

# **THE NEW COVENANT NEWS**



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**Some Thoughts For Our Time**

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**Switch**

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**Notes from a Group Study  
of the Epistle to the Hebrews**

**News and Notes**

# Some Thoughts For Our Time

by Colin Giles

Because I perceive at this time in world affairs some anxiety due to the COVID medical epidemic which is sweeping the world and bringing distress and death to the elderly, and bringing the necessity of disease control and associated financial problems, there is a need to re-assure ourselves that God is aware of the present situation and has purposed a plan to deal with the problem.

For this reason I have determined to give a message of hope which is the foundation of our faith and is found in a message contained in one of the books of Old Testament. What I have in mind is found in the writings of Habakkuk and is thrice repeated in the New Testament. It is a verse made famous during the Reformation, by the words, *“the just shall live by faith”* (Romans 1:17; KJV).

To understand this verse and its meaning we need to examine the circumstance in which it was first given and to whom the message was given. We have very little knowledge about the life of Habakkuk and when he wrote the message, but the nature of the message gives us some indication of the purpose. It would seem that the prophecy was meant for the two tribes of Judah, as the ten tribes had already gone into captivity in Assyria. The people of the two tribes were already drifting into idolatry, so this would place the prophecy to around the year 600 B.C. Perhaps the meaning of his name ‘one who embraces’, a wrestling term, may give some indication of the character of Habakkuk and the style of his writing, as it suggests that the writer was someone who was challenging God to explain why he was or was not doing something about evil. There are questions like, if God is good and all powerful, how is it that the innocent suffer and the guilty go free. When we witness man’s inhumanity to man we can only wonder about how God feels. It is an age-old problem, but at least Habakkuk received an answer that also helps us to understand God’s ways, and it also underlies the way God is bringing about his righteousness.

There are also some other notable verses in the book of Habakkuk that sum up what may have been Habakkuk’s conclusion when he understood what God had said. Verses such as Romans 11:33-36 could sum up Habakkuk’s conclusion. *“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen”* (KJV). The subsequent verses also have the same theme.

My intention now is to make a detailed review of the salient points in the book of Habakkuk so as to follow the sequence of thought.

In Chapter 1, verses 2 to 4, Habakkuk asked the question as to why evil goes unpunished. *“O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save. Why dost thou show me iniquity, and look upon perverseness? for destruction and violence are before me; and there is strife, and contention riseth up. Therefore the law is slacked, and justice doth never go forth; for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore justice goeth forth perverted”* (ASV).

And then in verses 5 to 7 is God’s answer to this question; *“Behold ye among the nations, and look, and wonder marvellously; for I am working a work in your days, which ye will not believe though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, that march through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling-places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves”*.

Habakkuk could not understand how a holy God could do this, to use a more wicked nation to punish the less wicked, so he put forward reasons why God should not do this. This is best stated in verses 12 and 13, which put forward his belief with powerful words; *“Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?”* (KJV).

To resolve the issue Habakkuk made a decision on what he would do, as is recorded in chapter 2. *“I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will look forth to see what he will speak with me, and what I shall answer concerning my complaint”* (Habakkuk 2:1; ASV).

Then in the next 19 verses we have God’s answer to that question, with some general statements up to verse 5, and then continuing in the next 15 verses with statements that God would punish the evil person for their particular sin. In verses 5 to 8 the Chaldeans would be punished for their greed; in verses 9 to 11 for their covetousness, in verses 12 to 17 for their cruelty, in verses 18 to 20 for their idolatry.

When Habakkuk had considered all this he gave his reply in chapter 3, beginning with a prayer in verses 1 and 2 for God’s mercy to continue while he judged with wrath, and then continuing on in the rest of the chapter praising God for his judgements. Then from verse 16 there is a statement of Habakkuk’s unswerving faith in what action God would take in the future to put things right. Verses 17 to 19 give his thoughts in very vivid language.

*“For though the fig-tree shall not flourish, Neither shall fruit be in the vines; The labour of the olive shall fail, And the fields shall yield no food; The flock shall be cut off from the fold, And there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation. Jehovah, the Lord, is my strength; And he maketh my feet like hinds' feet, And will make me to walk upon my high places” (ASV).*

I note that there is a further statement in my Bible that it was directed to the choirmaster with stringed instruments. So it may be that this prayer of Habakkuk was to be sung. One Bible commentator has suggested that it was designed to be sung while the people were in captivity, as it has passages that gave hope for deliverance.

The book of Habakkuk, like those of the other minor prophets, is a very short book with a single message. It is unusual in that the message is contained in a dialogue with God, but it is also memorable because one key verse is quoted a number of times in the New Testament. The particular verse is of course Habakkuk 2:4; *“Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him; but the righteous shall live by his faith” (ASV).* The last part of this verse is quoted in three different places within the New Testament.

As a way of helping to understand the lessons that are drawn from this verse, it will be profitable to consider how the meaning within the verse is applied in these various biblical references, noting that some versions use the word ‘righteous’ while others use ‘just’ which has the meaning of ‘justified’.

The first one that comes to mind is in Romans 1:17. This letter of Paul's to the Romans was written in about AD 58 after he had spent many years in missionary service preaching to both Jews and gentiles. We may expect that by that time he had come to some mature Christian thought and reasoning about living the Christian life. We do not know for how long the church in Rome had been established before they received this letter which informed them of how Paul understood the way that God was bringing about righteousness by faith. Judging by the ethnicity of the names mentioned in the greetings, it would seem that there were roughly an equal number of Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome, and it was also a critical subject for comment. So, Paul's objective in quoting this key verse from Habakkuk would seem to be to support his understanding of how God was bringing all people into a right relationship with himself.

