
THE BETTER PRIEST AND BETTER COVENANT

Michael Woody | Hebrews 9:9–12

WHY THIS MESSAGE?

1. After my last sermon on Hebrews 9:1-10 I had some discussions with several and the questions were if the position I took was saying there were two classes of Christians or two ways people are saved.
 - a. Know that this would be the position of some Dispensationalists: some would say Old Testament saints were saved by the Law and Sacrifices and others would say there were saved by faith but they are a different class of God's people.
 - b. I am not saying that I believe what many Dispensationalists believe but I believe that the Old Covenant is portrayed by Paul in both Galatians and Hebrews as an inferior covenant. Words like so much better, and that it was weak, do not say that it was the same but different.
 - c. I hold that God's grace was evident and the basis of all His actions both in the Old Covenant and the New, but I do not believe that the Old Covenant, even the covenant through Abraham is the New Covenant. What I do believe is that the Old Covenant provided the promise and basis of the of the New Covenant and that all of those saved in the Old Covenant enjoyed the obscured blessings of the covenant to come.
2. In my last message I stated that the Old Covenant did not purify the conscience in Hebrews 9:9
 - a. David Allen in his commentary on Hebrews notes, the periodic paragraph Heb 9:6–10 serves as a "microcosm foreshadowing the argument that follows in chs. 9 and 10."

- i. He speaks of the change from many priests in the old covenant to one high priest in the new covenant; from many sacrifices to one sacrifice by Christ; and from external cleansing of the flesh to internal cleansing of the conscience.
 - ii. The Old Testament sacrificial system actually erected a barrier between the people and God (9:8), and mandated gifts and sacrifices on the part of the worshipper, which although commanded by God, were incapable of inward cleansing from sin. All of this was, of course, by God's design in preparation for the new covenant.
 - b. Spurgeon notes, All these sacrifices and ceremonies, although full of instruction, were not in themselves able to give peace to the conscience of men. The new and better covenant does give rest to the heart by the real and actual taking away of guilt, but this the first covenant could not do.
3. This distinction between Old and New Covenant - and what that Old Covenant refers to - is actually a very important distinction. To be bold in my words - it is a primary distinction that causes a person to be a Presbyterian versus a Baptist.
 4. Pascal Denault has a wonderful book titled The Distinctives of Baptist Covenant Theology and in this book he shows the perils of the Presbyterian model. The first question to ask is what does the Old Covenant really mean in Scripture?
 - a. Is it the entire Old Testament?
 - b. Is it the covenant with Israel with Moses as the Mediator?
 - c. The answers are not Yes and No - versus a dualism that must be seen where the two existed at the same time

SO WHAT DO WE KNOW OF THE OLD COVENANT?

1. The end of the Old Covenant is easy - just read Hebrews 7:11-19, it concluded with Christ but when did it begin?
2. A critical question you must ask is what did the Old Covenant include? Was it just the covenant with Israel via Moses or was it more?

- a. Your view here is not if there was grace in the Old Covenant - all Covenant Theologians hold to this, but the real question is the extent that the New Covenant was realized in substance versus promise.
 - b. There are reformed theologians who wish to divide the Mosaic covenant from the other covenants; however, I believe Scripture is clear that the Old Covenant included more than the Mosaic Covenant per John 7: 22– 23; Gal. 5: 3.
 - c. You cannot Scripturally separate the Abrahamic Covenant from the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant.
 - d. The first covenant covered the entire period from the fall to the establishment of the new covenant but the blessings of the New Covenant were operative even in the Old Covenant
3. Another question you must answer is if you see the Sinaitic covenant as a conditional covenant versus unconditional.
- a. Presbyterian Views
 - i. Many Presbyterians saw the Sinaitic covenant as a unconditional covenant - though there are numerous passages that clearly make it conditional.
 - ii. Other Presbyterians, along with Particular Baptists, saw the Sinaitic covenant as a conditional covenant.
 - iii. So why do most Presbyterians make this covenant unconditional? This really speaks to the practice of infant baptism; to say this was conditional to Israel they either denied the conditional aspect of the Mosaic covenant in order to associate it with the covenant of grace, or they placed the Mosaic covenant aside and isolating it from the covenant of grace (the other covenants were covenants of grace).
 - b. Particular Baptist View
 - i. Do Particular Baptists reject grace in the Old Covenant? Absolutely not, but you say that Hebrews and Galatians make strong distinctions between the Old and New Covenants that cannot be ignored or bypassed.

