Something Old – Something New

Zech 8:1-19

Mark 2: 18-22

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we praise You that Your Word always accomplishes Your purposes for it and that You send it out with great power to do so. So Father, we pray that the preaching of Your Word today may do that work that you have set it to do in our lives, convicting us of sin, reassuring us of Your grace, bringing sanctification and causing praise and thanks to arise in our hearts. We pray it in Jesus name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, when I was at theological college the students were once challenged by the question – ‘if you had been alive at the time of Jesus, do you think you would have been a Pharisee or a Sadducee’? To put that question in modern terms it would be like asking ‘would you rather be a conservative or a liberal?’ Because that was pretty much the way it went with the conservative Pharisee and the liberal Sadducees. Now some who are conservative in our present time, conservative in doctrine, might be so out of a conservative temperament more than out of a deep rooted conviction about the word of God. I am talking about the kind of people who simply don’t like any kind of change at all in any area of life, which is of course not a very good reason, for holding to the views that you do. It should arise out of a heart-felt conviction as to what the scripture teaches. Not simply because you don’t like change. I say this because I wonder if you have stopped to consider just how radical the Lord Jesus must have seemed to the conservative Pharisees of the time who simply did not like change. Here we see in these passages, the Lord Jesus coming along, and claiming to forgive sins, in a new way - a way that no-one else had done before – we see the Lord Jesus coming along and breaking the ceremonial law, in a certain sense, on occasion. We see the Lord Jesus wining and dining and reclining with those who had been excommunicated from the church at that time, and now on top of that, in this passage, we see the Lord Jesus ignoring the Old Testament practise of fasting. And in the section after that, we are going to be dealing with the Lord Jesus allegedly breaking the Sabbath. And this was an awful lot of change happening very very quickly to these Pharisees who no doubt, had a lot of trouble coping with that. To many Pharisees, the Lord Jesus must have looked like a liberal. What they failed to understand though, was that the changes that the Lord Jesus brought had not to do with a loose approach to the Law of God – certainly not. On the contrary, but the changes He brought came from the fact that He was and is, both God and Messiah, bringing in the Kingdom of God – and that is a very different matter.

We look at the newness that the Lord Jesus brought on that account under three headings:

1. The nature of the old

2. The nature of the new

3. The relationship between the old and the new.

In a way this whole text here in Mark’s gospel is about new versus old. The old situation before the bridegroom comes. The new situation when the bridegroom comes. You have also, of course, the old garment and the old wine skin contrasted with the new. So the three parts of this passage fit together. The fasting and the bridegroom, and then the two small parables about the garment and the wine skin.

Here though, there are two forms of the old that we find at work here in this passage. There are two different expressions of it. You have John the Baptist and his disciples and then you have the Pharisees and their disciples. And they are both dealing with the old in their own respective way. Both groups demonstrated that by their attitude towards fasting. Both had this Old Testament practise of fasting and they did it on a regular basis. And they came to Jesus and they asked him questions about that when they saw that His disciples were not doing it. We must have to assume though that these two groups came to the Lord Jesus from the same angle, or from the same motives. Most likely the disciples of John the Baptist came with the more genuine question and puzzlement in their minds. And if they thought anything about the Lord Jesus and His disciples, perhaps they thought well, maybe they are a little bit undisciplined, they are not doing these religious exercises, in a disciplined way, the way that others do. The Pharisees no doubt would have been more hostile. Trying to prove that Jesus and His disciples were not just a little bit undisciplined, they were downright liberal and anti-law.

To understand this accusation, let us just briefly review what we know of fasting from the Old and New Testaments. Fasting was understood to be commanded only once per year in the Old Testament, and that was on the Day of Atonement. That was based on passages like Lev. 16:20, 21. Lev. 23:27-32, and Num. 29:7, especially. For that is all to do with ceremonial law. And that ceremonial law concerning the Day of Atonement and what is done around it, that is something that is now being fulfilled and we no longer have to practise those regulations concerning the Day of Atonement. In addition to that, the Jews kept four more annual fasts from the time of the post exilic period. And we read about that in Zech. 8. And in addition, there were other occasions when they fasted – times of national mourning, or grief, or repentance. As did individuals - and also times of national or individual or personal humbling or even of seeking guidance or help from the Lord in some other way. And therefore, generally, fasting was associated in both Testaments, with judgment, grief, repentance or the need for help of some kind or guidance of some kind.

In the New Testament the Lord Jesus does not forbid fasting, and especially at times of grief, He understands that it is appropriate as we see also in this passage where He talks about what will happen when He is taken from His disciples. They will grieve, it will be appropriate for them to fast at that time. The Lord does warn in Matt. 5:17, that fasting should never be used in order to draw attention to yourself. Which is what the Pharisees were doing. Fasting was also used by the church when seeking guidance, such as choosing an office bearer in Acts. 13:7, and Acts 14:23. And the Westminster Confession, on that basis argues in Chap. 21 Art 5, that fasting may be part of religious worship on special and solemn occasions – national disasters and times of national mourning and repentance and so on, particularly terrible and widespread sin for example.

And of course, we may also say that it is possible for believing people today to give up anything from this life for a period of time in order to concentrate on prayer, for example, as the apostle Paul shows in 1 Cor. 7:5. Fasting may therefore be useful on occasion, but there is no basis in the New Testament for saying that it must be insisted on today as a practise for God’s people. And especially not, if you are thinking of it as something that will more or less, automatically bring you close to God and make you a more holy person. And that is the problem of the Roman Catholic Church historically, one of the things that they did take it in just that way, that it was an obligation that will bring you close to God. And others too from the Protestant world have sometimes taken a similar view.

