

# The New Covenant and the Sabbath

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I want to begin by asking a couple of questions: Are we an old covenant Church, or a new covenant Church? Is our 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. Mr. 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. Mr. Armstrong wrote, for example, that "The old covenant is ended." And he wrote that Christians today "live according to the conditions of the new covenant."

As I say, we have often overlooked the implications of this new covenant, and *that* is what I want to focus on in this letter: 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 I want to focus on -- 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. Abraham made covenants with his neighbors. Israelite kings made covenantal treaties with other kings, and kings made covenants with their citizens. David made a covenant of friendship with Jonathan. God made covenants with Noah and with David.

These are all interesting, but in this letter we will look more closely at three covenants: First, the covenant God made with Abraham. Second, the covenant God made through Moses with Israel at Mt. Sinai. And third, 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 in Genesis 15:1-5:

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 (verse 8). In response, God asked for some animals, and Abraham cut the animals 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. 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.

Next, in this dream, something very peculiar happened: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates'" (verses 17-18).

Now, we might ask, what is this business with a smoking firepot and a blazing torch? Answer: This seems to be part of the ancient custom of making a covenant. Animals were cut in half, and arranged in two rows, and the people making the covenant walked between the halves and took an oath, saying, if I break this covenant, if I break my part of this agreement, let me be cut in half like one of these animals. It was a rather bloody custom, but it certainly emphasized how seriously the people took the agreement they were making. In the Hebrew language, covenants weren't simply "made" -- they were *cut*.

In this dream, God is symbolized by the smoking firepot or the blazing torch, and he passes between the pieces of the sacrificed animals to emphasize to Abraham how *guaranteed* his promise was. He *cut* 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.

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 of Abraham -- 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. Cutting the foreskin was a continuing reminder that God had *cut* a covenant with the children of Abraham. This covenant and the circumcision was continued in Isaac, Jacob, and the Israelites. Let's skip now 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. 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. God would have spoken the rest of the covenant, too, 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.

The Abrahamic covenant had emphasized God's promise, and the Sinai covenant emphasized human responsibilities.

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. The next thing we notice about the Sinai covenant is that the Ten Commandments were at its core. 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 people agreed to be servants of God, and he agreed to protect them.

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.

There are also other, lesser-known covenants God made with his people, such as the covenant of the showbread, or bread of presence, that was to be eaten only by the priests (Leviticus 24:5). But the major Old Testament covenant is the one God made with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. This is where they became one nation under God. Later Israelite history is built on this covenant at Mt. Sinai. This covenant was renewed several times during Israel's history.

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. You know the history. The people eventually lost possession of the land and were sent into captivity.

### **The new covenant:**

The first thing we note about the new covenant is that it was prophesied in the Old Testament. But let's look first at what Hebrews 8:5-6 says about the relationship between the old and the new covenants:

They [the priests] 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 an earthly copy.

Second, the new covenant that Jesus brought is *superior* to the old covenant. It is better, and it has better promises. It gives us a better inheritance.

Let's keep reading 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."

So here 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*. And here in Hebrews 8, a section of Jeremiah is quoted. Let's continue reading 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.

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.

And not only that, the ritualistic sacrifices of the old covenant will no longer be needed. God will forgive 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."

And verse 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.

You see, the fault of the old covenant was in the people, and 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.

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 predicts 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 involves 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 involves a spiritual relationship, a matter of the heart and 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. It goes inside us. The new covenant affects our innermost being. The blood of Jesus Christ changes us. Hebrews 9:14 says that his 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." 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. 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 commands of Jesus, beginning with the command to repent and believe in him, are the requirements of the new covenant. And 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.

Let's look at Hebrews 7 to see what the Bible tells us about it. 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 their 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."

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.

This new covenant has better promises. For one thing, as verse 10 says: "And by that will, 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.

Now, 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. We'll look at a few laws from the covenant made at Sinai.

