

THE NEW COVENANT OF GRACE

Exodus 19-24; John 13:1-17

What gives you the “hibby-jibbies?”

For those of you unfamiliar with this term, it means a feeling of extreme emotional and psychological discomfort that might even makes your body shake or tremble. People get the hibby-jibbies when they come terrifying close to death, danger, or distress, like the feeling you would have if the person standing next to you on a crowded train platform got hit by a bolt of lightning and you were left untouched. Or, it might be the feeling you get from the high-pitched shriek of a fingernail scratching along a blackboard.

When I was 6 years old I exercised my budding intelligence by inserting my finger into the electrical arc flashing between a spark plug of a 120 horsepower engine and it's loose plug wire. The resulting jolt of electricity knocked me down faster than one of Mohammed Ali's punches. I was left with a lifetime fear and awe of the power of electricity. Every perception of electrical current in any form is now associated with massive danger in my mind.

My purpose for this post is for God's Word to create that kind of powerful association in your mind about the Lord's Supper. I believe the Lord Jesus wants each of us to forcefully associate His Table with the massive and energizing grace of His New Covenant. Like the electricity that sent me down to the ground, the Lord Jesus desires the power of His grace to put us prostrate before Him in reverent awe when we think about His Supper. Instead of fear, *our Lord desires us to be overwhelmed by the greatness of His covenant grace every time we think about Communion.*

Communion is a Covenant Renewal Meal remembering and celebrating the terms of the New Covenant that Jesus established for us in His own blood. Celebrating communion without remembering the new covenant is like celebrating a wedding anniversary without a single thought of the marriage itself! Jesus gave us this ordinance so that we would remember and draw strength from His grace as set forth in the New Covenant, as we worship and remember Him.

The New Testament, and especially the Book of Hebrews, has much to say about the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. *Hebrews 8:6* mentions 3 areas of superiority in just one verse: (1)*The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to the Levitical Priests as (2) the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the*

old one, and it is (3) founded on better promises. In this meditation we want to pay special attention to the powerful way Grace is emphasized in even the *SETTING* for inaugurating the New Covenant. Let's look at HOW and WHEN these 2 Covenants were established and see how these 2 contrasting settings are intended to brand GRACE into our every association of the New Covenant.

First, we'll look at the establishment of the Old Covenant of the Law at Mount Sinai. This involves a lot of scripture and details, but our goal is to get a feel for the atmosphere as a whole. We find the *Old Covenant Initiation Ceremony/Rites in Exodus Chapters 19-25*.

READ Exodus 19:1-8. Note (19:5) that *the Lord required obedience and faithfulness to their promises as conditions for entering into covenant relationship with God*. The people clearly understood this and promised their obedience to ALL covenant stipulations in 19:8: *"All that the Lord has spoken, we will DO!"*

READ Exodus 19:18-20. This is a terrifying scene. Billowing black smoke rose from Sinai like the smoke of a million burning tires. A huge ball of fire like the Sun descended upon the mountain. The shriek of the shofar—the ram's horn trumpet—blasted louder than a fleet of fighter jets on take-off, and continued to grow louder. Mt. Siniai rumbled and rolled in a perpetual earthquake at the Lord's presence. Moses spoke to God and Thunder blasted back from His throne. It was terrifying.

READ Exodus 19:21. *God barred the people from His presence and kept them away lest they be consumed.* This is a scene of being on the very edges of disaster, like being stuck within a meter of a steaming lava flow and having nowhere to run if it shifts its course toward you! *Stay away!*

READ Exodus 20:1. This is the setting for the giving of the 10 commandments. The implication is that *God spoke these 10 commandments directly from heaven in the voice of thunder!*

READ Exodus 20:18-21. The people were completely overwhelmed and panic-stricken by this point. They trembled with fear in their hearts equal to the earthquake shaking the ground around them! They said, *"Do not let God speak to us any more, or we will DIE!"* So God accepts their plea for mercy and speaks another chunk of the covenant Law to them through Moses, from 20:22-23:33.

READ Exodus 24:1-3. God continues to cordon off the people from Himself as He sends more of His covenant conditions to the people through Moses. After

receiving them the people affirm for the 2nd time: *“All the words that the Lord has spoken to us we will do!”*

READ 24:4-7. After writing down the covenant stipulations and requirements Moses read the Book of the Old Covenant yet again, and the people affirmed for the 3rd time: *“All the words that the Lord has spoken to us we will do!” But, this time they added...”and we WILL be obedient!”*

READ Exodus 24:8. Moses showed them the blood that would inaugurate this covenant, sprinkled it upon them, and said, *“This is the blood of the covenant...”* to formally initiate the covenant. These words would be repeated almost word for word by the Lord Jesus Christ when He established the New Covenant in His own blood some 1400 years later.

