

Worship and the Covenant of Grace

We're in the middle of a short sermon series on Worship. The first sermon I preached from the burning bush passage with Moses in Exodus 3. We talked about the holiness of God and how that affects our worship. Then we had Pastor Kevin Kirby come and fill the pulpit and he spoke on worship from a heavenly perspective, thinking about a passage from the book of Revelation that described the worship in heaven. Last week we looked at Exodus chapter 32, the passage about the Israelites making a golden calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai, and we used that passage to talk about Worship and the Law of God; how God's Word instructs us on how to and how not to worship God.

Well for today we are going to think about worship in terms of the covenant. As Christians we are in a covenant relationship with God. In the Old Testament the people were in a covenant relationship with God, and that had an effect on their worship. And in the New Testament, believers continue to be in a covenant relationship with God. This covenant relationship affects our worship. Of course, in case you don't know what a covenant is, it's sort of like a contract. In the Bible we see God making covenants with people. In the Biblical sense, God reaches down and relates to mankind through different covenants. And the covenant defines the terms of that relationship. How we as Christians relate to God is dictated by the terms of the covenant that we are in. And that, consequently, has significant implications for how we worship God. Frankly, the covenant in so many ways defines our worship and provides the context for our worship.

Well in one sense, this passage from Hebrews is not primarily about worship. It's actually primarily about covenant. It's comparing the old covenant with the new covenant. It's describing how God's covenant of grace that was administered in the Old Testament compares to how he's administering it the New Testament. Specifically the author's saying that the new covenant is far better than the old covenant. The old covenant was a shadow of the better things to come in the new covenant. With the coming of Christ, the new covenant has been established. That did away with the old covenant, because basically the new covenant fulfilled the old covenant. This is what this passage is really getting at: showing the supremacy of the new covenant over the old. And yet it's in the context of this new better covenant that the author then applies this to how we worship God. And so this is a very fitting passage for us to think about how God's covenant of grace relates to our worship. And so this morning we'll look first at what this passage has to say in comparing the old covenant with the new. Then we'll look at how it relates that to our worship.

So let's start by seeing how this passage compares the old covenant with the new. We know we are talking about the old covenant versus the new covenant in a few ways. First look at verse 1. It mentions the law. This is referring to all the laws given through Moses. God established a covenant with the people of Israel through Moses, and gave the people a number of laws, and we call that the Mosaic Covenant. That's the old covenant that we are talking about, the Mosaic covenant made at Mount Sinai. And so in this chapter, when it talks about *the* law, it's basically shorthand to refer to that old covenant. And so when you read about *the* law in this chapter, think of the Mosaic covenant. But verse 1 says that the law was but a shadow of "good things to come." The law was not the same as these "good things to come." These "good things to come" ultimately come through Jesus in the *new* covenant.

That's what's referred to in verse 16. Verse 16 quotes the Old Testament that prophesied of a new covenant that God would one day make. Verse 16 is the only verse in our passage that actually uses the word covenant. And yet clearly that's what's being talked about throughout this passage. The old covenant, basically referred to in this passage as "the law," is being compared with this new covenant referenced in verse 16. And the new covenant is described throughout this chapter when it talks about the work of Christ.

And so the point that author is making is that with the coming of Christ, a better covenant has arrived. That's why in verse 9 it says that the first is done away with, so that the second may be established. Look at the end of verse 9. This is talking about the two covenants. The first covenant is, literally in the Greek here, "abolished." The second covenant, is "established." This is a technical word in the Greek for establishing a covenant. And so the author's making the case that the new covenant does away with the old. And he makes the point by showing how much better the new covenant is. He shows that the new covenant has a better sacrifice. He shows that the new covenant has a better priesthood. And he shows that the new covenant has better benefits.

Look first at how this passage shows that the new covenant has a better sacrifice. The author makes this point first by showing the insufficiency of the old covenant. The sacrificial system in the old covenant was, frankly, ineffective. Verse 1 refers to the priests offering up the same sacrifice year by year. This refers to the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur, the Jews still celebrate it today. You can read about it in Leviticus 16. It's like an annual day of repentance that God had commanded the Jews to do. And the High Priest would annually take a sacrifice on behalf of the whole people into the Most Holy Place in the temple. This was called the Holy of Holies. It was the most holy place in the temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was separated with a curtain or veil. This was to keep people out. No one was allowed to just enter this most holy place. Only but once a year the High Priest would enter in with the blood of a bull and a goat to sprinkle as a sacrifice for sin.

