



“By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13).

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## Understanding the Covenants

Is Grace Communion International (formerly Worldwide Church of God) an Old covenant church, or a new covenant church? Is a Christian’s relationship with God based on the old covenant, or on the new? Are our lives regulated by the laws of the old covenant, or by laws of the new?

This is a very basic, and a very important, subject, yet we have very seldom addressed it. Herbert W. Armstrong wrote about it in 1978 in his article “The Plain Truth About the Covenants.” Mr. Armstrong made certain points in that article whose implications we have often overlooked. He wrote, for example, that “The old covenant is ended.” And he wrote that Christians today “live according to the conditions of the new covenant.”

We have not clearly seen what the new covenant means to Christians, and *that* is what we want to focus on in this study paper: What is the new covenant, and what kind of relationship do we have with God?

We can start by defining the word “covenant.” In simple terms, a covenant is a *formal agreement*. It can be an agreement between two people, a treaty between nations, or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation. It’s this last kind of covenant that we want to focus on – that is, the relationship between God and his people. What kind of covenant relationship did God have with Abraham, and with ancient Israel, and what kind of covenant does he have with us today? What *promises* has he made to us in this age? And what does he *command*?

The Old Testament describes numerous covenants. These are all interesting, but we will look more closely at three covenants. These will be the

covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant God made through Moses with Israel at Mt. Sinai and the new covenant that is mediated by Jesus Christ.

### **The covenant with Abraham**

The first thing we notice about the covenant with Abraham is that it was *unconditional*. We are familiar with the story of Abraham. God called him out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his descendants the land of Canaan. We read the following in Genesis 15:1 through 5:

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

This was a phenomenal promise. But, even more remarkable is what we read in verse 6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

This is a landmark statement of justification by faith. Abraham was counted righteous on the basis of faith. The apostle Paul develops that thought further in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, which we will get to later. Right now, let's continue in Genesis 15 and see the *covenant* that God made with Abraham.

God repeated his promise to give Abraham the land of Canaan (verse 7). Abraham asked for some evidence of God's promise (verse 8). In response, God asked for some animals to be brought for sacrificial purposes. Abraham procured these animals and cut them in half and arranged the halves (verses 9-10). Then God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep (verse 12), during which God described the covenant (verses 13-16):

Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the

nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

God made some dramatic promises to Abraham, and they were *unconditional* promises. God didn't say, I'll do this *if* you do that. There was no command for Abraham to keep the Sabbath holy or to obey the food laws, for example.

Abraham had already done enough. He had accepted God's call, went to the land as God had commanded, and he believed God and was therefore counted as righteous. So God told him, Know *for certain* that I will give your descendants the land. It was guaranteed. He made a covenant with Abraham, formalizing the promise he had made to Abraham because of Abraham's faith. This is the landmark covenant that God made with the father of the faithful.

### **Sign of the covenant**

The next thing we notice about God's covenant with Abraham is that it had a *sign* associated with it. In Genesis 17, we find that some 14 years after the events we just read about, God confirmed his covenant, changing Abram's name to Abraham. We read about this covenant *renewal* in verses 1-8:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will *confirm* my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of *many* nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and *I will be their God.*”

God renewed the covenant, and he added some more blessings. He promised to be the God of Abraham's descendants. And God now required something else of Abraham – physical circumcision (verses 9-11):

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and *it will be the sign of the covenant* between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be *an everlasting covenant.*"

Circumcision was to be the sign of the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. The covenant was renewed and expanded. This covenant and the circumcision was continued in Isaac, Jacob, and the Israelites.

Notice, the sign was circumcision, not keeping the Sabbath holy as it was for Israel. But this "everlasting sign" for Abraham, we know from the New Testament, is *not required* for Christians. We should remember this as we are looking at the Sabbath as the sign for Israel under the old covenant. We now go to the book of Exodus and look at God's covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel in the days of Moses.

### **The covenant at Mt. Sinai**

The first thing we notice about the covenant at Mt. Sinai is that the people agreed to obey God. We are told that God remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he therefore brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He brought them to Mt. Sinai, and there he made a covenant with them. As their ruler, he gave laws, and they agreed to keep those laws (Exodus 19:5-8). God said:

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole

earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. [And he told Moses:] These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said."

