

A Better Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of August 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Covenant and is based on Hebrews chapter 8 verses 1 to 13.

And you'll find the Bible reading back on page 974 in the Black Bibles in front of you and you may find it helpful to have a Bible open while preaching through this letter to the Hebrews and today chapter 8.

So let's pray that God will help us as we look at these verses and teach us. Heavenly Father we thank you that you're a God who reveals himself and his purposes and character through the words of the scriptures.

We pray that as we come to them this morning you'll indeed speak to us, to our hearts that we may believe and trust your word and promise and that live lives bringing glory to Jesus in response.

[1 : 1 3] And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Moat Farm in Fressingfield in Norfolk in England is not high on the usual tourist route of England.

I doubt that you'll ever find in the tourist brochures at Harvey World Travel or any of those other places pictures of Moat Farm in Fressingfield in Norfolk in England.

I doubt that many of you have been, although I did discover somebody at 8 o'clock who had actually been to Moat Farm in Fressingfield in Norfolk. But I had seen a picture of something at Moat Farm in Fressingfield in Norfolk in, of all things, a theology book once that I was reading.

So a few years ago when I was in England I set out with a friend for the day to find Moat Farm in Fressingfield in Norfolk. And we found Fressingfield easily enough and drove into this little rural village on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk in England surrounded by farms and started asking around where is Moat Farm?

See there were no tourist signs and there was no trail of tourist buses to Moat Farm. And most people we asked in this little village had no idea what we were talking about or where we wanted to go.

[2 : 3 1] But eventually we found somebody who thought they knew where it was and directed us up one road and a path and a lane and so on. And eventually in the middle of nowhere in effect we found Moat Farm in Fressingfield.

Now we had no idea whether anyone would even be there. But thankfully the wife, the lady in charge of the farm I suppose, was there. And so she took us down to the farm shed which is what we wanted to see at this farm.

And there in this farm shed, about perhaps half the size of this new church here, we saw a large scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem.

Now it's not the sort of thing I expect you look for in rural farms in Norfolk and England. But there in this farm, Moat Farm, was a large scale model of the Temple of Jerusalem which had taken a retired Methodist lay preacher something like 18 years to make and build.

Not from a kit, not one of those airfix models that teenage boys use, but he'd made it from scratch. There was this temple, all the dimensions in beautiful proportion from all the research that he'd done through not only the scriptures but the ancient Jewish writings and Midrash and so on, and ancient Jewish histories.

[3 : 56] There were several hundred little models of people standing around the precincts of this Jerusalem temple. And we looked at it and marvelled at it and thankfully before we left, the maker, the husband of this lady, came and explained what he'd been doing and how he'd researched what he'd been doing.

Amazing model, very impressive. I thought to myself, I wonder what's going to happen to it when he dies. I hope it just doesn't get covered in dust. I hope it goes somewhere where people might see it. Certainly a labour of love.

Of course, what would have been more impressive would have been the real Temple of Jerusalem. Sadly, it doesn't exist today. It was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans when the Jews sort of created a bit of an uprising and the Romans came down fairly hard on them and destroyed much of Jerusalem and certainly the temple that was built.

But that would be more impressive. See, this model was very impressive, but the actual thing, the real thing, would have been even more impressive to look at and stand and marvel at.

For those who've been to Jerusalem, you've seen on the site of the Jerusalem temple what is now the Dome of the Rock, built there in the late 600s after the Muslim invasion. That's quite impressive.

[5 : 12] Gold leaf dome. But the Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day was even more impressive than that building. Taller, more striking than even the Dome of the Rock that is there today.

Sadly, you can't see it. So the best you've got is this model of it in Moat Farm in Pressingfield in Norfolk. Now you imagine that you're this Methodist minister or lay preacher who's built this and you could sort of boast on your CV or whatever, but you are in fact the minister in this model of the Jerusalem temple.

You're the priest in charge. You can move around all your models of people. They'll do what you tell them to do. It's very tempting, let me tell you, to think about that. But even more impressive, of course, would be that if you were the priest in the real Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day, I mean, that's more impressive than being the priest of a model.

