

The Better Covenant

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Recently someone sent me a list entitled:

More Fun from America's Dumbest Criminals!

Tennessee:

A man successfully broke into a bank after hours and stole the bank's video camera. While it was recording. Remotely. (That is, the videotape recorder was located elsewhere in the bank, so he didn't get the videotape of himself stealing the camera.)

Louisiana:

A man walked into a convenience store, put a \$20 bill on the counter and asked for change. When the clerk opened the cash drawer, the man pulled a gun and asked for all the cash in the register, which the clerk promptly provided. The man took the cash from the clerk and fled -- leaving the \$20 bill on the counter. The total amount of cash he got from the drawer? Fifteen dollars. (If someone points a gun at you and gives you money, was a crime committed?)

Arkansas:

Seems this guy wanted some beer pretty badly. He decided that he'd just throw a cinder block through a liquor store window, grab some booze, and run. So he lifted the cinder block and heaved it over his head at the window. The cinder block bounced back and hit the would-be thief on the head, knocking him unconscious. Seems the liquor store window was made of Plexiglas. The whole event was caught on videotape.

Kentucky:

Two men tried to pull the front off a cash machine by running a chain from the machine to the bumper of their pickup truck. Instead of pulling the front panel off the machine, though, they pulled the bumper off their truck. Scared, they left the scene and drove home. With the chain still attached to the machine. With their bumper still attached to the chain. With their vehicle's license plate still attached to the bumper.

Seattle:

When a man attempted to siphon gasoline from a motor home parked on a Seattle street, he got much more than he bargained for. Police arrived at the scene to find an ill man curled up next to a motor home near spilled sewage. A police spokesman said that the man admitted to trying to steal gasoline and plugged his hose into the motor home's sewage tank by mistake. The owner of the vehicle declined to press charges, saying that it was the best laugh he'd ever had.

It is amazing how stupid people can be. Fortunately, most of us are law-abiding citizens. We'd never break the law, right?

Actually all of us are law-breakers at heart, in our flesh.

*"Everyone who sins breaks the law: in fact, sin is lawlessness."
([1 John 3:4](#))*

So in a certain sense, even though we may never have tried anything like the stupid crimes I just listed, every one of us is a law-breaker because every one of us has sinned, and sin is lawlessness. The Bible tells us that the wages of law breaking-- the wages of sin-- is death. Since all of us have sinned, all of us deserve to die. But thank God for his gospel of grace. The very next verse in [1 John 3](#) says:

"But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin." ([1 John 3:5](#))

Jesus Christ met the demands of God's law. He obeyed fully and perfectly. And he paid the penalty for transgression when he died as our substitute on the cross.

If you don't want to die for your sins, what are your choices?

- You can accept what Christ has done for you, accept his free gift of salvation by grace, allow your life to be hid in his, and be accepted by God and counted as perfect (in Christ);

OR

- You can try and provide your own perfect record of obedience to God's law. You can make promises and work hard and give attention to detail and see how you fare in the judgment.

If you make the first choice then you are a New Covenant Christian. If you make the second choice, you are insisting on the Old Covenant and making a very foolish choice. Many people insist on living under the Old Covenant but it is a foolish choice because:

"All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" ([Galatians 3:10](#))

In the last chapter we saw that the Ten Commandments were God's covenant with Israel that he gave at Mount Sinai. They were called the "*words of the covenant*." The Ten Commandments were then expanded and extended in many other laws (in Exodus-Deuteronomy) which were called the "*book of the covenant*" or the "*book of the law*." The Ten Commandments were the summary, but all of the laws together made up the Book of the Law.

As a part of the Old Covenant, *blessings* were promised for those who obeyed, and *curses* for those who disobeyed ([Deuteronomy 28](#)). And notice that *total*

obedience was the standard: "*Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything in the Book of the Law.*"

Now God knew all along that it would be impossible for anyone to gain righteousness through the law, but he wanted to educate humanity concerning sin and the need for a Savior. In preparing the world for the coming of Jesus, God designed things –

"...so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." ([Romans 3:19,20](#))

The old covenant prepared the way for a new and *better* covenant. I have entitled this chapter, "*The Better Covenant*," based on the words of this Scripture:

"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant..." ([Hebrews 8:6](#), NASB)

Reasons why the New Covenant is "better"

Why is the new covenant a "better" covenant? Let's think about several reasons.

