Some of you may try to get me fired for putting a picture of this guy on the screen today. You might be tired of hearing about Tom Brady by now. Last Sunday in Superbowl 53 he rewrote the Superbowl recordbook again. He has now won more Superbowls than any other NFL quarterback has ever even played in. (picture of Tom Brady)

Despite his record, there are a lot of folks who don’t like him. For some it’s because of Deflategate a few years ago. For others, he’s just too good. There’s something to be said for rooting for the underdog.

Here’s my point: no matter what your opinion of Tom Brady, the fact is that he and his team understand the fundamentals of football. They understand that the point of the game is to score more touchdowns than the other team, and they know how to make that happen. This season, and five other seasons, they did that better than any other team in the league.

It’s easy to get caught up in the details. It’s easy to get caught up in a players record, or plays that could have gone differently. Sometimes it’s easy to forget what the point of the game really is. Sometimes reading the Bible can be like that too. It’s easy to get caught up in the details and customs that we aren’t familiar with and let it get us off track. It might be hard to know what the point is sometimes, especially in a book as deep and heavy as Hebrews.

That’s where we’re at in the letter to the Hebrews. In chapter 8, the author knows that he needs to make sure his readers really understand what he’s been getting at this whole time, so he starts off by saying: **Hebrews 8:1 ESV — 1** Now the point in what we are saying is this:

He wants to make sure they don’t miss what’s coming and what the whole point of his letter to them is all about. He has already talked to them about how Jesus is superior to angels, he is superior to Moses, he is superior to all the religious rituals of the Jewish faith, and he is superior to any human high priest that ever lived. He goes on to say this:

**Hebrews 8:1–6 ESV — 1** Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, **…6** But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

Everything the author has said so far comes down to this one point, that Jesus is the high priest of a new and better covenant. Jesus is the mediator between man and God in a covenant that is far superior to the covenant God made with the Jewish people.

One of the first things that we have to understand when we’re talking about this New Covenant is exactly what a covenant is. What did the author of Hebrews mean by that?

Today when we want to make a legal agreement with someone else, we sign a contract. We all sign contracts of some kind. Business agreements, rental agreements, employment contracts. We sign a contract when we take out a loan for a car or a house, or when we agree to pay a bill for a service of some kind.

When we sign a contract, we agree to something. Usually today contracts are an agreement to pay for a service of some kind. The utility company agrees to provide electricity and gas to your home, and you agree to pay for it.

Contracts also have consequences if one party doesn’t follow through on their end of the bargain. If you fail to pay the utility company for their services, you’re going to be in the dark pretty soon, because they are going to shut off your electricity.

When I was in college my roommate and I decided to pay for cable TV in our dorm room. It turned out that neither one of us really watched it, and so we decided we didn’t want it anymore. I was young and naïve, so don’t judge me too harshly. I thought that if I simply stopped paying the bill, they would get the point and cancel my service. Turns out that’s not how bills work in the real world. I had signed a contract, I failed to follow through, and I was left with an expensive lesson.

Covenants have a lot in common with contracts, even though they are not exactly the same thing. A covenant was how people signed a legal contract in the ancient world. Two people would make a covenant together. They made an agreement with one another and there were consequences if that covenant were ever broken.

The difference between a contract and a covenant is that a contract is purely a legal agreement. A covenant is a moral agreement between two people. A contract is very narrow in its terms and its expectations of what the two parties will need to do in order to fulfill their end of the contract. A covenant is a very broad agreement that comes with a lot of responsibility.

A covenant is a morally binding promise that one person makes with another person or another group of people. Covenants carried obligation and responsibility with them, but they were willingly entered into by both parties. Both parties would know the terms of the covenant before they ever entered into it. By entering into the covenant they both chose to be bound by the promise they were making. They were agreed to live by a certain code of conduct. Three separate times when God was making his covenant with the people of Israel, the people agreed to the covenant saying, ‘Everything the Lord has said we will do’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There were other covenants outside of the Bible in the ancient world. The Hittite’s made treaties with other nations that followed the principles of a covenant. The Celtic people had oath societies that followed these principles, and so did Alexander the Great’s Corinthian League.

Those covenants were very different from the covenants of the Bible. Covenants between nations were usually made between two kings, the two leaders of the nations. The covenants in the Bible were not between two people, they were between God and men. WThat happened with Noah at the end of the flood and again with Abraham in Genesis 15. These covenants were also not just between God and a king of some kind, but between God and an entire people.

One of the clearest pictures we see of how a covenant works is when God made a covenant with Abraham. A few chapters after God’s first promise to Abraham, right after his encounter with Melchizedek, we see him make an official covenant with him.