Well, that sort of distinction is what underlies the early part of chapter 8 here in the letter to the Hebrews. The argument that we've seen over last week and building onto it earlier in the year when we looked at the early chapters of Hebrews is that Jesus is our great high priest.

But the model of him being the priest is different from the priests of the Old Testament who ministered in the Jerusalem temple. And the argument at the beginning of chapter 8 is that Jesus is a better priest than the Old Testament priests because he ministers in a better temple or better sanctuary.

[6 : 53] Jesus ministers in heaven, which the first couple of verses tell us is the true tent. The language of tent is a bit strange to think of a temple being like a tent.

But when the first instructions were given to build a sanctuary in the Old Testament, it wasn't the temple in Jerusalem, it was before they even arrived in the land. And so they built a portable temple, a tent in effect.

And the instructions for that were given at enormous length to Moses in the book of Exodus. Exodus 25 to 31, seven chapters in fact, of instructions of how to build the first tabernacle or tent that was to be the place like the temple where priests would minister, sacrifices would be made, and so on.

Jesus doesn't minister in that sort of tent or temple. But he ministers in the true tent in heaven where now he is exalted to the right hand of God on high.

The true tent of heaven is not built by human beings, by mortals. It's built by God himself. And even though the tent on earth and the temple later on were built by human beings, they followed the instructions of God.

[8 : 10] But nonetheless, were human built. So Jesus is a better priest because he ministers in a better sanctuary. Now certainly a role of a priest is to offer sacrifices and gifts.

Verse 3 tells us, for every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices. Hence it's necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. And if you remember back to last week, what does Jesus, our great high priest, offer?

Not the sacrifice of a bull or a goat or an animal, but he offers himself. Verse 27 of chapter 7 made clear. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people.

But this he did once for all when he offered himself. Jesus himself is his offering. That's his role as a priest. That's the sacrifice that he offers.

Now the irony is that if Jesus were just a priest on earth or just on earth, he would actually not be qualified to be a priest in the temple in Jerusalem because he's not of the tribe of Levi, but as we saw last week, the tribe of Judah, not the priestly tribe.

[9 : 26] Verse 4 says, Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. That is referring to the tribe of Levi of which Jesus was not a member.

So here is the contrast being painted. Jesus is a better priest, though he's not of the tribe of Levi, because he offers himself in the real tent, the real sanctuary, the heavenly temple, and not just the temple in Jerusalem.

Now when we did our building program last year and in the couple of years leading up to it before we actually built, we had firstly some diagrams and then a model of what we're going to do.

You can still see the model that's sitting on the library cabinet near the front office. And certainly when the model arrived, it was quite exciting to see what we were going to be doing, to be able to visualise the building program.

And we could envision people walking in the front door and down the corridor and if we'd had little models of people, we could have moved them around and they'd all be much more obedient and life would be much simpler. But of course the model's not the end product.

[10 : 35] I mean the model's very helpful, needful for directing us and our attention towards the end product to show and explain to people what it was going to be like. But we weren't just on about building a model.

I mean that'd be ridiculous if we'd stopped at that stage, just had a model and said, well that's what we want, here it is, isn't this lovely? We wouldn't get in it. The model was pointing us to the real reality, the real building that we're now in effect sitting in.

That's what mattered. And that's the contrast that's being painted in these opening verses. We might think, as the Jews might have thought and the Levitical priests probably thought, that the temple in Jerusalem was the real thing.

Very grand, very ornate. You could see it for miles around. The building that dominated the ancient Jerusalem. That's it. That's the place where you meet God.

But no, says the writer to the Hebrews, the temple at Jerusalem is just a model. It's a model, a sketch, a shadow of the heavenly reality.

[11 : 45] And that's what verse 5 is saying to us. The Levitical priests offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one.

Now what this writer to the Hebrews consistently does is argue that Jesus is better than various people and institutions in the Old Testament. We saw that earlier in the year and last week and we'll see it again as this series continues at different points later in the year.

Jesus is better. Better than Melchizedek, better than Abram, better than the heroes of the Old Testament, better than the sacrifices of the Old Testament, better than the priests of the Old Testament.

It's a better hope and so on. But the writer to the Hebrews doesn't just say, well, here's your Old Testament, but now we've got Jesus, he's better. Every time he looks into the Old Testament itself to show that the Old Testament looked forward to something better.

