

# Two Covenants

Consider a momentous statement in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 7:18-19

That short excerpt from the New Testament draws a clear and emphatic contrast (“on the one hand...on the other hand”). The forceful distinction raises several important questions.

- Exactly what has been “set aside”?
- What is the “better hope” contrasted with the Law?
- What has changed in how “we draw near to God”?
- How do these alterations affect our lives as Christians?

This brief essay attempts to examine those questions in the following sections.

- [The Old Covenant](#) – What was the arrangement of the Old Covenant?
- [A New Covenant](#) – Why did God provide a change in His covenant with His people?
- [New Covenant Emphasis](#) – How much is the New Covenant emphasized in the New Testament?
- [A Change in Thinking](#) – How did the New Covenant change thinking about the believer’s life?
- [New Covenant Thinking](#) – What are examples of New Covenant thinking in the New Testament?
- [New Covenant Perspective](#) – How does the New Covenant change the perspective on life?
- [New Covenant Training](#) – How does the New Covenant affect the goals of spiritual formation?
- [Drawing Near to God](#) – What does life under the New Covenant look like?
- [In A Nutshell](#) – How does one author summarize the centrality of the New Covenant?
- [APPENDIX A](#) – What made the Old Covenant unlivable?

## *The Old Covenant*

The “former commandment” was very straightforward, for example, in Deuteronomy 28. The sixty-eight verses Moses spoke in that chapter can be summarized briefly.

Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God: (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, followed by twelve more verses of attractive, desirable promised blessings.)

...

But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you (Deuteronomy 28:15, followed by fifty-plus verses filled with horrific afflictions.)

This passage and others (Leviticus 26:3-33, Deuteronomy 11:13-17) present a consistent description of God’s demands on the people of Israel, the Old Covenant. If these passages are taken as a pattern for the Christian life, a certain mindset follows.

People who live the Old Way believe the Law of Linearity, a law that states there is an A that leads to the B you want. Figure out what A is, do it, and you’ll have the life you most desire. The pressure’s on.<sup>1</sup>

Pressure is on because everything depends on my faithfulness, on my getting it right so life will work. If things are not going well, what do I need to do to make circumstances improve? The pressure is on.

Once we accept this linear arrangement—A then B; you do this, God will do that—not only is the pressure on, but failure is guaranteed. We find ourselves in the same pickle as Israel: We can’t keep our part of the bargain. When God instructed His people to “carefully follow the terms of the covenant,” He was not setting a *fairly* high standard. He was not prepared to provide blessings to people who followed His rules *reasonably* well. The standard was perfection—perfect love for God and for others at every

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Crabb, , *The Pressure’s Off: There’s A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 12; Kindle Edition location 232.

moment, in every interchange. They couldn't get it right. They couldn't do it. Neither can we.<sup>2</sup>

That Mosaic covenant depended on the perfect obedience and faithfulness of an entire nation.<sup>3</sup>

That was a “system that was fair but unlivable.”<sup>4</sup>

## *A New Covenant*

God did not intend a “fair but unlivable” system as the permanent arrangement with His people.

Over five-hundred years<sup>5</sup> before Jesus was born, the prophet Jeremiah revealed God's intention to replace that impossible-to-keep covenant:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, **not like the covenant** which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, **My covenant which they broke**, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But **this is the covenant which I will make** with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34, emphasis added in **boldface** type)

The New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and initiated by Jesus radically changed the arrangement between God and His people. The Old Covenant summarized in Deuteronomy 28 was absolutely linear: Keep the Law perfectly and experience blessing. Fail to keep the Law perfectly and be cursed.

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Crabb, , *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 30; Kindle Edition location 232; original emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> [APPENDIX A](#).

<sup>4</sup> Larry Crabb, , *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 32; Kindle Edition location 487.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 370.

The New Covenant replaced the Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant. Jeremiah looked forward to a covenant, a way of relating to God, that was internal and relational and gracious in ways only shadowed by the Old Covenant.

### *New Covenant Emphasis*

The inauguration of a New Covenant was not a minor matter. The New Testament repeatedly refers to the change in the covenants, accenting the importance in the life of believers. The book of Hebrews was written to a Christian congregation with Jewish roots. That document emphasized the change in covenants. This group would have been thoroughly familiar with the Old Covenant. The writer states the difference succinctly.