In the Galatians' reference (3:11) Paul was making the contrast between righteousness that was freely available by faith and the righteousness promised by the Law, which the people discovered was not possible to keep, and brought a curse instead.

The other place in the New Testament where this verse from Habakkuk is quoted is Hebrews (10:38,39), where the writer was encouraging the readers to maintain their faithfulness, which promises to bring about a great reward. Perhaps of some interest, the writer of Hebrews may have been quoting from memory, but there seems to be some small changes made in this quotation compared to those in the other places. Some translators also re-arrange the verse to change the order of the key words so changing where the emphasis should be placed.

The KJV and some other translations have the arrangement of the words as **Righteous, Live, Faith**, that is, "*the justified (righteous) shall live by faith*", whereas the Diaglott is consistent across all three references and puts the order as **Righteous, Faith, Live**, with the wording being, "*the justified by faith shall live*". Other translations such as the Amplified are not as consistent across the references but generally have **Righteous, Live, Faith**. I don't know enough about the Greek language, but I suspect that the ending of the words in Greek indicates where the emphasis should be placed and not as in English where the word order is important. However, the important point that I wish to emphasize is the outcome of **faith** and that is to **live** in its fullest sense.

Also to be considered is the view that faith may be either a system of belief, or the conviction of things unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Thus, the believer may live the present life according to his faith, which is in agreement with the first definition and with the original text in Habakkuk, that "*the justified (righteous) shall live by his faith*". Alternatively, using the second definition, the believer, being justified by faith, will be raised to eternal life.

To sum up, this one statement found in a minor prophet has application in many ways. In the original reference in Habakkuk the faithful believer was going to find a source of comfort to endure the haughty Chaldean invader which all in the nation had to suffer. This is the sense in which it was used about the irresistible Chaldean as he swept over the land, but the righteous man who put his trust in God would have a reason to live.

In the letter to the Romans there is further development of this thought in that it states the principle of how God is granting righteousness that is to be revealed and which applies equally to Jew and Gentile. The wrath of God is also being revealed in a similar way by the fact that Christ has shown the way of righteousness and by that means has shown up what unrighteousness is.

In Galatians the principle of living by faith is used to explain what the law could not do but now the gaining of righteousness is available by the coming of Christ. In the Hebrews reference the key verse about gaining righteousness is used to encourage believers to continue in his or her faithfulness and not to lose faith and their reward.

My thought in taking up the discussion of this important verse in Habakkuk was to remind both you and me of the source of our constant confidence in God's promises. It is by hearing and reading of what God has done and by being convinced what he has promised he will bring it to pass so that we can build on our faith. It can also grow stronger.

With the present troubles in the world it is easy to get swept along by its anxieties and fears. Also, difficulties in relationships and in the conflict that can occur can disturb us and be sources of challenges to our Christian vitality.

My message is summed up in a verse that is associated with the reference in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 35. *"Cast not away therefore your confidence which hath great recompense of reward."* (KJV).



## SWITCH

by M Buckmaster

### **Preface**

The Christian Bible is the most widely published and most widely studied book of all time. Its account answers all the fundamental questions about human existence: our origin, our present situation and the prospect of our future. The following essay presents my understanding of some of the important features of the Biblical record, gleaned from parents and encouraged and aided by other Bible students, based upon the belief of its truth, and its great importance to our life and wellbeing.

### **Introduction**

In a similar manner to the signalman who adjusts the points at a railway junction to switch a passing train onto a different line and send it to a different destination, the LORD God has brought about events on earth, such as the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden in Eden and the flood of Noah's time, which have acted as a switch to adjust the course of human history. However, the train may return to the junction and be sent to another destination, whereas with God's plan for the Ages (Ephesians 2:7 and 3:5), he did not allow alternatives as the signalman has, because the destination for humankind has always been the new world where God reigns with righteousness for the glory and pleasure of himself and his creation. As the signalman plans to make the switch for the train, so has God, the only one who knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9,10), also planned his changes from the foundation of the world.

We need to know what we can of that far-off period before the flood, and what lessons it entailed, such as creation and the fall. It was followed by the Patriarchal Age and then the Jewish Age from which the lessons they teach are more easily discerned. A very important lesson was the giving of the Law Covenant and its outcome; viz. that it was beyond fallen mankind to obey. Its purpose was, in Paul's words, to be "*our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ*" (Galatians 3:24).

Which brings us to consider by far the most important, the most significant, and, indeed, the only lasting switch in history to the present time; and that is the sacrifice given by Jesus of Nazareth. The direction of the flow in the affairs of the human race was changed suddenly and permanently when the veil in the Jewish Temple was torn miraculously from top to bottom at the moment the Lord Jesus surrendered his life to atone for the disobedience of mankind and the shed his blood, which ratified the New Covenant between God and the human race.

That event signalled an immediate and transforming change in God's relationship with his disobedient earthly people; firstly, and briefly, to the Jews only during Jesus' ministry, then to all people, including the Jews. As prophesied in the Old Testament and explained in the New Testament, Jesus' sacrifice opened the way to reconciliation and forgiveness, through faith in God's grace and mercy. The change would accomplish his purpose and justify his promise to bring the earth and its human inhabitants to a state that would reflect his glory and give him pleasure.

That switch, from one covenant to the other, was announced in Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks (chapter nine), when during the final week the Messiah would "*confirm the covenant*", the New Covenant, "*with many*", the Jews, "*for one week: and in the midst of the week he would cause the sacrifice and the oblation*", the sacrifices of the Atonement Day of the Law Covenant, "*to cease*" (Daniel 9:24-27).

