

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART X

THE NEW COVENANT

I. The letter moves on to say how it is that Jesus instituted the new covenant with His own death, combining two images, that of a will and that of the blood of the sacrifices that renewed the old covenant.

A. The letter first describes the new covenant as giving us an inheritance, which in turn implies that there was a will.

1. The letter uses the Greek term *diatheke*, which could mean either a covenant or a will leaving an inheritance to others after death.

2. The concept of an inheritance was very important in ancient Judaism.

- The land and the blessings made to Abraham was above all the inheritance of Israel. The Chosen Land was divided up as the inheritance for each tribe. See Joshua 13. The Levites received no land; instead, the ability to offer sacrifices and receive tithes was their special inheritance; in a way they were special heirs to God Himself. See, e.g., Lev. 18:20-21; Num. 18:20-24. A righteous Jew would preserve the land that he inherited, see 1 Kings 21:3. And, according to the law, which was often neglected, land inherited in this division could not be permanently sold, but had to be returned to its original owners at the Jubilee Year, which occurred every 50 years. See Lev. 25. The permanence of the land reflects the permanence of God's blessings; and Ezekiel sees the restoration of the ancient inheritances of land as part of the glorious restoration of the new Jerusalem and the new Israel. See Ez. 46:16-18, 48:29; however, in this case, people from foreign lands will receive a part of this inheritance. See Ez. 47:22-23

- In the reverse direction, the people of Israel were God's special inheritance, protected by Him as one would protect an ancestral property. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 10:1; 1 Kings 8:51; Ps. 28:9; Is. 19:25

- As time would go on, the idea would develop of wisdom and even God Himself as being the inheritance of all of the just. See Ps. 16:5, 73:26; Sir. 4:16; Lam 3:24.

- Jesus would then take this idea of inheritance and apply it to inheriting eternal life from being faithful to His calling.

See, e.g., Matt. 5:5, 19:29, 25:34. St. Paul likewise spoke of having an inheritance in the new Kingdom. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 1:15, 5:5; Col. 1:12, 3:24. It is by being adopted sons through Jesus that we become co-heirs with Him. See Rom. 8:17, Gal. 4:4-6. See also 1 Peter 3:9; Rev. 21:7.

3. The letter takes up this theme and says that a death is needed for an inheritance; and thus it makes sense to believe that the new inheritance is passed on by a death, in this case, the death of Christ.

B. The letter then indicates that, in order to make this point, the Old Covenant was inaugurated and renewed through the sacrifice of animals and sprinkling of blood. See, e.g., Ex. 24:3-8. Their deaths, however imperfectly, would in a mysterious way make the Israelites continue to inherit the blessings of God and preserve the land.

- Most, although not all, of the Jewish sacrifices, involved sacrifice of animals. See, e.g., Ex. 12:1-28; Lev. 4-8; 15:1-29. Some rites specifically involved purification through the sprinkling of blood. See, e.g., Lev. 8:14-30 (purification of the priests), 14:3-7 (purification from leprosy); Num. 19:6-8 (for the water that purifies one after contact with a corpse.) Because blood represents life, the blood of animals may not be consumed, for that would be sharing in animal life; but blood on the altar does in a mysterious way atone for sins. See Lev. 17:8-14.

- When the letter says there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood, it does not mean that other things are not also necessary or helpful for this forgiveness. The Hebrew Scriptures mention almsgiving, contrition, and fasting as leading to forgiveness as well. See Ps. 51:9, Sir. 3:29, Jl. 2:12. In fact, if the animal and other sacrifices were impossible, contrition would be deemed a sacrifice in their place. See, e.g., Dan. 3:38-40; Ps. 40. However, the sacrifices were a part of the overall worship that would lead to forgiveness.

C. The letter then goes on to point out that, if such sacrifices and blood was needed for symbolic purification and forgiveness for the Old Covenant, which centered on the Temple and earthly worship that is but a copy of the worship and Temple of heaven, all the more should the New Covenant, leading to eternal things have such sacrifices.

1. The letter goes back to the idea of Christ as the high priest, entering the new sanctuary of heaven to offer the sacrifice of Himself. He also appears on our behalf because he is preparing a place for us there.

2. The earthly sacrifices had to be repeated because they were earthly and could not really get rid of sin, but rather only

deal with the surface level. Christ's sacrifice completely overcomes sin itself, the root of the division between man and God. Therefore, it only had to be done once.