READ Exodus 24:16-18. This terrible, fearsome scene continued for one full week. The glory of God’s presence was a consuming, insatiable fire for 7 days. Have you ever heard the roar of a raging fire on the loose nearby you? Have you choked in the billowing smoke? Have you ever seen the glow of red-hot burning flames lighting the night sky brighter than the light of day? God’s people did, and the sight branded awe-truck terror into their hearts. Moses, the mediator of this covenant walked into this cloud of fire and disappeared for 40 days.

Let’s sum this up. *This narrative clearly emphasizes the commitment to complete obedience on the part of the people, and the awe-full, raw power and glory of the revelation of God.* Can you hear the thunder and feel the rumble of the ground beneath your feet as your face is blasted by the heat, and your eyes scream for relief from the searing light?

Nobody who survived this covenant initiation ceremony could ever think about it without beginning to tremble again. Wouldn’t an experience like THIS encourage you to pledge your total obedience to God’s commands?

Seeing how the Old Covenant was established allows us to fully appreciate the grace emphasized in the New Covenant.

So we turn our attention to Jerusalem, on a moonlit night some 1400 years later. Jesus, the Mediator of a New and Much Better Covenant, has gathered with His disciples to inaugurate the New Covenant in His own Blood with a simple ceremony in an upper room. Instead of killing thousands of bulls and other animals, He will offer up His own life-blood as the atoning sacrifice for sin, and to

seal the covenant promises forever. John reverently records the scene in *John Chapter 13*.

READ JOHN 13:1-5. Could there be a greater contrast between the Setting of Mt Sinai and the Upper Room? Jesus knew that He was the full Possessor of ALL the fullness of God! He knew He came from the throne room of the universe, and was returning to the right hand of the Father. So what does the holder of ALL power and authority in heaven and earth do? He utterly shocks His own disciples, not by the display of the thunder and lightning, fire and fury, earthquake and trumpet blast, but by His unspeakable grace and humility.

The lowest job on the slave scale was washing people's feet. City Streets contained dirt, garbage, animal and even human waste. After a day in the dirty dust a person's feet could require a serious cleansing. So, *the lowliest slave got the dirtiest job—foot-washing.*

When Jesus' disciples piled into the Upper Room to celebrate Passover together they had been arguing about which one was the greatest among them. In the absence of a house servant to wash their feet, these disciples felt like the job was beneath their dignity. No one even gave the possibility of taking on *this* responsibility a thought. It was beyond consideration. So Jesus looked around the room and saw the pride and haughtiness in their hearts, and decided to act.

John makes it clear Jesus was motivated by nothing other than pure-hearted love: *"Having loved His own, He loved them to the very end."* This love was going to cause Him to give up His very life before the sun next set, and so He was happy to give His life in the same gracious servant-spirit that very night.

Jesus rose up from His dinner couch in regal dignity and began to take off His clothes. A baffled hush settled over the disciples. When He was down to His loincloth Jesus stooped over, swept up the towel their host has prepared, and tied it deftly around Him with a master craftsman's efficient movements. He would use the end of it to dry his disciples feet.

By this time shock had turned to amazement and then panic in His disciples, as it dawned on them that Jesus would soon be kneeling before each of them to scrub their feet clean. Faces burned crimson with shame at that thought. He was their Rabbi...and their Lord. He was due the utmost honor and respect. They were supposed to wait upon and serve Him! How could they have possibly forgotten to

wash HIS feet? This was a scandal...a crisis of woeful neglect and failure on their part.

As Jesus gave each of these men the most skillful foot-washing of their lives He looked long and warmly into their eyes. There was no condemnation...no accusation...just golden-hearted, gracious service. Each of them wanted to cry out like Peter in protest at this stunning role-reversal, but the awesome majesty and beauty of their Lord's grace gripped them vise-like in complete silence. All they could hear was the gentle drip and splash of water, and their own hearts beating like drums.

My friends, this passage is so rich in meaning that I could write for a year from this one chapter and never exhaust its depths. But right now, as we think together of our Lord's Supper, I want nothing but this still, silent, unbelievably gracious setting for the inauguration of the New Covenant to be branded into our hearts forever.

Jesus rose from washing His disciples' feet and very quietly initiated the New Covenant of Grace. There was no earthquake. No black, billowing cloud. No thunder. No lightning. No trumpet blasts. No separation from His Presence. No commandments and conditions. No stone tablets...

Just enough love to die for His enemies, and more than enough grace to serve without limit or any conditions.

Just Love on His knees, cleaning up the mess of soiled feet...giving us a picture of the way He stooped to cleanse our sins through the humiliation of shedding His blood on a shameful, cruel cross.

Just the Creator and Lord of this universe, revealing His glory by stooping down to extend His grace to us in our desperate need.

As John wrote: *The Word became flesh, and pitched His Tabernacle Tent among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father...so full of grace and truth. For of His fullness we have all received and endless grace upon grace. The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

It was there, in the penetrating, pregnant silence of unspeakably gracious, loving service, that the New Covenant of Grace was inaugurated. *"This cup is the New Covenant in my blood; Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

No one who was there ever forgot *that* scene.

Every time they took His cup in hand, they remembered it.

And so should we.