledge of the Lord. In the new covenant, all of God's chosen ones from the least to the greatest— rich and poor, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free—will have a saving knowledge of him (Gal 3:28). And the outcome of this saving knowledge of God is that all his covenant people will not teach each other to know the LORD, because all of them will know him. Therefore, without the new covenant, we are all bound to hell under God's righteous wrath on us sinful people.

Fourth and last, complete forgiveness of sins is a once-for-all event in the new covenant. In the old covenant, the high priest had to offer bloody sacrifices for the sins of the people once a year. But in the new covenant, our Lord offered his blood for the sins of his people once for all. He does not have to die on the cross repeatedly for our sins; his sacrifice was once for all. Therefore, without the new covenant, none of our sins will ever be forgiven by God.

“Better Promises”

Our text also says that the new covenant is better than the old *“since it is enacted on better promises”* (8:6). What are these promises? Throughout his sermon, the preacher of Hebrews mentions three better promises.

The first promise is a better hope. In Chapter 6, the writer assures us that God guarantees his promises in the old covenant with two unchangeable things. And he explains these two unchangeable things in Hebrews 7:17. The first is that his Son Jesus Christ is “a priest forever,” an eternal priest, because unlike the old covenant priests, he lives forever. The second is that he is a priest not because he descended from the tribe of Levitical priests. Rather, he has no beginning nor end. Therefore, he is our *“strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us... a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul”* in times of distress, sufferings, afflictions and persecutions. We flee to his throne of mercy and grace for refuge (6:17-20). We have *“a better hope... through which we draw*

near to God” (7:19). Our presidents and their policies, programs and laws are replaced every four or eight years. Not so with our Lord. Since our Lord is the unchangeable God, his promises and his word never change.

The second promise is a better possession in a better country. In Hebrews 10:34, the Jewish Christians were being persecuted, imprisoned, and their properties plundered, but they joyfully persevered in the faith. Why? Because they knew that they had a better and abiding possession in a better country. What is this better country? In Hebrews 11, Abraham is commended for his faith in God in leaving his homeland and going to another country of which he knew nothing about and where it is located. And even in the Promised Land, he lived in tents because he desired *“a better country, that is, a heavenly one,”* a heavenly city (11:16). These old covenant saints lived thus because they considered themselves as *“strangers and exiles on the earth”* (11:13).

Being aliens and exiles in this world is hard for all people—even Christians—to swallow. We love our life on earth, and this is why the teaching of a thousand-year paradise called the millennium is widely popular. How can one not long for a thousand years of paradise on earth where we will continue to enjoy our perfect lives with our families, homes, cars, and other possessions? But we see, even in our own nation, that life in this world is not something that we long for. The corruption, crime, recession, inflation, sexual immorality, murder of millions of unborn infants, and drug and alcohol abuse seem to get worse by the day. Worse of all, Lady Justice seems to have removed her blindfold, favoring particular races, social classes, and political persuasion. This present age is far removed from what Christians must long for.

While Paul spoke about *“every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”* that we will inherit (Eph 1:3), he also assures us of the incomparable glory that awaits us after the sufferings of the present time (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17). How is he so sure? It is not only because God’s word guarantees it, but also because he had been there and had seen what heaven is like, saying, *“[I] was caught up to the third heaven... into paradise... and [I] heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter”* (2 Cor 12:2-4). But God had forbidden him from revealing what he saw and heard in heaven. Jesus also assures us of our heavenly dwelling-places in his Father’s house, the new heaven and new earth, the glory and majesty of which is beyond our understanding (John 14:2; Rev 21).

Third and last, there is a sure promise of a better life. In Hebrews 11:35, believers who were tortured and martyred even refused to be released, *“so that they might rise again to a better life.”* What is this “better life”? It is not life here and now, not Joel Osteen’s “your best life now,” but life after death, eternal life in heaven with a perfect resurrected body and soul.

Better hope. Better possession in a better country. Better life. These are the better promises in the new covenant that is better than the old.

“A Better High Priest”

Lastly, the new covenant has a better High Priest. We have already learned that our Lord Jesus Christ is the better high priest because he lives forever and his priesthood is not based on descent from the Levitical tribe, but by virtue of God’s oath and appointment as his Son. He is the guarantor

of a better covenant (Heb 7:22). In the old covenant, the main service of the high priest is to offer sacrifices once a year on the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of sins of all the people. Our Lord fulfills this service by offering himself as a once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of all believers.

In our text, Christ our Great High Priest is better because he is serving us while seated at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven (8:1). He is a minister in *“the holy places, the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.”* This true tent is heaven itself, while the tabernacle and temple in Jerusalem was an earthly tent. The writer of Hebrews calls heaven *“the greater and more perfect tent”* that is not man-made (9:11). Everything that Israel did in worship was only *“a shadow of the heavenly things,”* a picture of what was to come when our Lord comes down from heaven. So the priest was a shadow of the real High Priest, and the animal sacrifices were only a shadow of Jesus’ sacrifice (Heb 8:1-5). Hebrews 9:23 explains further, *“Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.”* Jesus is the better High Priest with a better sacrifice.

And as he is seated at God’s right hand, Jesus also intercedes for us. He prays for all his suffering and persecuted people (John 17). He sends our petitions and supplications to his Father (Rom 8:34). When we sin, he pleads our case before his Father, because he is our Advocate, our Lawyer (1 John 2:1). In these services, he is *“able to save to the uttermost [completely] those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them”* (Heb 7:25; see also 9:24). Do not hesitate to come to God’s merciful throne of grace. Come boldly to your heavenly Father, for Christ is there on your behalf. You do not have to ask permission or have an appointment, for Jesus already knows what you will be asking for in your prayers beforehand.

Dear brothers and sisters: To summarize our study of God’s covenants with man, we have learned how Jesus fulfilled all these covenants. He fulfilled what Adam failed to do: obey God’s law in the Garden of Eden. He then fulfilled God’s promise of the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head. After the great flood, God promised Noah through the sign of the rainbow that he would not destroy all humankind again with a flood. Jesus fulfilled this promise because he is saving a multitude of people from destruction. God’s promises to Abraham of a Seed who would bless all the nations with a multitude of children is still being completed with people from all nations coming to Christ in faith. Afterwards, God established Israel as his own chosen nation, from where the Christ would come. He is now expanding God’s people from one nation to a multitude from all nations. He is also the Son of David, to whom God promised an eternal kingdom. Jesus is now King of kings and Lord of lords.

Finally, Christ himself came down from heaven to fulfill all of God’s better promises in the better new covenant as the better High Priest. Now in heaven at God’s right hand, he serves us as he intercedes on our behalf before his Father in heaven. So we look forward to that great day when our Lord Jesus Christ finally takes us to a better life in a better country, our final home: the new heaven and new earth, the heavenly city, Jerusalem the golden.