

THE GREAT MOTIVATION: THE TWO APPROACHES TO GOD — THE OLD AND THE NEW COVENANTS HEBREWS 12:18–24

Introduction

Life is a race, a race that we are all running. There are several ways that we can run the race of life.

=> If we are running the race of life for self, then the race could be called *The Great Selfish Race*.

=> If we are running the race of life for self-righteousness or personal goodness, then the race could be called *The Great Legalistic Race*.

=> If we are running the race of life for Christ, then the race is called *The Great Christian Race*.

The proclamation of the preacher is just what everyone expects: “Run the Great Christian Race.” But why? Why should a person run the great Christian race? Why should a person get on the track of life and run and run and endure and endure following after Christ? This is the discussion of this passage: the great motivation of the Christian race — *the two approaches to God, the old and new covenants*.

I. The first or old approach: the old covenant (vv. 18-21).

II. The new approach: the new covenant (vv. 22-24).

I. Hebrews 12:18–21 The Old Covenant Approach to God

The first approach to God is the old approach — by the old covenant — by the law. A person can approach God like they did in the Old Testament: he can profess the law and try to keep it in order to be acceptable to God. But remember: God is perfect. Therefore, no person can approach God and be acceptable to God, for no person is perfect. And tragically, no person can become perfect, for imperfection can never become perfection. Once a thing is imperfect, it is imperfect forever.

What, then, can be done? How can a person approach God? Under the old covenant — under the law — two things were done:

=> First, people made sacrificial offerings of animals to God for their sins. The animal sacrifices became a substitute for the people. The animals bore the guilt and condemnation of the person’s sins. If a person believed this, really believed that God counted his sins as being borne by the animal, then God really forgave the person. But we must always remember this: no animal sacrifice was ever a perfect sacrifice.

An animal is not a man, nor is an animal the ideal man. Only the ideal and perfect man could offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice to bear our sin and condemnation. This is the reason the animal sacrifice only pointed to and pictured the coming Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself. Jesus Christ had to come and establish the new approach to God. But this is the discussion of the next point. The point to see now is this: under the old covenant of the law, people approached God through animal sacrifice in order to receive forgiveness of sin.

=> Second, people approached God by following the law and doing good works. They approached God by trying to be as good as they could and by trying to do as much good as they could.

The point is this: when a person approached God by the old covenant of the law, he did not have the full picture of God. His concept of God was inadequate. Note three facts about the approach of the old covenant. Note also that the writer makes his points by sharing what happened at Mt. Sinai when God gave the law to Israel.

Exo 19:16-18 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently.

1. The approach of the old covenant (the law) was an *external, material approach* to God. The people had approached God to receive His Word and His law. Note where they had approached Him: at Mt. Sinai, at an earthly, material place. This is what is meant by the word touched. Under the old covenant (the law), the place where God was approached was not spiritual or heavenly; it was a physical place, a place on this earth. What is the point of mentioning this? Mt. Sinai will pass away. Just as the earth passes away, so will Mt. Sinai. Therefore, if a person approaches God any-place on this earth — any-place that can be touched — his approach shall pass away. It is not an eternal or lasting approach. It is a physical and material approach, an approach through the senses. The only approach to God that will last is a spiritual approach, for only a spiritual approach will last eternally.

There is also the possibility that being physically touched refers to the law. The idea would be that of the senses, of the physical and material, of the law belonging to this earth and being external to man. The law was an *outside force* that told man what to do; it was *not an inside force* that transformed the heart of man. The law could never give man the power to do God's will. This was not its purpose. The law's purpose was to control man's behaviour and show him how far short he came from perfection. Its purpose was to show man that he needed a living relationship with God, not to bring man into a living relationship with God. The law could never transform man; it could

only show man that he needed to be transformed. The law is not an internal force that can work in the heart of man; it is an external force that puts demands upon the heart of man and that demands judgment if behaviour does not match up.

The point is this: if a person approaches God through the old covenant of the law, he shall stand condemned before God. The law only condemns man; it does not transform him. Man can touch the law: he can pick it up and read the words and letters of the law, but he cannot implant the law into his heart. It is external to him. If he approaches God through the law, he will never be perfected and never be transformed to live in God's presence.