Jesus has become the guarantor of a **better** covenant (Hebrews 7:22).

He restates the superiority of the New Covenant to ensure his Old Covenant audience recognizes the reality.

But now He (Jesus) has obtained a **more excellent** ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a **better covenant**, which has been enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

(In order to ensure that his readers remember his key points, the writer repeats Jesus' exalted status as "mediator of a **better covenant**" in Hebrews 12:24.)

The New Covenant is emphasized throughout the New Testament because eternal salvation depends on it. Whatever else the Hebrew thought about the Old Covenant, the writer makes clear that the New Covenant to key to our life in Christ.

For this reason He is the mediator of a **new covenant**, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the **eternal inheritance** (Hebrews 9:15).

Then the writer, still addressing his Old Covenant thinking audience, quoted extensively from the Jeremiah 31 passage cited above. He summarized the amazing implication, our relationship with God is no longer based on the Old Covenant:

When He said, “A new covenant,” He has made the first **obsolete**. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is **ready to disappear**. (Hebrews 8:13)

(Continuing his pattern of repetition for emphasis, the writer repeated parts of the Jeremiah 31 New Covenant prophecy again in Hebrews 10:16.)

Jeremiah was not the only Old Covenant believer who foresaw the revolutionary New Covenant. David spoke of a new priesthood with lineage even farther back to the time of Abraham.

The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind,  
“You are a priest forever  
According to the order of Melchizedek.” (Psalm 110:4)

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. (Genesis 14:18)

The writer to the Hebrews used the precedent of Melchizedek, “a priest of the God Most High” as support for the superior priesthood of Jesus. Like Melchizedek, Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi. God had clearly established a priesthood apart from the Mosaic covenant and physical descent from Levi (Hebrews 7:14-17). The “setting aside” of the Old Covenant for the better hope follows directly from the example of Melchizedek (v. 18-19).

Again, we see a more comprehensive preview of God’s intention that the Old Covenant was temporary. The Linear Thinking of the Law (exemplified in Deuteronomy 28) included a kind of theological planned obsolescence, to be replaced by something better. Once again, the writer to the Hebrews makes reference to the significance of that change in the priesthood.

For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place **a change of law** also. (Hebrews 7:12)

That same writer builds his case for the superiority of the New Covenant. There was a good reason why the New Covenant was part of God's plan from the beginning. The writer used strong words to emphasize the limitations of the Old Covenant:

For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment **because** of its **weakness** and **uselessness** (for the Law **made nothing perfect**), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.  
(Hebrews 7:18-19)

A more recent writer draws the application to our efforts in living the Christian life:

From that statement [*Hebrews 7:18-19*], I suggested that the Old Way formula of linearity has been abolished. No longer can we work hard to get it right and claim a guarantee that life therefore will work. The Judaizers were dead wrong. The Law of Linearity, which they depended on, is not in effect.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus pointed to the importance of a new covenant when He instituted the Lord's Supper:

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the **new covenant** in My blood. (Luke 22:20)

Often we participate in Communion accompanied by the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:25: "In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the **new covenant** in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." Every time we receive the elements, we celebrate the reality of the New Covenant. The Apostle found it important to quote the words of Jesus exactly. He carefully included the emphasis on the New Covenant.

The reality of the New Covenant was an important part of Paul's understanding of his miraculous ministry:

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a **new covenant**, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.  
(2 Corinthians 3:5-6)

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 115; Kindle Edition location 1642.

Paul's reference to the New Covenant explicitly mentions the source of his adequacy: God, not himself.

### *A Change in Thinking*

The letter of the Old Covenant was its absolute standard requiring precise conformity. The humanly unattainable perfect righteousness required by a Holy God could only lead to pride or pessimism, hubris or hopelessness. Either is fatal to spiritual formation.

When the law works, we become proud, though we disguise it as gratitude. And we profoundly discourage the parents who tried just as hard to “do it right” and now ache over a drug-abusing son and a rebellious, sexually active daughter. When the law doesn't work, we assume we simply didn't follow it well enough. We believe someone failed, usually us. We become more defeated than trusting. It doesn't occur to us that the law might no longer be in effect.<sup>7</sup>

The belief that correct behavior leads to a better life reflects the Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant (Deuteronomy 28:1-68, Leviticus 26:3-43, etc.). That approach to life frequently seems to work.