**Genesis 15:1–18 ESV — 7** And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” **8** But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” **9** He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” **10** And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. **11** And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. **12** As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. **13** Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. **14** But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. **15** As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. **16** And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” **17** When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. **18** On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land…

The process that’s described here in Genesis 15 was called cutting a covenant. Today we talk about ‘cutting a deal’ with someone. That language comes directly from this tradition of how covenants or deals were formed in the ancient world.

The animals that Abraham cut in half were laid out opposite of each other in a small valley so that all the blood would run to the center. Then both parties that were making this covenant with each other would walk through the blood of the animals that had just been killed. The idea was that each person was saying, “If I don’t hold up my end of the agreement, let what has happened to these animals happen to me.” Can you imagine if we still signed contracts that way today? PETA would have a fit.

In most covenants, both parties would participate in the ceremony, and both would make that pledge. That’s not what happened here. In this covenant, Abraham never steps foot between the animals, only God does. This is what was called an unconditional covenant. God was stating in the legal terms of the ancient world that he would keep his word to Abraham and that he alone would be responsible for keeping the covenant.

Hundreds of years later, when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, he led them to Mt Sinai. There he gave them his law and made a covenant with them. That covenant was not just for the men and women at the foot of the mountain. It was for the people of Israel from that day forward, until one day God would create a new covenant. This is the promise that God made to the Israelites:

**Exodus 19:5–8 ESV —5** Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; **6** and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’… **7** So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. **8** All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

This was the beginning of the covenant between the Israelites and God. Right after this Moses spent 40 days on Mt Sinai receiving the law from God. The people promised to do whatever God commanded them to do. They willingly chose to be bound by the terms of the covenant God made with them. The Israelites covenant with God was the code of conduct they agreed to live by from that point forward. There were 613 specific commands in the law that God gave to the Israelites. Sounds like a lot, and it is.

Now you could go read through all of those commandments throughout the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Torah. But Paul tells us in Romans 13 that the law can be summed up by the command to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus said all of the law and prophets depend upon the commands to love God and love other people. It’s a very simple concept, but it’s impossible for us to do 100% of the time.

In order for people to fulfill their end of the covenant and stay in good standing with God they would have to follow God’s law perfectly. Following God’s law in the Old Covenant required perfection. Any deviation, any sinful behavior makes us guilty of breaking that covenant. James tell us: **James 2:10 ESV — 10** For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. The problem is that no one could do that. Paul tells us very clearly in Romans 3.23 that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. Every one of us breaks the law of Moses, often every day.

Because people were incapable of meeting the requirements that God laid out for them, there had to be something to make up for it. In the Old Covenant that was animal sacrifices. Whenever people failed to uphold their side of the Covenant, they had to offer a sacrifice to make up for it. The priests were the ones who offered the sacrifices for them. They were the ones who mediated between man and God. **Hebrews 8:3 ESV — 3** For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.

The priests always had to have something to offer, because people constantly fall into sin. The sacrifices that the priests brought in the Old Covenant were like putting a bandaid on a broken arm or taking Tylenol because you were diagnosed with cancer. It might help a little, but it’s not going to fix the deeper problem.

Ultimately the Old Covenant didn’t work, and Hebrews tells us why. **Hebrews 9:9–10 ESV — 9** …According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, **10** but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. Hebrews 10 explains why just about as clearly as it can. **Hebrews 10:4 ESV — 4** For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The Old Covenant made provision for people to be temporarily set right with God, but it was never a permanent fix. The sacrifices had to be offered day after day and year after year. A new covenant was needed. A new code of conduct, a new agreement between God and man that would allow our sins to truly be taken away once and for all. That’s what Hebrews 8.6 tells us Jesus does for us. He is the mediator of that new covenant that is better, superior, to the Old Covenant. This new Covenant has superior promises and a high priest that sits at the right hand of God.

When the author describes what this new covenant will look like, he goes back to what Jeremiah prophesied in Jeremiah 31.

**Hebrews 8:8–12 ESV — 8** … “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, **9** not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. **10** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **11** And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. **12** For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

What a difference. This new covenant that Jesus ushered in is not a covenant of checklists and rituals. The New Covenant is all about knowing and loving God. Instead of a list of commandments for us to follow, he writes his law on our hearts. He changes our hearts, changes who we are. This is not about following rituals and doing all the right things. The New Covenant is about having a relationship with the living God and allowing him to change our lives.

Most importantly, when we enter into this New Covenant with God, he says that he will be merciful toward our iniquities and remember our sins no more. The Greek word here is ίλεως (hileos) which means to overcome an obstacle in a relationship. Our sin is that obstacle that God had to overcome in order to be with us for eternity. Because of our sin, we couldn’t be in the presence of God, just like the Israelites weren’t able to go beyond the curtain into the Holy of Holies. We could never be free of our sin. The sacrifices were only a temporary fix.