- ii. I do not deny grace from God in the Old Covenant, and I reject the Dispensational view, but I also reject the Presbyterian views, the Old Covenant had a conditional element that the New Covenant does not - we will look at this in a moment.
- iii. **Historically, Baptists considered the Sinaitic covenant as a covenant of works that existed in parallel and simultaneously with the covenant of grace without compromising it.**
- c. For Presbyterians it was necessary to find a way to affirm the unity of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament without compromising the unconditional nature of this New Covenant.
- d. The two ways Presbyterians affirmed the unity of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament without compromising the unconditional nature of this covenant:
 - i. Deny that the Mosaic Covenant was Conditional: to support this they take Leviticus 18:5 and state that people either lived by works or by faith, those who lived by faith kept the covenant. This is the view held by men like John Owen (whom I greatly admire and love); to sum this up the obedience we read of is not the condition of the covenant but as the fruit. Owen states,

I do not say the covenant of grace is absolutely without conditions, if by conditions we intend the duties of obedience which God requires of us in and by virtue of that covenant; but this I say, the principal promises of it are not in the first place remunerative of our obedience in the covenant, but efficaciously assumptive of us into covenant, and establishing or confirming in the covenant.

1. The best way to see the fallacy of this argument is the comparison of Exodus 19:5-6 to 1 Peter 2:9.
2. What was present in Exodus 19:5 that was not present in 1 Peter 2:9? The conditional statement **if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant.** In the New Covenant there is no conditional element to the same promise.

- ii. The other view is that the Mosaic Covenant was Distinct from the Covenant of Grace Concluded with Abraham - Particular Baptists would hold to this view but differently than Presbyterians.
 1. Denault states, In order to be able to maintain the paedobaptist model of the covenant of grace while recognizing that the Mosaic covenant was a conditional covenant, certain paedobaptists radically separated the Abrahamic covenant from the Sinaitic covenant.
 2. Denault refers to one Presbyterian theologian and states, By separating the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants (at least implicitly), Petto recognized without difficulty that the New Testament presented an old covenant that did not justify, but condemned, that was temporary and replaced by the new covenant. To this effect, Petto's understanding was identical to that of the Baptists - there is an ongoing dualism in the Old Covenant period.
 3. Petto, however, completely isolated the Abrahamic covenant as a covenant of grace. According to him, the covenant concluded with Abraham offered the grace of salvation and, evidently, included the natural posterity of its members. In this view the covenant with Abraham was the same as the New Covenant and he appeals to Galatians 3:18 in support of his view.
 4. If the view of Petto is accepted then why does Paul say in Galatians 5:3 that the covenant with Abraham is linked to the covenant with Moses?
 5. You cannot separate the giving of circumcision to Abraham from the reinforcement of that in the covenant on Sinai.
- e. My view is that the covenant on Sinai was is shown in Scripture as both a conditional covenant and, therefore, covenant of works; however, that covenant existed in parallel and simultaneously with the covenant of grace without compromising it.
- f. Does this mean that the New Covenant was then realized in fullness in the Old Testament? For that we must do an analysis of Galatians 3-4 as we have already studied what Hebrews has said on this topic.

ANALYSIS OF GALATIANS 3-4

1. How we understand Galatians 3:16-17

- a. My view, and the historical view of Particular Baptists, is that Galatians 3:16-17 teaches us the covenant with Abraham had two peoples, one physical and one spiritual, not that they were one mixed group.
- b. The Presbyterians see this as one posterity of mixed (saved and unsaved) who both do the same covenant sign (circumcision/baptism).
- c. Baptists support their distinction from Galatians 4:22-31, which we will look at soon, but I believe that Scripture distinguishes between these two posterities, one could not mix both up under the same covenant without compromising important doctrines affirmed in Rom. 9: 6– 8; 2: 28– 29; 11; John 8: 39; Mat. 3: 9; Gal. 3: 29; 4: 22– 31; 1 Thess. 2: 15– 16.
- d. Some might argue from Galatians 3: 17-18 that Paul attributes grace to the Abrahamic Covenant while showing that the Mosaic Covenant did not offer this grace.
 - i. Paul clearly affirms that it is through the Abrahamic covenant that God promised his grace and that the Mosaic covenant which came about 430 years later did not bring the inheritance nor did it replace the Abrahamic covenant.
 - ii. In the text (Gal. 3: 17– 18) Paul does not affirm that God gave his grace to Abraham through the covenant, but through the promise; the Abrahamic covenant contained a promise--this promise was the revelation of the covenant of grace.
 - iii. This is the primary distinction between the Particular Baptist and the Presbyterian views: if the promise of grace equals the New Covenant
 - iv. It is obvious to both that not all the members of the Abrahamic covenant benefitted from the grace of God, but Baptists hold that this benefit did not occur because the covenant of grace was not concluded with the members of this covenant.

