

Fulfilling all the Old Covenant Promises

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[0 : 0 0] Now, for our Bible reading, we are continuing in the letter to the Hebrews, and you'll find the passage on page 1005. I'm going to read from chapter 8, verse 1, to chapter 9, verse 10.

Our author has been developing the main central theme in his letter, which is that Jesus is the great high priest in heaven, who represents us, who intercedes for us, who is there on our behalf.

And now he continues with that theme, chapter 8, verse 1. Now the point in what we are saying is this. We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. But every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices, thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now, if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, see that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.

But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is much more excellent than the old, as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would be no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

For they did not continue in my covenant. And so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord.

[2 : 1 2] I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They shall not teach each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. In speaking of the new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. Now, even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the presence. It was called the holy place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the most holy place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a gold urn, holding the manna and Aaron's staff that budded and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory, overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties. But into the second, only the high priest goes, and he, but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. By this, the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened, as long as the first section is still standing, which is symbolic for the present age. According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, if we could open our Bibles, please, at Hebrews 8 and 9 on page 105, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings to us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. May that be our experience tonight, our Father. As the Lord Christ walked the Emmaus Road and caused his disciples' hearts to burn, caused their eyes to be opened, and sent them back with the message of resurrection, we pray that that same Lord, through the Spirit, will do that to us this evening and

bless us.

We ask this in his name. Amen. It's always an interesting experience to look at pictures of babies and small children, if you know the adults into whom they've grown, because the adult happens to be you.

[5 : 50] It's often a rather embarrassing experience as well, is it not? But, if we look more closely at these pictures, it's usually possible to trace a kind of organic connection between the child, the baby, and the adult whom they've become. It's an organic connection, not the picture of a baby and then of another adult who is unrelated.

And that is the connection, I'm going to argue, between the old and the new covenant. It's not that the old covenant is bad and the new covenant is good. It's that the old covenant represents, if you like, the childhood of the nation, the new covenant, the maturity. Here's another illustration. I've heard it said that the old covenant is like the moon and the new covenant like the sun. Now, the moon is glorious. But that's quite a wrong illustration. It's not like the difference between the moon and the sun. It's like the difference between the sunrise and the sun at noonday. It's the same covenant, a natural and necessary development. Those of you who know my love of the Old Testament are not likely to imagine I'm going to get up here and trash the Old Testament and say it's obsolete, because that's not what the author is saying at all. So you'll see if you'll look at it closely. That's why I've chosen my title, Fulfilling All the Old Covenant Promises.

I was going to say a line from the second hymn we sang. That's not exactly true. Those of you who are connoisseurs of the hymn book will know that that hymn is in the hymn book. But verse 2 in it, in the hymn book version says, not now by words bringing death to transgressors, life-giving hope the new covenant brings. Now, that is totally wrong. It's totally wrong because it draws a total distinction between the covenants and also, as we were remembering this morning in the new covenant, there are still words bringing death to transgressors. That's why we changed the line to fulfilling all the old covenant promises. If it goes on like this, we'll have rewritten half the hymns in praise, but it's the value of modern technology, isn't it? So that's the first thing, organically linked, natural development. And why is it here? It's written to help people to persevere.

Notice verse 1, we have such a high priest. It's not an imaginary idea. It's not a fine thought. It's not a blessed thought. We actually have such a high priest. That's why it's wrong to go back to the old sacrifices, because the high priest who has come is the fulfillment of these. And as I say, the fulfillment, not denying their value. We'll come back to that. And you see, there's a lot in Hebrews of a kind of nostalgia for an imagined past. Can't we go back to the golden days?

Nostalgia is delicious, but it never gets us anywhere, does it? You often get this in evangelicals.

And can't we go back to the golden days of the covenanters, the Billy Graham crusades, the times of revival? Now, these were times when God worked, and God worked powerfully.

[9 : 11] But we have a high priest. Not they had a high priest, and therefore things were great for them. But we have a high priest. The second thing, already implied this, is the importance of the Old Testament in understanding Christ. Our author ransacks the Old Testament. Ransacks the Psalms, Genesis, Exodus.

