

(Hebrews - Part 23): Old Covenant Was Provisional

by A.W. Tozer

The old covenant was provisional and imperfect, while the new covenant is a better covenant that changes a man's heart and brings salvation.

Duration: 29:51

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:34, Hebrews 8:6-13

Topics: "Expositional"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the internal struggle between the flesh and the spirit. He refers to the 7th chapter of Romans, where a holy man expresses his frustration with the sinful desires within him. However, the preacher emphasizes that there is provision for deliverance from these sinful factors through the new covenant. He also addresses the topic of religious education, stating that while doctrine and ethics can be taught, true knowledge of God comes from a personal relationship with Him.

Transcript

Hebrews, the 8th chapter. We begin with verse 6 and read the rest. But now hath he, Jesus Christ, obtained a more excellent ministry, for how much more also he is the mediator of the better covenant, which was established upon better promises.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. But finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord.

I will put my laws into their minds and write them in their hearts. And I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.

For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. In that he saith, A new covenant is made the old, or the first, old. That which decays and waxes old is ready

to vanish away.

Now, God has established a new covenant. That's the teaching of the book of Hebrews. But that isn't to try down the old covenant in any way, the Old Testament, the old law.

But it is only to say that the old covenant was provisional, something like the scaffolding that goes up when you are erecting a building. You cannot say the scaffolding is of no benefit. It is of a benefit until the building is completed, then the scaffolding is torn away.

So the Old Testament covenant, the Old Testament law, was, according to the New Testament writer here, a scaffolding provisional for the time until the new building was erected. Then it was old, obsolete, and vanished away. That old covenant was imperfect by the nature of it, and it was temporary in its continuance and inadequate in its effect.

I want to show why the Old Testament law fell short of perfection. By the law I do not mean the Ten Commandments only. The Ten Commandments were never given by themselves.

They were given as a part of a larger law which included sacrifice and the priesthood and the high priests and the altars and the blood and the lambs and the beasts and the bulls and goats and the Sabbath, and all of these were included and are included when we talk about the law. Now, the Old Testament law was holy and just and good, but its weakness lay in its location. Its weakness lay in the fact that it was external instead of internal, because always the springs of a man's conduct and character are within him.

Jesus said that the outside isn't so important, but it's the inside, what comes out of a man, that matters. And just what the law could not do was to change what came out of a man. You can chain a tiger, but it's a tiger still.

You can put a mad killer in prison for life, but he's a mad killer until there has been a change on the inside of him. And this was the weakness of the Old Testament law. It was on the outside, and it could not deal with the life motivations which came from the inside.

Its motivations were the ten words, thou shalt not and thou shalt. But a man always lives from within, and so it couldn't affect that which was inside of the man. I don't want to keep repeating that, but I'm afraid I'm not making myself too clear.

That which is on the outside is legislation, and you cannot change a man by legislating. The City Council could pass a law and put sanctions on. Ten years in, or one year, I don't know how much authority the City Council has, but it's enough.

They can chuck you in jail, and you can pass a law that everybody in Toronto is to love his neighbor. But we can't fulfill that. We can go grinning down the street in order to stay out of jail.

And we can act as though we loved our neighbor in order to stay within the confines of the law and obey the ordinances. Because if you smile at your neighbor and look loving, they'll probably think you're loving. But the City Council wouldn't pass any such silly law, because you can't legislate to a man's heart.

You can only legislate to a man's conduct. And therefore, it could not create any inward moral propensity. Now, God promised to provide an inward moral bent to holiness.

He said that there was to be a new covenant. And the writer argues, if you are going to get a new covenant, then you make old and obsolete the old covenant. And he argued thus that the old covenant had no more power over the Christian, because God had promised a new covenant and the Christian was under the new covenant.

And that new covenant was not an external thing, but an internal thing. Now, in order that we might illustrate this, let us go to nature itself. I realize that the word nature and the word instinct are in bad repute in some very learned and extremely egghead circles.

They don't like the word instinct anymore, nor the word nature. In fact, you'll even go to the dictionary, you'll not find the word nature used in the sense in which I'm using it this morning, at least not in the one I was consulting recently. But they are willing to say that there is something in a man, they don't want to call it instinct anymore, and they don't want to call it nature.

But they do admit that there is a native factor in behavior, that there is an intrinsic, eternal factor in behavior. A young rattlesnake is hatched out of its egg, and before it has ever seen any other rattlesnake, it will coil and strike. When it's a tiny thing and hasn't seen any other snakes and hasn't itself ever been going to school to learn how to strike, it coils up and strikes.