- Be diligent in your profession, and you will likely succeed.
- Pay attention to diet and exercise, and you will presumably be healthy.
- Raise your kids right, and there is a high probability that they will turn out well.
- Study hard for the math test, and there is a chance you will pass.

That's simply common sense, or perhaps more properly, God's common grace: “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Some “laws of nature” (and science and psychology, etc.) do have predictable and general results.

However, those “laws” do not translate into spiritual life under the New Covenant. The writer to the Hebrews affirms the “setting aside” of the Old Covenant in favor of the “better hope” of the New

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 21; Kindle Edition location 324.

Covenant. The new arrangement between God and His people has set aside the Linear Thinking in that relationship. That change in thinking is demonstrated throughout the New Testament.

### *New Covenant Thinking*

Living under the New Covenant has changed the way we experience a relationship with God. This change in no way implies the abandonment of God's Word in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. The Old Covenant still has value in revealing God's work through history and displaying His character and His holiness. We still see God's standard of righteousness. We continue to value and learn from God's self-revelation under the Old Covenant. We still value His revealed moral law that defines how we were created to live, how we please the One we were created to please. What has changed is the way we relate to God.

Deuteronomy 28 and other passages communicate the Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant. That arrangement depended on the people's adequacy and faithfulness to God. Those human responses were never perfect – not even close. The new Covenant depends entirely on the adequacy and faithfulness of God to us. His adequacy and faithfulness are absolute and infinite.

New Testament writers describe difficulties, suffering, even persecution. However, they don't often offer advice on how to make life work better. They don't suggest that improved spiritual disciplines or stricter obedience will improve circumstances. Instead, numerous passages affirm the value of the better hope as superior to the blessings of a comfortable life.

### **John 10:10**

Some may see the promise of better life circumstances in Jesus' words in the Gospel according to John.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and **have it abundantly**. (John 10:10)



That statement is beloved by all Christians. The hope of a life that Jesus calls “abundant” is a thrilling thought. For some believers, this passage suggests the reward for their correct behavior. That abundant life must be the result of our “getting it right” in our spiritual life. Abundant life is equated with life working well.

This attitude is not limited to the approach called the “prosperity gospel,” guaranteeing material wealth and success. Those who reject that distortion can easily see the abundant life less materialistically: a happy marriage, godly children, fruitful ministry, etc.

Of course, maybe that is what Jesus meant by the abundant life, maybe not. But in any case, this passage does not support Linear Thinking. Jesus’ words come in the context of knowing the Shepherd, hearing His voice, following Him. No conditions are mentioned. Nothing is said about the abundant life depending on how well we listen to the Shepherd or even how closely we follow the Shepherd. Jesus is talking about the motive for His mission and the contrast with many other religious leaders. He is not encouraging Linear Thinking to enable His followers to figure out how to make life work abundantly.

The encouraging words of Jesus give hope for the present and the future experience of an abundant life. Several other New Testament passages by various inspired writers should shape our thinking about what that abundant life might look like.

### Matthew 5:1-11

Jesus didn’t describe the abundant life as absence of difficulties. Instead, He pointed out a comprehensive counter-intuitive blessedness.

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who **mourn**, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> “Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness**, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who have been **persecuted** for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when *people* **insult** you and **persecute** you, and **falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.** <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5:3-12)

Jesus told his followers to rejoice and be glad in the face of trials, just as His half-brother James later wrote to “count it all joy” (James 1:2). That is not a Linear Thinking response to poverty, mourning, insults, persecution, and slander. Linear Thinking focuses on making life better now, eliminating difficulties, so life will work. New Covenant thinking delights in the kingdom of heaven (v. 3, 10, 12) and the intimate relationship with God (v. 8, 9).

### Hebrews 11:39

Hebrews 11 is sometimes called variously the “hall of fame of faith” or “the heroes of the faith” because of the listing of a dozen men and women who exemplified trust and confidence in God by their lives. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews seems overwhelmed by all the illustrations he leaves out (v. 32). The chapter concludes with some surprising words.

And **all these**, having gained approval through their faith, **did not receive** what was promised. (Hebrews 11:39)

The writer had just summarized his list into two groups in verses 32b-38. The first part is to be expected, the wonderful life stories of those who faithfully followed God, almost an affirmation of Linear Thinking. They acted faithfully, and their lives worked. But the next section sobers us to the reality where Linear Thinking breaks down.

