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7 Things Catholics Should Know About the New Covenant

by Dr. Andrew Swafford

Do we appreciate the grandeur of the New Covenant, the true sublimity of God's revelation and work in and through Jesus Christ?

Do we realize how the Saints of the Old Testament would have longed to see what we see? How Isaiah, for example, would have yearned to experience what we experience in *every* Mass?

As Catholics today, we stand on the other side of the veil, in the *absolute fullness* of revelation in Jesus Christ.

Yet many of us have only scratched the surface in our understanding of what that truly means, how richly we've been blessed by it, and what's expected of us because of it. Only when we awaken to the magnitude of this gift can we truly appreciate it.

Here are seven things Catholics should know about the New Covenant as taught in Ascension's newest Great Adventure Bible study program, *Hebrews: The New and Everlasting Covenant* by Dr. Andrew Swafford.

1. THE HEAVENLY IS AMONG US.

The opening verse of Hebrews sets the tone for revealing this majestic fullness in Jesus Christ: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these *last days* he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1, emphasis added).

Notice that the author (or homilist) sees himself as standing in the “last days.” This is not a mistaken reference to a supposed early Christian expectation of the imminent end of the world.

Rather, the “last days” refers to the *end of the Old Covenant* and the “in-breaking” of the messianic age (see Micah 4:1-2). Ancient Jews frequently thought in terms of two ages—*this age* and *the age to come*. Jesus inaugurates the age to come; the new creation has dawned in and through his resurrection.

Christians straddle, as it were, the middle of a Venn diagram—living after the age to come, yet still experiencing the effects of the former age—namely, sin and death. For this reason, St. Peter likewise speaks of the “last days” at Pentecost, because the descent of the Holy Spirit has signaled the dawn of the new age (see Acts 2:17, citing Joel 2:28).

For ancient Jews, the hope of the prophets was that God would one day return to his people in a definitive and manifest way, at which time the following realities would be fulfilled:

- **The Davidic kingdom would be restored, once again restoring all twelve tribes.**
- **A new (and heavenly) Temple would be built.**
- **A new (and heavenly) Jerusalem would be established.**
- **Creation itself would be renewed (see Isaiah 65:17-18).**
- **Israel and the nations would join together in one family, worshiping the God of Israel (see Isaiah 2:2-3).**
- **God would dwell among his people in a new and unsurpassed way through the indwelling gift of the Spirit (see Ezekiel 36:26-28; 37:26-27).**

The expectation and hope for a “new covenant” comprises all of this (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

All those who are now “in Christ” stand on the other side of this veil and share in the new creation, as St. Paul states emphatically: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

To share in the risen life of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is to live this heavenly life *now* (see Romans 6:3-11). While there is an “already, not yet”

dimension to it, since we still experience concupiscence and death, **we should not underappreciate the heavenly dimension already present among us** (see Romans 8:14-17, 19).

Salvation is not just about the future—it is very much a reality *now*, as we already share in the glorious life of God in the present.

2. THE FULLNESS OF GOD’S WORD IS REVEALED IN JESUS.

While the prophets spoke God’s truth partially, God speaks fully and most completely through his son (see CCC 65). Hebrews is very clear that Jesus is no mere prophet, but rather shares in the fullness of divinity of the Creator God, “through whom also he [Jesus] created the ages. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:2-3).

Notice that the Son clearly has a role in Creation, just as we profess in the Nicene Creed: “Through him all things were made.” The same teaching is found in the Gospel of John: “All things were made through him” (John 1:3; see also 1 Corinthians 8:6).

What was revealed in the opening chapter of Genesis as Creation through God’s spoken *word* (“Let there be light”) and later as Creation through God’s

wisdom is now fully revealed as Creation through his *Son*—through the *Eternal Word* who became flesh (see Psalm 33:6; Proverbs 3:19; John 1:14).