Consider, for example, the Seventh Commandment, which forbids adultery. Is that in force? Absolutely! The commandment is repeated in the New Testament.

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*. We would remove such a person from our 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.

Briefly, now let's notice some examples of laws that are completely obsolete. Exodus 20:24, for example: "Make an altar of earth for me." We do not keep that law in any way.

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:**

The point is, *we inherit the promises of Abraham on the basis of faith -- and laws that were given to Moses simply cannot take away those promises.* This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17. This is an especially important passage that we simply haven't given enough attention to.

Let's go to Galatians 3 and see what the apostle Paul is talking about. 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.

"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. But 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.

"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.



Now we come to verse 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. His 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." These scriptures seem clear to me. I hope they are to you, too. We are not under the old covenant laws -- except, of course, those that are also part of the new covenant.

Let's drop down to verse 29: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." So, 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 those laws cannot change the promise given to all who are Abraham's children by faith. That package of 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 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. Physical circumcision is not required for Christians today. Circumcision is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29).

You see, the law cannot give us salvation. All it can do is condemn us, since we all are lawbreakers. And God knew in advance that nobody could keep the law. As we read Galatians 3:24, the law points us to Christ. The law cannot give us salvation, but it can help us see our *need* for salvation, and it helps us see that righteousness must be a *gift*, not something we earn.

When Judgment Day comes, and the Judge asks us why he should let us into his kingdom, how are we going to answer? Are we going to say that we have kept particular laws? I hope not, because the Judge could easily point out laws that we haven't kept, sins that we never repented of. We can't say that we were good enough to keep the laws. No -- all we can do is plead for mercy. We have faith that Christ died to redeem us from *all* sins. He died to rescue us from the penalty of the law. That's our *only* basis for salvation.

Of course, faith does not do away with obedience. Faith *leads* us to obedience. The new covenant has many laws of its own. Jesus made many demands on our time and our hearts and our money. We know that.

Jesus did away with many laws, but he also *reaffirmed* many laws and made them *more* demanding, since they must be kept in the spirit and not just superficially. We must look to Jesus' teachings, and the teachings of his inspired apostles, to see the way that *Christian faith is expected to work* in our lives in the new covenant.

Christ died for us so that we might live for him. We are saved from the slavery of sin so that we might become slaves of righteousness. We are called to serve one another, not ourselves. Christ demands everything we have, and everything we *are*. We are expected to obey -- but we are *saved by faith*.

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).

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. Paul continues in verse 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. We have faith in the promise given to us through Jesus Christ.

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.

So you see that 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. The law cannot change us, but Christ 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, but the new covenant is so much better that the old one doesn't compare, 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. They 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.

So all those 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 us perfect.

But Christ does. We see that in verse 10: "And 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: "because 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, yes.

We have been forgiven -- by grace, through faith in our Savior Jesus Christ. *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*.

That's the conclusion in verses 19-25. Notice that it starts with "therefore." The writer is making a conclusion based on what he's just written. We are in a new covenant, forgiven by our great High Priest. Let's read it:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near to God* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and

having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

So, 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. We *can* have a good relationship with him. And we can also have a better relationship with one another. Let's continue reading in verse 24: ``And let us consider how we may spur *one another* on toward *love and good deeds*. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

We are to encourage one another in the faith; we are to encourage works of service. We are all called to worship and glorify God and Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more important. We are to support and encourage each other in that, and we can't do it when we're all accusing and attacking each other.

### **Old covenant practices:**

Jesus Christ has established the new covenant on better promises, and he has made the old covenant obsolete. The Bible clearly teaches this much. Now, this leads to some obvious but difficult questions: What about old covenant practices like tithing, avoiding unclean meats, and keeping Sabbaths and Holy Days?

Each of these is a separate subject, needing separate treatment. Each has a different history. The Sabbath, for example, was sanctified at creation, long before the old covenant began. The distinction between clean and unclean animals existed in the days of Noah, long before Abraham. The Passover season began before Sinai, but other Holy Days were instituted later. Circumcision and sacrifices began before Sinai, too.

