

## **Hebrews 9:1-22 The mediator of a better covenant**

### **Introduction**

The underlying theme of the book of Hebrews has been about how Jesus is ‘better than’ all aspects of the Old Covenant and superior not only to the great heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, but also superior to the heavenly beings who honour and adore and worship God in His immediate presence in heaven. It is written to Jewish-background believers in Italy who have been seriously persecuted for their faith and are seriously tempted to go back to their mainstream Jewish practices and see the persecution from the Roman authorities stop. Our author wants to encourage them to stand firm in their faith supremely because Jesus is so special; especially because He is the mediator of a better covenant. Over the course of this book he endeavours to make this point from different angles and perspectives to convince them of the rightness of the choice they made some years earlier to follow Jesus. For many of us we have not known nor do we expect to experience physical persecution for our faith. It is in our world an increasingly common part of Christian discipleship in many parts of the world, but thus far in the United Kingdom we have been spared this difficulty.

What particular aspects of his message does the author of Hebrews highlight in these verses?

### **1. The Old Covenant: its glories and and its inadequacies** (Hebrews 9:1-10)

(a) **The wonder of the Old Covenant** (Hebrews 9:1-5) *Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. <sup>2</sup>A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. <sup>3</sup>Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place,*

(i) **The holy place** (Hebrews 9:1-3) It is as if our author stops for a moment, putting down his quill pen or gets his secretary to do so and takes a tour in his mind’s eye of the early and exciting history of the Jewish community in the time of Moses and Aaron. It was a dangerous and difficult time as they struggled to fashion a less than enthusiastic mass of people into a disciplined and organised nation. His thoughts begin on the tabernacle in the wilderness and the simple furnishings that fulfilled the guidelines God has given and which are recorded in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. It was a man-made facility (Hebrews 9:11); the Jewish people when asked, most generously provided all kinds of material that was required to set up and furnish this place of worship (Exodus 35). There were a small number of people who had particular skills as craftsmen – most notably Bezalel, son of Uri of the tribe of Judah and Oholiab, son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan, who were in charge of the construction process. Exodus 35:30-35 summarised the gifting and skills of these two men. *Then Moses said to the Israelites, ‘See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, <sup>31</sup>and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – <sup>32</sup>to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, <sup>33</sup>to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. <sup>34</sup>And He has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, **the ability to teach others.** <sup>35</sup>He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers – all of them skilled workers and designers.* Exodus 36 onwards describes how some of the work was done in fulfilling these requirements. Particular people stepped up and offered what they could do and God prompted enough people to give what they could so that there was enough provided for the work. It was also something they made a point of passing on to others by training them to follow on in their footsteps. Things have not changed and apply equally in each generation of Christians.

(ii) **The holy objects** (Hebrews 9:4-5) ...*which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.* <sup>5</sup>*Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.* What was it that the famous Ark of the Covenant contained? Our author highlights three things – **first** of all a sample pot of manna, the special food the Israelites ate during their desert wandering for forty years. It was a basic foodstuff, but Exodus 16:33-34 records the decision to preserve a small sample of it to remind later generations of the faithfulness of God and His provision for their needs while in the inhospitable desert. Sceptical scholars over the centuries have taken delight in pointing out that the desert terrain through which Israel passed could not have supported the needs of more than two million Israelites and their flocks and herds. What they failed to realise is that God supernaturally ensured the provision of their needs because He had asked them to be in that place. The principle of God providing for us is both biblical and deeply practical. It was a lesson Abraham learned on Mount Moriah in Genesis 22 when God provided a ram for the sacrifice –instead of Isaac. In that incident God revealed Himself as Jehovah Jireh –the God who provides. In Genesis 22:14 Abraham declared these words: *So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'* It was a lesson sung in a number of the Psalms. For example, Psalm 34:8-10 declares: <sup>8</sup>*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.* <sup>9</sup>*Fear the Lord, you His holy people, for those who fear Him lack nothing.* <sup>10</sup>*The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.* It is an issue of principle from the New Testament as well. In Matthew 6 Jesus sought to inculcate a real confidence in God in His disciples through His teaching known as the 'Sermon on the Mount'. In Matthew 6:31-33 it states: *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"* <sup>32</sup>*For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* <sup>33</sup>*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* It is a conditional award that depends on us honouring the Lord as we step out in faith for Him. Paul wanted to teach exactly this lesson to the new Christian congregations spread out around the Mediterranean Sea. In Philippians 4:19 he wrote: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.* There are plenty of other verses that could have been quoted, but this principle, symbolically represented by the pot of manna in the holy place, is foundational for God's people then and now. As we walk by faith we will add our testimony to those who have gone before us that the Lord will provide for all my needs –not my wants- but my essential needs.