Now, here again, he's coming back to Leviticus, and he's quoting extensively from Jeremiah. Difficult to find a part of this letter. She's not drawing from the Old Testament, and drawing from the living truth of the Old Testament. Our author is saying, you won't understand Christ without the Old Testament, nor will you understand the Old Testament without Christ. That's a point we'll come back to at the beginning. So I've said so often, this is one book, the Scriptures, and it has one subject, Jesus Christ. So let's look at the passage then. And it's a passage about newness, isn't it? Particularly about three new things. First of all, there is a new ministry in chapter 8, verses 1 to 8. What does it mean that we have such a high priest?

Last week, we saw how he was greater than this mysterious king priest Melchizedek, who appears briefly and then disappears from the pages of Genesis, mentioned again in the Psalms. He is greater than Aaron, the earliest high priest. He's even greater than Moses. Now, I think there are two things he's saying here, and both are necessary. First of all, he's saying Jesus is an active priest who carries out his ministry in the presence of God. We have such a high priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven. Control room, if you like, of the whole universe. Now, don't misunderstand seated. Seated doesn't mean he's doing nothing. Seated means that the first part of his work at Calvary is over, and this part begins. No more means he does nothing than the part of Genesis, which is almost certainly being echoed. God rested from his

work at the end of the sixth day. Does that mean God has done nothing since then? Of course not. But it means that the basic work of creating is done. The basic work of salvation is done. But it continues, as we are told, he is a minister in the holy places. That suggests somebody who is active. Not somebody who has the title of priest and does nothing about it.

We're all familiar in all walks of life of people who rejoice in titles rather than in the work that goes along with the title. The historian Gibbon once said of his tutor at Oxford, a man who remembered he had a salary to collect and forgot he had a duty to perform. Jesus Christ is not like that. Jesus Christ actively in the heavenly sanctuary, caring for us, seeing us, interceding for us. And we are told in the true tent, verse 2. Now, don't misunderstand the true tent. True tent doesn't mean that the early tent, the tabernacle that Moses set up in the desert was false. Not the distinction between true and false. It's the distinction between the reality and the picture. Now, the point is, when we are separated from our loved ones, it's good to have a picture of them. But, here's what he's saying to the Hebrews. Now, don't stick with the picture when we've got the reality. After all, just imagine a man away on business. He phones his wife and says, by the way, I'm not going to bother coming home. I've got a picture of you. That we'll do instead.

Now, that's what the Hebrews were in danger of doing, of getting obsessed with the picture and forgetting the reality. So, let's refer. It's not the distinction between what is true and what is false, but what is an illustration and what is the reality which it illustrates. Now, it's very interesting calling this a minister in the true tent. Back in John 2, Jesus talks about his own body as a temple. Remember, you may remember he says, I'll destroy this temple and I'll build it again in three days. And John says he was talking of the temple of his body. Now, I think the real meaning of this true tent is that Jesus takes his glorified humanity into heaven. He is the true tent, the one to whom the tent pointed and therefore guarantees that his people will be with him in the true tent.

[13:53] You see, a picture never just has one reference. The tent, of course, refers to the heavenly places, but also refers to the body, the risen body of the Lord himself. So, that is the first thing then, that Jesus is an active priest. He is the reality to which the picture points. But the second thing, which is easy to forget, is the earlier ministry of priests were genuine pictures of salvation.

Now, all of us who preach and teach use illustrations. Sometimes they're good, sometimes they're bad, sometimes they're downright misleading. One of the problems about good illustrations is that people remember the illustrations or don't remember what they illustrated.