2. The approach of the old covenant was to a *holy, distant God of judgment* (v. 18). This is what is meant by the description of what happened on Mt. Sinai.

=> Fire symbolized the holiness, righteousness and purity of God. Man had to be careful, ever so careful in how he approached God, lest he be consumed.

=> Blackness and darkness symbolized the fact that God was hidden from man's sight. He could not be fully known because He could not be seen. Blackness and darkness also symbolized that the old covenant of the law could not give man a clear picture of God; it could only give a shadow of what God was like, a shadow that was given through types and symbols and written words which are ever so inadequate. The point is this: man just could not know God, not all that he needed to know about God, not by approaching God through the holy places of this earth and by law.

=> Tempest or raging storm symbolized the judgment and fierce wrath and power of God. He was to be feared and revered as the Great and Almighty Judge who could exact judgment upon any who refused to obey His covenant of law.

The point is this: any person who approached God through the old covenant of law faced a holy, distant God of judgment.

3. The approach of the old covenant was a *reluctant, fearful approach* to God. Note: both the people (v. 19-20) and Moses feared (v. 21). What happened was this: when God first began to give the law to Moses, there was the blast of a trumpet and then God Himself apparently began to speak in an audible voice. The voice of God was so strong and forceful and the ten commandments so convicting that terror struck the heart of the people. They cried out to Moses.

Exo 20:19 *“Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”*

The point is this: when a person approaches God through the old covenant of the law, he must approach reluctantly and fearfully. Why? Because the law is going to condemn him; it can only show him where he comes short of God's glory and perfection. The law cannot make man righteous and perfect. This was not the purpose

of the old covenant of the law. The law was given to show man that he was sinful and short of God's glory — show him beyond any question — show him so that he could never intelligently deny his sin and transgression nor his need for a Saviour.

Rom 3:19-20 *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

Rom 5:20 *The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.*

Rom 7:7 *What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."*

Rom 7:18 *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*

Gal 3:10 *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

Gal 3:19 *What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.*

Gal 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

1 Tim 1:9 *We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers.*

Heb 7:19 *(For the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*

II. **Hebrews 12:22–24** *The New Covenant Approach to God*

The new approach to God is by the new covenant, the covenant of God's grace. This is the covenant of the New Testament, the way a person really becomes acceptable to God. In fact, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ — the grace of God's very own Son — is the only way a person can ever be perfected and acceptable to God. Note six wonderful facts about this approach, the approach of the new covenant, the covenant of God's grace.

1. The approach of the new covenant is a spiritual and heavenly approach to God (v. 22). It is approaching God to receive His Word, but it is approaching Him right where He sits, right where His throne and presence really are — in Mount Zion, that is, in

the city of the heavenly Jerusalem itself. It is approaching God in spirit and in truth, approaching His very presence face to face and heart and heart. Note the contrast between Mt. Sinai which is earthly and physical and Mt. Zion which is heavenly and spiritual. Under the old covenant a person had to go to some physical place — some earthly location or temple or building to worship God. But not now, not under the new covenant. The person who approaches God in this new way can meet God any-place: heart to heart, on a spiritual basis. The person's spirit can *commune and fellowship* with God any-place. Note: this does not do away with joint worship with other believers in a church gathering. This was covered in Heb. 10:25 and elsewhere. The stress of this point is spiritual and internal worship verses physical and external worship.

2 Cor 5:1 *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

John 4:23-24 *“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.”*

Heb 11:10, 16 *For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

Heb 13:14 *For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*

1 Pet 3:10-13 *For, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?*

Rev 21:1-5 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

Rev 22:14 *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”*

2. The approach of the new covenant is to the angels of God, thousands upon thousands of them (v. 22). When a person approaches God by grace, he is assured of receiving fellowship and communion with a host of angels. When believers depart this world for the next world; they shall be perfected just as the angels are, and they shall join the countless host of angels in worshipping and serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rev 5:11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

Rev 7:11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God.

Rev 19:6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns."

3. The approach of the new covenant is to the church of Christ, the church of the first-born. The first-born is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ. It means that Jesus Christ is the First, the Founder, the Author, the Beginning, the Saviour of the church. Note that the person who is a part of the Lord's church is "*written in heaven.*" His name is registered in heaven, actually written down in the Book of Life. He actually becomes a citizen of heaven. Note the phrase "to the general assembly." This can refer either to the gathering of angels in the former point or to the great gathering of the church or its believers.