The New Testament discusses each of these subjects in a slightly different way, and I will not address them all in this letter. But in each case, they have been transformed in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. In this letter, I want to comment briefly about tithing, and then comment in more detail about the Sabbath.

### **Tithing:**

Tithing was done before Sinai. The first mention of it is in Genesis 14. Abraham tithed on his spoils of war, giving a tenth to Melchizedek. And immediately after that, we see that God made his first covenant with Abraham, promising to bless him, and that's the covenant that Christians today are heirs of.

As far as we know, tithing was not required in the days of Abraham. He seems to have done it voluntarily, doing more than was required, because he wanted to glorify God -- and God blessed him because of his faithful attitude. Later, Jacob pledged that he would tithe to God, but this is also presented as a voluntary thing rather than a requirement.

Under the old covenant, tithing was required for the support of the old covenant ministers. The hard-hearted Israelites were required to give 10 percent -- and their blessing was only a physical one! We who are in the new covenant have much better blessings -- spiritual ones. How much more willingly ought we to give in thankfulness for the eternal spiritual blessings we have in Christ Jesus?

The Israelites were commanded to give 10 percent under the old covenant that could not make them perfect. How much more joyfully should we give to God under the new covenant? We, who have the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which *does* cleanse our conscience? Should we give less than a tithe, when the blessings we have are so much more glorious than those of the Israelites?

The old covenant gave us condemnation; the new covenant gives us justification. How much more should we be willing to give freely and generously to God so his Work can be done in the world -- to

proclaim the gospel, to declare the new covenant ministry that gives us true life, and gives that message of life to others?

Under the new covenant the tithe is voluntary, done out of love and allegiance to Jesus Christ. And isn't that appropriate? Shouldn't our giving be done out of the measure of the love of God in our hearts? The new covenant stresses *generosity* more than the old did. The new covenant doesn't set a new percentage, but it requires *greater* sacrifice.

A person who has faith in Jesus Christ does not worry about whether tithing is commanded in the New Testament. A person who has faith wants to give *all he can* to Christ -- within his means, of course. Christians should give generously to the Church -- but again, giving is a *result* of their relationship with God, not a basis for it. We are given access to the throne of grace through faith, not through tithing. But shouldn't our attitude be willingness to give *more* than the minimum?

Some people think that Christ liberates us from the law so that we can be more selfish. That is false! He liberates us from the penalty of the law so that we can be free to serve him *more*, as loving children and not merely as slaves under the lash. He frees us so we can have faith instead of selfish anxieties.

When it comes to tithing, the real question is, Is your heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are you putting your money where your heart is? Or maybe I should state it as a fact: You can tell where your heart is by seeing where you are putting your money. "Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also," Jesus said (Matthew 6:21).

### **The Sabbath:**

Now let's move on to the topic of the Sabbath. Is the Sabbath an old covenant law? Certainly. It is part of the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments formed the core of the old covenant.

But, is the Sabbath required in the new covenant? Or, as another possibility, is it *transformed*, to be kept in a different way? We know the Bible *doesn't* say the Sabbath was changed to Sunday. But is it possible that Jesus Christ changed *the way we ought to observe* the Sabbath? So the question is, How does the Sabbath fit into the new covenant?

The new covenant is based on faith, not on law. But we know that faith produces good works. It produces obedience to God. Faith leads us to love God and love our neighbors. Tithing, for example, is an expression of love to God *and* of love for all who hear the gospel that our tithes help support.

Faith leads us to love God and to spend time with him in prayer and in study. Faith and love lead us to spend time with one another, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, but exhorting and encouraging one another in love and good works.

