

6. The writer treated Jesus' priesthood at length in order to demonstrate the superiority of the covenant associated with it. He previously introduced the idea of a new covenant as a central component of God's promise of future renewal through the Messiah (8:7-13), but he also made explicit what Israel's prophets hinted at, which is that Jesus is the *mediator* of this new covenant (8:6). This covenant, and Jesus' relationship to it, is the subject of the writer's final instruction (9:15-10:18) before issuing a series of closing exhortations (10:19-13:17) drawn from that instruction and all that he brought to his readers.

He'd earlier mentioned Jesus' role as mediator of a new and better covenant, but only now returned to elaborate on it. And the first thing he noted was that Jesus' shed blood was fundamental to His mediation of the covenant. But not His sacrificial death per se, but what it accomplished: *Jesus' death has brought cleansing and renewal such that God now, at last, has secured true children for Himself – children delivered from alienation and death so as to serve Him as sharers in His life.*

- Israel's mediators – whether Moses, priests or rulers – managed a covenant relationship defined by alienation, violation and uncleanness. The priestly system was devised to hold the covenant relationship intact, but failure at every point, including by the mediating priests, left it in tatters. Even if the Levitical ministration could bring inward cleansing – which it couldn't (9:13), what was needed was comprehensive renewal. The covenant children needed to become children indeed; sons and daughters who are *image-children* as God intended. They needed a new redemption to deliver them from their self-enslavement.
- Jesus accomplished that great work of deliverance and renewal (9:15), first in that He is Himself the true image-Son; *He* is, in His resurrection and enthronement, what God intended His human creature to be. But that intent for man lay behind Jesus' sacrificial death. He didn't die simply to satisfy divine justice for wrongdoing, or even to bring cleansing from impurity, though He accomplished both. He died to put to death *pseudo-man*: man as dead to God and to himself; man as cut off from God's life and consigned to an existence defined by alienation from God, himself, and every other created thing. Jesus died in order that God's image-bearers should be delivered from their false and fatal human existence to become living image-children as He Himself is image-Son.

And so, whereas Israel's mediators mediated a divine-human covenant relationship falsified and made impossible by the death and alienation of the human parties, Jesus mediates a covenant relationship that is authentic and true – *a relationship that actually conforms to the definition and prescription set out in the covenant.* This is the fundamental premise behind the Hebrews writer's instruction, and it provides the essential lens through which his instruction must be viewed and interpreted.

- a. That instruction begins with a summary assertion which has this sense: *Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant grounded in the redemption and renewal effected by His death. And this mediation has its goal in the human parties to the covenant obtaining the full inheritance of the sonship that is God's eternal purpose* (9:15).

All that God prescribed and promised in connection with the covenant at Sinai (the “first covenant”) remained unfulfilled right up until Jesus’ birth. Whatever their intent and zeal, the people of Israel remained unfaithful and disobedient children throughout their generations. The priestly ministration brought a measure of relief, but not redemption from the self-enslavement that prevented the covenant children from inheriting the promises and blessings of true sonship.

- b. Establishing this framework of understanding is important, especially because the writer seems to immediately take his argument in a different direction, shifting from the concept of covenant *mediation* to how a covenant is *enacted* (9:16-17). He wasn’t changing the subject (note the conjunction “for” that begins verses 16 and 17), but it certainly appears that he was changing his focus. He was still discussing the matter of covenant, but seemingly from a different vantage point.

The Greek noun rendered “covenant” is *diatheke* (διαθήκη), and it refers to either the Sinai covenant or the new covenant across the wider context (ref. 8:6-10, 9:4, 15, 20, 10:16, 29). But this noun can also refer to a different sort of covenant, known more commonly as a *last will and testament*. The parties to this type of covenantal contract are the testator and his heir(s), and that is the sense in which the writer used the term in 9:16-17. (Hence the KJV, NKJV, and NAB use the noun *testator* in these verses). But this shift in meaning occurs only in those two verses; beginning in verse 9:20, and then for the balance of the epistle, the writer returned to the former sense of the noun *diatheke*. This phenomenon has long puzzled readers and scholars, and there are two general ways of understanding it:

- 1) The first is that *diatheke* should be translated *covenant* in these two verses and interpreted as referring to the new covenant, but in terms of a particular covenantal feature – i.e., activation by the death of the testator. This, of course, raises the question of how this principle of covenant activation by the death of the one making the covenant applies to the covenant at Sinai (note the “therefore” that introduces vv. 18-20).
- 2) The second view is that the writer was indeed referring to a *last will and testament* and the way that it’s put in force. This interpretation best fits the context, but it raises its own difficulty. The concept of a last will being enacted through the death of the testator fits with the new covenant (at least in some sense), but doesn’t at all apply to the Sinai covenant.

Verses 18-20, together with verse 15, provide an important key to resolving the interpretive issues. For there he was talking about the *ratification* of the covenant at Sinai – i.e., the fact that the covenant was formally enacted and made binding through the blood of an acceptable sacrifice (ref. Exodus 24:1-11). This practice was common in the ancient world, and God also employed it in making His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). Whatever the writer had in mind in verses 16-17, he understood his statements there as both an inference derived from verse 15, and truths that pointed to his argument about covenant ratification.

The point in 9:16-17 isn't complicated, and people in every culture and time understand it: A last will and testament is a form of covenant (a legal and binding agreement between parties), but one that depends on the death of the person making it (the testator) to be enacted. Like all covenants, a will defines and prescribes a relationship between two or more parties, but because this particular relationship pertains to *inheritance*, it cannot be initiated until the testator dies. The covenant parties may be related in any number of other ways, but death alone puts in force the covenant relationship set out in a will.