Yes, the Prime Minister in Durham, there's a guy there, an American minister who used to take notes during part of the sermon and not during others. I discovered at one point he was taking down the illustrations. Well, I suppose that's a legitimate enough thing to do. Now, the point, however, is the tent, the priests were genuine. They were God's illustration. When God uses an illustration, he doesn't get it wrong. He doesn't mislead. This, they faithfully reflected reality without themselves being totally aware of it. You see this in the great 11th chapter, talking of the people of faith in Old Testament times. They saw in the distance. They didn't see as clearly as we do, but they saw in the distance. And notice they're called copies and shadows. And these are, that's very important. Remember, Jesus Christ is the first word as well as the last word. So when God planned this worship for his people, when he told Moses how to build the tent, he was already illustrating what was eternally true of Jesus Christ and what would be true, especially of his sacrifice for sin. You see, the tent didn't have to go because it was misleading. The tent had to go because it was provisional. When the reality came, there was no need for the copy and for the shadow. Verse 5, they serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. The reality is there. We are in the shadow lands at the moment. And sacrifices were always needed because of sin. That was a lesson God was teaching him right from the beginning. Indeed, even before the law came. He obviously taught, he obviously taught Abel that he needed to sacrifice. You see this in chapter 11. How would Abel know how to sacrifice unless God had spoken to him? Remember, nobody in the book of Genesis had a Bible. That included Abraham. How would all these people know what to do? How would Enoch know how to walk with God?

See, I'm getting at it. God is revealing all right from the very beginning, kind of God he is, and the Christ who is to come. And the first covenant, verse 6, Christ's liberty and ministry is much more excellent than the old because the covenant he mediates is better. Better because it is fulfillment, because it is reality. Come back to the illustration we began with. When our children are very small, it's delightful. It's very, very sad and sometimes happens if a child doesn't grow up and doesn't develop. What's delightful at one stage becomes sad, unbearably sad at other stages.

[17 : 33] And remember, this is all linked to his call to maturity. Stop playing around in the nursery, he says. Get on to maturity. The first covenant was not flawless. That's to say it was incomplete.

And the promises had not yet been fully given, but they are the same promises. I think that's so important. Please don't let us imagine the Old Testament people lived a life of rules and regulations while we live a life of faith. Read Hebrews chapter 11 if you think that by faith, Abel, by faith, Noah, by faith, Moses. It was always by faith. The point is their faith was given pictures, copies, and illustrations before Christ came. And if Christ can save us thousands of years after he died, surely he could also save those who lived thousands of years before his death.

That's the first thing, a new ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Secondly, we have a new covenant in chapter 8, verses 8 to 13. And here he quotes part of the great new covenant passage in Jeremiah chapter 31. Well, you notice an important detail in verse 8. For he finds fault with them. Doesn't say he finds fault with the covenant. It's not the covenant he found fault with. It was the failure of the people to obey it. You see the point that's being made because we'll get it badly wrong if we think it was because there was something intrinsically wrong with the Old Covenant. It needed to be replaced.

No, it wasn't the Old Covenant as such, but the failure to obey it. It's interesting, that passage in Jeremiah and other prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah, they call the New Covenant the Eternal Covenant, the covenant that God made at the beginning when he created heaven and earth, the covenant he made with Noah after the flood, and right through the other covenants, Abraham, Moses, David, and so on.

They're all parts of the one eternal covenant. In Revelation, John calls it the everlasting gospel. From the land of the sunrise to the full glory of the risen sun, which rises and never sets.

[19 : 47] So what is the new covenant? First of all, verse 9, it's a new exodus. The day I took them to bring them out of the land of Egypt. Now remember exodus. The exodus story in the Old Testament is the great picture of salvation. God's bring his people from slavery and death into the land of promise.

And in Luke 9, when Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah, they speak, says, look, of his exodus, of his departure. This is the one who'll lead the new exodus. It wasn't the old exodus was wrong or flawed.