That all changed when Jesus died on the cross. **Hebrews 9:11–12 ESV — 11** But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, … **12** he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

It was the blood of Jesus that allowed us to be cleansed of our sin. Jesus’ death and resurrection is what overcame the obstacle of sin that kept us from a relationship with God. All the things the Israelites were doing out of rote and ritual, all the things that were just a temporary fix, were all obsolete when Jesus came. All of those things had something to offer, but they were all inferior to what Jesus had to offer. This new covenant that Jesus ushered in was far superior to anything the Israelites or the rest of the world had ever known.

When the author of Hebrews started off chapter 8 talking about the point of all that he had said, this is it. It’s easy to get caught up in the details or get confused by all the Jewish history and imagery. But don’t miss this point: Jesus is far better than anything else this world has to offer. Jesus is better than Moses, he’s better than the angels, he’s better than trying to follow the Jewish law. His new covenant is better than anything else the Jews had ever known.

I’m confident that if the author of Hebrews had been writing to Greeks or Romans, he would have said that Jesus is better than the Greek and Roman gods, he’s better than worshiping Caesar as divine.

If he were writing to our culture today, I’m sure that he would say Jesus is better than Islam, he’s better than Hinduism, he’s better than Buddhism. Jesus is better than letting everyone come up with their own ‘truth’.

Realize that all those things are a kind of covenant. People may not make a promise to follow after those ideas and beliefs like we do when we follow Jesus, but they certainly live by that code of conduct. They live their lives by those standards. They structure their lives around their beliefs.

What the author of Hebrews is saying is that while other covenants, other ideas about how we ought to live may have some things to offer, none of them can compare to Jesus. Jesus is far better than anything else this world has to offer.

Jesus never forces his covenant on anyone. This has to be something we choose of our own freewill. I once sat down with a family who wanted me to baptize their children. The mom and dad were excited about it. They wanted a big celebration in the church the mom had grown up in, and her dad was a prominent member of the church. I looked across the table at the kids, and they were not so excited. So I asked the kids if they really believed in Jesus, if they wanted to make the commitment to follow him, and I got a shrug in return. I pushed a little harder, and finally both the kids said they didn’t know what they believed yet.

I had to gently but firmly tell the parents that I couldn’t baptize their kids just because they wanted them to be baptized. It had to be a choice that they made for themselves. This is not a decision we can make for our kids or for anybody else, as much as we might like to. Entering into the New Covenant with Jesus is a decision each one of us has to make for ourselves.

When we enter into this new covenant with Jesus, we are making a promise. Being a part of the New Covenant means we are agreeing that we will leave behind our old covenant, our old way of life, our old code of conduct, and we will follow after Jesus instead. That old way of life is going to look different for every one of us. For the Jews that meant that they lived according the law of Moses and tried their best to do all the right things at all the right times.

For us it probably was not a promise or agreement that we made, but simply the way that we lived before Jesus was a part of our lives. Maybe it was a different kind of religion. Maybe it was Islam or Hinduism. Maybe your code of conduct before meeting Jesus was all about you. Maybe it was eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. Maybe it was doing whatever made you feel good at the time with no thought of what the consequences might be or who it might hurt. Maybe it was all about how much money you could make or making a name for yourself.

Whatever your old covenant was, whatever you lived for before you met Jesus, I can promise you one thing. Jesus is better. Nothing in this world can offer you what he can. Nothing can overcome the obstacle of your sin that is standing between you and God except for Jesus.

Once we choose to follow Jesus and enter into that new covenant, what does it look like? The author of Hebrews tells us that as well.

**Hebrews 9:13–14 ESV — 13** For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, **14** how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

When we receive that eternal redemption that only Jesus can offer us, we are purified. The Jews no longer had to go through the rituals and ceremonies that didn’t really save them. We no longer have to live according to our old ideas of what will save us and what will make our lives worthwhile. We have been purified and saved by the blood of Jesus.

The author of Hebrews doesn’t stop there. We aren’t purified and saved so that we can simply enjoy life knowing that we’ll be with him in heaven one day. We are saved *from* our sins, but we’re also saved *to* something. We are saved for a purpose. Jesus purifies us from our old way of life so that we can now serve the living God. Serving the living God starts the moment we enter that new covenant with Jesus, and it continues for all eternity.

No matter where you came from, no matter what your old covenant, your old code of conduct, you were made for a purpose. You were made to serve the living God. Only Jesus gives us the ability to do that when he gives us eternal redemption that he paid for with his own blood.

1. Exodus 19.8, 24.3, 24.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)