Now, that is a native factor in behavior. If they don't want to call it nature or instinct, well, we don't want to argue with the learned brethren. But it's there anyhow.

I sometimes think of the argument over whether Shakespeare, William Shakespeare, or somebody else wrote Shakespeare. And one man didn't want to argue about it, so he took both sides. He said that he didn't think himself that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, but that a man named Shakespeare wrote it.

And of course, that pleased everybody, and all were content. So that, if you don't like the word instinct or nature, let's call it a native factor in behavior that makes a little rattlesnake strike without ever having seen any other rattlesnake strike. And so we're back at Shakespeare again.

And then it's said to be actions or resulting actions not dependent upon previous experience, individual previous experience. I have seen chickens hatch out and lie helpless for maybe five minutes and then struggle to their feet. And the breeze would begin to dry them off, and the fluffy little fluff would begin to show.

And before they were completely dry, they'd be out scratching. They never saw anybody scratch, any chicken scratch. They were the first one to do the scratching.

They scratched by some native factor which led them to do acts which were not dependent upon any previous experience. They did it without having been taught it. And then it's a tendency to action which lead to an end, and it's that unknown factor which impels each creature to act like itself.

Now, I think we've made that plain by definition. Whatever this is in animals and birds and fishes and worms and all the rest, it's that unknown factor which impels every creature to act like itself. Now, this can be altered by pressure from the outside, of course.

A chimpanzee can be taught in the circus to put on a bib and eat with a knife and fork. But he's a chimpanzee still. They haven't altered him inside, and they haven't in any wise removed that unknown factor which impels every creature to act like himself.

He will act like a chimpanzee as soon as he gets by himself or gets out with another chimpanzee. But there has been a force used from the outside to persuade him to act like something else. That's pressure.

And you know that there's such a thing as teaching a sinner to act like a Christian, to imitate him. You baptize him and confirm him and feed him the Lord's Supper regularly, and you instruct him in ethics, and pretty after a while he begins to act like a Christian, just as a chimpanzee acts like a man. But he's not a Christian because he has not that inward factor that impels him to righteousness and true holiness.

He only is taught from the outside to be a Christian. And there is so tremendously, terribly much of this. The vast numbers of Church members are taught to imitate Christians.

They read the Sermon on the Mount, and they know how a Christian should live. They don't live like that at all, but they approximate it. They play it by ear and get close to it, close to it enough that they are accepted into the Church, and they go to Church and sing and give, and people think they are Christians.

But they are living by external pressure and by artificial training and imitation, and not by that native factor inside of them which teaches them to act in a certain way, and that unknown factor which impels them to act like Christians. They don't have that. Now, moral preachers, you can take two extremes, if you will.

Let's take two extremes in order that might be clear. Let's take the first archangel. While he sings, he hides his face beneath his wings, as Watts said.

Let's take that first archangel, and then over against that, let's take that old devil which is called the dragon and the Satan. Let's take those two. Now, there is far apart morally, I suppose, as possible for creatures to get.

And why does the first archangel act like an archangel? Because there is an unknown factor in him which impels him to act like himself. Call it what you will. You don't like the word nature, name it X. But it's there, and it impels the archangel to act like an archangel.

And when he acts like an archangel, he is not acting the way he has been trained to act. He is acting from the inside out. That thing inside of him makes him do it, and he doesn't resist it.

He wants to do it, just as the tick doesn't resist the temptation to scratch. It scratches because something inside it impels it. It never saw anybody scratch, but it does.

And so the archangel does not compare himself with somebody else and say, Now, I've got to act like an archangel. He acts like an archangel because he is an archangel. The old question that the Church has chewed over in the past is whether a sinner sins because he's a sinner, or whether he's a sinner because he sins.

Well, both, of course, would be true. You're moving in a circle, but he sins originally and first because he's a sinner, and then he's a sinner because he sins, and so he goes around the circle until, by the grace of God, he breaks out of it and is a sinner no longer. So a sinner is one who sins, but he sins because he has been a sinner.

He acts like himself. Why does the baby, as soon as it's able, act like the little sinner it is? Now, you don't feel yours are. Ours are all sinners.

We had seven sinners in our home, even little Becky, all sinners. They didn't do anything very bad, really, but they did enough to know that the instinct scratch was there. They didn't have to imitate, it was there.