First, the old covenant was the *Law*; the new covenant is *Jesus*. Which is better - the *Law* or *Jesus*? That is easy to answer!

Long before he arrived God foretold that the coming Messiah would *be* his covenant with humanity:

"I will... make you [The Messiah] to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." ([Isaiah 42:6](#))

"I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people." ([Isaiah 49:8](#))

When compared to the new covenant, the old covenant was incomplete and fragmentary. The new covenant revelation of Jesus is a *better* revelation because, unlike the laws of the old covenant, Jesus is the "*radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature.*"

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of

God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." ([Hebrews 1:1-3](#))

The new covenant is a better, more complete revelation of God because Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Jesus is the final word. Notice how the two covenants are contrasted and compared in these verses:

The Old Covenant

God Spoke

to the forefathers
in the past
through the prophets
at many times
in various ways

The New Covenant

God has spoken (with finality)

to us
in these last days
by his Son
the radiance of God's glory
the exact representation of
his being

God *did* speak during the old covenant, but it was in summary and shadowy form. For example, the statement made to Abraham, "*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed*" ([Genesis 12:3, NASB](#)) was not fully understood by the forefathers. It would take hundreds of years before it would be fully understood as revealed in Christ. Jesus is God's final word. All that came before as revelation pales in significance to the revelation of Jesus who could say, "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father.*" ([John 14:9](#))

The new covenant is a better covenant because it is based on the reality rather than the shadows.

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming -- not the realities themselves." ([Hebrews 10:1](#))

Many of the rituals, festivals and ceremonies of the old covenant were shadows or types pointing forward to the coming Savior. But which would you rather have - the shadow or the real thing? Those of you who are married: which is better in your arms - the shadow of your spouse or your spouse?

The old covenant with all its regulations was -

"...a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." ([Colossians 2:17](#))

The new covenant is a better covenant because it is based on substance rather than shadows.

The new covenant is a better covenant because it is rooted in grace, not law.
There was grace in the old covenant, but the focus was law. There is law in the new covenant, but the focus is grace. New Covenant Christians are --

"...not under law, but under grace." ([Romans 6:14](#))

We will examine the Christian's relationship to the law in more depth in the next chapter. For now just observe that the new covenant is a better covenant because it is based on grace, not law.

The new covenant is a better covenant because sin is dealt with completely through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

In the old covenant there were always more sacrifices, more rituals, more offerings needed to deal with sin. It was never fully dealt with.

But in the new covenant things are different. Christ is our High Priest.

*"Such a high priest meets our need-- one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."
([Hebrews 7:26-27](#))*

Christ dealt with sins *"once for all when he offered himself."* The new covenant is a better covenant because sin is dealt with completely through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

The new covenant is a better covenant because it is a covenant for all people.

The old covenant was made with the nation of Israel. God's heart has always been for the entire world, though. To Abraham he promised that all nations would be blessed through his coming descendant, the Messiah. And in Christ that promise is fulfilled.

Writing to Gentiles (non Jews) about the blessings of the new covenant, the apostle Paul said:

"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ...were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once

*were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."
([Ephesians 2:11-13](#))*

The new covenant is better than the old covenant because it is for all people. Those *"who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."*

Consider one more reason why the new covenant is a better covenant.

The new covenant is a better covenant because it is founded on better promises.

In [Hebrews 8](#) there are some contrasts between the ministry of the priests in the old covenant and the priestly ministry of Jesus, our High Priest, at the right hand of God in heaven -

"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." ([Hebrews 8:6](#))

Notice that the new covenant is a superior or better covenant because it is founded on better promises.

What were the promises upon which the old covenant was based? God made specific promises to the children of Israel that were conditioned upon obedience. But the covenant was based on more than just God's promises. It was also based on the **people's** promises. When given the law they said, *"All that the Lord has said we will do."* A number of times they gave that response. For example, [Exodus 24:7](#):

"Then he [Moses] 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.'" ([Exodus 24:7](#))

Not long after making those promises, the people were breaking them. The old covenant was based in part on the promises of *the people*. The new covenant is based entirely on the promises of God. That makes it a better covenant founded on better promises. That's what [Hebrews 8:6](#) says. The next verses read:

"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 and said: 'The time is coming... when I will make a new covenant... It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers...'" ([Hebrews 8:7-9](#))

The next several verses quote from the [Jeremiah 31](#) prophecy where God promises to write his laws on his people's minds and hearts in the new covenant, to have a personal relationship with any individual who will respond, and to forgive and forget their sins. All those promises make the new covenant a better covenant!