God did not allow all men and women to remain ignorant of the changes that he made, but informed the Israelites of his concern for them, according to Hebrews 1:1. As is recorded in Amos 3:2, they were a special people to him, and some were aware of those changes and reacted accordingly. During the time of the patriarchs the faithful men and women of that period recognised the creator as God almighty; during the Jewish Age the Israelites were beholden to Yahweh as a covenant-making god. Believers of the Gospel Age have the privilege of calling him our heavenly Father.

## THE COVENANTS

A covenant is a contract or agreement between two parties in which there are defined conditions for compliance and recompenses for both. The inclusion of conditions makes such an agreement a conditional covenant. The word 'covenant' is used throughout the Bible, translated from the Hebrew word 'bereeth' (Strong 1285), or the Greek 'diatheke' (Strong 1242), and is a general term for a diverse range of arrangements between separate parties, both individuals and nations.

While there are conditional covenants, conversely there are unconditional covenants in which only one party is bound by the terms of the arrangement. The other party is not bound by any conditions, so an unconditional covenant is essentially a promise offered by one party to the other. Both these definitions apply to Biblical agreements. There are two conditional covenants in the Bible, the Law Covenant, also known as the Mosaic or Old Covenant, and the New Covenant. On the other hand, the LORD God has bound himself to provide many blessings to the peoples of earth with promises to individuals and to nations, requiring no contribution by them.

Those earlier changes to God's dealings with mankind, the one brought about by a spectacular flood, and the other change made by giving a formal declaration of his law beginning with an awesome display of his power on the mountain in Arabia, were sufficient only for God's intermediate purposes, and were not intended to endure beyond the achievement of those purposes. The first was to destroy rampant wickedness; the second was to bring to bear the consequence of disobedience, which is indicated by the prophecy in Jeremiah that God would make a new covenant with his people (Jeremiah 31:31).

Until that time some events in the Old Testament were on a large scale involving nations, with personal events woven into them. Since that time, that is for the Gospel Age, there has been a switch to dealings on a personal scale, with small groups involved peripherally. No longer is God dealing with the whole of a recalcitrant nation, but since Pentecost his calling has been for a response from individuals from all nations, initially the Jews, then the Gentiles, as he takes out a people for his name (Acts 15:14) to become a spiritual Israel, "*the Israel of God*" (Galatians 6:16).

The change was to a new dispensation, a switch from the Law Covenant to the New Covenant. Paul referred to the prophecy in Jeremiah chapter thirty-one, and pointed out that God had promised a new covenant which "*made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away*" (Hebrews 8:13; NKJV).



During approximately sixteen hundred years of the Jewish Age the Law Covenant was shown to be beyond the full obedience of the Israelites, so it was to vanish, to be taken out of sight. There is no suggestion of any interim measure; the old was to be replaced by the new. Jesus' death took away the first covenant to establish the second covenant (Hebrews 10:9). It was a complete switch; there was nothing in between; there is no record of, nor any suggestion of, an intermediate covenant; no ancillary agreement.

### **The Nature of the Covenants**

All covenants, and particularly the two conditional covenants, are gifts from God. Both of the conditional covenants are covenants of grace, that is, unmerited favour, given because of his love and mercy to a cherished race of beings who are "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14), which may be taken in a physical sense; and "*made in his image*" (Genesis 1:27) which may be taken as an intellectual likeness. However, "*by grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is a gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast*" (Ephesians 2:8,9). We have no merit upon which to base a claim for forgiveness and reconciliation. Since that is God's purpose in establishing a relationship with us, the manner of his dispensations in the covenants is the first indication of the differences between them.

The differences begin to become evident in the manner in which they were initiated.

Moses was called several times up onto Mount Horeb (Sinai) where God displayed his power and presence with '*thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud*' (Exodus 19:16), and where Moses received the Ten Commandments, (Exodus 20:2-17) and many other instructions and regulations of the Law Covenant to put before the Israelites in his appointment as the mediator of that covenant (Galatians 3:19).

*"And the LORD spoke to Moses ... and when he had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, he gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone"* (Exodus 31:18) on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). After receiving the tablets of stone, Moses was given laws which concerned the worship and other aspects of social life of the Israelites (Exodus 20:22 to 23:33). Then after Moses had "*told the people all the words of the LORD ... all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words which the LORD has said we will do.'*" And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD" (Exodus 24:3,4).

God defined the terms of the covenant and the Israelites agreed to them.

Thus the record shows that the Law Covenant was written upon tablets of stone and scrolls of parchment. The New Covenant was prophesied to be very different from this. The prophecy was that God said “*I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts*” (Jeremiah 31:33). The change was confirmed in Hebrews 8:10 which quotes the promise in Jeremiah.

The New Covenant was instigated in a totally different manner from the Old Covenant. Jesus came down from heaven to bring the gospel message (John 20:21), a new dispensation of God’s care for his people, and he died to ratify the terms of a New Covenant, and to become the mediator of that covenant (Hebrews 9:15).

While the Law Covenant was a system of commands and instructions, a complex law for obedience imposed by divine rulership, the New Covenant is also a law, but a law of love, a royal law (James 2:8). The law of the new dispensation is to love God with heart and mind completely, and to love each neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:37-39).

That was a profound change; a switch from the imposition of relentless obligation and obedience coming from without, to worship and self-sacrifice coming from within.

