The Scandal of Grace

Hebrews 9:1-14

Well it doesn't seem 2 minutes since we began our study in Hebrews, and we're already in chapter 9, and there are only 13. So that means we'll be through it by summer! "Thank goodness" some of you are thinking! "I don't get it – all this sacrifice, High Priest, covenant stuff – it's all getting too much for me!" Well it is tough to handle. Even the theologians struggle with this book! And even though you might not get every detail, there's some powerful truths in this letter. I'm going to do a teacher thing now: I wonder if I can ask you "what God has shown you in this study so far?" Or maybe "what are some lasting impressions and some key truths of the book of Hebrews?" *Jesus is our Great High Priest and what that means, the new covenant in Jesus is a better way…*

You might have realized by now that the writer of Hebrews likes to make a lot of comparisons, especially to Judaism. Remember, his audience is Jewish. These guys have grown up going synagogue, observing holy days, offering sacrifices to the priest, tithing their income. All these traditions are deeply instilled. You know how we are with our family traditions. We must have a whole load of different traditions amongst us, many of which are cultural. Take the Slacks for example. They are about English as English gets do you agree? And at Christmas English people, when they sit down to eat their Christmas dinner, they pull crackers. But you can't buy crackers here in Switzerland. But that doesn't stop the girls making them and then sitting down to pull them and shouting BANG when the paper tears! "Why bother?" you might ask. Because it's fun and a good old English tradition! No doubt you guys do the same. You have things that you were brought up with that you just have to introduce into your family. Well, the Jews had their traditions as well.

You know, one of the reasons we struggle to understand all the details of Hebrews is simply because we're not Jewish and we're not so familiar with all their traditions. And Hebrews is probably the most Jewish of all the New Testament letters! That's why the writer is constantly making comparisons to

Judaism. He frequently uses the Old Testament and talks about how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Jewish faith. Angels, Moses, Prophets, High Priest, the old covenant, the Old Testament law. I guarantee you wouldn't have a hard time understanding all the details of Hebrews if were Jewish.

And so, with that background we are up to chapter 9 in our study. Last week, as we saw in chapter 8, he began to talk about the old and new covenants. A covenant is simply 'an agreement between two parties.' Covenants in the bible are all about God being in relationship with man. It's always between God and someone else. There are two types of covenants: conditional and unconditional. A conditional covenant is an agreement that is binding on both parties. Both parties have to agree to fulfil certain conditions. If one of the parties fails to keep their side of the bargain, the covenant is broken and the covenant is over. Marriage is a covenant (explain). But there is another type of covenant: unconditional. This is where only one of the two parties has to do something. In other words, the covenant will be fulfilled regardless of what the other one does. Nothing is required of the other party. The bible speaks of 7 different covenants, God made covenants with Adam, Abraham, Noah, David and others. But we are going to focus on just two this evening. And the writer of Hebrews calls them the old and the new.

When he speaks of the old covenant he is referring to the covenant he made with Moses. This covenant was centred around God's giving the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. If Israel were obedient, God would bless them, but if they were disobedient, then God would punish them. What type of covenant do you think this one was? Conditional of course! The blessings and curses that are associated with this conditional covenant are found in detail in Deuteronomy 28. So this was the covenant that God put in place with his people. The blessing and cursing associated with keeping the law aren't for salvation. Salvation has always been by God's grace and through faith. But just like today if we don't follow Gods commands we will forfeit his blessing, so it was with the law in the Old Testament.

So, in chapter 8, when the writer of Hebrews begins this discussion on the old covenant this is the one he's referring to. The Mosaic covenant – the law. And

he spends chapters 8 and 9 explaining how the new covenant, which we haven't discussed yet, is better than the old one. He quotes in chapter 8 a prophecy from Jeremiah:

"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, 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." (Hebrews 8:8-9)

He shows them that the old covenant needs to pass away because the new one has arrived and it's way better! He finishes chapter 8 by saying the first covenant is *'obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.'* Obsolete means out-dated. It's like the first mobile phones that were like breezeblocks with a big aerial, at one time, they were the best thing going! But they aren't now are they? They've been replaced…by the iPhone…which has an aerial built in! And just like Apple wants you to buy its latest product because it's their best yet, the writer of Hebrews is asking these Jewish believers to give up the old for the new. The iPhone is superior to old models! They need trading in! In the same way the new covenant is way better than the old. The old was great in its day, but now it's redundant!