But what does the author of Hebrews say about this annual sacrifice? It was ineffective. Look at verses 2-4. If the sacrifice was effective, then it wouldn't have to be offered up again every year. The fact that they had to be offered up again each year, just served to remind the people of their sins. It just wasn't possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. In other words, an animal is not a suitable substitute for man. Humans are guilty for their sins. No number of bulls and goats could satisfy their debt. In verse 11, the author makes the same point, this time referring to the sacrifices and offerings being made *daily* at the temple. There were all sorts of sacrifices and offerings that the priests made with the people. You can read about them in the opening chapters of Leviticus, for example. And so both yearly and daily there was sacrifices going on. Lots and lots of sacrifices. But they were all ineffective. The very fact that they kept getting offered up, showed that they were ineffective.

But that was not the case with Jesus. Jesus was the one time sacrifice. Once for all, according to verse 10. The continuous sacrifices of the old covenant are compared against the one time, once for all, sacrifice of Christ in the new covenant. Verse 8 offers an interesting insight here. It refers to Psalm 40 that says that God didn't ultimately desire all these sacrifices and offerings. What God really desired was obedience. And yet verse 8 points out that all these things were done according to the law. In other words, this extensive sacrificial system was part of the old covenant. It was inherent to it. So the people did them.

But the sacrifices in the old covenant showed the problem. They were not the solution. All these sacrifices in the old covenant were not part of the solution, just a recognition of the problem. The problem was sin. It gave a clue about how the problem might be solved. It gave hope that there might be a way to solve the problem of sin through a sacrifice. But the bulls and goats weren't it. They needed something that actually could bring true remission. A sacrifice that atoned for their sin; that satisfied the demand of justice; that paid the penalty. They needed a better sacrifice.

And that sacrifice was Jesus. And the author shows how Jesus brought together both obedience and sacrifice. This quote from Psalm 40 showed God desired obedience over sacrifice. Well, Jesus fulfills both. Jesus obeyed all God's laws. He himself is the only sinless human. And in obedience he did what God had planned for his life. God had planned that his body become the once for all sacrifice. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The sacrifice to definitively deal with sin. And so Jesus obeyed. He obeyed all the way to the cross. And as the sinless, perfect, God-man, Jesus Christ, his death was more than sufficient to atone for the sins of all God's people. Not just the sins of that day, or the last year, or even up to that point in history. But to atone for all the sins of God's people, past, present, and future. The sins we committed yesterday, and the sins we'll commit tomorrow. That's why we don't offer up any more sacrifices for sin anymore in the new covenant. The new covenant has only one sacrifice for sin. And it is effective.

The author also shows how the new covenant has a better priesthood. Verse 11 mentions the priests' daily work, but then compares that with Jesus. It says that Jesus, after offering himself as the sacrifice, then ascended up into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. This has in view the ability for Christ to intercede for us. That's what the high priest did in the old covenant on the Day of Atonement. Entering the Holy of Holies once a year was essentially coming before God's presence once a year with a sacrifice to intercede on behalf of the people. So think about the contrast. Jesus is seated, permanently, at the right hand of God. That's not only in God's presence, where he can and does intercede for us. But that's in a position of authority - he's at the right hand of God. Jesus is reigning right now as his enemies are being conquered. And notice Jesus doesn't bring in new sacrifices as the high priest who comes before God. No, again, that's been taken care of already. And so we have a better high priest now in the new covenant, better than anything the old covenant had to offer.

And look at the better benefits of the new covenant. Verse 18. We have remission of sins. Since the sacrifice was effective, we have complete remission. Atonement has been made. Justice has been satisfied. And then notice the word sanctification. It's mentioned a few times in this passage about the benefits of the new covenant. Verse 14 is one example of that. Look there. Christ's offering is at work in such a way that in one sense it says that we've already been perfected, and in another sense it says that we were still being sanctified. We're still being made holy and righteous. We're being made people who are obedience. That's what verse 16 goes on to say. That in the new covenant God would write his laws on our hearts and on our minds. That's what sanctification is about. It's about making us people who not only try to be obedient, but are by nature obedience. That we love obedience. That we love following God's laws. Of course, this process is only started now in this life; it's brought to completion when we get to heaven. And so these are all part of the benefits of the new covenant. Real justification and atonement. Real sanctification going on. We look forward to our final glorification when we will be perfected in our obedience. All these are benefits of the new covenant. They are all because Christ secured them for us on the cross, and now gives us these benefits through the covenant.