Some had powerful, successful lives (summarized in Hebrews 11:32-35a). Some had lives that were difficult at best and often ended horribly (Hebrews 11:35b-38). Both groups shared a common

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outcome. Neither group received God's promised reward. The outcome did not depend on their behavior or even their faith. All had gained approval, and some conquered kingdoms and some were sawn in two. Clearly the Law of Linearity was not in effect.

### James 1:2-4

James has even more startling words. We are to accept difficulties that come even when we are doing our best to get it right, and our attitude is to be one of delight.

Consider it all **joy**, my brethren, when you encounter various **trials**, knowing that the testing of your faith produces **endurance**. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

James commends suffering and offers no hint that it can or should be avoided through more effective or more frequent spiritual disciplines. Rather, he extols its value toward growth in endurance.

### Romans 5:3-5

Paul leads his readers in Rome in the same direction.

And not only this, but we also exult in our **tribulations**, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, **hope**; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

Like James, Paul exhorts the Romans to see the profit in tribulations: perseverance and hope.

There is no suggestion that the tribulations result from lack of faithfulness or failure to pray or lack of time studying Scripture. He does not tell them what they (and we) likely want to hear, how to avoid or remove troubles. The Apostle points to the "love of God poured out" on them (and us) as the response that grows out of the perseverance and hope that come from trials.

### 1 Peter 3:13-17

Peter, one of Jesus' closest companions, raises another possibility. Suffering for doing wrong is one thing, but when we do right, we would expect better results (which is Linear Thinking).

Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to **everyone who asks** you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with **gentleness and reverence**; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. (1 Peter 3:13-17)

Peter tells his readers that suffering or difficulty (especially when unjust) provides an opportunity.

People usually don't expect hope in the face of injustice. Curiosity prompts questions. A gentle, respectful response to abuse creates a readiness to listen to our explanation. Peter doesn't suggest that better spiritual disciplines will reduce suffering (Linear Thinking). Instead, "sanctifying Christ in our hearts" enables our perseverance through suffering. That hopeful perseverance can prompt questions that we should be ready to answer. Linear Thinking focused primarily on eliminating our discomfort will miss amazing opportunities.

### 1 Timothy 3:12-17

Once again we find the Apostle Paul, here writing to a younger believer, unmistakably stating an uncomfortable truth.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted**. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (1 Timothy 3:12-17)

Paul offers the young pastor, Timothy, the sobering assurance that the desire for godliness will certainly result in persecution. Most Christians value Bible reading, prayer, and worship as key parts of following Christ and living godly lives. Any expectation that those spiritual disciplines are the way to reduce suffering is clearly refuted.

This warning about persecution is in the context of one of the most powerful affirmations of the authority and application of Scripture. Verses 16-17 describe the inspiration and profitability of God's written Word. But in his list of benefits (teaching, reproof, correction, righteousness), he says nothing to counteract the persecution promised in v. 12. Linear Thinking would curve v. 17 back on v. 12 and explain how regular Bible reading would make life work better and reduce persecution. Paul never suggests any such strategy.

### John 9:1-3

The Apostle John provides a classic example of Linear Thinking by even the closest followers of Jesus.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, **who sinned**, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "*It was neither that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* so that the **works of God might be displayed** in him. (John 9:1-3)

The disciples were quite used to Linear Thinking. It came very naturally to them as a basic assumption of how life worked. We can hardly blame the disciples for their Old Covenant mindset, the environment of their religious upbringing. Bad circumstances must have a direct cause in bad behavior. Note however that Jesus immediately contradicted that belief and dismissed their Linear Thinking.

Consider at least two effects of Linear Thinking in this event. First, the Old Covenant assumption of the disciples desensitized them to any relational consideration. The text does not indicate whether the disciples asked Jesus the question in the hearing of the blind man or not. But either way, instead of compassion, they only felt curiosity about assigning blame. The Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant inevitably indicts the victim of difficulty. Something the blind man did (or failed to do) must be at the root of his tragic circumstances. Relational concern and kindness are not part of the disciples' thinking. Jesus responded by healing the man (v. 7) and later revealing Himself to him (v. 37).