2. How we understand Galatians 4: 22– 31 where Paul clearly teaches us that the two covenants that came from Abraham (Hagar and Sara) were the old and new covenants.
 - a. What do I believe from this passage?
 - i. The covenant of circumcision, Hagar, corresponded to the old covenant: a covenant of works established with the physical posterity of Abraham.
 - ii. The covenant of the promise, Sara, corresponded to the new covenant: the covenant of grace revealed to Abraham and concluded with Christ and the spiritual posterity of Abraham (Gal. 3: 29).
 - b. The fundamental divergence between the Presbyterians and the Baptists regarding the Abrahamic covenant was found here.
 - i. The Presbyterian model does not view Ishmael and Isaac, Hagar and Sara, the circumcision and the promise, the old and the new covenant as distinct.
 - ii. They united these dualities within the same covenant of grace that possessed at the same time a physical and spiritual reality, an internal substance and an external administration, and earthly and heavenly blessings.
 - c. We must interpret Galatians 4 in such a way as to recognize that two covenants came from one patriarch.

Denault says, Understanding the workings of the dualism of the Abrahamic covenant is essential for every theological system.

- i. We believe Presbyterian federalism and dispensationalism have failed in this task by confusing the promises of the covenant of grace with the covenant of circumcision (Denault).
- ii. The Presbyterians thereby made the covenant of grace mixed and the dispensationalists assigned a distinct and permanent status as people of God to the physical descendants of Abraham (Denault).
- iii. In both cases, the spiritual and permanent blessings were amalgamated with the earthly and temporary covenant of circumcision (Denault).

- d. The Baptist view has been to understand that the two posterities of Abraham, along with their respective inheritances, although distinct, were intertwined throughout the old covenant.
- e. This brings us to the Mosaic Covenant/Sinaitic Covenant
 - i. This brings us to the duality realized in the Old Covenant of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace existing simultaneously
 - 1. The Sinaitic covenant was specifically concluded with the physical posterity of Abraham for the accomplishment of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant.
 - 2. The natural posterity of Abraham was to inherit the Promised Land and the Sinaitic covenant was made to this end.
 - 3. Denault notes, God promised Abraham that the accomplishment of his promise, by which all nations would be blessed, would fulfill itself by his posterity, that is, Christ (Gal. 3: 16). Consequently, the Abrahamic lineage until the Messiah had to be preserved by a covenant with the natural posterity of Abraham (Rom. 9: 4– 5).
 - 4. Since Abraham's physical posterity existed by virtue of the covenant of circumcision (the old covenant), when the goal of the covenant was accomplished (leading to Christ through the preservation of Abraham's physical posterity), the covenant made with Abraham's natural descendants came to an end (Denault).
 - ii. It must be stated that this covenant at Sinai was not futile (a charge made against the Baptist view) since it consisted in leading to Christ - this is the point of the passages in Hebrews.
 - 1. Per Denault, and others, this end was accomplished in at least three ways:
 - a. by preserving both the messianic lineage and the covenant of grace;
 - b. by pointing typologically towards Christ;

- c. by imprisoning everything under sin in order that the only means to obtain the promised inheritance was through faith in Christ.
2. The covenant of grace was revealed and promised to Abraham as well as to his descendants during the whole duration of the old covenant, but it was not concluded before the establishment of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, my term realized refers to this conclusion and revelation in fulness.
3. This distinction is a primary difference with men like John Owen - revealed and promise versus concluded.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

1. Being God's people under the new covenant is guaranteed by the forgiveness of sins obtained by the Mediator of this covenant; this is why Christ is presented as the one who is its guarantor (Heb. 7: 22) versus being the people of God under the old covenant was conditional on the obedience of the people (Exodus 19:5).
2. The New Covenant gave what it demanded; this is why Hebrews presents the law as being weak and lacking since it could not operate in sinners what it required from them (Heb. 8: 7; Rom. 8: 3). It is also precisely on this point that the new covenant is radically distinct from the old since it gives what God orders.
3. Everything in the Old Covenant pointed and culminated in the New Covenant; we should not be concerned with new signs and better promises. We have the better covenant with better promises.
4. This brings us to Christ realized in Hebrews 12:1-2 - after finishing speaking of the Old Testament saints Paul pens these words:
5. We have a better covenant founded on better, unconditional promises, and it is both distinct from the Old Covenant and it is superior.