**Second** *Aaron's staff that had budded...* What does this refer to? In Numbers 16 and 17 there is an account of a struggle for power and authority amongst the Israelite community. There were more than 250 individuals ... *well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.* <sup>3</sup>*They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?'* (Numbers 16:2b-3). In simple terms these individuals resented the fact that God had appointed other people to serve in ministries they desired. They had a deep-seated jealousy against them that eventually erupted in this public challenge against Moses and Aaron. The question was this: Had God called Moses and Aaron to their posts? Yes He had! It was the Lord that these individuals had an issue with not God's servants getting on with the work with which they had been entrusted. Dathan and Abiram and their colleagues had no idea just how serious it was to misrepresent God in the public assembly of God's people. It would cost them their lives. It appears that the particular person they wished to replace was Aaron. In Numbers 17:1-5 the Lord outlined how He would demonstrate to Israel that He had chosen Aaron for his post. *The Lord said to Moses,* <sup>2</sup>*'Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes.*

Write the name of each man on his staff. <sup>3</sup> On the staff of Levi write Aaron's name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe. <sup>4</sup> Place them in the tent of meeting in front of the ark of the covenant law, where I meet with you. <sup>5</sup> The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.' It was an extraordinary spectacle, following on from the earth opening up and swallowing up all the men who had stood against Moses and Aaron. What was the outcome here? Exodus 17:8-9 states: *The next day Moses entered the tent and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.* <sup>9</sup> Then Moses brought out all the staffs from the Lord's presence to all the Israelites. They looked at them, and each of the leaders took his own staff. God could not have made it clearer. What was the lesson here? It was quite simple that God wants His work done in His way. He gifts each one of us to engage in Christian service, but we must not be jealous of one another, rather we must rejoice in the gifting He has given to each one of us and certainly not be envious of someone else who may be appointed to serve in a particular post. God knows what He is doing. May we celebrate and affirm one another in our callings and be supportive of whomever is set apart to lead in particular areas of ministry. I thank God for so many people in this church who generously have given their time and abilities to serve the Lord in work amongst the youngest to the oldest in our church family and community.

**Third ...the stone tablets of the covenant.** The tablets containing the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai; this was of course the replacement set after the first ones were broken after the idolatry of the people. In Exodus 34:1-2 it states: *The Lord said to Moses, 'Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. <sup>2</sup> Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain... Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands (Exodus 34:29).* The first four commandments related to giving God the first place in our lives and the next six covered our relationships with other people. It was a reminder –if they or we needed it- that our faith journey is not a solitary one, but ought to be as part of a community of God's people. These are the boundaries of the believing community of God's people. Here is so much to rejoice in, but not all was ideal about the Old Covenant.

(b) **The limitations of the Old Covenant** (Hebrews 9:6-10) (i) **Restricted access** (Hebrews 9:6-7) <sup>6</sup> *When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. <sup>7</sup> But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.* Access to God under the Old Covenant sacrificial system was through a priest. However, access to God in the Holy of Holies was only by the High Priest Himself and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. This restrictive access was important and worked, but it was so limited compared to the impact of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. All of His New Testament people can come directly to God in prayer, in the name of Jesus, to bring our petitions to our heavenly Father. We can open our hearts to the Lord at any time in any location. Now this system covered sins that took *the people had committed in ignorance...* What about sins we deliberately committed? If we now wish to repent of such sin from the past –is it possible? It is under the New Covenant in Jesus. I John 1:9 states: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Hallelujah for that! We must never presume on God's grace, but we must magnify and rejoice in it. Jesus' sacrifice made possible cleansing from each and every sin we have committed in the past, present and future.