The people agreed to make a covenant with God. After they were ready, God spoke the Ten Commandments, as we see in the first part of chapter 20. Please note carefully that God would have spoken the rest of the laws of the covenant as well but the people were frightened (verses 18-19):

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

So Moses became the mediator of the covenant on Mt. Sinai. Beginning in verse 22, God started giving more commandments to Moses for him to give to the people. He told them to make altars in a particular way, to treat servants in a particular way, to punish serious sins, to punish theft, and various other laws in chapters 21, 22 and 23. And if they did all that, God promised to drive out the Canaanites and give the land to the Israelites. That was his part of the agreement.

### **People agreed to obey**

The Abrahamic covenant had emphasized God's promise, and the Sinai covenant emphasized Israel's commanded responsibilities - and they were much more than the Ten Commandments.

The people agreed to obey: "When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the Lord has said we will do'" (Exodus 24:3). So Moses prepared for a covenant ceremony:

Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it

on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (verses 5-8).

So animals were killed, and the people came under the covenant by being sprinkled with the blood.

We do notice that the Ten Commandments were at the core of the Sinai covenant. In Exodus 34:28, we read that "the words of the covenant – the Ten Commandments" – were written on tablets of stone. The Ten Commandments were the words of the covenant. The tablets were called the "tablets of the covenant." They were placed inside an ark, and the ark was called "the ark of the covenant." The covenant, then, was stored inside the ark.

The Ten Commandments formed the *core* of the Sinaitic, or old covenant, but the covenant *also* included all of Exodus 20-24. The old covenant was based not just on the Ten Commandments but on the many and varied laws in the Book of the Covenant. Later, further regulations were added to Israel's responsibility, which we read about in Exodus through Deuteronomy.

In essence, the people agreed to be servants of God by obeying all the regulations he gave them, and he agreed to protect and bless them in this life.

In Exodus 31:13-17, we see that the *Sabbath* was made a sign of the Sinai covenant, just as circumcision had been a sign of the covenant with Abraham. The Sabbath was a perpetual reminder of the covenant that Israel made at Mt. Sinai.

Just before the Israelites went into the promised land, they renewed the covenant on the plains of Moab. The Ten Commandments remained the central core of the covenant, but more laws and more detailed blessings and curses were given. Throughout the rest of Israel's history, God blessed them according to this covenant, and he punished them according to this covenant. He was acting according to the terms of the agreement they had made.

God was faithful, but the people were not. As a result, the people eventually lost possession of the land and were sent into captivity.

## The new covenant

A good starting place for understanding the new covenant is to see what Hebrews 8:5-6 says about the relationship between the it and the old covenant:

They [the priests of the old covenant] serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” 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.

We see several things in these two verses: First, Jesus has a better ministry than the Levites had. Jesus is a more effective High Priest. He is actually in the “heavenly throne room,” not in an earthly copy in the tabernacle or temple.

Second, the new covenant that Jesus brought is *superior* to the old covenant. It is better in that it has better promises and a better inheritance. We read in verses 7-8: “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people.”

We see that there was something wrong with the old covenant. The problem was that the people couldn’t do what they said they would do. They couldn’t obey the law. As we are told earlier in Hebrews, they didn’t have faith. Their minds were spiritually dull; they did not understand. They didn’t have the *heart* to obey – and God knew it from the very start.

Therefore, another covenant was needed, *and that is exactly what the prophets predicted*. (This “new covenant” actually reflected the real purpose of God from eternity because we know Jesus was to be a Savior from the foundation of the world.) Here in Hebrews 8, a section of Jeremiah is quoted. We read in verse 8:

God found fault with the people and said: “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 did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.”

### “The Law” of the new covenant

So the new covenant is prophesied to be different than the old. How much different? Let’s continue reading in verse 10, still quoting from Jeremiah 31:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Each person will have his or her *own* relationship with God, Jeremiah predicted. Each person will want to obey God not because of some list of rules written down somewhere, but because he or she has an obedient attitude – a circumcised heart, God calls it. The laws will be internalized. People will keep the *spirit* of the law. They will be *in allegiance* with God, no longer in rebellion against him.

But “the law” put into human hearts cannot literally be the one described from Exodus 20 through the end of Deuteronomy. If it were Christians would have to keep it all – including circumcision, the sacrificial rituals, purification rites, civil statutes, punishment decrees, and so on.

But under the new covenant we know the ritualistic sacrifices of the old covenant are no longer needed. God forgives his people without need for sacrifices. We see that in verse 12: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The old covenant priesthood and physical circumcision we also know are obsolete. Hence, we see a principle in how to judge all the religious requirements of the old covenant as a body of law.