Second, the Old Covenant viewpoint narrowed the perspective of the disciples. This man (or his parents) must be responsible for this hardship. Instead, Jesus saw the bigger picture, the larger story that God was telling. Jesus was inaugurating a New Covenant. Circumstances, even tragedies, display God at work. God's sovereign, providential purpose, not our behavior, is the ultimate source of the events we experience. The disciples would have missed that truth if they had focused only on the Old Covenant debate of who caused the misfortune. New Covenant thinking is more attentive to God's wider purpose in the lives of individuals and communities. Jesus' perspective was in direct disagreement with the disciples' Old Covenant outlook. He saw a bigger vision of what God was doing, and He was able to act in empathy rather than criticize or accuse.

### Hebrews 7:18-19

A pattern in the Old Testament reinforces Linear Thinking: follow God and His rules for righteousness, and life will work. The New Testament, the New Covenant, exchanges that pattern for a better one.

For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of **a better hope, through which we draw near to God.** (Hebrews 7:18-19)

The New Testament (James 1, Romans 5, etc., discussed above) describes how life not working is a source of spiritual formation. What are we to make of that difference? The writer to the Hebrews makes clear the difference is in the very nature of the two Covenants, Old and New. The Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant has been replaced with the freedom of the New Covenant. Rather than an unachievable standard required for life working well, the New Covenant in Christ provides something immeasurably more desirable.

Sometimes life works, but when life does not work, we can draw near to God. The reason for right living has changed.<sup>8</sup> The pressure of Linear Thinking has been replaced by the freedom to enjoy God. Our motive is not fear of the consequences if we fall into sin or fail in our daily devotions. Rather, we pursue virtue and search Scripture and persist in prayer in order to see and know and trust God in ever deepening ways. We want to rid our lives of those barriers to our relationship with Him. We want to know as much as we possibly can about Him. We want to draw near to Him. And that is His new covenant promise. The point is not that we will feel a certain way about God or experience particular blessings, but that we can be near Him in spite of circumstances and emotions. We can trust Him in that nearness, even in times of darkness and difficulty. Under the New Covenant,

we are liberated from the drive to fill ourselves, to keep feeling good based on good things in our lives, and we are released to live for Christ and to love both God and others. ... There is a linear relationship between living the New Way and enjoying God.<sup>9</sup>

One after another, New Testament discussions about difficulties break with the Old Covenant pattern of Linear Thinking. The response to suffering is not advice (or commands) about improved spiritual disciplines or stricter obedience to improve circumstances. Instead of Linear Thinking, Jesus, Paul, James, and the writer to the Hebrews encourage endurance as a part of training in Christian maturity.

### *New Covenant Perspective*

The Linear Thinking of the Old Covenant and the better hope of the New Covenant suggests different perspectives on life. Consider an illustration from C. S. Lewis:

If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad. Imagine a

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<sup>8</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 31; Kindle Edition location 468.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 158; Kindle Edition location 2218.

set of people all living in the same building. Half of them think it is a hotel, the other half think it is a prison. Those who think it a hotel might regard it as quite intolerable, and those who thought it was a prison might decide that it was really surprisingly comfortable. So that what seems the ugly doctrine is one that comforts and strengthens you in the end. The people who try to hold an optimistic view of this world would become pessimists: the people who hold a pretty stern view of it become optimistic.<sup>10</sup>

Christians with an Old Covenant perspective presume this life is “intended simply for our happiness.” The assumption is that we should be experiencing the first half of Deuteronomy 28 in the comfort of God’s blessings. When life begins to feel even a little like the dreadful second half of that chapter, managing life takes priority. The highest aim is to recover the comfort and eliminate the pain. The pressure of Linear Thinking (“How do I eliminate the unpleasantness? What do I need to do to get it right?”) becomes a consuming passion.

In the New Covenant perspective, the consuming passion is drawing near to God in every circumstance. Paul’s example (from prison) is worth repeating: “I have **learned** to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Philippians 4:11b). That contentment was a perspective that the Apostle had to learn. Paul didn’t expect this life to be about his happiness and comfort. Instead, he recognized the aspect of discipline and training, like an athlete preparing for serious competition.