Of course, it's not that these things were not available in some sense in the old covenant. It's not that there was no salvation until the coming of Christ. No, we look forward to seeing the saints of old in heaven one day too; people like Moses and King David, and the prophets of old. There's certainly a difference between the old covenant and the new covenant, but there is also a fundamental unity. What they possessed in the old covenant anticipated the new covenant. It looked forward to it. That's why verse 1 said the law was a "shadow" of the good things to come. When people like David in Psalm 40 saw beyond the sacrificial system to a Christ who would come, they saw the good things to come. If you lived under the old covenant, you tasted of the benefits of the new covenant *in shadows*. You got a taste of them, and by faith, you believed that the substance of them would one day come. That the Christ would one day come and bring the salvation that they looked forward to. Those in the old covenant who had this faith, were saved, and ultimately share in the same benefits that we do. There's only one overarching covenant of grace, experienced in shadows in the old covenant and in substance in the new covenant. Only one way of salvation in both the new and old testaments.

And yet we can't deny the better times we live in. The shadows of the old covenant have been replaced with the substance in the new covenant. With the very image of the good things to come, as it says in verse 1. The promised Christ has come. He has brought the final sacrifice that all the old sacrifices looked forward to. The promised Christ has come, the final high priest, that all the old covenant priests looked forward to. He has come. And now by faith in him, we are brought into the new covenant. By believing in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are made members of the new covenant. Of course our baptisms formally bring us into the new covenant, the covenant ceremony given by God to publically initiate us into this covenant. And so I call us all again today. If you have not yet turned in faith to Christ, do so today. Belong to God's covenant of grace. Come into that covenant by faith in Jesus. Repent and be baptized. Turn to Christ, so that your sins may be washed away, and begin a life of growing in your obedience to God, by the power of Christ.

And so what I've discussed so far is really the primary point of this passage. But as I've already mentioned, this text also connects the idea of the covenant with our worship. Just look at verse 2. The text calls the people under the old covenant "worshippers" as they were offering the sacrifices. The text describes the people as worshippers as they are going about their covenantal duties. And so what I want us to see is that our worship is covenantal. The worship of God's people was covenantal under the old covenant. And it continues to be a covenantal worship under the new covenant. I'll explain more about what that means in a few moments. But first let me make sure I make my case that worship is covenantal.

I pointed to verse 2, that the old covenant people were worshippers as they go about their covenantal duties. But does this passage really talk about worship at all with regards to new covenant believers? Well, I believe it does, especially starting at verse 19. Verses 19-25 really turn from teaching about the covenant to applying that teaching to our lives and our actions. And verses 19-25 really get into our worship. But notice the connecting words in verse 19. "Therefore brethren, having..." Therefore brethren. The word "therefore" is making a connection. The application about worship starting in verse 19 is connected with the previous verses that compared the old covenant with the new. Because we are members of the new covenant, we too are called to worship. If the members of the old covenant were covenantal worshippers, then we too are to be covenantal worshippers under the new covenant. And even more so, because of how much better the new covenant is!

Just look at how the argument is developed. Verses 19 and 20 describe our new covenant worship, and frankly, it's amazing. We, Christians, it says, worship by entering *boldly* in the Holiest. What's this word the "Holiest" referring to here? Well, this is short hand for the Holy of Holies. You know, that place in the temple protected by the curtain, lest someone unworthily would enter and be judged by God! But our worship is now one where we come *boldly* into the Holy of Holies. Now, this is *not* talking about an earthly temple. The author of Hebrews already made the point that Jesus entered into the true Holy of Holies, the heavenly temple, into God's very presence. The author said that the temple in Jerusalem was just a representation of what was really in heaven. Jesus entered in the real temple, the heavenly one where God dwells. That's where he entered, and that's where he still is, seated at the right hand of God. The author told us that in the last chapter, 9:23. So when it talks about us *boldly* entering the Holy of Holies, it's talking about entering the heavenly sanctuary. *Boldly*. *Boldly*, because we belong to the new covenant. We are not in our sins anymore, because of Christ. If we were still sinners and enemies of God, we'd not want to come *boldly* before God. But since we are beneficiaries of a new covenant, we can confidently come before God. Because we've already been reconciled with God. Our enmity with God has been resolved. We're his friends. His servants. His adopted children. You see verse 20 refers to that old veil. Well, it's been done away with. The curtain that separated sinful man in the old covenant, no longer exists in the new covenant for Christians. It was physically torn at Jesus' death in the earthly temple in Jerusalem. But that just represented the new heavenly reality for those who belong to the new covenant. And so the new covenant affects how we worship, and it is different than how they worshipped in the old covenant in this regard.

And so the command then comes in verse 25 to not neglect assembling together. This again is talking about worship. Worship is the people of God assembling together. The word in the Greek is related to the word for synagogue. And the word synagogue basically means to come together. That's what the Jews who were scattered all over the nations did when they met in the synagogues. They came together. They assembled to worship. And that's what we do as a church. We weekly assemble together to worship. And it's covenantal worship. New covenant worship. And the command here is to not neglect this coming together.