Hebrews 8:13 plainly tells us that the old covenant *is obsolete*, or, as Mr. Armstrong wrote, *it is ended*: “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.” The old covenant, as a package of laws regulating a relationship between God and his people, is obsolete. Of course, not every law in the old covenant is done away.

Many of those laws are repeated in the New Testament, but the *old covenant itself*, as a package, is obsolete.

### **The need for a Redeemer**

The fault of the old covenant was in the people. There was nothing in the old that would renew the people spiritually. The blood of bulls and goats could not change their hearts. It could not cleanse a guilty conscience. That's why they had to keep sacrificing animals year after year. They were never done. They could never do enough.

Of course, the old covenant was intended to bring the people into a relationship with God and keep them there. The means was the whole system of law God gave to Israel – including a place to worship, a mediating priesthood, holy days and holy time, and so on. But it was an ineffectual and external “schoolmaster” that could not get the job done.

So the prophets foretold a new covenant – a new basis of relationship between God and his people. The book of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah, but Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet to predict a new covenant. In the first of his “Suffering Servant” prophecies, Isaiah wrote of the mission of Christ. In Isaiah 42:6-7, God is speaking to his Servant:

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and *will make you to be a covenant* for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy. He is the light for both Jews and Gentiles. He opens the eyes of the spiritually blind, and he brings freedom to those who are enslaved by sin. And he *is* the covenant that God makes with his people. He is the basis for our relationship with God. It is only through him that we can receive the better promises of the new covenant.

Isaiah predicted this new and improved covenant in several places. Let's look at Isaiah 59:20:

“The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the Lord. “As for me, this is my covenant with

them,” says the Lord. “My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,” says the Lord.

The new covenant promises the Holy Spirit. That’s why it is better. The Holy Spirit is given to God’s people as a sort of down payment guaranteeing their future inheritance. And the Holy Spirit changes their hearts. The people are transformed, and they grow more and more like Christ, the Messenger and Mediator of the new covenant. The new covenant creates a true spiritual relationship, a matter of the heart, conscience and faith.

### **Jesus and the new covenant**

Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. He brought the new covenant. We are familiar with the words of the Last Supper, which we review at every New Testament Passover. Jesus said that the cup of wine represented his own blood, which would be *the blood of the new covenant* (Matthew 26:28). Luke tells us that the cup represents *the new covenant in Jesus’ blood* (Luke 22:20).

The old covenant was sealed with blood. The new covenant was, too. It was ratified, or established, when Jesus’ blood was poured out on the cross. We renew that covenant and we reaffirm our commitment to it when we eat the bread and drink the wine, remembering the Lord’s death until he returns. We are saying, in effect, “I have faith in my Savior. Jesus Christ has brought me out of slavery and rescued me. All that he says, *I will obey.*”

The Lord’s Supper is a reminder of the covenant, a visible sign of the covenant. But the wine isn’t sprinkled on us, like the blood was. Rather, we *drink* the wine and eat the bread. They go inside us. The new covenant affects our innermost being. The blood of Jesus Christ changes us because it makes possible the presence of the Holy Spirit who renews us.

Hebrews 9:14 says that Jesus’ blood cleanses our consciences. His sacrifice sanctifies us, makes us holy, sets us aside for a holy purpose. We are called to be a kingdom of priests, doing God’s work in this world. That’s part of the new covenant, part of our relationship with God. Jesus Christ is the Messenger and Mediator of the new covenant; he is also the sacrifice. He *is* the new covenant.

All that our Lord has said, we ought to do. That's part of the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations...*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:19-20). When we say Lord, Lord, we have the duty to obey what our Lord says.

If we really believe that he was the Son of God, if we really believe that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him, if we really believe that he is the Judge of the living and the dead, then we are going to want to obey him. Faith leads us to obey our Savior. If we love him, we will keep *his* commandments – not the package of religious regulations of the old covenant. If we love him, if we have faith that he died for us, then we will want to live for him.

Everything we do should be for his honor and glory. We are his people, in his service, willing to do his work. The "work" we do is to believe in Jesus as our Savior and it reflects the fruit of the Holy Spirit in love, joy, peace, self-control and other such qualities.

The commands of Jesus, beginning with the command to repent and believe in him, are the requirements of the new covenant. If we believe, it is because God has called us; it is because God has already begun to change our hearts. Through repentance and faith in Christ, we are given the Holy Spirit and are promised eternal life in the kingdom of God. This is an eternal covenant, guaranteed by Jesus himself, who is our High Priest interceding for us. He is working in us, perfecting us for his use (Hebrews 10:14).