After quoting the words of Jeremiah, the writer to the Hebrews concludes chapter eight with these words:

"By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear." ([Hebrews 8:13](#))

When you read a verse like that there can be no doubt about how the two covenants rate when compared. The old covenant is obsolete and needs to disappear now that the new has arrived.

The new covenant is a better covenant. We have considered several reasons why it is a better covenant:

- The new covenant is better because... it is a more complete revelation of God because Jesus is *"the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."*
- The new covenant is better because... it is based on the reality rather than the shadows.
- The new covenant is better because... it is rooted in grace, not law.
- The new covenant is better because... in it sin is dealt with completely through Christ's atoning sacrifice.
- The new covenant is better because... it is a covenant for all people.
- The new covenant is better because... it is founded on better promises.

Why did God give the Old Covenant?

We could go on and on with these comparisons. But I want to shift gears here and ask: Why did God ever give the old covenant when the new was so much better?

The old covenant was given as a temporary, teaching tool to prepare humanity for the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ.

"So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." ([Galatians 3:24-25](#))

The New International Translation (NIV), which I just quoted, says that the law was "put in charge to lead us to Christ." As new covenant Christians we are no longer under the supervision of the law. The Greek word used in this verse describes a tutor or guardian who takes care of children. Listen to the different ways it is translated in various versions:

"The law was our custodian until Christ came" ([RSV](#))

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" ([KJV](#))

"The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ" ([NASB](#))

"The Jewish laws were our teacher and guide until Christ came" ([TLB](#))

"The law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Christ came" ([NLT](#))

The law of the old covenant was a:

- custodian
- school master
- tutor
- teacher
- guide
- guardian

Whichever word you use, the role of the old covenant was temporary. Its purpose was to educate concerning what sin is and how much we need a Savior. It was for children, not grown-ups.

Now that we have the full reality of Christ, we no longer need the tutor. That means we no longer need the old covenant. That means we no longer need the law.

I encourage you to read carefully the whole book of Galatians, especially chapters three and four.

According to [Galatians 3](#) the covenant that God made with Abraham was not a law covenant. It was based on faith.

"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'"
([Galatians 3:6-8](#))

God's covenant with Abraham was not a law covenant. It was based on faith. In it God was "announcing the gospel in advance," proclaiming a coming salvation for all that would believe. That's why those who believe in Christ become spiritual "children of Abraham," not children of Moses.

The teaching covenant that was given to Moses and Israel was a law covenant. It was not based on faith.

"The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them.'" ([Galatians 3:12](#))

The law covenant was temporary

The law covenant that came in as a temporary, teaching measure did not nullify or make void the previous faith covenant that had been made with Abraham. The law covenant was a temporary provision that existed only until Christ came as a fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham. Notice how this is clearly spelled out in [Galatians 3](#):

"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. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise." ([Galatians 3:17-18](#))

What is Paul saying here? He's saying that God's faith covenant with Abraham which pointed forward to Christ was based on grace and was not canceled out by the law covenant that came 430 years later at Mount Sinai. The law was not given to Abraham. It came 430 years later. And it was in effect as a covenant only until Christ arrived. Look at the next verse:

"What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come." ([Galatians 3:19](#))

Please notice the word "until." The law covenant, which had not existed before Moses, was "added" **until** the Seed came. The Seed is Christ (according to [v.16](#))-- the promised seed or descendant of Abraham.

You might be saying, "Wait a minute, didn't God give the Ten Commandments to Adam and Eve, or Noah, or Abraham?" No!

The Ten Commandments are great principles which talk about loving God and each other, but God's basic law of love goes far beyond a few "Thou Shalt Not's" written on stone. The law was not given before Mount Sinai.