- c. Though not in the same way, covenant *ratification* (in Israel's case) also involved death as the mechanism for enacting the covenant relationship. Thus verses 16-17 lay the groundwork for an inference concerning the covenant at Sinai (9:18-20). Just as a will takes effect through a death, so it was with that covenant; it, too, was inaugurated by means of blood (v. 18). Of course, there is an important distinction, which is that a will is put in force through the death of the person who created it, whereas Israel's covenant was enacted through the blood of sacrificial animals (vv. 19-20; ref. again Exodus 24:4-8). Even so, the Sinai covenant's preparatory role connected it *prophetically* with the new covenant, and this seems to be how the writer related both covenants to the death mechanism of a will.
- In the case of the Sinai covenant, this ratification formally established the Father-son relationship between Yahweh and Israel – the relationship that Israel fully embraced and vowed to uphold. But precisely because the covenant pertained to Israel's sonship, it also involved *inheritance*. Israel's faithfulness as Yahweh's son would see the nation inheriting all of His provisions and blessings. This inheritance was depicted in the creation account and illumined in God's covenant with Abraham and later with Abraham's offspring (cf. Genesis 1:26-30, 12:1-3, 17:1-8, 15-16; Exodus 6:1-8, 15:1-18, 19:1-6; Deuteronomy 15:1-6, 28:1-14).
 - But the covenant son proved hopelessly unfaithful, and therefore the Father withheld his inheritance. Israel experienced a *taste* of Yahweh's inheritance by dwelling with Him in His sanctuary land, but the relationship was marred by alienation and rebellion, which soon resulted in expulsion and captivity (cf. Isaiah 1:1-9, 5:1-15; Jeremiah 6; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1:1-2:13). Israel had shown itself unworthy of its inheritance, and yet God's promise of it remained; His "last will and testament" continued intact and unaltered (Isaiah 40; Jeremiah 3; Zechariah 7-8).
 - Yahweh was determined that Abraham's offspring should fulfill their election as sons (initially a Jewish remnant, and then ingathered Gentiles – Genesis 17:1-7; Galatians 3:1-29), and so obtain the inheritance covenanted to them. But before that could happen, the problem of unfaithfulness and estrangement needed to be addressed (cf. Deuteronomy 30, 31:14-32:44; Psalm 28, 74; Isaiah 40-41, 51-54; Lamentations 5; Ezekiel 33-34, 36-37; Daniel 9; Hosea 11-14; Joel 1-3; Micah 7; etc.).

Israel's priestly system spoke of this need and Yahweh's provision for it. Hence, the ritual of sacrifice and sprinkling of blood that ratified the covenant at the foot of Mount Sinai was repeated throughout Israel's history as a rite of cleansing for the people as well as everything associated with their relationship with God. The blood of ratification had become the blood of *continuation*; in almost every instance, cleansing from defilement required blood, and without the shedding of blood there was no forgiveness for the covenant children (9:22).

The writer, then, was drawing on various dimensions of covenant structure and function and Israel's covenant experience to show how all of that finds its ultimacy and meaning in Jesus' person and work. *He – and the covenant He ratified, put in force, and continues to mediate – is the key to how the writer was relating the activation of a last will and testament with the ratification and administration of the Sinai covenant.* Jesus ratified the new covenant with His own blood (ref. 10:28-29, 12:22-24, 13:20-21; cf. also Luke 22:20), achieving the covenant renewal God promised through His prophets and securing *in actuality* the covenant relationship of sonship that the former (Sinai) covenant prescribed. Jesus' death, then, actualized what Moses accomplished symbolically when he, as God's appointed mediator, sprinkled blood on the book of the covenant, the covenant parties, and the covenant appointments.

Jesus' death must be understood in terms of covenant *ratification* by the sprinkling of sacrificial blood, but also covenant *activation* by the death of the testator. For it wasn't the blood of an acceptable animal sacrifice that put in force the new covenant, but the blood of the One who created that covenant. Jesus' death was the death of the covenant testator, and this implies that the inheritance specified in the covenant has now been freed up to pass to the heirs. *Uniquely, the testator is the first of those heirs:* the One who *died* is also the One who *lives* to inherit all things (1:1-2), but as the first among many brethren (2:5-15; cf. also Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 3:21-4:7).

What had been held in trust since God's promise in Eden – the promise of an eternal inheritance for His image-children – was now being dispersed to the heirs (9:15). And not simply because of Jesus' death, but *in Him* as the *living* Son, the glorified King-Priest (cf. Matthew 5:3-5 with Romans 4:13; also 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5, 21:1-7).

“And a Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,” declares Yahweh. ‘And as for Me, this is My covenant with them,’ says Yahweh: ‘My Spirit which is upon You, and My words which I have put in Your mouth, shall not depart from Your mouth, nor from the mouth of Your offspring, nor from the mouth of Your offspring’s offspring,’ says Yahweh, ‘from now and forever.’ Therefore, arise, Zion, and shine; for your light has come, and glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth, and deep darkness the peoples; but Yahweh will rise upon you, and His glory will appear upon you. And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes round about, and see; they all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, and your daughters will be carried in the arms. Then you will see and be radiant, and your heart will thrill and rejoice; because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, the wealth of the nations will come to you.”