3. JESUS IS THE INCARNATE WISDOM OF GOD.

Where the text says that Jesus “reflects” the glory of God, the Greek word for “reflects” is *apaugasma* (Hebrews 1:3). This word occurs in only one other place in the Bible, namely, in Wisdom of Solomon 7:26, where the text refers to wisdom as a “reflection [*apaugasma*] of eternal light.” This text is related to ancient Israel’s understanding of wisdom and its personified role in Creation (see Proverbs 8:22-31), almost to the point of seeing wisdom as a separate Person from the Father. In God’s providence this ancient Jewish reflection marked a step toward revealing the mystery of the Godhead—paving the way for God’s revelation of his triune identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Sirach continues this reflection but adds to it by seeing God’s wisdom as ultimately embodied in the Torah given to Moses (see Sirach 24:1, 8-11, 23). Similarly, Isaiah draws a parallel, a virtual equivalence, between God’s “law” and his “word” (see Isaiah 2:3b).

All of this is background for fully appreciating John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God. ... All things were made through him. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 3, 14).

Jesus is functionally prophet and redeemer, but his deepest identity is that of the Eternal Son, with an utterly unique relationship to the Father: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27).

This sublime uniqueness is a relation to the Father that the heavenly New Covenant enables us to participate in, *making us sons and daughters in the Son* and through the Spirit.

4. THE OLD TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD AND THE GOLDEN CALF

Moving from the unique revelation of the Son, the author of Hebrews now combines a number of key Davidic texts, drawing together Israel’s understanding of not only David’s *kingship* but also his status as *son* of God and *priest* as well (see Hebrews 1:5, citing Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14; and Hebrews 1:13, citing Psalm 110:1).

These three roles—*son*, *priest*, and *king*—have a deep biblical connection, going back to Adam and the patriarchs of Genesis as well as Israel’s early identity as a nation freed from Egypt. The patriarchs act as spiritual and

temporal heads of their families—that is, they function as *royal priests*, offering sacrifices, building altars, and giving the blessing (see for example Genesis 8:20; 12:7, 8; 26:25; 28:18; 33:20). The ideal is for this royal and priestly status to be handed on to the firstborn son as the heir apparent, but the irony in Genesis is that this almost never happens.

The biblical connection between sonship, priesthood, and kingship continues in Exodus, in the description of Israel as God’s “firstborn son” who is called to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 4:22; 19:6). This royal priestly role is forfeited when Israel turns away from God to worship the golden calf, and the description of Israel as a “kingdom of priests” is never referred to again in the Old Testament. The phrase next appears in the New Testament, where it is used of the New Covenant Church (see 1 Peter 2:9).

Hence, the episode of the golden calf marks the end of the patriarchal priesthood, which is now given over to the Levites, who become surrogate firstborn sons (see Exodus 32:29; Numbers 3:12, 41, 45; 8:18).

This becomes very significant later. The fact that the Levitical priesthood arises after (and because of) the golden calf episode explains why it eventually comes to an end—because it was part of the “law” that was “added because of transgression” (see Galatians 3:19). Jesus’ priesthood, as we will see, restores and elevates the earlier priesthood, from before the golden calf—namely, the priesthood of the patriarchs.

In the Davidic period, there is a slight shift—a return of sorts to the patriarchal setting, with David and Solomon acting as priest-kings (see 2 Samuel 6:14, 17-18; 1 Kings 8:54-55, 62-64; 1 Chronicles 21:28). This, too, will be very significant, as the Abrahamic and Davidic periods together constitute key background for the New Covenant, whereas many aspects of the Mosaic covenant (e.g., the Levitical priesthood and levitical sacrifices) are precisely what come to an end in Christ. This is one of the central teachings of Hebrews.

5. THE GRANDEUR OF THE NEW COVENANT GIFT

As we move into the second chapter of Hebrews, we begin to see a contrast between the Old and New Covenants. The author alludes to the deeply held Jewish belief that the covenant at Mount Sinai was mediated by *angels* (Hebrews 2:2; see also Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). This shows that Christ was clearly not an angel; otherwise, how would the New Covenant be greater than the Old, as it clearly is (see Hebrews 8:13; 9:15; Galatians 4:24-26)?