It was the old exodus. It was a genuinely picture because it says his exodus, not the exodus that happened long ago, but the exodus which he would carry out at Jerusalem. That's what Luke is saying to us. But notice they did not continue. They did not respond. They were hardly in the land when they were breaking the covenant. And then verse 10, a new inner obedience, put my laws in their hearts, into their minds, and write them in their hearts. Now, what's often ignored here is that it is the same laws he's going to put into the new covenant people. God reveals his character to Moses, and God has not changed his character. So it's essentially, and the fact he uses the word laws and so on, they'll be different. Once again, think of an analogy from childhood. When our children are small, and we're trying to get them to behave like human beings at the table, we tell them things like, don't speak with your mouth full. When our adult children come to visit us, we don't say that to them. At least I hope we don't. We hope that maturity has brought about and has brought about it unnecessary to have these particular rules. But the same principle remains. And similar to all other things we tell children, we tell children not to take sweets from strangers, not to speak to strangers. We don't say that to our grown-up children, but the principle remains we still care for them and don't want them to take up with just anybody. And already in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, the law was obedience of the heart. You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. The two parts. So remember how Jesus summarized it, love the Lord, love your neighbor. It's a new exit, a new inner obedience, and it's a life-transforming experience. Verse 10 again, I will write on their hearts. Remember heart in the Bible is a bigger thing than English. Heart is the whole personality. It's not just an organ in our body. Heart is you. Heart is me. When we say worship the Lord with all our hearts, it means with all that we are, all that we have, all that we've got. And notice writing on their hearts carries on the eye. It's an idea that's going to surface in the New Testament. The Word became flesh. That's what it's really pointing to, isn't it? The written Word of God, the spoken Word of God, actually takes human form. Jesus Christ, the living Word, who is fully expressed in the written Word. And the Word has to become flesh in us as well. In other words, we express the truth, we express the life of God.

There are personalities. We don't all become the same when we're converted, but the Word has to become flesh. And they shall not teach each one his neighbor. It doesn't mean the truth won't need to be taught. It means rather that there is immediate access to God. Remember in the old covenant, if you read the book of Leviticus, it's like entering a radioactive zone. Everywhere you go, there are notices that say something like this, do not enter, do not touch. This is dangerous. Do not go beyond this point. Indeed, that's the point that he's made several times and made again in this chapter. Only one man was allowed to go beyond this point. That was into the most holy place of all, and only one day a year. Now remember when Jesus died, the great curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom, and the way is opened into the holy place as the great high priest has gone into heaven.

That's the reality. We have a great high priest who has gone into heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Therefore, let us come with confidence to the throne of grace. Don't come with confidence because we deserve to be there, but come with confidence because he has blazed the trail for all his brothers and sister will believe in him. And verse 13, the old covenant obsolete. I'm not happy with that translation. I think unserviceable will be a better translation because now we no longer need to go back to these sacrifices. One other thing I want to say, though, about the new covenant is that we, in our present situation still on earth, do not completely as yet enjoy the blessings of the new covenant. And we won't until Christ returns. Remember the language of the new covenant. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. And remember the phrase, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Until he comes, we will not experience the full blessings. The marriage of the lamb, to use another illustration, has not yet happened. So, you see what I'm saying? The new covenant is not something that radically replaces the old because the old had got it wrong. It's something that fulfills. Just as I've often heard me talking about it, it's the new creation. It is not so much a brand new creation as everything that is good and lovely in this creation, purge of its sin and fallenness, will last into eternity.

[26 : 21] If you don't believe me, read the last battle. You may not believe him either, of course. So, we have a new ministry, a new covenant, and finally, chapter 9, 1 to 10, a new understanding. The key, and he comes back once again to the... In fact, when you read this, first of all, it might seem rather dull. Why do we need a description of the layout and furniture of the tent and yet another reference to the high priest going into the holy place, the most holy place? It's very far from that. You might be relieved at the end of verse 5, he says, of these things we cannot now speak in detail. It's rather like that other verse at the end of the letter where he says, I have written to you only a short letter. The letter to the Hebrews is far longer than any letter I've ever received, but once again, because of the subject, the greatness of the subject. The key is verse 8, I think. By this, the Holy Spirit indicates the way into the holy place is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing, which is symbolic for the present age. In IV, I think, puts it better, which is an illustration for the present time. You see, the first section, it's called, is the holy place. There are actually three sections.

There's the outer court, which he doesn't speak about because it's not particularly relevant for his purpose. Then there's the holy place where the priests spent their time. And then there's the most holy place, the second section, which wasn't open to them, only open to the high priest once a year. So I've said, when the curtain of the temple is torn, that God has removed the barriers. And this is, and this seems to me the point of the point of the holy spirit showing us this. Verse 7, into the second, that's the most holy place.

