

DISCOVERY

BIBLE STUDY COURSE

Lesson Five: The New Covenant

The book of Hebrews is devoted to proving to Jewish Christians

that Jesus and His New Covenant are better than the Old

Covenant. In chapter eight, the writer quotes from Jeremiah, a

Jewish prophet of the Old Testament.

But now He [Jesus] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this

LOOKING BACK...

The Bible tells the story of God's love for us and His desire to save us from our sin...

There is objective evidence proving that the Bible is the Word of God...

God's Word is authoritative, providing needed spiritual direction for those who desire to serve God...

The purpose of the Old Covenant was to prepare a people for the Messiah...

The Old Covenant was fulfilled by Jesus' death...



is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Hebrews 8:6-12).

In the previous study, we noticed that the Old Covenant was temporary and destined to be replaced. This was God's plan from the beginning (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God intended for the Old Covenant to prepare the Israelites for the coming Messiah and a new, better covenant (Galatians 3). Once the Old Covenant had served its purpose, it was fulfilled and taken out of the way.

When did this happen and what brought the Old Covenant to a close? The Scriptures plainly tell us the Old Covenant passed away when Jesus died on the cross.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (Galatians 3:23-25, NIV).

...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

Did God arbitrarily decide to "break" the Old Covenant and offer a new agreement (covenant) with mankind? Absolutely not. A covenant ceases to exist only when its promises have been fulfilled. For example, a covenant made with the bank (e.g., a car loan) ceases when all the promises contained in the agreement are fulfilled, usually

when the borrower makes the last payment. Jesus' death fulfilled the last of the promises God had made to Abraham and Israel contained in the covenants. In these covenants, God had promised to send a Messiah who would bring a blessing to the world. This blessing, the forgiveness of sins, was bestowed when Jesus died on the cross. Since all the other promises had already been fulfilled, the Old Covenant ceased exist when Jesus died on the cross. Note Jesus' words:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-18).

As a sign that the Old Covenant had been fulfilled, the veil of the temple was torn in half at the very moment Jesus died for the sins of the world (Matthew 27:51). No longer would mankind be separated from the Creator because of sin. The Savior of the world had died, bringing an end to that old system that could not redeem humanity.

➤ **The New Covenant: Its Beginning**

When the Old Covenant was fulfilled, the New Covenant came into effect. Just as the Old Covenant was confirmed with the sprinkling of blood (Exodus 24:7-8), so the New Covenant was confirmed with the shedding of blood—Jesus' blood.

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the

covenant, which God has commanded you to keep” (Hebrews 9:16–20, NIV; compare Exodus 24:7–8).

Both the Old and New Covenants were made effective by the shedding of blood. In Hebrews 10:9, the writer goes on to say that in sacrificing His body, Jesus set aside the first covenant and established the second.

In Hebrews 9:16–17, the writer introduces an interesting metaphor. He describes the New Covenant as God’s “testament” or “will.” A will is a type of covenant (promise) that is fulfilled after one’s death. In Greek, the words for “covenant” and “testament” (“will”) are the same. The author reasons that a will takes effect only after the testator (the one making the will) has died. Before that time, the will is only as valuable as the paper on which it is written. Likewise, God’s new will (covenant) came into effect at the death of Jesus, not before. Therefore, the promises and blessings of the New Covenant were of no force until after Jesus’ death.

➤ **The New Covenant: Its Scope**

The Old Covenant was given to the Israelites after their departure from Egypt. It was a national covenant, not extended to those who were not Israelites (Exodus 24:1–8; Deuteronomy 7:1–6). Gentiles who desired to place themselves under the Old Covenant could do so through a process called “proselytizing” (see note in lesson four), but the Israelite religion was not designed to be spread among other nations.

In contrast, the New Covenant is open to anyone who desires to be a part of it, whether “Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female” (Galatians 3:28). No one is excluded on the arbitrary basis of race, background, social standing, or financial status. If one desires to participate in the New Covenant, he may do so by meeting the conditions established in that covenant. Further, the New Covenant is designed to be proclaimed to every nation of the earth (Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16), giving everyone an opportunity to decide whether or not they would like to be a part of God’s New Covenant.