The Israelites failed to keep the Law Covenant but despite that failure God bestowed grace on those individuals who were faithful to him, as he had done previously. Similarly, the New Covenant is a covenant of grace to all those individuals who choose to accept its terms through faith in the merit of the sacrifice that Jesus made. The difference could be expressed as a switch from physical obedience to spiritual conviction.

The apostle Paul described the change of heart and mind as being “*risen with Christ*” (Colossians 3:1), which means that for each individual who responds to God’s call, belief into Jesus brings about a spiritual revival. While the essence of the Law Covenant was physical obedience, the essence of the New Covenant is spiritual choice to obey. That spiritual revival (Strong 4891) is what the Israelites could not attain because of their hard-heartedness, and is what God calls for to be exhibited sincerely by those who accept his rule under the New Covenant.

In Galatians chapter 4, verses 21 to 31, Paul differentiated the two covenants in an allegory, “*the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar*”; the bondwoman, and the other covenant to be represented by Sarah the freewoman, and as recipients of that covenant “*we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise*”. These are called the Sarah covenant and the Hagar covenant.

Paul used the allegory to compare the Law Covenant represented by Hagar, who was a servant, to the New Covenant represented by Sarah, who was Abraham's wife of choice. The importance of the comparison is that the Law Covenant was a covenant of bondage to obedience, whereas the New Covenant is a covenant of freedom, of choice. The allegory demonstrates the stark difference between the two covenants, and is complete in itself.

### **Organisation within the Covenants**

A basic pattern of the organisation was established for each covenant.

The Law Covenant had a mediator, who was Moses  
(John 1:17 and Galatians 3 19).

The New Covenant has a mediator, who is Jesus  
(1 Timothy 1:5, Hebrews 9:14,15, 12:24).

The Law Covenant had a high priest, the first one being Aaron. He was succeeded by many high priests (Hebrews 5:1,4).

The New Covenant has one high priest who is Jesus (Hebrews 5:5,10).

The Law Covenant had a priesthood, the Levites, who were responsible to the high priest to administer religious duties to the people and maintain the worship of the nation according to that law. That arrangement was intended to continue only until the end of the Jewish Age.

The New Covenant had the apostles to administer God's blessings to Jews and Gentiles after the ascension. They spent their lives establishing the covenant itself according to Jesus' instructions in Matthew 28:18, using the miraculous power of the holy spirit given to them at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The apostles, and particularly Paul, set up congregations for worship of God and for teaching the gospel message in many cities throughout the Roman Empire. The men and women who served in those congregations were guided and encouraged to meet in private residences (Acts 12:12), and to maintain their form of worship and service to the best of their abilities.

After the deaths of the apostles there was a switch in the mode of operation for the New Covenant. A form of organisation is given in the third chapter of 1 Timothy by the appointment of bishops and deacons, if and when the need arose, so that *"all things be done decently and in order"* (1 Corinthians 14:40). Since communication at that time was difficult and slow, the conduct for those meetings was clearly set out in the writings of the apostles. Jesus provided further guidance for believers during the Gospel Age through his messages to the churches recorded in the early chapters of Revelation.

The Law Covenant was cancelled when the New Covenant was ratified. The New Covenant will operate throughout the Gospel Age and will continue in the Kingdom Age because *“by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”* (Acts 4:10,12).

However, there will be another switch of great importance when the Gospel Age ends and when the Kingdom Age begins, because God has promised to *“make all things new”* (Revelation 21:5). The reforming of the earth and the caring for the billions of human beings raised to life, present a task beyond human comprehension and beyond human accomplishment.

We do not know much about the organisation during the Kingdom Age, but we are told that there will be worldwide government with Jesus as both king and high priest, as Melchisedec was, as explained in Hebrews chapter 7 and described as *“the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords”* in 1 Timothy 6:15. Jesus will operate with God’s power and authority (Matthew 28:18) and will share that power and authority with the 144,000 joint-heirs who will *“reign with him a thousand years”* (Revelation 20:6). The apostles will *“sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”* (Matthew 19:28).

Paul knew Jesus to be *“the righteous judge”* (2 Timothy 4:8), and the example of Moses who appointed judges from all the tribes of Israel (Exodus 18:19-26) may be applied also during the Kingdom Age. We do not need to know of the administrative arrangements to come, because it is sufficient to have God’s assurance that all the work of that age will be done in righteousness and peace (Romans 14:17).

## **Sacrifices**

The fall from God’s grace was the consequence of Adam’s disobedience (Romans 6:23), and reconciliation could be made only by God’s forgiveness, which was offered through acts of sacrifice (Psalm 130:4; Colossians 1:14).

The surrender of something of value and offered to God as an act of homage has always been a feature of God’s dealing with mankind. Acts of sacrifice were established as commands in the Law Covenant, detailed mainly in the book of Leviticus. Of the many sacrifices, or offerings, described, the most important were the annual Atonement Day sacrifices which are detailed with respect to timing in Leviticus 23:27 and their ritual is given in Leviticus chapter 16.

The nation of Israel was chosen by God to be a special people to him because of the faith of Abraham, a situation of which they were inordinately proud. However, they were held to account by God, firstly through the

restrictions of the moral law in the Ten Commandments, and secondly their lives were constrained further by the laws of sacrifice and service, all of them having penalties for further disobedience associated with them.

The Israelites experienced the Law Covenant as a national burden despite the promise of a Messiah who would rescue them from its restrictions (Daniel 9:25,26), but only a few realised that God had a solution that would relieve them of the burden, and that the Law Covenant was to establish and encourage in them a hope for the future.