That is, it's not just saying, here's the Old Testament, but we've got something better. It's that the Old Testament itself knew that something better, someone better was needed.

[12 : 54] So here in verse 5, the second half, he quotes from Exodus 25 in the instructions given to Moses to build the tabernacle or tent. For Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, see that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.

That's Mount Sinai where the laws were given. Now the point of that verse is to say to us that when Moses was given the instructions to build the tabernacle, and that was the basis for later building the temple in Jerusalem, he was shown something on which these instructions were based.

And the implication, the writer is saying, he's shown the reality, heavenly sanctuary. And that's the reality for which the tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem were just the sketch diagram, the shadow, the model, if you like, on earth of what is the true reality of heaven.

My nephew, who's I think 11, loves model cars. He's always loved model cars. He's got dozens and dozens of them, boxes it seems to me.

And almost every birthday and Christmas he gets some new form of model car from the old little matchbox ones to electronic remote ones and ones that do all sorts of different things and doors that open and boots that open and close, etc.

[14 : 18] He loves model cars. He loves playing with them. But the reason he loves model cars is because he has a passion for a real one. Now he's got to wait till he's 18 before he can drive a real car, although he's already tried to drive my brother-in-law's car and climb into it and switch the lights on and blow the horn and all those sorts of things.

He's got a passion for cars. He's the next Michael Schumacher, I'm sure. The model cars will probably always be part of his collection, but they are biding the time until he gets the real thing.

And so it was with the Jerusalem temple and the tabernacle instructions before it. It was grand, ornate, significant, important, but it was biding time for the real thing.

The real sanctuary in heaven and the real priest who would offer himself in that heavenly sanctuary. And that's the point of what's being said in these opening verses here.

The writer is writing to Jewish Christians who are in danger of reverting back to Judaism, who think that the Levitical priests and the temple in Jerusalem are all that matters.

[15 : 30] And he's saying it's just a sketch. It's just a model. The reality is Jesus, our great high priest, who has entered into a heavenly sanctuary and sat down at the right hand of God on high, his job accomplished.

That's where our priest is, in the real sanctuary, in heaven. That's what verse 1 is saying. The main point in what we're saying is this. We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and a true tent that the Lord and not any mortal has set up.

That's the reality. That's the better priest and the better sanctuary. And for all the importance and grandeur and splendour of the old temple in Jerusalem, it's just a sketch.

It's just a model. And indeed, probably a bit after this letter was written in 70 AD, in fact, that temple was destroyed by the Romans. The old temple of the Old Testament times is biding time until a real priest came and offered himself in the real sanctuary of heaven.

That's a great priest. Far better priesthood and far better sanctuary than the Old Testament priests and the old temple of Jerusalem.

[16 : 54] There's a further implication of this that the rest of the chapter teases out. If Jesus has such a better ministry, that it implies that he is then the mediator of a better covenant.

The Old Testament priests, in many respects, were the mediators of the old covenant or the Old Testament, as we call it. But Jesus having a better ministry, a more excellent ministry, verse 6 says, means that to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.

Now, the old covenant, embedded in what we call the Old Testament, is enacted by promises of God. It began, in effect, with promises God made to Abram very early on, 2000 BC, in the early part of the Old Testament.

God made promises to Abram that the descendants of Abram would be God's people, that they would be blessed by God, that they would be numerous, that they would receive a land, and that through them the world would receive blessing from God.

Great promises. And they are the significant promises that actually guide and overrule and direct the whole of the history and the story that we read throughout the Old Testament.

[18 : 12] The promises to Abraham set in train the events and the people of the Old Testament and Old Covenant. Great promises which God firmly keeps.

He is faithful to those promises in the Old Testament. But those promises carried with it some obligation. It forced, as stated in the laws given to the people through Moses, in the books of Exodus through to Deuteronomy.

But this covenant failed. It had fault within it. Not because of God or his faithlessness, there was none. Not because of the promises.

They are actually good promises. But the Old Covenant failed because the people failed to keep the obligations placed upon them. The promises were good, but the people of God were at fault.