➤ **The New Covenant: Terms of Entrance**

Under the Old Covenant, all those who were born into an Israelite family were naturally a part of the covenant; those who did not have this good fortune were not a part of the covenant. Choice did not play a role in whether or not one was a part of the Old Covenant. Those who were born to an Israelite family had to be taught that they were different—they were God’s people and had responsibilities to their Creator that included keeping the laws of the covenant. As the writer of Hebrews points out, those under the Old Covenant had to be “taught to know the Lord” (Hebrews 8:11).

By contrast, the New Covenant, open to all, is based on an individual’s choosing to be a part of God’s covenant. It matters not whether one is born a Jew or Gentile, male or female: if a person does not want to be a part of God’s covenant, then he will not, indeed cannot, be a part of that covenant. Those who enter God’s New Covenant do so because they have chosen to accept the terms of the covenant. This means those who would participate must be mature enough and intelligent enough to understand the responsibilities and the blessings described in the covenant before they can accept it. This is what the Hebrew writer meant when he said that those under the New Covenant would not have to be taught to know the Lord, for they would already know Him, “from the least of them to the greatest of them” (Hebrews 8:11). Those who are a part of the New Covenant learned about the Lord before they accepted His covenant.

COMPARISON OF ENTRANCE INTO OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

Under the Old Covenant	One was born physically into the Old Covenant.	The covenant was forced upon the child; there was no choice involved.	Later, the child had to learn about God and the terms of the Old Covenant
Under the New Covenant	One is born spiritually into the New Covenant.	After maturing, one learns about God, sin, and the terms of the New Covenant.	One makes a personal decision whether or not to accept the New Covenant

There is a fitting analogy between one’s acceptance of the New Covenant and the establishment of the Old Covenant in Exodus 24. Remember that a covenant is a promise, and usually an exchange of promises. In Exodus, God gave the Israelites a law that

promised blessings to the obedient and punishment to the disobedient, and in return the people promised to obey all the laws God had given to them. Thus, a covenant was established. Today, God makes covenants with individuals, not nations. As each individual comes to know the Lord, he decides whether or not he desires to submit to God in accordance with the dictates of the New Covenant. To those who agree to submit to the terms of the covenant, God promises various blessings, including the forgiveness of sins and a home in heaven. Thus, there is an exchange of promises between the individual and God. At that point the individual enters into a covenant relationship with God.

Since the New Covenant is open to everyone, God has made the basic terms of the New Covenant clear and easily adhered to by the general populace. In general, the terms are: (1) a person's willingness to believe God's promises found in the covenant, (2) a person's willingness to live according to the instructions found in God's covenant, and (3) a person's willingness to submit to a symbolic spiritual cleansing. God's wisdom is evident in the simplicity of the terms.

First, if God had required elaborate, difficult terms of entrance into His covenant, some people would be left out, not due to a lack of desire, but due to a lack of ability to comply. For example, if the terms were based on extraordinary intelligence, physical strength, endurance, or athletic prowess, some would lack the skills necessary to enter God's New Covenant where they could be saved from sin. Therefore, God has provided a basis by which anyone can enter His covenant: desire, commitment, and willing submission. These simple terms are the same for everyone.

Second, since entrance into the New Covenant is not a difficult task, it guards against people feeling that they have earned their salvation. Under the New Covenant, salvation comes through God's grace, which He extends to those who comply with the conditions of the New Covenant. Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We will discuss more about God's simple terms of entrance into the New Covenant in later studies.

➤ **The New Covenant: Its Nature**

A Conditional Will. Most covenants (agreements) are made between two parties who meet face to face. However, a person can make a conditional agreement without being present with the other party. For example, in my will, I could leave a sum of money in a trust designed to give \$5000 to each of my descendants who graduates from college. Notice that the money is available to any of my descendants, but its reception is conditioned upon their willingness to complete a college education. In the same way, the New Covenant is a conditional will that came into effect at Jesus' death. In it, Jesus promises to grant the forgiveness of sins and a home in heaven to anyone on the condition that they agree to accept the terms of the New Covenant.