We have been given exceedingly great promises! Can you believe them? If so, then your faith can be counted as righteousness, just as Abraham's was. Salvation is God's gift. If you don't believe God, salvation won't be given to you. In the new covenant, faith is required. God forgives our sins because Christ died for us. Because of his one great sacrifice, God can forgive all our sins. And we are acceptable to God only if we have faith.

### **Terms of the new covenant**

The new covenant is not simply a restatement of the old laws. We have already seen in Hebrews 8 that the old covenant is obsolete. Some of its laws have been discarded. Some of its laws have been changed. Some have been continued, and others have been added. The new covenant is different from the old. It not only adds faith and the Holy Spirit, it also removes some of the laws of the old,

particularly those religious regulations that physically “hemmed in” Israel in an attempt to keep them loyal to God.

Let’s look at Hebrews 7 to see what the Bible tells us about this issue. The passage is talking about Jesus being a High Priest forever, even though he is not a Levite. The question is, How can this be? Hebrews 7:12 answers: “For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.”

The old covenant said that priests had to be of the family of Aaron. So when Jesus ascends to heaven as our eternal High Priest, it means that the old law has been changed. In fact, it is changed so much that it is set aside. It doesn’t apply any more. We notice that again in verses 18-19: “The former regulation is *set aside* because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.”

The old covenant is set aside because it was weak. It could not make anyone perfect. It could not change human hearts. Now, in the new covenant mediated by Jesus, we have a better hope, better promises, and we can each draw near to God. We can each know the Lord and have a direct relationship with him. Therefore, as verse 22 says, “Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.”

Under the old covenant, the high priest could approach the presence of God in the Most Holy Place only once a year on the day of atonement. He did this on behalf of the people and effected a national reconciliation between God and Israel. Today, all God’s people can come into God’s presence individually at anytime because his presence is in them through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the old rituals such as the one on the day of atonement can be set aside because they are no longer necessary.

This “setting aside” is not just talking about Levitical and sacrificial laws that were added to the old covenant – it is talking about the old covenant itself. The whole package was set aside and replaced by Christ. “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (verse 25). Hebrews 10 continues the theme, discussing the prophecies about Christ’s coming and how he did away with all the old covenant offerings:

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”

(although the law required them to be made). Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second (verses 8-10).

When this passage talks about “first” and “second,” it’s talking about the old and new covenants. Jesus has set aside the first covenant, setting aside some of its laws, so he could establish the new covenant, the new relationship we have with God.

As stated previously, this new covenant has better promises. For one thing, as verse 10 says: “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Through the new covenant, we have been sanctified, made holy to God.

### **Which old covenant laws apply today?**

Let’s notice that some of the laws of the old covenant are still in force, and some are changed, and some are obsolete. We won’t take space to go through them all, but we can go through a few just to demonstrate the point.

Consider, for example, the Seventh Commandment, which forbids adultery. Is that in force? Absolutely! The commandment is repeated in the New Testament. This law was also in force before Sinai, as in the days of Joseph, because it is a law that will always govern the relationship of human beings to each other.

Another law in the old covenant is in Exodus 22:22: “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.” That commandment is actually given new force in the New Testament, because rather than merely not taking advantage of widows and orphans, we are commanded to reach out to help them. So that law is still in force, and even made stronger.

Let’s consider the First Commandment, in Exodus 20:3: “You shall have no other gods.” That commandment is repeated in the New Testament, so it’s still in force, but in actual application, we obey it in a distinctly different way, because we worship Jesus Christ, and we cannot worship the Father at all unless we come to him through his Son. The First Commandment now requires faith in Christ. So this commandment, too, has been changed by being *expanded*.

Another law we apply in a different way is Exodus 22:19: “Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.” The principle of the law is still in force (the New Testament forbids all sexual immorality), but we do not enforce this particular penalty. The law has been changed by being *reduced*. Christians would remove such a person from their fellowship until repentance, because anyone who does such a thing is obviously not in a right relationship with God. They are violating the new covenant and are not in “the church,” which is the body of Christ, made so by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each of its members.

Briefly, now let’s notice some examples of laws that are completely obsolete. Exodus 20:24, for example, says: “Make an altar of earth for me.” That law is irrelevant for us today.

Exodus 22:29-30 is another example: “You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep.” Today, we give all our children to God in one sense, but we do not give our firstborn in any special way. We might give God an offering of thanks, just as we would for anything. But there’s no particular requirement that we have to give any certain amount, or even that we have to do anything unusual at all for our firstborn cattle and sheep. Instead, our whole life is a sacrifice to God.