(ii) **Partial cleansing** (Hebrews 9:8) <sup>8</sup> *The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. Could the High Priest go in to the Holy of Holies right away and offer a sacrifice for the*

nation's sin? No! Hebrews 9:7b states: *...never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.* Here was a limited individual who had repeatedly to address his own sins – but not Jesus who never sinned. The cleansing from sin under the Old Covenant inevitably was partial. It had to be repeated year after year. The cleansing one day might have covered that day, but it certainly needed to be repeated again and again. What a difference to the efficacy of the death of Jesus in our place as Hebrews 10:19-20 informs us: *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,* <sup>20</sup> *by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body...*

(iii) **Limited pardon** (Hebrews 9:9-10) <sup>9</sup> *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 worshipper.* <sup>10</sup> *They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.* The Old Covenant sacrifices covered external sin. But our sins are not restricted to outward actions. We have words at times that we regret and need to repent of. There are inappropriate attitudes sometimes that we need to address and seek God's forgiveness. Hebrews 10:22 explains the difference Jesus' sacrifice made in this respect: *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience ...* The Old Covenant provided a limited pardon, but Jesus's sacrifice was a sufficient one to cleanse both the inner person as well as take care of external sin. Would anyone really want to go back to the old way instead of the new covenant way through Jesus? Now our author turns more briefly to highlight the effectiveness of the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus.

## 2. **The effectiveness of the new covenant** (Hebrews 9:11-14)

(a) **Our redemption is secured** (Hebrews 9:11-12) <sup>11</sup> *But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation.* <sup>12</sup> *He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.* The stuff of this life is of limited duration. Food goes out of date; parts of various gadgets cannot be replaced and we can all list so many of these scenarios. Even the best things of this life eventually wear out and need to be replaced; but the sacrifice of Jesus affects us not only in time but also for eternity. There is time limit – it is *eternal redemption*. The devil may tempt you by saying: 'Are you really saying you are good enough to be a Christian?' Are you convinced that God will keep on forgiving you when you repeatedly come to confess that you have failed Him yet again! Remind him of the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus. It is of infinite worth and value for each child of God; it covers all our sins, past, present, and future. The security this brings for the genuine child of God is immense. This is what Jesus has obtained for you.

(b) **Our consciences are cleansed** (Hebrews 9:13-14) <sup>13</sup> *The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.* <sup>14</sup> *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,* Our author recognises that the animal sacrifices were fit for purpose at the time. They did what the Levitical regulations said they would do to reconcile a sinner with a holy God. Yet it was a constant repeated action that provided at best temporary relief. What a difference the sacrifice of Jesus made because through it we can be purified from **all** unrighteousness. It not only covers outward actions, but addresses also the problem of guilty consciences and attitudes. It purifies the entire person which is what we really need. Whole person transformation is what is required in this and so many other contexts. The best remedy for

human sinfulness is what Jesus did on the cross for us. We must repent of our sin and turn to Him for forgiveness and salvation and a new beginning.

(c) **Our calling is made clear** (Hebrews 9:14b) *...so that we may serve the living God!* The day we turn to Jesus for salvation is not the end of it, rather it is the start of Christian discipleship and a new way of life. We are saved to serve! We are called to a new approach to life in which God is at work in us changing our attitudes, our speech and our conduct to conform more closely to His way. We progress at different speeds and if we are honest we don't always want to change in some areas of our lives because we like it as we are. However, we need to let Him work in us for our good and His glory. No-one ever 'arrives' in this life; we are always a work in progress. We need to 'Be patient with me! God is still working in me to change me for the better! Philippians 2:1-5a reminds us *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup>not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. <sup>5</sup>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