As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:24, *“the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ”*, because God had planned to make a switch to a different dispensation of his care for mankind, which would be accomplished in a miraculous and dramatic fashion.

That change was the replacement of the Law Covenant by the New Covenant.

The first chapter of Hebrews explains how God had operated through the prophets to keep the Israelites aware of his purposes until the advent of Jesus, his anointed Messiah, by the means of the Law Covenant *“imposed on them until the time of reformation”* (Hebrews 9:10). The short period of Jesus’ life and ministry culminating in his death and resurrection established and ratified an arrangement that was new, as being just made, that was fresh and strong, unblemished and enduring.

The essence of this New Covenant is love given and received in all its manifestations. For this to be achieved the Law Covenant had to be replaced completely because the disobedient and gainsaying nation of Israel was unable to keep it. The replacement is embodied in the meaning of Colossians 2:14, quoted previously. Jesus was killed on the cross; the old covenant also died as the consequence of that sacrifice because it ratified the new.

No longer were various offerings and sacrifices required for God’s forgiveness. Jesus’ sacrifice of his perfect life (Hebrews 4:15) replaced them all, and sealed off the old way, while opening a new way of seeking reconciliation. Jesus had been made the mediator and high priest of the New Covenant, since *“by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us”* (Hebrews 9:12).

A sacrifice to be an atonement for the high priest, as under the Law Covenant (Leviticus 16:6), was not needed because Jesus was sinless. *“And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood”* (Hebrews 13:12; NIV). Jesus made the atoning sacrifice for all

people. As the scapegoat did for the Israelites, Jesus took on the burden of the wrongdoing of all people. He alone carried out God's will; he took away the first covenant and established the second covenant. *"And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all"* (Hebrews 10:9,10). And *"this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever"* (Hebrews 10:12), became the high priest over the house of God, which is the church of the living God, those individuals who now worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

### **The Passover and the Lord's Supper**

When the old covenant was replaced by the new one the ceremony of the Passover was also replaced. On the evening of the day when the exodus from Egypt began, the Israelites were commanded to partake of a special meal. The simple meal was to acknowledge the promise of their protection from the death of the firstborn of both man and beast, the tenth plague, and to strengthen them for the start of the forty-year long journey to the land promised to them through Abraham. This ceremony was then to be observed annually as a recognition of the Israelites' release from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus partook of his last Passover with his disciples according to the law, and when the formal ceremony had been completed, he instructed them to take some of the unleavened bread as a symbol of his body, the bread of life, and some of the wine as a symbol of his blood which ratified the New Covenant. He said *"This do in remembrance of me"* (Luke 20:19), thus instigating a ceremony which was to be observed every year as a memorial of life, death and resurrection, especially the sacrifice he would make during the following hours. Observing the supper would be in accordance with Jesus' words which he preached in the synagogue, as recorded in John 6:48-59.

In the sense that the Passover was the recognition of the deliverance of the physical nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt, the Lord's Supper is the recognition of the deliverance of spiritual Israel from the bondage of disobedience. The Passover was to be observed until it was replaced; the Lord's Supper is to be observed until he returns (see Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25 and Luke 22:14-20).

### **Miracles**

During the Old Testament times God intervened physically with miracles in order to guard, guide and assist those who chose to serve him and thus serve his plan for reconciliation. That intervention with miracles ceased when the apostles, who had the miraculous power of the holy spirit, came to the end of their work for Jesus. Since then, time and chance, as observed by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 9:11), has continued to interfere with the affairs of all the people on earth. When the work of the apostles ceased there was a

switch from a dispensation of direct action by God and his agents acting to overcome the vagaries of happenstance, to a dispensation of giving the holy spirit, upon request, to strengthen, comfort and guide the believer through a life of service (John 14:26 and Hebrews 1:14).

I believe that the idea that God still takes direct physical action in people's lives in the Gospel Age is inconsistent with the reality that bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Good things and bad things happen, at random, to anyone at any time, stated clearly by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:2; *"All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath"*.

Although God has absolute power, it is illogical to invoke that truth to consider him to be responsible for everything that now happens on earth, because he is only good, and *"with him there is no variableness nor shadow of turning"* (James 1:17). His nature of being perfectly good is reflected in Peter's words *"Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons"* [*"does not show favouritism"*; NIV, *"is not one to show partiality"*; NAS] (Acts 10:34). And Paul pointed out that no-one has any merit for which to expect special treatment from God (Ephesians 2:9). He allows it to rain on the justified and the unjustified (Matthew 5:45), and he does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender or status under the terms of the New Covenant (Galatians 3:28).

The absolute stability of God's character is a direct contrast to the instability of the situation of men on earth where circumstances may change to influence that situation for good or bad. On the other hand, neither man's environment nor his mind appear to be unaffected by the influence of that variability. The thought that God is fully responsible for both good and bad ignores the evidence in the story of Job, that good things come from God and bad things come from Satan; and ignores the statement that Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), *"the god of this world who hath blinded the minds of them that believe not"* (2 Corinthians 4:4). Thus the powers of darkness still affect the affairs of mankind (Ephesians 6:12), showing that the principle from Job is still in operation.

Miracles, those events which were brought about by divine power, served God's purpose until they were no longer needed. The challenge from Joshua rings down through the Gospel Age; *"choose you this day whom ye will serve"* (Joshua 24:15), and from Paul, *"work out your own salvation"* (Philippians 2:12); do not rely upon miracles. The promise from Jesus' is peace of mind, not miracles. *"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28). (See also Philippians 4:7).