Importantly for the first hearers but perhaps even more so for us, the author cautions us against not just *rejecting* the glorious gift we have received in Christ, but *neglecting* it: “For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we *neglect* such a great salvation?” (Hebrews 2:2-3, emphasis

added). In other words, if unfaithfulness in the Old Covenant resulted in earthly curses, such as the Babylonian exile, what is the implication for spurning—or *neglecting*—something so much more glorious in the New Covenant?

In a marriage, mere complacency and indifference can be as devastating as outright hostility. The same is true of our relationship with God: not prioritizing it makes it wither and erode over time.

Perhaps one way to come to grips with hell is first to come to grips with the heavenly majesty of what God has offered us in Christ. In other words, to understand why hell is so devastating, we must first understand the sublimity of the invitation that those in hell have eternally forfeited.

6. JESUS' SUFFERING AND HIS UNIQUE PRIESTHOOD

The author of Hebrews begins to draw on additional Old Testament background, this time from Psalm 8, which is a meditation on the glory of human beings created in the image and likeness of God (see Hebrews 2:6-8; Genesis 1:26-28). Jesus, as the New Adam, is now “crowned with glory and honor”—he is exalted “*because* of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:9, emphasis added).

The author then uses a phrase that he will return to on several occasions: Jesus is made “perfect through suffering” (*dia pathematon teleiosai*; Hebrews 2:10).

This phrase is a bit puzzling on its face. After all, Jesus is the Eternal Son: How can he be *made* perfect? Isn’t he *already* perfect?

Two points help explain the meaning of this important statement. First, the perfection of the Eternal Son is lived out in and through his human nature, not just eternally but now. That is, the life of the Eternal Son—the perfect image of the God who *is* love (see Colossians 1:15; 1 John 4:8)—takes on a distinct hue in his human nature: *Jesus’ perfect love in a fallen world takes the shape of the Cross* (see John 15:13). And as we will see, his act of redemption now empowers each and every one of us to do the same—to love fully in accord with the divine image in which we were created.

Second, *teleiosai* (“made perfect”) is used in the Greek Old Testament for *priestly ordination*. This nuance is present here in Hebrews: Jesus is “made perfect” in that *he is consecrated as priest* in and through his priestly self-offering to the Father.

Thus, Jesus is “made perfect” in the sense that (a) he perfectly lives out divine love in and through his human nature—he lives out total divine love in his self-gift on the Cross; and (b) his self-offering on the Cross is the means

by which he is consecrated as our everlasting priest. In fact, these two meanings are related, since in the Bible priestly sacrifice is ultimately an expression of *ritualized self-offering*; that is, the offering of various animals, for example, was a symbolic way for the ancient Israelites to express their own self-offering to God. In Jesus, we have the most perfect union of priest and sacrifice, of what is offered and the person offering—since Jesus offers his very self in a total gift of love to the Father on our behalf.

Jesus' self-gift perfects human nature by infusing it with divine love. And this self-offering reveals Jesus as our high priest.

As both priest and victim, Jesus goes to the Cross as our head, ultimately sending the Spirit so we can enter into his priestly sacrifice—which then becomes the offering of the entire Mystical Body, head and members, to the Father (see Romans 12:1).

7. GOD'S VICTORY OVER DEATH

Intriguingly, the author now cites Psalm 22, the famous psalm Jesus cited from the Cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm 22:1). Though this psalm begins in a cry of abandonment, it quickly expresses hope and trust and ultimately praise. For

example, this psalm continues, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed” (Psalm 22:3-5).

The very passage that Hebrews quotes is precisely where Psalm 22 most evidently turns to praise: “I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (Psalm 22:22, quoted in Hebrews 2:12). This psalm goes on to prophesy the reality of the New Covenant—when all the nations will enter the universal (“catholic”) family of God, worshiping the true God: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Psalm 22:27).

In other words, rather than this psalm being merely about a cry of defeat, it ultimately echoes the hope of Israel and the definitive victory of God. By citing it in this fashion, Hebrews is announcing that the long-awaited “age to come” has been inaugurated in and through Jesus Christ.

This divine victory in Jesus is obviously not merely a matter of Israel’s physical return to the Promised Land and the removal of foreign subjugation; rather, the last enemy to be overcome is death (see 1 Corinthians 15:26; Genesis 3:19)—this is the definitive victory of God.

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