- The letter especially emphasizes the contrast with the Day of Atonement, in which the high priest would enter once a year to make sacrifices of the ram and the goat, along with the sending of the scapegoat into the desert. This sacrifice was merely a symbolic atonement, which depended on the faithfulness of the people to be effective. Cf. Is. 1;12-12; Prov. 15:8, 21:17. Thus, it could never really be perfect even for its limited purposes because the offeror and the people never made a quite perfect offering,

3. The Mass is not the re-sacrifice of Christ, but rather the re-presentation of the one sacrifice of Christ, an over-coming of the barriers of time and space that we may be present again at Calvary. See Catechism for the Catholic Church 1364-67. Thus, far from contradicting the doctrine from the letter to the Hebrews, the Catholic doctrine of the Mass upholds the principles stated elsewhere in Hebrews, that we even now enter into the sanctuary of Christ and come to the new Mount Zion. See Hebrews 10, 12:22-24.:19-22.

- Even among the ancient Jews, the Passover was not considered a mere recollection, but in a sense, a making present of the saving power of the Exodus. See Ex. 13:8, 14-15.

D. Thus, the letter says, Christ "appeared once for all at the end of the ages," which probably means the ages of the Old Covenant. There is an emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of all time. See Gal. 4:4, Eph. 1:10. Jesus would then launch the final age, the age of grace. See Matt. 28:20.

E. The letter then speaks of Jesus, who was offered for sins, see Is. 53:4-11, as dying only once, for humans only die once. However, it looks forward to the return of Jesus to save and reward His faithful people.

- The idea is that the final coming of Christ will not be needed for redemption, for Christ's sacrifice on Calvary already did that. Rather, it will be to bring an end to all corruption and open up a new heavens and new earth now purified, glorified and beyond sin and death. See, e.g., 1 Tim. 6:13-16; 2 Peter 3:11-14; Rev. 21:1-4; Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 38 (1965.)

II. The letter then goes back to argue that even the instructions and prophets of the Old Covenant indicated that they were imperfect

and must be fulfilled in the future.

A. It begins with the theme again that the sacrifices and rituals of the old law were only a "shadow" not even an image of "the good things to come."

- There seems to be an implication that we now have images of the good things to come, but do not see them in full because we are not yet able. See 1 Cor. 13:12;

- Christ is above all the image of God for us. See Col. 1:15. The idea is that, in Christ, we see God as much as we can on earth. See John 1:18, 14:9-11. Man was also created in the image of God, see Gen. 1:26-27, 9:6, Sir. 17:1 ff. Thus, we show our love for God by love of neighbor. See 25:31-46; James 1:27; 1 John 4:12, 20-21. The Wisdom literature likewise presents wisdom as the image of God, but an image we only perceive partially on this earth. See Wis. 7:25-30. Now, with the knowledge of Christ, this image is more clear, although still not yet full sight.

B. First, he argues that the very fact that the sacrifices had to be repeated over and over again indicate that they were imperfect, for the fundamental flaw that required them was still there. Even the prophets recognized that a fundamental conversion was needed in order for the sacrifices to be efficacious; they provided the sign of repentance and a knowledge of the need for forgiveness, not the forgiveness or purity itself. See, e.g., Jer. 2:22, 4:15; Micah 6:7-8. The complicated sacrifices were required because of types of evil, such as the idolatry that led to the need for many more sacrifices and the sin offerings; and because they could not eliminate the evil, they had to be repeated over and over again.

C. The letter then quotes from Psalm 40, which is a prayer of thanksgiving for God rescuing the speaker from great danger and enemies. In the passage quoted, verses 7 to 9, the speaker says that God gave him ears open to obedience; the Septuagint says God prepared a body for him for obedience as a sacrifice. The meaning is the same either way; openness to God's will is the sacrifice offered. The letter indicates Christ perfectly fulfills this passage with that perfect sacrifice of obedience to God's will, which the psalm indicates will bring the power of heaven down to earth. See, e.g., Matt. 26:42, John 5:19-30; Phil. 2:5-11.

- The letter argues that this Psalm anticipated a day when the perfect sacrifice of obedience would end the need for all of the old sacrifices which were only a start.

D. The letter then refers back to the 110th Psalm, which spoke of a future king who would conquer all fo the enemies fo god. The letter argues that the victory over sin and death is the great triumph, of which the victory over earthly kings is but an image.

E. The letter then quotes from the prophesy of Jeremiah about a new covenant that God would bring that would bring about a deep conversion and forgiveness of sins. See Jer. 31:31-40. This prophesy, which the letter quoted earlier is one of several prophesies that speaks of a new and glorious covenant. Ez. 36:16-38, 37:21-28 The idea is that, once Jesus has achieved this forgiveness of sins, there will be no more need for the sacrifices that purified only at the surface level.