And the promises of the old covenant are also obsolete. We do not expect God to drive the Canaanites out so we can occupy the land.

So you see that some laws are still binding, and others are changed, and some are done away with. But the old covenant itself, as a package of laws between God and his people, is obsolete. We can’t assume that *any* part of the old covenant is binding on us today *simply* on the basis of its being in the old package of laws. There is more to it than that.

### **Righteousness by faith**

*Christians inherit the promises of Abraham on the basis of faith – the same way Abraham received the promises in the first place.* The package of laws that were given to Moses for Israel – which came with purely material promises – simply cannot take away the greater spiritual promises given by grace and received in faith. This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17, an especially important passage that clearly states that the mosaic covenant with Israel has nothing to do with the covenant of grace given to Abraham and Christians.

Let's go to Galatians 3 and see what the apostle Paul is talking about in this regard. In this letter, he was arguing against a legalistic heresy. In verse 2 he asks: "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" The answer, of course, is that they received the Holy Spirit by faith, not by the law. He asks something similar in verse 5: "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" The answer, of course, is that the Holy Spirit - and salvation - comes by faith, not by law.

That is, the promise of salvation is not predicated on observing the demands of the old covenant religious regulations. Of course, those laws that spoke to relationships of spiritual love between people and between people and God are always in force. But under the new covenant it is *belief and faith* that show the Christian's relationship to God.

Notice this in Galatians 3. "Consider Abraham," Paul says in verses 6-7. "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham." Paul is quoting Genesis 15. If we have faith, we are children of Abraham. We inherit the promises that God gave to him.

Notice verse 9: "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." Faith brings blessings. But if we rely on keeping the law, we will be condemned. We will fall short. Christ saved us from that. He died for us. Notice verse 14: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that *by faith* we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

Then, in verses 15-16, Paul uses a practical example to tell the Christians at Galatia that the law of Moses cannot do away with the promises given to Abraham. That is, the law of Moses is not a transformed law whose religious requirements would be necessary in the Christian life.

Paul says: "Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed."

That seed, of course, is Jesus Christ. But Jesus is not the only one who inherits the promises of Abraham. The point that Paul is making is that the

Galatian Christians do, too, and we do today as well. If we have faith in Christ, we are Abraham's children, and we inherit the promises through Jesus Christ. That is, this inheritance occurs on the same basis as Abraham inherited the promise, not on his basis plus the old covenant law.

Now we come to Galatians 3:17: "What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise."

The law given at Mt. Sinai cannot set aside the Abrahamic covenant, based on faith in God's promise. That's the point that Paul is making. Christians have a relationship with God based on faith, not on law. Of course, we obey God, but we obey according to the new covenant, not the old. Paul explains that we have to be obedient in chapters 5 and 6. The obedience takes the form of allowing the Holy Spirit to express his "fruit" through us - love, joy, peace and so on.

### **Law of Moses temporary**

Paul's point here is that the law of Moses - the old covenant - was temporary. It was added only until Christ came. That's what we see in verse 19: "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come."

Christ is the Seed, and the old covenant is now obsolete. The new covenant has a new set of laws, though many are the same, and our relationship with God is on a different foundation, based on a different agreement.

Let's read verses 24-26: "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. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Clearly, Christians are not under the old covenant laws - except, of course, those that are also part of the new covenant.

Then, in Galatians 3:29 we read: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The point is that Christians are given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith. We are justified by faith, or declared right with God by faith. We are saved on the basis of faith, not on law-keeping, and certainly not on the basis of the old covenant. If we believe God's promise through Jesus Christ, we have a right relationship with God.

In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise, just as Abraham's was. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham and to all who are Abraham's children by faith. That package of old covenant laws became obsolete when Christ died, and there is now a new package.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of *his* covenant, cannot change the original promise to him based on faith. In Romans 4, Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was **uncircumcised**. It was at least 14 years later that circumcision was commanded for Abraham and his offspring. As stated earlier, physical circumcision is not required for Christians today. Circumcision is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29).

Keeping the old covenant religious law cannot make us righteous in God's eyes nor give us salvation. All it can do is condemn us, since we all are lawbreakers in one way or another.

We can see that in Romans 3. In one short section, Paul spells out the plan of salvation. Let's read it and see how it confirms what we have seen in Galatians: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, *apart from law*, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (verses 20-21).

### **Salvation through faith**

The Old Testament scriptures predicted salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and it comes not through the old covenant law, but by faith. That's the basis of the new covenant terms of our relationship with God through our Savior Jesus Christ.