Luke 10:20 "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Eph 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

Eph 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

2 Cor 6:17-18 "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Gal 4:4-6 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”

4. The approach of the new covenant is to God the Judge of all. This means two things.
 - a. The person who approaches God by the new covenant of grace finds the most wonderful thing. God is the Judge, but He is the Judge who has judged the believer’s sin in Christ. That is, God judges the believer righteous and perfect in Christ. God does not judge sin against the believer; God judges sin against Christ the Saviour of men. This is grace — what grace is all about — the favour and gift of God, the favour and gift of salvation that man does not deserve. But God loves man; therefore, He has established the new covenant of grace, the new way that man can now approach Him and be judged perfect and righteous forever.

John 3:18 *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, [judged] but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”*

John 5:24 *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned: he has crossed over from death to life.”*

Rom 8:1 *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Rom 8:33-34 *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

- b. Believers as well as unbelievers must never forget that God is the Judge of all. Note the word all: God is the Judge of all — not only of unbelievers, but of believers as well. God does not play around with a person who lives in sin, no matter what he professes. The person may continually declare that he is saved — declare that he is approaching God by the new covenant of grace — but what he professes is meaningless if he lives in sin. God shall judge him. God is the Judge of all, not only of unbelievers. This has been the very point of the five warnings in the Book of Hebrews, five severe warnings. As A.T. Robertson says: “People should not forget that God is the Judge of all men” (*Word Pictures In The New Testament*, Vol. 5, p. 441).

William Barclay states it well:

“There awaits the Christian God the Judge. Even amidst the joy there remains the awe. The writer to the Hebrews never forgot that, at the end, the Christian must stand the scrutiny of God. The glory is there; but the awe and the fear of God still remain. The New Testament is never in the faintest danger of sentimentalising the idea of God” (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 213).

Rom 2:16 *This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

1 Cor 3:11-15 *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

2 Cor 5:10 *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

Psa 96:13 *They will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.*

Eccl 3:17 *I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."*

Rev 20:12 *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.*

5. The approach of the new covenant is to the spirit of the righteous who have already departed and gone on to heaven. They stand before God perfected forever. The person who approaches God by the new covenant shall join his loved ones and all others who truly believed in Christ. He shall join them in heaven, in the very presence of God. And note the words "made perfect." What a glorious hope! He shall be made perfect — perfected forever and made acceptable to God forever. He shall live with God eternally.

John 14:2-3 *"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*

John 17:24 *"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."*

2 Cor 5:8 *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

Phil 1:23 *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.*

1 Th 4:16-18 *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be*

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

6. The approach of the new covenant is to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant. Jesus Christ is the One who stands between sinful man and God, who is holy. He is the only Mediator who can present man perfect before God. How? By His blood.

=> Jesus Christ is the perfect High Priest. He never sinned: therefore, He stands as the Ideal and Perfect Man, as the Ideal and Perfect High Priest before God. Being perfect, whatever He offers is perfect. Therefore, when Jesus Christ offers the sacrifice for sins, His sacrifice is the ideal and perfect sacrifice. His sacrifice can stand for and cover all men — all of the sins of every person.

=> Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice. As the Ideal and Perfect Man, He can take all the sins of all men, and bear the guilt and condemnation of all sin for man. And God can accept His sacrifice, for it was the perfect and ideal sacrifice.

The point is clear: Jesus Christ is the Mediator, the one perfect sacrifice and High Priest who stands between God and man. He alone can present men perfect before God.

Note the reference to Abel. What does this mean? When Abel was killed by his brother Cain, his blood cried out for vengeance and justice (Gen. 4:10). But not the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ cries out for man to be forgiven and cleansed of sin. The blood of Christ cries out for mercy upon those who would kill, reject, deny and curse Him.

Mat 26:28 *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*

1 Tim 2:5-6 *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men — the testimony given in its proper time.*

Heb 8:6-10 *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

Heb 9:14-15 *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, 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.*

Heb 9:24-28 *For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

Heb 12:24 *To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

1 John 2:1-2 *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. ■*