With the establishment of the New Covenant, and even from a human viewpoint, he has done all he needed to do to achieve his primary intention, which is the redemption of a fallen race, except for the final miracles, the resurrection of mankind (John 5:29) and the reconstitution of all things (Acts 3:21).

Since the time of the apostles God has contributed to our wellbeing in a spiritual sense, rather than a physical sense, by sending a measure of the holy spirit as a guide and comforter to those who ask for assistance. According to the apostle Paul, God provides comfort when adverse events occur; *“Who comforteth us in all our tribulation”* (2 Corinthians 1:4). The occurrence of adverse events in all people’s lives is in harmony with Solomon’s inspired observation concerning time and chance (Ecclesiastes 9:11), in order to test our faith and patience. Adversity is not joyous but grievous, although it may result in the *“peaceable fruit of righteousness”* for those who overcome it and are strengthened by it (Hebrews 12:11).

This is not to suggest that God is not able to intervene in the affairs of men, but that he is choosing not to do so since the time of the apostles. He has established the means of salvation, and he is providing guidance and support for the spiritual revival which is the hallmark of choosing to serve him through the terms of the New Covenant.

### **The House of God**

As a focal point for worship under the Law Covenant, and to be the site of and a symbol of God’s presence with the Israelites, the nation was instructed, through Moses, to build, firstly a tabernacle that could be taken with them on their travels until they were settled in Canaan, and then during Solomon’s reign a temple, where sacrifices were to be made and where God would commune with his people through the high priest.

The New Covenant has no such requirement of a symbolic edifice to be a witness to his sovereignty. This is shown in Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4:5-26) and in Stephen’s words, pronounced after Jesus’ resurrection, *“the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands”* (Acts 7:48). Jesus showed that Christian behaviour is what God requires to be a witness to his supremacy in all things.

God confounded the language of the people who were building the tower of Babel and thus halted its construction. It and other mighty monuments of past kingdoms have been or are being destroyed by the ravages of time. The Jewish temples of Solomon and Herod have been destroyed according to God’s intentions because the New Covenant has no alliance with structures of stone to symbolise the meeting place of God and his people. That change is the kernel of truth in his promise to *“put my law in their inward*



*parts, and write it in their hearts”* (Jeremiah 31:33). Paul explained the switch in 2 Corinthians 6:16, viz. *“And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God”*.

Comparing the arrangements of the Old and New Covenants shows that there was a switch in God’s provisions when the Old was replaced by the New. There was to be no discontinuity in the acknowledgement of God as the creator and heavenly Father, but the change, though still binding, was an act of mercy; a call to individuals who acknowledged their need for reconciliation, who recognised that it was impossible to obtain it through the Law Covenant, and found it to be provided in the terms of the New Covenant.

The office of high priest obliged Aaron and his successors to wear special garments, to perform specific duties and to oversee the work of those, the Levites, who were delegated to provide religious guidance and perform special services to and on behalf of the tribes of the nation of Israel. The high priest of the New Covenant is Jesus who has taken his place with God in heaven (Hebrews 4:14; 5:10). There is now no earthly high priest, a man among men.

The outward show of the embellished garments, the ceremonial rites, the exclusive place of worship, all of which God required under the Law Covenant, have been removed by Jesus, *“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). As part of the Law Covenant they became worn out and vanished away (Hebrews 8:13). None has been replaced under the new arrangement.

### **Temporal to Spiritual**

In Hebrews chapter 9 is explained the switch from the Law Covenant with its worldly sanctuary to the New Covenant with its spiritual sanctuary; the same message as in Colossians 3:1,2 to change from the earthly things of the Law Covenant to the promise of heavenly things of the New Covenant. The responsibility now rests with each individual to undergo a spiritual revival and choose to serve the one God through the one mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

Also in that chapter of Hebrews, it is stated that Jesus’ sacrifice during his first advent *“put away sin by the sacrifice of himself”* (verse 26), being made a sin offering, whereas *“he will appear a second time for the purpose of salvation”* (verse 28), beginning with the resurrection, firstly the raising of those chosen because of their faith, to be followed by the rest of mankind according to the promise that *“because of Jesus all will be made alive”* (1 Corinthians 15:22).

## **The Rewards**

It has always been the case that God has good things in store for those who love him as a father, as was pointed out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9. According to the terms of both of the covenants God promised rewards to those who were faithful to him (Deuteronomy 1:11).

The outstanding promise that God gave to the Israelites was that if they kept the Law they would live, a statement as it appears to be, according to Leviticus 18:5, "*You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, which if a man does, he shall live in them:*" (Ezekiel 20: 11,13,21), that they would continue living. And from Ezekiel 3:21; 18:9,21,22, "*the righteous man ... and he does not sin, he shall surely live*", and quoted in brief from Genesis 42:18 when Joseph told his brothers "*Do this, and live*". It appears that the fulfilment of this promise required that the Law had to be obeyed perfectly, since the Law Covenant was a contract of obedience, and its promise of life was nullified by any disobedience. The validity of the promise was sealed by the resurrection of Jesus who was a man who did not disobey at all. He was crucified as a righteous man and the grave could not hold him (Acts 2:27; Psalm 16:10).

However, all human beings are sentenced to death because of Adam's disobedience (1 Corinthians 15:22). That sentence included the Israelites of the past and includes the Jews of the present time. Therefore, God's promise of life under the terms of the Law Covenant could not have been for the continuance of life during the period of that covenant, but a resurrection to a new life under a new arrangement. God's promise was not vain since one, and only one, Israelite qualified for the reward, and the promise of life through obedience to the Law has been replaced, as has the covenant itself, by the promise of life through the terms of the New Covenant.