Paul continues in verses 22-24: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely *by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Because Jesus died for us, we can be declared righteous. God justifies those who have faith in Christ – and therefore no one can brag about how well they keep the law. That's because holiness or faithfulness to God is not predicated on

keeping the strict religious requirements that came in with the old covenant, but being cleansed from sin through faith. Thus, Paul can say in Romans 3:28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart from* observing the law.”

These are profound words by the apostle Paul. And James, like Paul, warns us about any so-called faith that doesn't lead to obeying God. It was Abraham's faith that led him to obey God (Genesis 26:4-5). Paul is talking about real faith, the kind that includes repentance and total allegiance to Christ, a wholehearted willingness to obey him. But even then, he says, it is the *faith* that saves us, and not the works.

In Romans 5:1-2, Paul writes: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

Through faith, we have a right relationship with God. We are his friends, not his enemies. That's how we will be able to stand before him on the day of judgment, and not, for example, because we kept holy time, were circumcised or avoided certain foods. Rather, we have faith in the promise given to us through Jesus Christ and this leads us, through the Holy Spirit, to desire to do the will of God. Paul explains this further in Romans 8:1-4:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

The “righteous requirements” for Christians are not Sabbath, tithing, food laws and circumcision, but following the lead of the Holy Spirit to live in love toward God and fellow humans. This is what puts us in a right relationship with our Savior.

Our relationship with God is based on faith in Jesus Christ. That's the agreement that God has made with us. He has agreed to count us as righteous if we have faith in his Son, if we live by the Spirit and are led by the Spirit in

newness of life. Law-keeping cannot change us, but Christ through the Holy spirit in us, can. The law condemns us to death, but Christ promises us life. The law cannot rescue us from the slavery of sin, but Christ does. Christ gives us freedom, but it isn't freedom to please ourselves – it is freedom to serve him.

Paul makes that clear in 2 Corinthians 3. Here he writes that God: “Has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (verse 6). The old covenant condemns us, but the new covenant gives us life through the Holy Spirit. He continues in verses 7-8: “Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?”

The old covenant was good in that it attempted to keep a non-spiritually-minded people mindful of God. But it failed. The new covenant is so much better that the old one doesn't compare to it, and we are privileged to have a relationship with God based on the new covenant!

### **Old and new in the book of Hebrews**

The book of Hebrews explains more about the old covenant and the new. We have already looked at parts of chapters 7 and 8. Jesus is the new High Priest, making the old priesthood obsolete, and he brought a new covenant, making the old covenant obsolete. The new covenant is better, since it has a way to make people perfect, a way to forgive their sins, a way to change their hearts.

Let's go to chapter 9 and continue the thought. The old covenant had a tabernacle that was a physical copy of what was in heaven. The Israelites had regular sacrifices, but the priests could go into the Holy of Holies only once a year. Notice what verses 9-10 says about this:

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Notice the phrase “external regulations.” That's what made up the old covenant, enforced as a schoolmaster until Jesus finished his earthly work and

the Holy Spirit became available. Those old covenant rituals were temporary works. Now, the new order has come, and the old is obsolete. Those rituals could make people outwardly clean, we are told, but the new covenant is better. We see that in verses 14-15:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our *consciences* from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Let us move now to chapter 10, verse 1: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.” The law pointed people to Christ. The regulations and rituals and rules were good, but they were not good enough. They could not make human beings holy nor infuse human beings with the love of God, which is necessary for us to be at one with him.

But Christ does. We see that in Hebrews 10:10, to repeat the thought: “By that will [God’s will, that is], we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” And in verse 14: “By one sacrifice *he has made perfect* forever those who are being made holy.” This is already being done to us in the new covenant. We have been declared righteous. We are being made perfect and holy.

Can we believe these promises of God? If we have the faith of Abraham, the answer is, yes. We have been forgiven – by grace, through faith in our Savior Jesus Christ.

### **The Christian life**

*But does this make any difference in how we live?* Of course it does. It must. We have obligations to serve our Lord and Master, and we have obligations toward one another. We are no longer the servants of sin. We have a new Master, and we are to give all our allegiance to *him* (Hebrews 10:19-25).

Because we have been forgiven, we should have a better relationship with God. We should draw near to him, knowing that he accepts us as righteous because we are children of Abraham and heirs of the promise given to him. In the new covenant, each of us *can* know the Lord in a completely intimate way. We *can* have a good relationship with him we can also have a better relationship with one another.

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