As St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans, the law of God is good, but it's weakened by human sin. And that was the fault of the Old Covenant. Human sin rendered it ineffective in the end.

[19 : 18] So another covenant with other promises, better promises, verses 6 and 7 say, are needed. And so Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted through better promises.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. But God finds fault with them, with his people. And then what comes is what is the style of this writer to show in this case a better covenant, but not just saying, well, we've now got a better one throughout the old, but that the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, actually looked forward itself to a new covenant.

So again, he argues his point from the Old Testament itself to show that if we're to understand the Old Testament, it knows that it needs something more, a new covenant.

And so he quotes at length in verses 8 to 12, the prophet Jeremiah, the longest Old Testament quote that we find in the New Testament. Now, Jeremiah was a prophet about 600 BC, plus or minus 20 years or so, and much of his book of prophecy, the longest book of prophecy in the Old Testament, castigates Israel, the people of God, for its faithlessness, for continually turning against God and being faithless in their relationship with God.

That's the opening part of verse 8. God finds fault with them when he says, and then quotes Jeremiah, so that through Jeremiah the prophet, God is castigating and finding fault with the people of God.

[20 : 57] Now, Jeremiah lived at particular time in Israel's history. Already half the nation had been conquered a hundred years before by the Assyrian Empire, and Jeremiah lives in the immediate days before and during the final destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, first temple, by the Babylonians in the early 500s BC.

To all intents and purposes, in the time of Jeremiah, the Old Covenant in effect comes to an end. I mean, the promises of God do still stand, but the people are exiled from the land, their temple is destroyed, all because of their disobedience to the obligations placed upon them.

But in the midst of such gloomy days, full of the doom of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah looked forward. Days are coming, God said through Jeremiah, when God will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

That's verse 8. Bringing together all the people of God from both north and south, from Judah and from Israel together. And this covenant will not be like the old covenant.

There's quite an emphasis on that in verse 9. Notice how verse 9 begins with the word, not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.

[22 : 26] And the reason that this covenant will not be like the old is because, the end of verse 9 says, for because they, Israel, did not continue in my covenant and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.

That is, the new covenant will be different from the old because in the old covenant the people of God failed God. So a new covenant is needed.

Now whenever a new car model comes out, Toyota or whoever it is, will advertise the new features, the new aerodynamics or the new shape or the new speed that this car can go at, the new road handling or the new engine that it has, the new colours.

Well, you only ever need a red car, it seems to me. Red's the colour, why bother with any other colours? Well, whenever a new model of any product comes out, it's always the new features that get paraded in the advertisements on television and the newspapers and so on.

So here is a new covenant that Jeremiah is announcing. What are its new features? Or, to use the language of verse 6, what are the better promises which enact this new covenant?

[23 : 39] And there are three in particular. Firstly, it has new internal power. That is, look into its engine to see the powerful engine of the new covenant.

Because in the old covenant it was a powerless engine. The laws of God were written on the tablets of stone at Mount Sinai. They were there for people to read, to meditate, to teach to their children, to try and inculcate into their lives.

But there they sat in front of them. But in this new covenant, it has got an internal power. Because now the laws of God, he says, will be written not on tablets of stone, but they will be written on the hearts and in the minds of the people of God.

See what verse 10 says? This is the covenant that I'll make with the house of Israel. After those days, says the Lord, I will put my laws in their minds and I'll write them on their hearts.

That's an internal power that the old covenant did not have. A power of God to work inside his people, to change hearts. Because that's why the old covenant failed.

[24 : 53] The hearts of the people of God were hard, were stony, unresponsive to God's laws and promises, disobedient and unbelieving.

But in the new covenant, God deals with the hearts of his people and changes their hearts from within. What is the power for this?

It is the power of the great high priest who has ascended to heaven and sends his spirit to change our hearts. It's the power of the resurrection that conquers death and brings eternal life.

The power of an indestructible life as we saw last week in chapter 7 verse 16. It's the power to attain perfection as chapter 7 verse 11 said.

That is, the old covenant could never bring us to perfection. But only when the power of God works in the hearts of God's people can perfection be attained.

[25 : 56] Not here and now, we still are sinners. But it is the power of the new covenant that guarantees that one day we will stand pure, blameless, spotless and perfect in the sight of God in that heavenly sanctuary, one day.