Only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and the unintentional sins of his people. You see, these sacrifices did genuinely open the way for the people, particularly the day of atonement, to approach God in his holiness. In the garden of Eden, God came and met Adam and Eve. But after they fell, there's the cherubim, the flaming sword, at the gates of Eden. There's no way back. But the Ark of the Covenant, which of course is Christ himself, notice what the Ark of the Covenant had in it. Verse 4, a golden urn holding the manna, the bread of heaven to sustain God's people on their journey, being well in with the persevering idea of bread. Aaron's staff that budded God, bringing life out of death. And the tablets of the covenant, the law that God is going to write on people's hearts. You see, these are not empty ceremonies. They are real illustrations. Now, of course, as in time, many of the priests would do them as empty rituals. The prophets, particularly Isaiah and Amos, talk about that. I hate, I despise

your sacrifice. Don't bring me any empty offerings. But anything that God gives can be done in the wrong way and done for the wrong reasons. But for those who had eyes to see, they would stimulate longing.

And there'd be many people who, in the quietness of their own hearts, and as they listened to Moses, who would begin, a strange longing would stir in their hearts. And they would wonder what it was all about.

That's, so you see, the rituals have gone, but the books in which they are described are the revelation of Christ, which is symbolic for the present. Who was the book of Leviticus written for? It was actually written for us, not just for the people of the time. It was written to us because we have now given the key to understand it. That's my second point. We need the Spirit to get the true meaning of this book.

[30 : 35] You see, if we read this book, the Bible, without the Spirit, we will learn an awful lot. Learn a great deal about ancient civilizations, ancient languages, ancient customs, human nature.

And this is a danger so often. Bible in the head, instead of Christ in the heart. Isn't that a real danger?

Now, all of the ministry here and in Cornhill is devoted to studying, teaching, and loving the Bible.

That's only the first stage, is getting beyond this text to Christ, to Christ himself.

I mean, I spent most of my life in this enterprise. Long before I came here, I was teaching the Bible.

And the point is, the danger is, Bible in the head.

It used to come across in so many ways. People would get up and say they were going to explain the passage, as if it were an exercise in comprehension. We must never simply explain the passage. We need to point people to Christ himself.

[31 : 45] How can we avoid that? How can we avoid simply increasing our Bible knowledge and becoming proud of that? Remember, Paul says, knowledge puffs up. You will not misunderstand me. You will not be saying, oh well, forget about the Bible and just know Christ.

We cannot know Christ apart from the Bible, because he is the great subject of the Bible. The only way we will avoid that is by total dependence on the Spirit.

Paul says, the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. I'm going to sing in a few moments of the Spirit. He himself, the living author, wakes the life, the sacred word, reads with us its holy pages, and reveals the living Lord.

That's what it's about. You see, you can teach the Bible in the sense of passing on information or instruction. Many people taught me the Bible when I was studying theology, where people were very gifted people, very charming people.

They knew the text of the Bible very well, but they didn't actually have the key, because they didn't believe it pointed to Christ. Many, if in particular in the Old Testament, would deny they'd say it was reading Christ back into the Old Testament.

[33 : 03] You see, the letter kills. But on the other hand, just to underline this, don't despise biblical knowledge.

It's possible to bury yourself in a commentary and rise in the presence of God. That is terribly, terribly important. But it is the Spirit that gives life.

You see, the Bible doesn't save us, but the only Christ who saves us is the biblical Christ. And only the Spirit of God, the living author who inspired these words, will bring us to Christ.

So, you see, study the Bible, read the Bible, love the Bible, but don't stop there. See, as Timothy Dudley Smith said in our hymn, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

And that's what I believe Hebrews is saying to us here. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, in all our study and teaching of the Bible, it's a wonderful privilege you have given to us to be able to share the unsearchable riches of Christ.

[34 : 15] Father, we pray it may be these unsearchable riches, and not simply information. Beyond the sacred page, we seek you, Lord. And we ask, indeed, that every time we open the book, we will hear our Master's voice.

And by the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.