So he finishes chapter 8 by telling them that the old covenant is redundant, out-dated. But that's like saying to British person, ok no more tea. It's been replaced…by this new drink, or no more fish and chips, they're out-dated, forget pulling crackers at Christmas, there's something new. These guys have grown up with the law, their parents did, their grandparents… Obviously they're asking "so the old covenant was purposeless – all that we've ever learned at synagogue? All that we've grown up with our whole lives - no good for anything?" But the writer's answer to that is here in chapter 9: "No – not at all. He's not rubbishing it by any means! The old covenant was good and full of purpose." Listen to verse 1 of chapter 9. `we'll read to verse 10.

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ***2*** *For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place.* ***3*** *Behind the*

*second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, **4** having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. **5** Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. **6** These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, **7** but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. **8** By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing **9** (which is symbolic for the present age). 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 9:1-10, ESV)*

Hang on, why is he returning to old covenant again? He's just argued that the new one is way better and now he's gone back to the old and started describing it? What has he done that for? Well there's a reason. He wants to show that all the ceremonial law, the temple, the animal sacrifice, the priests, all of it was good for a time but it was meant to be a picture, a shadow of what was coming. It was designed to be temporary and passing. It was intended to be scrapped when the real thing came and now the real thing has come: its Jesus Christ. He's what all this was pointing to. The old covenant was waiting for its fulfilment in Christ. So the writer is trying to get the message across to them: "stop playing in the shadows, He's here. The real thing is here!" As Martin said last week, they were in love with Jesus' shadow! Another preacher said it's like being content to look at photos of someone even when they're in the room! So he spends the next 10 verses proving to them how the old covenant and all that it entailed were pointing to Jesus and how Jesus has fulfilled every aspect of it.

Let's look at verse 1. He says *even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.* He's saying God instituted this old covenant, it was a place to worship him, but it was just temporary! The fact that it was earthly was because it was meant to only be temporary.

He goes on in verses 2-5 to describe this 'temporary' sanctuary. You would first of all come to the brazen altar. Coals and a grate. Basically a giant BBQ. The sacrifice was placed on the grate. On four corners of the altar were the horns of the altar to which the animal was bound when it was being sacrificed. The brazen altar is a perfect picture of Jesus Christ, the one who was a sacrifice for sin.

Next you come to the 'laver,' or wash basin: where the priests washed their hands after they'd slaughtered the animals. This is a really cool picture of Jesus Christ, who not only provides forgiveness through his spotless blood but then also cleanses us in the laver. This was all on the outside, then you come to the tabernacle itself. And the first stop is the golden lampstand. Jesus is the light of life. He is the light that directs our paths. Next you'd turn to the table of showbread. This was to symbolize that Jesus is our sustenance. He's the bread of life. And then we come to the altar of incense: the sacrificial coals from the alter outside are placed there, and the incense smoke rises. This represents Jesus interceding on our behalf. The perfect sacrifice became the intercessor. This is happening in heaven right now! He tells us that in verse 6 that the Priests had to go in every day to trim the oil on the lamp stand, put the incense on the altar, change the 12 loaves of bread. It was never-ceasing work. Again, a perfect picture of Jesus Christ, who never stops lighting, or feeding, or interceding on our behalf. He never stops His priestly work for us?

But there's still yet another veil, which no one is allowed to go through. Except one: the high priest, and only once a year, on one day. 'Yom Kippor: (the day of atonement). Once a year the High Priest would go through this second veil to offer a sacrifice on behalf of all the people to God. All through the year, sins would pile up that you forgot about, that you didn't know you committed. That's why he calls them errors or 'unintentional sins' in verse 7. Sin severed the relationship between God and man. Only forgiveness through sacrifice could put it together, and only temporarily and it was on this day: the Day of Atonement. He'd go in with a bell around his ankle on a rope in case he didn't come out! When he came out, he'd throw a party for all his

friends, because he had emerged safely from the presence of God. Nothing pictures Christ more than this event. You know it was this second veil that was ripped in two at the cross. What does that say? Is it significant? I think so! Jesus Christ has torn down the dividing wall between us and God. He ushers into the presence of God, into that holy place. Only on the basis of the blood of Christ will God have fellowship with men.