<sup>25</sup> Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; <sup>27</sup> but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:25-27)

Rather than look for ways to evade discomfort, Paul saw the value of demanding discipline and tireless training. He valued “the fellowship of Jesus’ suffering” (Philippians 3:10), the sharing or participation in (*κοινωνία*, *koinonia*) of the Savior’s suffering. Even the Incarnate Jesus “learned

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<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Answers to Questions on Christianity” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 52.



obedience from the things which He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus was “perfected” (Hebrews 2:10) in His ability to come to our aid during testing (Hebrews 2:18) through suffering. Paul took this highest of examples as his model for a life of training under the New Covenant.

### *New Covenant Training*

Old Covenant thinking emphasizes right behavior to ensure better circumstances. New Covenant thinking emphasizes the training value of all our circumstances. Like Paul, the writer to the Hebrews uses athletic images to explain the training under the New Covenant. His encouragement has focused on the superiority of the New Covenant that has replaced the Old (Hebrews 7:18-19, 7:12, 7:22, 8:1, 8:5) and on the resulting blessing of drawing near to God (Hebrews 4:16, 7:18, 7:25, 10:22). Now, nearing the end of what many consider a written sermon, he describes the disciplined training that characterizes New Covenant living.

let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>3</sup> For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. <sup>4</sup> You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; <sup>5</sup> and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;

<sup>6</sup> For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,  
And He scourges every son whom He receives.”

<sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you endure; (Hebrews 12:1b – 7a)

Just as Paul used the prize of a trophy-wreath as motivation for his disciplined training (1 Corinthians 9:24-27), here Jesus is described as enduring because of the joy He anticipated, the joy of sitting “at the right hand of the throne of God.” Likewise, our motivation in the New Covenant is drawing near to God. That anticipation enables our endurance through the discipline of training. The word here translated “discipline” is *παιδεία*, (*paideia*), translated “training” in 2 Timothy 3:16 (“training in

righteousness”). The context intended by the writer is positive encouragement (“exhortation” in v. 5) of a Father’s love (v. 6) as He trains His child to face life’s circumstances. The goal of the endurance is training (v. 7). The fruit of that training is “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

Under the Old Covenant perspective, righteousness is a means to a better life (“If I get it right, my circumstances will improve”). Under the New Covenant perspective, a life of training, contented through all our circumstances, produces righteousness and increasing intimacy with God.

### *Drawing Near to God*

The New Covenant offers the “better hope” of “drawing near to God” (Hebrews 7:19), something the Old Covenant lacked (Hebrews 9:9, 10:1). The perspective of the New Covenant is that of a trainee. Affliction or anguish are opportunities for increasing endurance (James 1:1-2) and growing hope (Romans 5:3-5) as God works in our lives. As anticipation enabled Jesus to endure the cross (Hebrews 12:2), our anticipation of “great reward” (Matthew 5:12) enables our endurance and contentment in every circumstance (Philippians 4:11b).

Endurance, hope, joyful anticipation – all these contribute to drawing near to God in our present situation, whether life is working the way we desire or not. Endurance, hope, and joyful anticipation build our trust in God who sovereignly rules over our circumstances and oversees the training He has for us. We still strive to live wisely and make prudent choices consistent with Scripture. But our confidence is not in right behavior that results in pleasant circumstances. Our trust is in the wise, loving, and sovereign Father who is constantly training His children to help them draw near to Him. As we draw nearer, our trust grows through endurance, hope, and joyful anticipation. As our trust grows, we are able to draw near to Him. That increasing spiral drawing nearer to God is our present taste of eternity. The New Covenant points to the eternally increasing joy and everlasting enlargement of our intimacy with Him.

## In a nutshell: from *The Pressure's Off*

“The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.”  
(Hebrews 7:18-19)

We've been released from bondage to a previous system that was fair but unlivable. The former regulation has been set aside. Although order remains in both the physical and moral spheres, the moral Law of Linearity has been abolished as the basis upon which blessings and curses are distributed.

Now consider what that means. Our arrangement with God has changed. No longer do prosperity and trial depend on our performance. Bad parents sometimes have good kids. Good parents sometimes have bad kids or kids who do terrible things.

The Principle of Influence, of course, remains. A hundred parents who love God and train their children well will rear a greater number of responsible children than will a hundred selfish, uninvolved parents. It makes practical sense to live wisely and well as parents, spouses, friends, and workers. The book of Proverbs makes that clear.

But now, under the new arrangement, the reason for right living has changed. We no longer depend on a linear relationship between performance and blessing to arrange for the life we want. That arrangement has mercifully been declared obsolete and has been replaced by something new, something better.

