



A NEW AND BETTER WAY



A STUDY IN HEBREWS

WEEK ONE: THE CENTRALITY OF THE BLOOD COVENANT

This series of seven studies looks at Hebrews, one of the longer New Testament books set amongst the shorter Epistles but is unusual in not having an opening greeting as other letters do. It does however close with a typical greeting. Its authorship and date are not certain; there are many scholarly theories about authorship, Paul being just one such claim with doubts about language and style. Origen, an early Christian theologian, made a famous remark “who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews only God knows for certain”. Its period is probably from between 65 and 90 AD. We shall not read through it all in sequence but instead pick out the themes that it addresses. One commentator says, if the writer to the Hebrews had one text it would be “Let us draw near”. So be it.

It is important to remember that most of the Christians at this time were Jews and some, despite having become Christians, were not totally convinced regarding their faith. Part of the reason for this is they believed that Jesus was expected to return any day but because that hadn't happened and because of the persecution they were experiencing, they were wondering if they should remain with the Christians or go back to Judaism. The intent of the book of Hebrews was to convey how much better this new covenant was compared to the old.

The book of Hebrews, because it was written to Jews, lays out more clearly than any other New Testament writing, the necessity for the Old Covenant to be replaced by a NEW and BETTER, COVENANT. The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts summed this up when he penned these words:

**NOT ALL THE BLOOD OF BEASTS ON JEWISH ALTARS SLAIN, COULD GIVE THE
GUILTY CONSCIENCE PEACE OR WASH AWAY THE STAIN
BUT CHRIST, THE HEAVENLY LAMB, TAKES ALL OUR SINS AWAY; A SACRIFICE
OF NOBLER NAME, AND RICHER BLOOD THAN THEY. (Isaac Watts)**

Hebrews 9:22

In fact under the Law almost everything is cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness [neither release from sin and its guilt, nor cancellation of the merited punishment]. (Amplified Bible)

In other words, running from the Old Testament and through the New, the shedding of blood in order to bring about forgiveness is the vital red cord. God is holy and the Old Covenant was the way, provided by God, to enable his people to be holy. Why is this important? One writer puts it this way: *“Holiness is a central marker of the fundamental divide between God and the sinful human creature. (Richard Lints)* The word holy in the Hebrew means to set-apart or separateness. His people were to be separate from the nations through which they passed, neither marrying into them nor worshipping their gods.

- Did they in any way achieve this?

This first part of this study tries to lay out in simple terms what was the **OLD COVENANT**.

In order to do help the Israelites to follow his instructions, God first instituted the Ten Commandments and then a widespread system of commands as to how they should live and worship. They covered strict dietary laws, legal contracts, family relationships including sexual conduct and instruction relating to servants and slaves and above all how they were to worship God. We may think this was incredibly complex, and it was, but the aim was for God’s people to become a holy people who would worship and serve God. If they did this, God promised his blessings, his guidance and protection from their enemies. He had miraculously delivered them out of Egypt, promising them their own land flowing with milk and honey **PROVIDED THEY OBEYED HIS LAWS AND COMMANDMENTS**. You can read about this in *Exodus chapters 20-24*.

- What miracles had God done for them?
- Were they able to keep his promises in mind at all times?
- Do we believe God’s promises made in his word?
- Do we ever doubt God’s promises?

Exodus 25 to 31 explains how God wanted his people to worship him. These instructions allowed for no deviation. He gave specific orders for building a Tabernacle which would house the Ark of the Covenant, and which would go with them until the end of their journey.

God also instructed that the priesthood should be the first born of the descendants of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi. They were not expected to do 'normal' work but to carry out all the priestly duties. They received the tithe of the people as their income (*Numbers 18:21*).

"The Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur is the highest holy day of the Jewish calendar. In the Old Testament, the High Priest made an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement. This act of paying the penalty for sin brought reconciliation (a restored relationship) between the people and God. After the blood sacrifice was offered to the Lord, a goat was released into the wilderness to symbolically carry away the sins of the people. This "scapegoat" was never to return." (M. Fairchild)

Read: Leviticus 16:8-34, 23:26-32, Numbers 29:7-11

The Day of Atonement was the forerunner of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross but highlights the major differences between the Old and New Covenants.

The Old Covenant practice, under the Aaronic priesthood had to be repeated every year. This priesthood also had to sacrifice continually for their own sins, as well as the sins of the people. The sacrifice of Jesus was a once and for all sacrifice. He was of course, sinless, but because he had experienced living in human form as we do, he is able to intercede compassionately on our behalf.

- Do we understand the differences between the high priest who offered the sacrifices and Jesus?

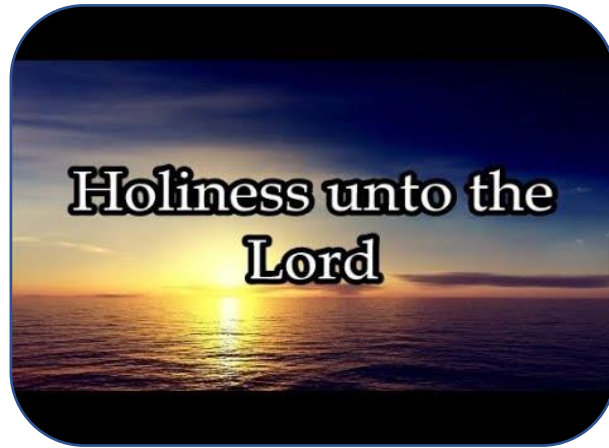
Read Hebrews 8:1-13

- Why was a new covenant needed?
- Why was Jesus '*The Perfect Sacrifice*' for sin?
- What does it mean for us to be holy?

One definition of holiness says: **HOLINESS** means to be set apart by God for a divine purpose. We are not our own but belong to God being bought with the price of the blood of Jesus Christ and therefore we live for him and not for ourselves.

A simpler definition is that to be holy is to be like Jesus. Whilst it sounds simple, it is not easy to live out in practice.

- How do we become holy, or more like Jesus?
- Does this sound an unreasonable or unachievable goal to you?



**Father God, help us to appreciate your holiness and to live our lives
in ways that reflect you.**