The unknown factors. That's something that we're ashamed to call or name within us. That's the archangel, not sinning, but the opposite.

He's out on the side of the holiness, but over and against him is the devil. The devil acts like himself, and that's the only thing I can say in his favor. He acts like himself even when he's deceiving, he's acting like himself.

Even when he's acting like a devil, he's acting like himself. He's acting like himself because he is a devil. Jesus said about certain Jews who are persecuting him, you're of your father the devil and the works of your father you'll do.

You'll act like your ancestry. The crowning achievement of the New Testament is to implant in the heart of a believing man an unknown factor which impels him to act righteously. Right there, I've given this morning in a few brief sentences the difference between denominational Churchanity and true Christianity.

It's the difference between training a man to be a Christian and having him born a Christian. You can take a man of another race, an Indian from the plains of Nebraska, and you can bring him up and give him an English accent. I remember once hearing on the radio a man by the name of Lobogola.

Lobogola was a Negro who had escaped, had run away when he was a tiny boy, and had gone to the coast and then had been taken to Scotland and had been reared in Scotland. He learned to speak, almost the first language he knew was Scottish. I heard him make a speech on the radio.

He had become a well-educated man. I think he had written a book, if I remember. It was the most brave Scots you ever heard in all your life.

And here he was, a Negro from the wilds of Africa, speaking like a Scotsman. And you wouldn't know the difference if you'd said, well, imagine this man's got red hair and a fresh complexion, he's a real Scotsman. But he wasn't.

He was a Negro. So he had been trained to sound like a Scotsman. And I suppose he ate lumps in it, just like the rest of the Scots.

But he was not a Scotsman. And nothing that you could ever do could make him one. No reason that he should be ashamed of what he was.

No reason in the world that he should be. Negro race. He belonged to his race.

But he had been shoved out of his racial norm and put where he learned another language. And so he sounded like this Scotsman, which he was not. Now, the average church is full of people like that.

They have been brought into the church and they learn the songs of Zion. And people who have never been any nearer to God than Adam, at his worst, will sing some of the most beautiful hymns you've ever heard in your life. They got their accent right from Mount Zion.

They sing the songs of Israel, but they are not Israelites. They sing the songs of the church, but they are not Christians. You say, what right have you got to in this bigoted manner rule men out of the church? I

don't have any right to do anything at all, only to go to hell.

But under the grace of God and by the authority granted me by the Lord Jesus Christ, I do have this commission to draw the line between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not, and to dare to stand and say in his name that unless a man be born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God. And no amount of training and no amount of religious accent that we put on will ever do, my brother. There has got to be implanted in the human spirit that thing which impels to righteous conduct.

We call that by various names. We call that the new birth, we call that regeneration, we call it sometimes conversion, though the conversion is a shallower word and means less. You were converted in order that you might be regenerated, and you are regenerated because you were generated wrong in the first place.

And that unknown factor, God calls it my laws. He said, For I will put my laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts, and I will be to them of God, and they shall be to me of people. So there is where we get it.

I will put my laws into their hearts. A Christian is one who has had the laws of God inscribed in his heart at the motivation center of his life. That's a Christian.

Nobody else is a Christian, nothing else is a Christian. Now, the New Testament also teaches this, and I wouldn't be honest nor fair if I did not give this side of it and show what it teaches. The New Testament teaches the presence of other conflicting factors in even a Christian's life.

While the main spring of his life is that new law of God written not in stone but in flesh, there are conflicting factors which sometimes overcome him, weakness and flesh in the world and lust and old habits. In the 7th chapter of Romans there is the classic wail of a holy man who sometimes felt factors stirring within him that impelled him to be unholy. He cried, What will I do, O God, who will deliver me from this body of death? And he went on into the 8th chapter and showed that there was provision made for deliverance from these wild factors that lie in us, which we call the flesh or carnality or the old man, or a dozen names are given to this.

A holy man, a good man, a man I heard of was converted, the law of God written in his soul. He loved God with all his heart, but he hadn't been converted very long, and he was a carpenter. He was pounding away and missed a nail and hit the thumb, and he let out a yell that would have curled the hair of an archangel.

It was an old swear word. But instead of getting on his knees, he smiled and said, Glory to God! It sounds sort of confusing, doesn't it? But it isn't at all. It's suddenly a rich thing that was gone.

That was a reflex, an old habit that he had fallen into for a second, but God knew he didn't mean it, and he looked up and glorified God who delivered him. He put that behind him and said, Glory to God, I'll have none more of that. I recognize that for what it is.