Principles vs. Specific Commands. Another distinguishing feature of the New Covenant is the nature of the laws contained therein. The Old Covenant is characterized by specific laws (i.e., laws that demand or forbid a specific act). A reading of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy reveals the painfully specific nature of the Law of Moses: the building of the tabernacle, methods of offering various sacrifices, proper observance of holy days, distinguishing between cleanness and uncleanness, upholding moral standards, penalties for disobedience, etc. Almost every divine requirement is spelled out in great detail. This was by design and reflected the spiritual immaturity of God's people at that time.

The New Covenant, like the Old Covenant, contains many specific laws. Consider the following list of laws in which God commands a specific action:

- Proper observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26);
- Qualifications for church government
(1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9);
- Requirements for salvation from sin
(Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-7; 10:9-10);
- Various moral restrictions forbidding adultery, theft,
drunkenness, etc. (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

However, coupled with the specific laws of the New Covenant, a host of general principles are given to guide our daily lives. Consider the following list of laws in which God commands a general action (principle):

- Love God with all your heart
and love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27);
- Set your affection on things above (Colossians 3:1-3);
- Dress modestly (1 Timothy 2:9);
- Give as you have prospered (1 Corinthians 16:1-2);
- Rejoice always (Philippians 4:4);
- Let your light shine before others (Matthew 5:16);
- Seek first the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 6:33);
- Treat others as you would have them treat you (Matthew 7:12);
- Do not love the world or the things in the world (1 John 2:15).

Principles do not have less weight than specific laws. Principles are comprehensive laws that are not fulfilled at a specific moment or by a single act. They govern our daily conduct. Because principles are so all-encompassing, they are much more difficult to keep perfectly than specific laws. For example, one may obey a command not to steal and know that he has done it perfectly, but it is impossible to “love your neighbor as yourself” perfectly. In this way, the covenant we live under today is much more difficult to keep perfectly than the Old Covenant. The nature of the laws is different because the nature of the covenants is different. Under the Old Covenant, justification was based on perfect obedience; under the New Covenant, justification is based on grace.

Why would God give encompassing principles to us instead of specific, detailed laws? First, principles are flexible, and thus find application in every nation of every age. The Old Covenant could be much more specific, because it governed only a single nation and culture. In contrast, the New Covenant is not limited to a single nation or culture. It had to be fashioned so it could apply to all cultures. For example, loving your neighbor in first century Judea might have included slaughtering a lamb or tending oxen when your neighbor was ill, while such actions would not be considered “loving”

in our culture today—we might mow our neighbor’s yard or make a trip to the pharmacy for medication. Yet, regardless of the culture, we are all able to obey the biblical principle, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Second, life principles allow for the unlimited spiritual growth of each individual. While we may never obey the principle “love your neighbor as yourself” perfectly, as we grow and develop as Christians, we will improve. Both the new convert and the elderly saint can serve God acceptably through the New Covenant by obeying this principle to the best of their respective abilities.

Emphasis on Inward Devotion. The Old Covenant, for the most part, governed the outward actions of the Israelites. Most of the laws involved doing or not doing some specific thing. Concepts such as motivation and attitude, while appearing in a few verses (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18), were largely lacking. As a rule, the covenant was fulfilled by outward action. The Pharisees served with their lips, but their hearts were far from God (Matthew 15:8). The nature of the Old Covenant (coupled with human nature) propagated this problem.

The New Covenant, again, is different. Not only must we do the right thing, we must do it for the right reason and with the right attitude. Inward devotion receives significant emphasis. For example, it is not enough to worship in truth, we must worship with the right attitude (John 4:22–24). It is not enough to avoid adultery; we must avoid lust (Matthew 5:27–28). It is not enough to avoid murder; we must avoid hate (Matthew 5:43–44). Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because of ungodly motivations (Acts 5:1–10).