Abraham and Job, although they were not Israelites, believed that God had the power of resurrection and looked forward to the time when that power would be exercised. Jesus acknowledged Abraham's belief when he said to the Jews, "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56). An element in the faith of the kings, the judges and the prophets of the Jewish Age, indeed, all those named in Hebrews chapter 11, was their belief in the power of God to bring about the resolution of all the wrong-doing against which they struggled in their service to their creator.

## **Health and Hygiene**

The Law Covenant required the priests to wash themselves and their priestly garments at specific times and with specific methods. The Israelites in general had to maintain bodily cleanliness in a manner that we would follow centuries later, especially during the period of a pandemic. When Jesus

brought the gospel message he castigated the scribes and Pharisees for persisting with their traditional ceremonial washings which were lacking heart-felt sincerity in their belief, when they should have switched from tradition to the spiritual revival, the “*washing of regeneration*” mentioned in Titus 3:5.

### **Dress**

Special garments were described for the priests in the terms of the Law Covenant (see Exodus chapters 28, 29, 35 and 39). The Jewish kings adorned themselves in ornate dress as shown by “*Solomon in all his glory*” (Luke 12:27). The scribes and Pharisees did “*make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments*” (Matthew 23:5). There were expectations among the Jews for the guests to be properly dressed at weddings (Matthew 22:11,12).

The consideration of formal dress does not appear to be given any attention in the New Testament in the same way that it is considered in the Old Testament. There is the broad injunction in 1 Corinthians 4:40 that “*all things be done decently and in order*” whether it be with respect to using different languages (verses 26 to 39) or to Christian behaviour in general. This agrees with “*be sober minded. In all things showing thyself (to be) a pattern of good works*” (Titus 2:6,7). It is also in agreement with Paul’s advice to Timothy that “*men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without anger or doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modestly, with decency and propriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly clothing*” (1Timothy 2:8,9; Amplified).

### **Review**

Thus, from Adam through Noah and Abraham and David to Jesus there were changes to life on earth at every stage of human history. But the most significant change of all was the switch from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.

The Jews had to switch from the Law Covenant to the New Covenant.

The Gentiles were outside the Law Covenant and had to switch from atheism to the New Covenant.

### **Faith Did Not Change**

During the Patriarchal and Jewish Ages there were men and women who worshipped God and served him faithfully. Some of them are named in Hebrews chapter eleven. In that context it is explained that they were justified because their faithfulness and therefore granted righteousness by imputation. Being righteous through God’s grace meant that their sins had been forgiven, and thus they gained the promise of resurrection to that

kingdom of which they were aware, and which they anticipated despite the realisation that they would follow their ancestors into death. Their faith was in God and his promises, given to the Patriarchs, and then to the Israelites under the Law Covenant, which had not been fulfilled. But that dispensation was changed when Jesus established the New Covenant.

The new dispensation was that imputed righteousness was granted because of faith in the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice given for the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:14). The apostle Paul made it clear that faith was the essential feature for imputed righteousness during both dispensations, that for Abraham, and the patriarchs, kings, judges and prophets of the Old Testament, justification depended upon faith in God; that is, upon the conviction that he exists, and that he has promised rewards for those who seek to serve him during all ages. There was no change to God's requirement of a faithful heart.

There was no change to the situation that men, and women, have always been fighting a personal war, resisting wrongdoing; a fight of afflictions (Hebrews 10:32) "*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Ephesians 6:12). And while these have been unending spiritual wars, to our shame as human beings, there has been physical war since the time of the first murder.

The Israelites were commanded by God to drive out the tribes which lived in Canaan in order to receive the inheritance of the land promised through Abraham, and while such conflicts may be mis-named holy wars, there is no justification for war, which is the greatest crime against humanity, and against the life-giving creator. The loss of life through famine, war, pestilence and (Adamic) death has been dreadful in the extreme.

Only God is justified in taking life because he gave it, and he will judge (Psalm 75:7) during the Kingdom Age all those who have died, when they have been raised to life, through his authority given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18; Acts 10:42; NIV).

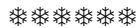
When the Law Covenant was delivered to Moses he was instructed by God to make "*a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I will show thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle ... ye shall make it*" (Exodus 25:8,9). During the Jewish Age that followed, God's presence with the Israelites was signified by the Shekinah light above the mercy seat in the holiest inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple. That divine arrangement was annulled when Jesus died on the cross, "*blotting out the*

*handwriting of ordinances that was against us, ... and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:14), "when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).*

From the testimony of God's presence in the Temple with the whole nation under the Law Covenant, the New Covenant made the switch to God's presence with each individual believer by placing his law of love in the heart and mind, as he promised through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31).

The switch from the Law Covenant to the New Covenant replaced a contract of strict and unremitting obedience to the Law with a spiritual commitment to a self-effacing law of love. The change was from a complex and comprehensive system of behaviour to a simple personal relationship with the creator through the faultless mediation of Jesus Christ. It can be only with a feeling of dismay to become aware of the many attempts made during the Gospel Age to modify the truth and purpose of the gospel message by introducing or amalgamating ideas and philosophies from foreign religions and ideologies with that message, thereby contaminating the simple purity of Jesus' teachings.

There is a very profound reason to rejoice that the Old Covenant has been replaced by the New. While the change involves the whole panorama of the Bible story, Jesus' gospel message, the message of redemption, is simple. We are promised salvation, not because of our lineage or our knowledge, but because of our faith.



