**Week 4 – Covenant: Our response to God’s grace**

**Bible Reading: Hebrews 9:11-15**

**TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group outline**

**Introduction**

* Previously we have considered the place of covenant as, for example, that established between Moses and God on Mount Sinai.
* Great promises were made by the people, committing themselves to abide by the covenant. (Exodus 19:8, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said.’) However, the keeping of the covenant was often short-lived.
* Jeremiah 31:32, ‘…because they broke my covenant’, reminds us of the propensity of the people to break the covenant. But still God continues to forgive. (Jeremiah 31:34, ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’)
* With the coming of Jesus a new covenant was established through his shed blood. However, even at Jesus’ last meal with his disciples as he declared the cup to be a sign of the new covenant, there was denial and betrayal. (Luke 22:20,21, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.’)
* So, just because a covenant is agreed doesn’t mean that it will automatically be fulfilled. But what difference can the new covenant make?

**Exploration**

1. **Saved**

* Hebrews chapter 9 gives us an indication of the centrality of Jesus in the establishment of this new covenant over the mechanisms of the old covenant. This old covenant clearly had its place in the lives of the people and gave them the assurance of God’s favour over the years.
* But this was a complex set of rules and regulations, with everything, including the items of furniture in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, having significance and, very often, deep meaning. Even the writer to the Hebrews acknowledges this complexity, suggesting that ‘we cannot discuss these things in detail now’ (Hebrews 9:5).
* So the death of Jesus brought about a new way of being, one not dependent upon the regular sacrificial system repeated year after year in different ways, but now completed once and for all by the blood of Jesus.
* Jesus, the great high priest, entered the most holy place by the shedding of his own blood so that the relationship with God could be established once and for all. As we know from our understanding of the Easter story, access to God was established as signified by the curtain of the Temple being torn in two, from top to bottom ([Matthew 27:51](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/MAT.27.51.NIV)).
* And so relationship with God has been re-established through the new covenant, so 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’ (Hebrews 9:15).

1. **To serve**

* This promised eternal inheritance might lead us to think about going to Heaven when we die; but as Jesus himself suggested, eternal life is not just about living for ever but about knowing God and the quality of the life that we live now. (John 17:2,3, ‘For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’; and John 10:10, ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.’)
* As Paul suggests in 2 Corinthians 5:17, ‘If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!’ Notice the tense here: this is not a future hope, but a present reality, a living of the life of Heaven here on earth, free from the sins committed under the first covenant ([Hebrews 9:15](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/HEB.9.15.NIV)).
* But it also seems to be clear that the new covenant leads us into service. (Hebrews 9:14, ‘…so that we may serve the living God’.)
* In speaking of the sacrifice of Jesus, William Barclay says, ‘The sacrifice of Jesus… is not only the paying of a debt; it is the giving of a victory.’ (*The Daily Study Bible*, comment on Hebrews 9:11-14)
* This victory means that we have been set free from sins committed under the first covenant, but not so that we live whatever life we want. That would be to abuse the grace of God, as Paul addresses in Romans (Romans 6:1,2, ‘What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?’)
* However, ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free’ (Galatians 5:1) – freedom not to do our own thing, but to live according to the ways of God, living a life of victory, serving him in all we do.

**Conclusion**

* The Bible is full of examples of what this may look like in our own lives as we live out our side of the covenant.
* It may be that the great words of the Old Testament prophet Micah come to mind (Micah 6:8), that we will ‘Act justly… love mercy and [to] walk humbly with our God.’
* It may be Peter’s challenge comes to mind, repeating the Levitical call to ‘Be holy, because I am holy’, indeed encouraging them to ‘be holy in all you do’. (1 Peter 1:15)
* So as we are living in the new covenant, saved by the blood of Jesus, let us pray God will help us serve the living God in all we do and in all we are.

**REFLECT – questions for discussion/small groups**

**Personal**

* Are you looking forward to the promised eternal inheritance or are you experiencing it now?
* Would you say that you live a life of freedom? How does this freedom show itself in your own life?
* If I am saved to serve, is there a danger that what I do (my service) can become more important than who I am (someone enjoying the life of God now)? How can I strike a good balance in my own life?
* Hebrews 9:14 speaks of having our conscience cleansed. As you examine your conscience, do you know something of it being cleansed? How does your living help to have a clear conscience?

**Community**

* Is it possible that we have substituted rituals for a genuine engagement with God? What might some of these rituals be? Are they helpful to our life as a corps?
* Does everyone in our corps fellowship feel they have a part to play in serving the living God? How have we been able to do that, even when we have not been able to meet together physically?
* What can our fellowship do to encourage everyone to be the people God has called us to be? How can we ensure that space is given for the apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and shepherds to equip God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up? (Ephesians 4:11,12)
* What can we do to ensure that those in our fellowship who may not have such an ‘up front’ way of service, feel as valued as those who do?
* Having experienced the promised eternal inheritance (remembering that eternal is not just about a length of time, but a quality of living), what difference is this making in the everyday life of our corps?

**Response**

* **Rainbow Covenants**: [This activity](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BIPZm6az4I) can be recorded and projected on screen in a worship service. Arrange Skittles in a circle around the edge of a plate (or you can arrange them in the shape of a cross). Pour over enough hot (but not boiling) water to cover all the Skittles and the plate itself. Watch and wait as a rainbow appears on the plate; the colours will move towards the middle and create a whirl of colour. As these colours move and merge into one another, reflect on the unity and relationship between God and his people. This activity could also be done using felt tip pens on a paper towel, and spraying this with water as seen [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GCBmdwYTro).