The arrangement under which the Better Life of Blessings is promised to those who perfectly follow God's principles has been replaced by a new arrangement. Now the Better Hope of Intimacy with a God who sovereignly assigns or withholds blessings according to an unseen plan is available. And it's available at every moment and in every circumstance to those who come to God on Jesus' coattails.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 32-32; Kindle Edition location 479.



## APPENDIX A – “Fair but Unlivable” (See page 3.)

Some people take the first part of Deuteronomy 28 as support for Linear Thinking. “If I follow God, then I will be blessed” or more succinctly, “Obedience brings blessings.” However, this application fails to recognize three key factors about Deuteronomy 28:

1. The blessings and cursings are *corporate*, not individual.

Moses is addressing the gathered nation of Israel (“the people,” Deuteronomy 27:1,11 and “all Israel,” v. 9). Rather than depending on the individual Israelite’s faithfulness, God’s blessings were promised to a faithful *nation*. This corporate promise is clear in the promised blessings that only make sense to Israel as a people. For example,

- The Lord will establish you as a holy **people** to Himself (v. 9)
- you shall **lend** to many **nations** (v. 12)

Likewise, some of the curses are clearly corporate.

- you will be an example of terror **to all the kingdoms** of the earth (v. 25)
- The Lord will bring **you and your king**, whom you set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known (v. 36)
- The Lord will bring **a nation against you** from afar, from the end of the earth ... It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout your land which the Lord your God has given you. (v. 49, 52)
- Also every sickness and every plague which, not written in the book of this law, the Lord will bring on you until you are destroyed. <sup>62</sup> Then **you shall be left few in number**, whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, because you did not obey the Lord your God” (v. 61-62)
- Moreover, the Lord will **scatter you among all peoples**, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known” (v. 64).

Like the blessings for covenant keeping, the curses for covenant breaking are directed to the nation of Israel corporately.

2. The blessings and cursings are *absolute* promises.

There is no hint of God “grading on the curve” so to speak. There is no lower acceptable threshold, only constant, full, total compliance with the covenant.

- if you **diligently** obey the Lord your God, being careful to do **all** His commandments (v. 1)
- if you **keep the commandments** of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. (v. 9)
- if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I charge you today, to observe them **carefully**, and **do not turn aside** from **any** of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. (v.13-14)

And likewise of the cursings:

- if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do **all** His commandments and His statutes (v. 15)
- because you would not obey the Lord your God by keeping His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you (v. 45)
- If you are not **careful** to observe **all the words** of this law which are written in this book (v. 58)

The absolute nature of this covenant is scattered repeatedly through both the list of blessings and the longer list of cursings. Apparently, Moses wanted to keep the focus of the people on the unqualified and unconditional conditions of the covenant. In the midst of descriptions of the blessings and the cursings, he inserted those relevant reminders. The Old Covenant was not a relative scale: “At least I am not as bad as that guy, and I’m certainly better than she is.” The covenant that God gave through Moses was not about comparative obedience or vague faithfulness. Blessings and cursings were based on an absolute, unwavering standard.

Notice as well that the Lord is not interested in perfunctory or mechanical obedience. The obedience of Linear Thinking expects to make life work better. Parts of the cursings are “because you did

not serve the Lord your God with **joy and a glad heart**, for the abundance of all things” (v. 47). Perfect, delighted obedience based on a relationship is the standard.

3. The blessings and cursings are a *covenant* between God and His people.

Following the lists of blessings and cursings in chapter 28, Deuteronomy 29 summarizes with the opening statement,

“These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab” (v. 1).

Other passages<sup>12</sup> in the Old Testament repeat this theme.

Unfortunately, keeping a covenant dependent on the perfect obedience and faithfulness of an entire nation is not humanly possible. The Old Covenant was a “system that was fair but unlivable”<sup>13</sup> For that reason, God’s plan from the long ago (Jeremiah 31:31-34) was a New Covenant (Hebrews 8:13) and a better hope (Hebrews 7:18-19).

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<sup>12</sup> e.g., Leviticus 26:2-13 and 14-39; Deuteronomy 11:13-15 and 16-17; Deuteronomy 11:26-27 and 28

<sup>13</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: There's A New Way to Live* (New York: Waterbrook, 2018), 32; Kindle Edition location 487.