All because of the power of the new covenant, the power of the resurrection of Jesus. So that's the first new feature and the second new feature is a relational power. The end of verse 10 and verse 11 say, I will be their God and they shall be my people.

They shall not teach one another or say to each other, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest. You see, God doesn't want a remote obedience to some unknown mystical being away up there.

Nor does he just want us to know about him, to feed our minds with information about what God is like. Though that's true, that we should. But primarily he wants us to know him personally, to be in a relationship with him.

It's not knowing as much as we can about God, but it's about knowing him in a relationship. And it's all the difference in the world between those things. You think of somebody that you might have heard about, that you'd never met.

[27 : 16] You might have known a lot about them, a pen pal, somebody famous, somebody you've known through work circles but who work in some other place and then finally you meet the person. Well, how much greater is it to know the person, to have a relationship with the person rather than just knowing about them?

So it is with God. Not to know just about them but to know God personally. And again, the power of this relationship which has been long anticipated through all of the old covenant is through the power of the resurrection.

Through the power of Jesus rising and ascending to the heavenly throne of God and sending back his spirit so we can call God our father and know him as an adopter adopted into God's family and so on.

Again, it's the power of Jesus' resurrection that enables this part of this promise of the new covenant to be fulfilled. And notice too that this is for every single Christian.

The end of verse 11 says, from the least of them to the greatest. This is not just for the super spiritual to know God personally but for every single Christian person from the least of them to the greatest to know God as their God and know that they are his people.

[28 : 34] And the third new feature is the power to forgive. Verse 12 says, For I will be merciful toward their iniquities and I'll remember their sins no more.

Oh yes, in the old covenant there was forgiveness and atonement through the sacrificial system of the offering of animals, bulls and goats and lambs and so on. And it provided some temporary, limited atonement and forgiveness.

But as we'll see in the next couple of weeks, it really wasn't powerful. The power to forgive comes from the offering of the great high priest when he offered himself.

It's the powerful blood of Jesus that brings the power for mercy and forgiveness that enables the relationship with God to continue.

They're the new features that the new covenant that the new covenant boasts about. An internal power when God's law is written on our hearts and minds. A relational power because we know God personally.

[29 : 37] And a power to forgive through the powerful blood of Jesus the great high priest. In 600 BC or thereabouts, Jeremiah prophesied that days are coming when this new covenant will come into being.

And if you read through the last bits of the Old Testament from 600 from Jeremiah onwards, those days don't come. But 600 years or so after Jeremiah's prophecy, the writer to the Hebrews is telling us those days have come with Jesus Christ, our great high priest.

He is the mediator of a new covenant enacted on better promises because they're promises that will change our heart, bring a relationship with God and bring real, lasting and permanent forgiveness and mercy.

So as a result, the old covenant is obsolete and ageing, verse 13 says. In speaking of a new covenant, God has made the first one obsolete and what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

And possibly soon after this letter was written, the temple of Jerusalem ended and the sacrificial system ended with it. But also perhaps referring to the fact that Jesus is soon to return when the power to make us perfect is finally fulfilled.

[31 : 01] This is a better covenant with a better high priest who ministers in a better sanctuary, the heavenly tent. If ever you are in Norfolk, it's worth having a look at Mote Farm in Pressing Field.

I think you'll marvel at the model of the Jerusalem temple. But of course, it's just a model. In fact, it's just a model of a model. Because if ever you could see the Jerusalem temple itself and marvel at it, it's just a model too.

Because the reality is heaven. The sanctuary of heaven where Jesus, our great high priest, has entered into a forerunner on our behalf and a guarantee that one day we will stand perfect, finally, in that heavenly place.

That is the temple that is worth everything to see. More important than Mote Farm in Pressing Field, more important than Jerusalem. And so the writer to the Hebrews is wanting to urge us to persevere in the Christian life, to run the race that is set before us with perseverance so that we may finally attain that heavenly sanctuary where Jesus, our great high priest, now is, exalted and seated at the right hand of the majesty on high.

There he's gone, a forerunner on our behalf, and there we are to aim for and run that race set before us looking to him.

[32 : 31] Amen.