So about making a production out of it, as the kids say, he got right with God right there where it was happening. And thank God from the depths of his heart that that was a memory, something that reminded him of what he used to be, but that he wasn't anymore. Now, it says here, and let's close with this.

And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, verse 11, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord. The reason is that all shall know me from the least to the greatest, for I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities I'll remember no more. Now, the question is, can we teach

religion? Can religion be taught? Tremendous ought of emphasis is being placed upon what we call religious education in our day.

And I believe in religious education if we understand what we mean by it. Doctrine can be taught and ethics can be taught. You can get a half a dozen little kids before you and you can teach them, God is love.

God created the heaven and the earth. God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son. Believe on the Lord and thou shalt be saved.

That's doctrine. And you can teach doctrine. You can get those little ones before you and you can teach them, obey your parents, lie not, do not steal.

You can teach them ethics, that is righteous laws. You can teach that, and we should. Doctrine should be taught.

I've been trying to teach it this morning. We can teach doctrine and we can teach ethics, but you can't teach salvation. Salvation is that which happens in a man's life because he has believed the doctrine that he has heard.

But he can receive the doctrine and pass a test in doctrine and recite the Catechism from the first question to the last, letter perfect, and still not be a Christian. Because you cannot by teaching make a man a Christian. Though by teaching you can impel him to want to be a Christian and you can show him how to be a Christian.

And when he's become a Christian you can teach him, as Jesus said, all things whatsoever I have spoken unto you. But you can't make him a Christian by teaching. The curriculum never yet was devised that could cause a baby to be.

A baby is a life, and it's born out of life. But after he's born and grows up, you can send him to college and subject him to the curriculum, and he can learn a great deal that he ought to know. But you have to start with life.

You cannot create life by teaching. I wonder how many Christians there are who are Christians only by instruction, Christians only by religious education, Christians only by having somebody manipulate them, put them in water or sprinkle water on them. This is tragic, it seems to me, that we can come into the Church and take a part in the Church and not be known not for being Christians, because we are acting like Christians, that is in the measure we are.

We don't do this and we don't do the other. And we are in Church and we do give, we are somewhat refined, so we act like Christians, but the terrible thing is we are Christians by manipulation. Christians by instruction rather than Christians by regeneration.

Salvation can't be taught. Salvation, among other things, brings an implantation of an unknown factor within the soul that impels the Holy Mass. And the true Christian cries, Abba, Father, by an impulse of the Spirit.

He doesn't have to be taught. Nobody says to the new Christian, now say, Abba, Father. He says it because the Spirit of the Son is in his heart impelling him to say it.

And so the biggest question before us this morning, has this happened to me? Have I received him, believed on him? Has he wrought in me that miracle which impels me to want to do right and makes me grieve if I don't? It's most serious, my friends, that we ask the question and answer it. And it's most serious that we answer it in the affirmative and be right about it. It would be a heart-breaking thing, or at least a very disheartening thing, if we were permitted to stand out in front of the average Church, just the average Church anywhere, just close your eyes and put a pin down in the telephone Church department and go to that Church.

It would be disheartening to go and be permitted to question each one that steps down the steps out of the grocery car. Are you truly a Christian inside? Do you have implanted in you by the miracle of the new birth that unknown factor which God has named for us, his laws that make you want to do righteousness and hate sin and love God and hate iniquity? Are you yourself now this morning blessed with this inward factor that impels to holiness? If you could get an honest answer, I know what you'd get. You'd get the brush-off from 99 percent.

But if you could get honest answers, it would be heart-breaking, because there is no question about it. If all the people who go to churches in Toronto had this unknown factor, this thing that imperiled them to righteousness, this would be a different city from what it is now. And Christianity would be quite some other thing than what it is now in this town or any other town.

So as we enter into the communion service, let's not blame each other. I won't blame you, don't you blame me. Don't try to pick flaws in me, and I won't pick flaws in you, but let's pick flaws in ourselves, each one.

And let's before God this morning say, Lord, don't let me be one more of these persons. It's like the chimpanzee that's been trained to act like a man that isn't a man, will die a chimpanzee. Help me, Lord, that I may not be a sinner, a good sinner, a moral sinner, a sinner with high ethical standards, a religious sinner, but a sinner nevertheless.

This would be a terrible tragedy, my brethren. Make God grant it shouldn't be the portion of any other. Amen.

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