

eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17.1-3).

The law of God in people’s minds and hearts – an inner inclination to obey God. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12.1-3).

The basis of the New Covenant will be spelt out as the writer considers the sacrificial death of Christ. Here the nature of the New Covenant is made clear to us – a new relationship with God resulting in a new life which is responsive to his will.

- In the old Covenant Service from a former tradition the people say, “I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”
- What does it mean to us to live in a covenant relationship with the Lord?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews
by Peter J Blackburn

5. A New Covenant

Reading: Hebrews 8

It used to said that an honest man was “as good as his word”. These days we need to have it down in writing, perhaps even in triplicate!

As we read the Scriptures we note several instances where people kept to their word – even when the consequences were against their best interests, or when their word had been foolishly given.

We recall, for instance, Isaac, old and blind and wanting to give his final blessing to his favourite son, Esau (Gen. 27). Rebekah and Jacob conspired together so that the blessing would be given to Jacob while Esau was out hunting for wild game. When Esau came in, the blessing had already been given and only an inferior blessing could be given to Esau. In modern law the first blessing was given in error because of deliberate deception. The intention was to bless Esau, not Jacob. The first blessing could easily be annulled.

Or we think of the foolish vow of Jephthah to sacrifice to the Lord “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites.” It was his daughter, his only child, who came out to meet him, and he felt obliged to fulfil his vow (Jdg. 11.30-39). He had given his word.

In the New Testament, we have the example of Herod who (under the influence of too much birthday “bubbly”?) promised Herodias’ daughter “whatever she asked.” Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” Because Herod had supported his promise with an oath – and because of the dinner guests – he ordered that the request be granted (Mt. 14.6-12).

In our society, the “word” isn’t enough. It has to be documented, signed and witnessed. Whether we are in the market for a new car or for some real estate, we find the disappointed salesman ringing to ask, “You haven’t signed anything yet, have you?”

- It used to said that an honest man was “as good as his word”. These days we need to have it down in writing, perhaps even in triplicate!... In our society, the “word” isn’t enough. Do you agree? Where can we find certainty and security? How can words be made to “stick”?

The Promise in Jeremiah

Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries. Ezekiel went with the exiles into Babylon. Jeremiah remained with the remnant who stayed in the land. People were inclined to say that they were suffering for the sins of an earlier generation – “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jer. 31.29; Ezek. 18.2). Both prophets spoke clearly that people would suffer and die for their own sins (Jer. 31.30; Ezek. 18.3-4 and following).

But Jeremiah gives God’s promise of grace – “The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31.31-34)

A covenant is a binding agreement. The Hebrew expression is literally “but a covenant” – a covenant was usually sealed with a sacrifice. Three things stand out in the promised “new covenant” – God’s law written on their hearts (as the very principle of their living, not just as an external standard), knowledge of the Lord, made possible because of complete forgiveness of their sins.

- How do Australians relate to the idea of a “covenant”? What other word or idea can help Australians understand the truth that God wants to draw them into a permanent relationship?
- Reflect on the three elements of this “new covenant” – forgiveness of sins, knowing God and having God’s law in our hearts. To what extent have we known these in our understanding and experience?

The New Covenant

Read: Hebrews 8.1-13

Hebrews has been speaking about the superiority of Christ’s priesthood – “in the order of Melchizedek.” The letter goes on to speak of the superior – “new” – covenant, promised in the passage from Jeremiah we have already been considering.

“The point of what we are saying” is a transitional statement, moving our

thought from all that has been taught so far to the next major theme. The opening two verses are crucial before going on – “We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (Heb. 8.1-2).

Priesthood, sacrifice, sanctuary (tabernacle) – all of them are themes that are bound up together.

Our high priest Jesus wouldn’t be a priest on earth. All the gifts prescribed by the law are already being offered by another line of priests. (Because the writer talks about the tabernacle rather than the Temple, it seems likely to have been written after the destruction of the Temple. The sacrifices had also ceased – which makes the present statement rather curious.) So “it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer” (v. 3b) – but we aren’t quite ready to speak about that.

The present line of priests “serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (v. 5a) – more about that later too.

“But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises” (v. 6).

- Priesthood, sacrifice, sanctuary... elements of so much human worship. Yet how relevant are any of them without the centrality of who Jesus is and what he has done?

These “better promises” were given because of what was wrong with the first covenant. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord” (v. 9).

A “covenant” is mutually binding. It requires commitment and responsibility from both sides. In the Hebrew of Jeremiah marriage is the symbol of the close relationship and commitment into which the Lord entered with his people and which they betrayed by their spiritual unfaithfulness. (The quotation in Hebrews follows the Greek Septuagint.)

Literally, “my covenant which they broke...” as if the characteristic of the old covenant was that it was continually being broken.

Forgiveness of sins – totally, “I will remember their sins no more.” That is what the coming of Jesus was all about. The angel’s word to Joseph, “[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1.21).

Knowledge of God – Jesus prayed, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is