Speaking to the Israelites, Moses said:

"The Lord made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us." ([Deuteronomy 5:2,3, NASB](#))

Mount Horeb means "mountain of God." It was also called Mount Sinai. It was the place where Moses first saw the burning bush, and where God later gave the law.

Moses states that the covenant was made at that mountain. Then he went on in [verses 5-21](#) to repeat the Ten Commandments -- the words of the covenant. Notice that they were not given before Mount Sinai. "The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers." The law was 430 years after the time of Abraham and was to be in effect as a covenant UNTIL Christ came.

We have seen that the Law or the Old Covenant was a tutor. Now that Christ has come we are no longer under the tutor. In other words, the old covenant no longer has authority over the life of a Christian.

A powerful allegory

You might be wondering, "Can we really be sure that is what Paul means in Galatians?" There can be no doubt. All you have to do is keep reading. Read all of Galatians 4. For the sake of time and space, we'll skip to the final passage of the chapter - a powerful allegory comparing the two covenants in [Galatians 4:21-31](#):

"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise."

([Galatians 4:21-23](#))

Paul addresses his comments to "those who want to be under the law." Surprisingly, there were and are those who want to be under law. They find security in having things spelled out in black and white rather than depending on the Spirit to lead according to the law of love written in our hearts. They also like to think that salvation ought to be at least partially dependent on their own efforts.

Speaking to those folks, Paul contrasts the covenants, allegorizing a historical account. If you are not aware of the Old Testament background here, Abraham and Sarah were childless. God promised that they would have a son who would be the beginning of a large ancestry from whom the Messiah would eventually come. But because Abraham and Sarah were old, it took a lot of faith to believe that miracle could happen. So they decided to help God out. Abraham slept with his wife's servant, Hagar, and she bore a son named Ishmael.

God was not pleased with that works-oriented approach. He had promised a miracle by faith. Eventually Sarah did have a son, as God had promised, and they named him Isaac.

Now Paul uses that story as an allegory of the two covenants:

"These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother."

([Galatians 4:24-26](#))

These two women represent two covenants. You can choose which covenant you want to be a part of. The old, given at Mount Sinai, which leads to slavery, or the new, ratified at Mount Calvary, which leads to freedom! Who is your spiritual mother? Hagar or Sarah? It is your choice. Do you want to be a slave child or a free child?

Let me just say that if you want to live according to the Old Covenant, then you should try and be very consistent and keep all the laws of the Old Covenant.

- Make sure every boy-child is circumcised. You ought to do it on the eighth day, too. It is a religious experience, so take him to the pastor and have him do it. That was the priest's job during the old covenant times. (I told my fellow pastors on staff that that sounded like an associate pastor's job!)
- Keep all the holy days starting with the Sabbaths - 24 hours from sunset to sunset, don't work, don't light a fire, don't go out of your home, don't cook, bake or boil, don't carry a load, don't buy or sell, don't do your own pleasure.
- Don't stop there. Keep the new moons and annual festivals as well. Follow the calendar and keep Passover, The Feast of Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and the Feasts of Booths. Don't forget the Sabbatical Years every seventh year and the Jubilee every fiftieth year.
- Don't eat any meat unless it's drained right making it Kosher. Buy it only from a Jewish slaughterhouse to be safe. And make sure to avoid any pork or seafood that doesn't have fins and scales.

I'm just getting started but that list can go on and on.

None of that is necessary in the new covenant! It is okay for you to do any of that if you find it helpful or healthful, but the old covenant is no longer binding on Christians as it was for Jews before the Messiah came and ratified the new covenant.

Let's finish reading the last few verses of Galatians 4 –

"Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now." ([Galatians 4:28,29](#))

Notice those words: "It is the same now." When you are set free from the bondage of the old covenant way of legalistic pursuits at self-righteousness, there will be those still living according to the old covenant who will resent you

and persecute you. It has always been so. Expect it. Be gracious and loving. But don't give in. Stand firm in your freedom!

Now read the last two verses:

"But what does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.' Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman." ([Galatians 4:30,31](#))

The slave woman represents the old covenant. What does the Scripture say to do with the old covenant? "Get rid of it!" We are not called to live in slavery, but freedom. New Covenant Christians are not under the old covenant. I encourage you to live as children of the free woman.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." ([Galatians 5:1](#))