### 3. **The significance of the new covenant** (Hebrews 9:15-22)

(a) **The effectiveness of the mediator** (Hebrews 9:15) *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.* In contrast to the Old Covenant sacrifices that needed repeating year after year, the sacrifice of Jesus is of infinite worth that provides *the promised eternal inheritance*. It is not only for now in time, but for eternity. What these first hearers and readers needed to grasp was that the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus was not simply better by degree compared to the Old one, but of a completely different kind of redemption in that the perfect priest who offered the sacrifice was Himself the offering to God; this individual alone could both reconcile God to humanity and humanity to God. To grasp the effectiveness of the work of the mediator should be such to ensure that no other way of salvation would either be sought or needed. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus as the only Saviour from sin? What a wonderful Saviour! What assurance we have for the future of following Him!

(b) **The benefactor and the beneficiaries** (Hebrews 9:16-17) <sup>16</sup>*In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, <sup>17</sup>because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.* We all understand the idea of making a will, a legal document that is useful for confirming what we want to happen to all the 'stuff' we have left behind when we die. How tragic in too many families when there are battles over wills. However, our author is referring this familiar human action to point to the amazing activity of Jesus in planning the spiritual blessings we inherit through His sacrifice for us. We are only able to be credited with His substitutionary sacrifice because He died in our place. His death brought us life in all its fullness when we by faith reach out to claim the inheritance offered. The inheritance we have available to us is a gift of God's grace alone, received by faith alone. It takes humility to recognise we are sinners who cannot save ourselves, but instead to come simply as we are to Jesus and take the free gift of infinite worth He has prepared for us in time and in eternity. In life we are grateful for many generous gifts. Yet only the special gift of Jesus lasts for eternity. In John 14:1-4 Jesus' amazing words to His disciples at the Last Supper: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. <sup>2</sup>My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that **I am going there to prepare a place for you?** <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for*

you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. <sup>4</sup> You know the way to the place where I am going. What a joy to know all your future beyond this life is planned by the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you committed all your life, past, present and future to Him?

(c) **The purpose of the blood** (Hebrews 9:18-22)<sup>18</sup> *This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.* <sup>19</sup> *When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.* <sup>20</sup> *He said, 'This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.'* <sup>21</sup> *In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies.* <sup>22</sup> *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*** (i) **The Old Covenant required blood sacrifices** (Hebrews 9:18) In biblical thought references to 'blood shed' in the Bible refers not to 'the release of life from the burden of the flesh, but the bringing to an end of life in the flesh' [Alan Stibbs, *The Meaning of the Word 'Blood' in Scripture*, p. 12]. The shedding of Jesus' blood was that once-for-all-time perfect sacrifice without which we cannot be saved. The author of Hebrews wanted to stress that the old Covenant only 'worked' as a result of the cost of blood being shed. *This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood* (Hebrews 9:18). Time and again priests and people were sprinkled and covered from their sins by the blood of the sacrificial animals and birds. It was a constant reminder to the Israelite nation of the seriousness of sin and the costliness of redemption. At the Last Supper Jesus changed the meaning of the Passover meal before them when He replaced the lamb offered as part of that act of worship with Himself as the Lamb of God. He took the cup of red wine in front of Him and declared in Matthew 26:27-28: *Then He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you.* <sup>28</sup> ***This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*** (ii) **The sanctuary was sanctified by the blood** (Hebrews 9:21-22) *In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies.* <sup>22</sup> *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood...* The shedding of the blood was an essential part of the worship of God's covenant people. A message from God loud and clear about the seriousness of their relationship with Him; under the Old Covenant it was the animal and bird sacrifices, but under the New Covenant our purification from sin is through the shed blood of Jesus. There is no other way to be saved. People choose many ways to live their life or to direct their spiritual journey. However, the book of Hebrews is quite explicit that the only way to fellowship with God is through the sacrifice of Jesus, the mediator of a better covenant. I pray that each one of us have received His free but costly gift of salvation through the death of Jesus in our place, Amen.