Does the Sabbath give us spiritual benefits? Certainly. Not only do we benefit physically from the weekly rest, we benefit spiritually from the time that's devoted to God. Should we forsake this spiritual benefit? Should we use all our time for our own pleasures? Of course not. A Christian should want *more* time devoted to the Lord, not less. The Sabbath is a blessing. We rejoice in it. We don't, and shouldn't, want to give up a good thing. But we *do* need to understand that there are changes in the way the Sabbath is presented in the New Testament from the role it played in the Old Testament.

### **Application in the new covenant:**

Let's look at what *Jesus* taught us about the Sabbath. First, we note that Jesus kept the Sabbath. He was born *under the law*, and he kept the law. He never sinned. When Jesus lived, the old covenant was still in force, so he lived by the terms of the old covenant.

That meant he did old covenant things like killing lambs at Passover time, supporting temple activities with his tithes, and telling cleansed lepers to make offerings according to the law of Moses. He kept the Feast of Dedication and other Jewish customs. And he was circumcised. In other words, he was

perfect in all the laws of the old covenant -- even the laws that the apostles came to see were no longer binding after Jesus was crucified and resurrected. The new covenant came in after Jesus' death and resurrection, not before it.

Jesus did not argue with the Pharisees about *whether* to keep the Sabbath -- but he certainly argued about *how* to keep it. Compared to the Pharisees, Jesus was a liberal. The Pharisees had rules against healing on the Sabbath, but Jesus made a *point* of healing on the Sabbath. He could have easily done his healings on any other day. He could have easily *promised* the people that they would be healed at sundown. But he did not. He healed *on the Sabbath* because that was a great day for liberating people from bondage.

The old covenant told people not to collect food on the Sabbath, under threat of stoning, but Jesus defended the right of his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. Let's read it in Mark 2:23-26:

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Jesus did not deny that the disciples were working on the Sabbath. Instead, he pointed out that David himself had *broken* one of God's holiness laws, and it had been OK for him to do it. Taking care of hunger is more important than keeping such strict taboos. The letter of the law was broken, but that was OK because a more important principle of the law was being kept. There was an important human need.

David had an emergency, but the disciples don't seem to have had any such emergency. They were just a little hungry, that's all. The point was that they didn't need to make a fetish out of avoiding activity on the Sabbath.

Mark continues: "Then [Jesus] said to [the Pharisees]: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath!'" (verse 27).

Jesus, as God in the flesh, had authority over the Sabbath. He had the right to interpret what it meant and how it should be kept. Here, he said that the Sabbath was given to benefit humans. So we see this principle in action: *Humanitarian needs are more important than sticking to a strict interpretation of rules.*

Jesus often healed on the Sabbath. There again, a humanitarian need was more important than Sabbath rules. In the past, we've been too strict with this. Sometimes we wouldn't even allow nurses to work for an hour on Friday evening. They had to give up their jobs if they wanted to be members of our Church. *That, my brethren, is too strict.* They aren't healing like Jesus was, but they *are* taking care of humanitarian needs -- needs that in many cases are more *urgent* than hunger.

I know that our motives were good in what we did. We wanted to uphold the importance of obeying God. We took his commands seriously, and that's good. But sometimes it seemed as if the Sabbath were more important than people, or the Sabbath was more important than expressing love and faith in Christ. We looked at the external instead of the internal.

We meant well. Now, we can change because God has led us to deeper understanding of the new covenant.

I have explained before that the Sabbath was the sign of the old covenant with Israel, but is not the sign of the new covenant in the blood of Christ. The sign of the new covenant is faith in Christ, and the

bread and wine are the symbols of that covenant. Consequently, *the way the Sabbath is to be observed* under the new covenant differs from the way it was to be observed under the old covenant.

The Lord of the Sabbath has come, and the reality has replaced the shadow (Colossians 3:17). The New Testament Sabbath, the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4) *is the new life in Christ*, the life of faith in him, the life of the Spirit. Our weekly Sabbath observance, then, should reflect and celebrate that fact, but it should not be an old covenant observance.