We serve God because we want to, because we love Him—not merely because a covenant made by our ancestors has been forced upon us. The New Covenant encourages proper commitment and devotion, which will in turn result in proper behavior. Jesus said, “First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Matthew 23:26). The New Covenant also places a strong emphasis on controlling our thoughts (Philippians 4:8; 2 Corinthians 10:5) and affections (Colossians 3:1–3; Matthew 6:19–21). Attitudes such as humility, patience, love, longsuffering,

contentment, joy, and thanksgiving are commanded repeatedly. The Old Covenant is comparatively void of such commands monitoring inward devotion.

One of the characteristics of the New Covenant was that it was to be “written on the heart” (Hebrews 8:10). The fact that Christianity seeks to change the inner character and governs the attitudes and motivations of the individual bears this out. Christianity does not merely seek to enforce an outward behavior, but to mold the inner character and thereby change the outward behavior.

➤ **The New Covenant: Its Promises**

Forgiveness of Sin. Contrasting the Old and New Covenants, God said, “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12). What a wonderful aspect of the New Covenant! No wonder the writer of Hebrews describes it as a “better covenant, which was established on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

The basis for the Old Covenant was the Law of Moses. It was a law, and law alone cannot make righteous those who are imperfect. Once the individual had broken the law, he was forever labeled a “lawbreaker,” one who had sinned against God and therefore deserved death (see lesson four, “The Old Covenant: Its Nature”). God said the New Covenant would not be like the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:9), and indeed it is not. The New Covenant promises grace and mercy to its participants.

Grace is unmerited and undeserved favor. In other words, God looked down on humans in their sinful state and said, “I am going to love you anyway. I will help you.” We did not deserve it, nor did we earn it—God was not under any obligation to us. But, because of love, God provided a means by which we could be justified in His sight. Paul said, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV).

Mercy is the withholding of deserved punishment. Sinners justly deserve spiritual death and eternal suffering (Matthew 25:46; Hebrews 10:26–31). Through the New Covenant, God gives us a way to avoid such a fate.

Therefore, by grace God gives us what we do not deserve; by mercy He does not give us what we do deserve. Paul wrote:

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4–5).

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4–5).

The covenant Jesus brought promises grace and mercy for the imperfect. We no longer have to keep a law perfectly in order to receive a blessing. Under the New Covenant, justification is based on grace. Grace is something that is given, not earned.

Paul illustrated the concept of salvation by grace when he said, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Note the contrast between “wages” and “gift.” Wages are earned. When sin results in spiritual death, just and fair payment is meted out for the deed done. But eternal life is a gift and thus falls under the category of grace. Why? Because it cannot be earned by imperfect humans. The only way imperfect humans can receive eternal life is if it is given to them. Under the New Covenant, God has offered to give us what we cannot earn and do not deserve. That is grace! And, instead of punishing us for our sins (which is what we deserve), He has promised to forgive our sins. That is mercy!

By saying that God offers a covenant promising grace and mercy, we are not saying that we do not have responsibilities to God or that we are not accountable for our actions. Most covenants have conditions that must be met. This was true of the Old Covenant, and it is true of the New Covenant. God has offered us a means by which we can be justified, and ultimately receive eternal life. But in order to be a recipient of

this gift, God requires us to submit to the teachings found in the New Covenant to the best of our ability. And after we have done our best, God will do the rest—this is grace in action. Thus, we do not earn our salvation, yet we do have responsibilities. Jesus described it this way:

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, “Come along now and sit down to eat?” Would he not rather say, “Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?” Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty” (Luke 17:7–10, NIV).

Therefore, the New Covenant, made possible by Jesus’ death on the cross, does not offer grace and mercy alone; it offers grace and mercy within the scope of personal responsibility. We should not forget that we still live under law today. Paul refers to the New Covenant as “the law of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:21). James calls it “the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25). God offers us the gift of salvation conditioned upon service. It is still a gift, an extension of grace, because our imperfect, though willing, obedience can never earn God’s blessing.