I hope you are beginning to appreciate what's being described here. The author is giving us a well developed theology of worship. What I mean is that he's giving us a well digested picture of how our Christian faith relates to how we worship. And he's doing this specifically with regards to covenant, specifically the new covenant. The new covenant demands that we worship, and it affects how we worship. The very fact that he's writing in this way suggests that this was something the people he was writing to didn't appreciate well enough. That the work of Christ in establishing the new covenant has huge implications for how we worship and fellowship together.

This is something very important. Something to take serious. Our worship is covenantal. That's the context of our worship. That's the basis and the foundation for our worship. It's even the content for our worship, and it tells us how to worship. We belong to the covenant of grace, and so that is why we assemble together to worship. We'd have no reason to come together if there was no covenant that we belonged to. And now, it'd be *wrong*, a sin, not to come together, because we belong to the covenant.

And so let's flush out the significance of this. Let's apply this truth. What's the significance of our worship being covenantal? How do we see that practically worked out in our church's worship service?

Well, first, it's the covenant that identifies us and unites us. Verse 14 gives us our identification. We are now those who are being sanctified; as members in the covenant, of course. And it's this covenant identity that unites us together. That's why verse 24 tells us to consider how to stir *one another* up to love and good deeds. That's why we must worship *together*. That's why verse 25 commands us not to neglect meeting together. Our common covenant that we belong too means that we now have a common heritage. And so we come together as one people with a common history, a common story, a common testimony. Even while at the same time we are a very diverse group of people. What unites us is our covenant identity and heritage. This defines why we come together to worship. That will influence and set the context for everything we do here together. And so it means, as we're commanded, that we need to be here. We need to make a concerted effort to come to the worship service each week. We need to see the importance of coming together as a worshipping covenant people.

Second, the fact that our worship is covenantal means that we come together to celebrate the covenant. Our worship is a celebration of the covenant that we are a part of. Verse 23 tells us to hold fast the confession of our hope. That's a command. We're commanded to persevere in our confession. Well, it's the new covenant that defines that hope. And so the covenant gives us the content of our worship. To celebrate the covenant is to tell us again and again about the covenant that we belong to.

And so each worship service is essentially a renewal of the covenant that we belong to. Each week, we seek to experience afresh the drama of the greatest story in human history. That story is the story of the covenant of grace that God has made with us. And so our whole liturgy in our service tries to communicate that. And so we do things like have a confession of faith, and a prayer confessing our sins, and a formal assurance of God's pardon. These things are a reminder and celebration of what the new covenant is all about. Now certainly we try to communicate this in the sermon as well, as we teach about the covenant. But the whole liturgy of the service is trying to remind us of our heritage. The whole service displays the beautiful reality of the covenant God has made with us. That we can come in a spiritual sense to draw near to God when we come together in worship, because we are his covenantal people.

The sacraments of course are a covenantal part of our worship as well. Just like in the old covenant; verse 2 called them worshippers as they were faithful to follow the ordinances of all the sacrifices. We too are worshipping covenantally, when we regularly administer the sacraments. The sacraments are the ordinances of the covenant. Baptism is a covenant initiation ceremony; a ceremony to bring people into the covenant. The Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal ceremony; a ceremony for those in the covenant to celebrate with a feast the work of Christ in establishing the covenant.

Lastly, the fact that our worship is covenantal has a forward looking aspect. Look at verse 25 again. It says that we especially don't neglect meeting together because the Day is fast approaching. Which day is this? This is the Day of the Lord. It's the day that Christ will return to earth. That's the same day when Christ will judge the earth, but for Christians this will be a good day. We'll be acquitted, because our sin has already been dealt with. And more so, that's then the time when our sanctification will be made complete and we'll be given our new glorified bodies. These are all benefits of the new covenant. In other words, when we worship, we're still looking forward to receiving the final benefits of the new covenant. And so during our worship service, the covenantal aspect means that we look forward as well. We look forward to that day when we receive the final benefits of being a part of the covenant. As much as we celebrate in our worship

what God has already done for us in the covenant of grace, we also celebrate what he will do for us through the covenant of grace.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you see that for our worship to be covenantal is to capture the drama of the covenant in our worship. That we belong to the new covenant is amazing. It's an amazing story, and it the story of our very lives. And so when we come together, we're trying to be caught up into that story each time we worship. And so let's keep faithfully meeting together. Let's be excited when we come to worship. Let's keep celebrating the covenant that God has brought us each into, each and every Lord's Day, all the way until the final Day of the Lord. Amen.

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