So that's the sanctuary. It had divine services, but it was earthly. And it was temporary and passing, and it never provided true access. This is what the Holy Spirit is wanting to show us through all this; that access to God was limited under the old covenant. Verse 8:*"the way into the holy place is not yet opened.'* They could come, but not too close. The Holy Spirit is also pointing out that the cleansing through the Day of Atonement was imperfect under the Old Covenant – I mean the High Priest had to go in on a rope - that says it all! Verse 9 says *'it could not perfect the conscience of the worshipper.'* And so it was limited, imperfect and temporary. It had its limitations.

I think you get the picture. The first covenant served its purpose but it couldn't set things straight. Its services were meaningful. But it was inadequate.

"But" verse 11, here we go - he's about to describe the new! [11] But *when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) [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. [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.*

The old priest could go in there for the people, only once a year and nothing was certain, he couldn't even take anyone else in with him. But Jesus… Jesus takes us in Himself! Right into the throne room of God! Ephesians 2:6 says *'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in*

Christ Jesus.' By his very own blood Jesus takes us in. If you believe in Jesus Christ this evening and trust in him for salvation he doesn't just forgive your sins but he actually takes you in to the holy of holies! How incredible is that? And how long can you stay there? FOREVER! Notice what it says in verse 12 – this redemption that Jesus has secured for all who believe in him. How long is it going to last? FOREVER! It's eternal. Eternal redemption!

So this new covenant is better in every way? It wasn't some animal's blood. It was the precious, spotless blood of God's own Son. It's once and for all. Never to be repeated. And it's no longer temporary! It's eternal! He sacrificed himself. And what does that mean? It means we get total forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It means that we can *"draw near to God with a true heart and full assurance, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience (Heb 10:22)"* Guilt free! The price is paid. No more temporary tabernacle. Jesus is it!

The day that Jeremiah spoke about has come. God has instituted a new covenant with the house of Israel and we're invited in! And it's not conditional. It's completely unconditional: we can receive his salvation as a free gift. We get to share in the inheritance of Christ and enjoy a permanent, unbroken relationship with God.

So what is our part? What do we have to do? Listen to John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* We have to believe in Jesus. That's it. We simply believe: trust in, cling to, rely on. We accept this salvation is a gift and we receive it with joy!

But this is such a foreign concept to Judaism. All their lives they'd been working hard to gain access to God: going to the temple, tithing 23.3% of all that they earned and grew, observing holy days, offering sacrifices and all these traditions were deeply instilled. To say "ok guys forget all that, all you got to do now is trust in Jesus." That seems too easy surely? To go from trying to keep every aspect of the law to receiving salvation as a free gift? You guys know what it is to study for a degree or for a test. Imagine if the university or school you were at just said, "ok don't bother finishing, you can have an A or

you can have a distinction: here's a bachelors, a Masters and PhD – all with distinctions. I suspect most of us wouldn't like that would we? Some of you maybe! But most wouldn't. Why? Because we want to feel like we've earned it! This concept of earning and rewards is so deeply engrained in our culture. We get out what we put in. That's always the case…except here! Salvation doesn't work like that! Salvation is a free gift that we receive, not when we've earned it but when we receive it by faith! "Nah too simple" you say, "scandalous even!" It is scandalous. It's an offence! It's too good!

Ever received a gift that you consider too good? We've probably all received plenty of gifts that we think aren't good enough…like last Christmas when the Slacks got me a gift that I didn't appreciate: a Brussels sprout wrapped in a lindt ball wrapper! But sometimes we refuse or try to refuse a gift that we think is too good. It's usually something we would never or even could never purchase on our own or perhaps it's something we desperately need but don't want to admit to needing. Last year somebody bought Nicola something that brought her to tears – it was overwhelming. Sometimes people even get offended when somebody buys them something they don't deserve! And God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ falls into this category! Ephesians 2:8–9 says, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Guys, Jesus paid it all. We contribute nothing! This doesn't sit well with our pride I know. This is why the gospel is called an offense. None of us want to accept that we're a charity case do we? But we are! As Martin Luther, the great reformer would say "Man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ." So I encourage you this evening, consider what God is offering you. Don't refuse the offer of forgiveness as if it's something to be earned! Receive his grace.