## **Notes from a Group Study of the Epistle to the HEBREWS**

### **Hebrews 7:11-19**

- 11 *If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?***
- 12 *For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.***
- 13 *For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar.***
- 14 *For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood.***
- 15 *And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest,***
- 16 *Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life.***

- 17 For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.**
- 18 For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.**
- 19 For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.**

This section is also talking about a change of priesthood which administers the law, and that a change of priesthood involves also a change of law. As well as this, the writer quoted Psalm 110 to prove the point that Jesus had superior qualifications to Aaron in that Jesus is both a king and a priest, and that Jesus' priesthood continues for ever. Verse 12 was seen to be a pivotal verse in chapter 7 because it set forth clearly the change of priesthood necessitating a change of law. It was considered that the change of priesthood was the underlying issue in chapter 7.

It was agreed that the new and better law arrangement was the New Covenant arrangement, as stated in Jeremiah 31, and this was based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which indicates that it is not what we perform that is so important, but rather what we are thinking that can bring us forgiveness and salvation and reconciliation with God. When the apostle referred to "*another priest after the similitude of Melchisedec*" in verse 15 he was obviously making a reference to Jesus who shed his perfect blood to be the ransom sacrifice for all mankind.

The question was asked on verse 15, 'What is meant by "*more clear*" as rendered in the NIV?'. In response it was pointed out that for "*more clear*", the KJV and RV have "*more evident*". It was suggested that what is more evident is stated in verse 14, namely that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah and not from Levi, the priestly tribe. Jesus could not inherit any priestly office from Levi because that office was only temporary and limited to the Law Covenant, with the priests, including the High Priest, continually passing into death and being succeeded by other priests, who also died, until God finally brought the arrangement to an end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Alternatively, it was suggested that the words "*more clear*" and "*more evident*" of verse 15 could be referring back to verse 12, which mentioned a change of priesthood, which in turn involved a change of the law.

Verse 16 mentions the distinction between the two priesthoods, that of Jesus and that of Levi. The Levitical priesthood was "*carnal*", that is, "*fleshly*", because its members were fleshly, dying priests ministering to a nation of flesh also condemned to death and passing into the grave. Jesus' priesthood, on the other hand, is a priesthood "*made after the power of an endless life*". There is no record of succession to Melchisedec, and God used this fact to apply to Jesus Christ, who became, and remains, a priest, and a king, for ever after, or like, the order of Melchisedec.

Verse 18 speaks of the “*disannulling of the commandment*”, meaning that the old Law with its priesthood was cancelled, and a new Law or arrangement has been brought in, one which can bring people to God and give them life, which the old Law could never do.

The “*weakness and unprofitableness*’ of the Law Covenant was that it could not take away sin nor bring forgiveness permanently. The sacrifices had to be repeated: some daily, some weekly, monthly and / or annually, whereas Jesus’ single sacrifice brought the means of forgiveness and took away sin permanently; that is, forever. This “*better sacrifice*” (9:23) ratified the “*better promises*” (8:6) which are the basis for the “*better covenant*” (8:6) that is, the “*new covenant*” (8:8) written on the hearts and in the minds of sincere believers whose “*sins and iniquities will I (God) remember no more*” (8:12).

Further thoughts were given that saw the context as referring primarily to the priesthood rather than the Law, because it was the purpose of the priesthood to bring people to God. The Levitical priesthood could not do this successfully, but the new priesthood under Jesus the High Priest can do this successfully for all who come to God through him.

Verses 18 and 19 clearly stated the reason for the change of law. The reason was that the old law could not meet the needs of the human race simply because the human race could not keep the law perfectly and could not gain salvation and life under its requirements. The Law Covenant could not eradicate sin, and could not make anything perfect, or complete, because there was no provision to remove sin. The new arrangement, however, could and does take away sin for all who believe into God through Jesus Christ, and makes salvation and life attainable in providing the possibility to “*draw nigh unto God*”.

The point is made in 1 John 2:1-2 that Jesus is the propitiation for sins, that is, he takes away sin, the covenant does not. And since we still commit sin in spite of our efforts not to do so, repentance and seeking forgiveness is an ongoing process.

The “*better*” hope of verse 19 was noted, and it was pointed out that the word ‘better’ is used in Hebrews many times. We have the “*better hope*” of our lesson, “*better testament*” (7:22), “*better covenant*” (8:6), “*better promises*” (8:6), “*better sacrifices*” (9:23), “*better country*” (11:16), “*better resurrection*” (11:35), “*some better thing*” (11:40) and “*better things*” (12:24). All such references point to the superiority of the New Covenant over the former Law Covenant.



# NEWS and NOTES

## Sunday Meetings

Due to the continuing requirement for masks to be worn in primary schools, our Sunday meetings will continue to be conducted via Zoom for the time being. We try to intersperse Bible and question studies with talks and other presentations every few weeks. All interested persons are welcome so please contact us for the meeting link if you would like to join us.

## Memorial Supper

The memorial of the Lord's Supper will be held at 8.00 pm on Friday 15 April 2022 at the home of some of our brethren. Please contact us for the address or further information.

## Autumn Conference

Planning is proceeding for our annual autumn conference, which will be held as a face-to-face event at the Foothills Conference Centre in Mooroolbark on Friday 22 – Sunday 24 April 2022. Our theme is "Praise the Lord!" and the program will include talks, Bible studies, devotions and fellowship. Furthermore, we are delighted to have been asked to conduct a baptismal service at this conference. We plan to record the formal sessions, which will be uploaded to our webpage after the event. Please contact us if you would like further information.

## Contact Details

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### THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the understandings of all the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words:  
***"Prove all things"*** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

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