Eternal Life. Under the Old Covenant, no eternal reward was promised. While there are a few Old Testament Scriptures that hint of eternal destinies beyond the grave (cf. Exodus 3:6; 2 Samuel 12:23), such was not emphasized in the Old Covenant. There was an ongoing dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees of the first century as to whether there was life of any kind beyond the grave. Not only does the covenant itself not deal with the afterlife, but all the blessings and punishments of the Old Covenant were centered on this physical existence.

The New Covenant takes us to another dimension. More than seventy times the New Covenant refers to heaven in the context of a place of eternal reward for the righteous. Indeed, the emphasis of the New Covenant is that if we live righteously here, we will live with God there. Death and its ensuing blessings become the goal of the righteous. The New Covenant is based on “better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

➤ **Conclusion**

When the fullness of time was come (when the Old Covenant had served its purpose, and man and society were adequately prepared to receive a Savior), God sent His Son to die on the cross (Galatians 4:4). In doing this, Jesus took the Old Covenant out of the way, nailing it to His cross (Colossians 2:14); and established a New Covenant for mankind.

But now He [Jesus] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second (Hebrews 8:6–7).

Jesus established a new and different covenant that was better than the covenant God made with Israel. The book of Hebrews is dedicated to proving this very premise.

The New Covenant, which had its inception at Jesus’ cross, is open to any and all who desire to participate. It is a conditional will that requires some action on our part so as to demonstrate our submission, but the rewards that convey to those who are faithful to the covenant are immeasurable.

The New Covenant governs our actions, as well as our attitudes, and allows for perpetual spiritual growth. God knows that we will never be perfectly righteous as long as we are in the flesh. For this reason, the blessings of the New Covenant are not dependent upon one being sinless, but submissive and penitent. Those who possess

these traits will put forth an honest effort to serve God under the direction of the New Covenant and will grow spiritually—to become more spiritually minded, to become purer in life, to obtain better attitudes, to gain more knowledge and understanding, to have purer motivations, to become more consistent in service. The nature and content of the New Covenant allow for this kind of growth.

What a loving and gracious God we have! He has been patient with us. He has been merciful to us. He has extended His grace to us, giving us what we need, not what we deserve. And this is seen in the glorious New Covenant He has provided for us.

Questions and Answers

1. When did the Old Covenant cease to exist? _____
2. When did the New Covenant begin to exist? _____
3. The Old Covenant was intended for one nation, _____,
and (was) (was not) designed to be taken to other nations.
4. The New Covenant is intended for _____
and (is) (is not) designed to be taken to other nations.
5. How did an Israelite become a part of the Old Covenant? _____

6. How does one enter into the New Covenant? _____

7. The Old Covenant was largely made up of specific commands; the New Covenant
contains a balance of _____.
8. The Old Covenant largely emphasized outward service; the New Covenant emphasizes
both outward service and _____.
9. The Old Covenant offered rewards and blessings that were physical and temporal in
nature; the New Covenant promises _____
and _____ to its faithful followers.
10. Define the Following Words:
Covenant _____

Grace _____

Mercy _____

Principle _____

Thought Questions

1. In what way is a covenant like a will? What kind of will is the New Covenant (conditional or unconditional)?
2. Why would God make the terms of entrance into the New Covenant easy to understand and easy to obey? Do you think the fact that entrance into the New Covenant is “easy” is a hindrance to some? If so, in what way? (e.g., some people like exclusivity and a feeling of personal accomplishment)
3. Are there any principles commanded in the New Covenant (e.g., love your neighbor) that one can obey completely and fully at all times?

Additional Study Goals

1. Paul says that all spiritual blessings are found in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3). This being true, list some of the blessings found in Christ and His New Covenant. They can be blessings described in this lesson or others that are special to you.
2. Take the time to offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God Jesus Christ and His New Covenant.
3. Reread the final two sections of this lesson (“The New Covenant: Its Nature” and “The New Covenant: Its Promises”).

Your Questions

In the space below, write down any personal notes or questions that you had while reading through this lesson.

CHARTING THE COURSE

What does the Bible teach about Jesus? Who is He? What do we know about His life, death, and resurrection?

These important questions deserve the attention of every Bible student. In our next lesson, we will consider the life and redemptive mission of a man called Jesus.