### **Work on the Sabbath:**

In John 5, let's see what Jesus did on the Sabbath, and what he said about the Sabbath. He had gone to the Pool of Bethesda and found a man who had been lame for 38 years. "When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'" (verse 6).

You might think that it's a strange question -- but some people simply don't want to get well. They are comfortable in their old habits, their old way of life. The man had been crippled for 38 years, and if he were suddenly healed, he'd have to change the way he lived. He would have to learn a new role in the community. It might be frightening, so Jesus asked him, 'Do you really want to be healed?' This man did want to be healed, so Jesus said:

"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat" (verses 8-10).

Now admittedly, there was no emergency. The man didn't have to go anywhere on the Sabbath. He could have stayed until sunset. But Jesus had told him to carry something on the Sabbath, and the Jewish leaders didn't like that. They found out that Jesus had done this healing on the Sabbath, and in verses 16-17 we read: "So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.'" So here Jesus admits that he was *working* on the Sabbath, and he was not sinning. Jesus was not afraid to use the word "work" to describe what he was doing. In the new covenant, we need to take a more flexible approach with work and humanitarian needs.

Scripture says that those who don't provide for their own families are worse than unbelievers, and common sense says that, too. If the choice is between working on the Sabbath and providing food for the family, it is not a sin to work on the Sabbath. We should not apply old covenant rules to the new covenant Sabbath. They aren't doing it for selfish benefit, but to avoid hunger and putting their families out on the street.

If other people want to be stricter, they certainly can be for themselves. But they should not judge their brothers. We are under the new covenant, you see, and the new covenant simply doesn't require the Sabbath like the old covenant did. We see New Testament examples of Sabbath-keeping, but we *don't* see commands like the Old Testament had: Do not gather food, do not carry a burden, do not travel out of the city, etc.

Some people want boundaries spelled out for them. Others do not, and they want to live their Christian faith as guided by broader principles. Jesus saw principles as more important than specific rules. We see this in the Sermon on the Mount, in his teachings about lust and hate and violence. We see it in his approach to the Sabbath, too. Humanitarian principles are more important than strict taboos.

But not everyone has a grasp of the broad principles as well as Jesus did. So, if they need rules, they are welcome to keep their own rules -- as long as they do it to the glory of God, as long as their faith is in Christ and not in their rules. The main point is that one group shouldn't criticize the other. The conservatives should not condemn the actions of others, and the liberals shouldn't despise the rule-keepers. We should welcome each other based on faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, we are a new covenant church. Our relationship with God is based on faith in Christ, not on the old covenant. Our faith leads us to obey God in different ways from the old covenant. Some old covenant laws remain the same, and some are obsolete, and some are applied in different ways. There is a new covenant between God and his people.

The new covenant is based on faith. There is nothing in the new covenant that says we are required to keep the Sabbath according to the rules of the old covenant. In the New Testament, we see examples of people keeping the Sabbath, and we see statements that tell us the Sabbath is a shadow pointing to the reality, who is Christ. That doesn't mean that the Sabbath is done away, but it means the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. *It means Christ is more important than the Sabbath.* It means the Sabbath rest for Christians in Hebrews 4 is the new life in Christ, not just a day of the week. And Paul tells us in Romans 14 that we should not be involved in disputes over days.

We should hunger and thirst for the things of God. We should desire a better relationship with him and Jesus Christ. That's part of the law written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit under the terms of the new covenant. But that *spiritual* law demands that we take a less rigid approach to the Sabbath.

Faith causes us to be willing to obey our Lord and Savior in whatever he tells us to do. We see clear commands to love one another, to believe in the Son, to preach the gospel, to work for unity in the faith, to meet together as a Church, to build one another up in the faith, to do good works of service, to lead pure and moral lives, to live peaceably and to forgive those who wrong us.

These new covenant commands are demanding. They absorb all our time. All our days are dedicated to serving Jesus Christ. We need to be busy doing his work always, and it's not the broad and easy path. It's a difficult task, a challenging task, a task that few Christians are willing to do.