So, as I say, John’s disciples practised this with an Old Testament mentality – they practised fasting and they did in regularly. And that was appropriate to John’s ministry. Because John was essentially an Old Testament style prophet. And He had come, as we have been before, to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. And he did that by warning Israel of imminent judgement and calling for the people to repent. He was calling for the people to mourn, to grieve over their sins. With that kind of message, John backed up his message by his lifestyle. He avoided luxury and comfort. He avoided feasts and celebrations and he lived in the wilderness and he fasted a lot. And that was in keeping with that message and that emphasis that he brought. As a man who was essentially an Old Testament style prophet, that’s all John could do. He could not yet emphasise the Day of Salvation and the joy that comes with that, he could only proclaim it as a day that was about to arrive but not as one that had already broken in upon the world – the day of salvation. John’s message is one that was designed to create mourning over sin and a desire for the help of God, and grief in order to prepare for the coming of that day.

And so, we can well understand the disciples of John, at a time when John is under arrest, he is in prison, as we know from Chapter 1, and at that time his disciples then start to gravitate towards the Lord Jesus but they also have questions and they are puzzled. If they listen to what the Lord Jesus is saying they will realise that He was indeed mourning over the sin of Israel, but He was not expressing that in quite the way that John did. And that was a matter for puzzlement. The Pharisees on the other hand had tended to take the few Old Testament references to fasting, and make this into a regular and showy ritual twice every week, that was the Pharisaic custom, and making it a showy ritual is exactly what the Lord Jesus condemns in Matt. 5:17. Because the Pharisees tended to think that by fasting and their other showy religious exercise they could prove to the world they were so much more pious than others. And by doing so they could also gain God’s favour, and they could gain the blessing of God and gain the guidance of God, by their own actions – more or less automatically from their own works’ righteousness.

That is also an old way that had to change. It was an even more serious problem than the confusion that lay in the minds of John the Baptists’ disciples because the view of the Pharisees was not just an Old Testament mentality, it was a perversion of the Old Testament and out of line as well with the New Testament. The disciples and the Pharisees no doubt failed to understand how this Rabbi, if He were any true kind of Rabbi, how He could not insist on fasting but their reasoning is more off in that than the disciples of John. They can’t understand why the Lord Jesus isn’t busy teaching His disciples how to use fasting as a practise that has works salvation value. Because that is their mentality.

Well in contrast to these old ways, the Old Testament system, which is now being fulfilled by the Lord Jesus, in contrast to John the Baptist’s disciples, who are part of that system in still thinking as old covenant believers, but also in contrast to the perversion of the old on the part of the Pharisees – in contrast to all of that we have the newness that the Lord Jesus brings.

Our second point – the nature of the new.

And we can see in a number of ways in the Bible how this really is regarded by God and proclaimed as something new. Not only in this passage, but the very fact that the scripture speaks of a New Testament or a New Covenant that already shows that this is indeed the case. It is a new thing. You’ll also notice in verses 21 and 22 this contrast is made explicitly. The old verses the new. The Greek language has a number of different words for new, and the one that is used in verse 21 is a word that means something that is new in quality or kind. Something that is completely different. And the word that is used in verse 22, a different word, means something that is new in time, chronologically new. The coming of the Lord Jesus and what He brought was new in both senses. It was new in character but it was also new in time.

What is this newness that the Lord Jesus brings? We see it first in the answer that He gives to the disciples of John and the Pharisees regarding fasting in verse 19. He explains that His disciples cannot fast because the bridegroom is with them – and you see this is the newness of the new covenant. This is the newness that comes with Jesus that now, for the first time in history; the bridegroom is present with sinners. Now in the Old Testament this bridegroom, bride, wedding analogy, this is something that is used of God’s relationship with Israel. You find that in Is. 54:5-6, Is. 61:10, and chapter 62:3-5, and you find it all through the book of Hosea, that great analogy of separation followed by restoration and restoration in marriage as an analogy of sinful Israel being restored to God, ultimately through the Lord Jesus. So that is quite common in the Old Testament – God is the groom and Israel is the bride. But in the New Testament we find that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. Which implies that Jesus is God. God is the groom in the Old Testament; Jesus is the groom in the New. And it also implies that the church is the new Israel – the bride. That makes the disciples of the Lord Jesus His attendants, as they are called here. And we can think of that as rather similar to groomsmen today, or friends of a groom at a stag party, for example. They are the people who hang around the groom and they help in the proceedings and they support him in the wedding. Of course, we have had a few of those recently, in our congregational life here. So some of you young men ought to know from experience what this is like to be an attendant of the groom to be.

This is an analogy of our relationship with the Lord Jesus. That we are like those young men who are hanging around the groom as the preparations are made and then during the wedding itself. So what is the fundamental difference between the Old and the New Testament – it is this – that the Messiah, the Bridegroom has come. And He comes bringing in a time of fulfilment. That is a new kind of time. It’s new compared to the Old Testament. The time of shadows and the New Testament time of fulfilment. He comes with His kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven that breaks into this present age, a different kind of kingdom – He comes with healing and salvation which in the Old Testament could only be looked forward to and foreshadowed, but now the Lord Jesus comes and He actually brings it in fullness. And that is a very different and new thing. In Him the age to come, the future as it were, breaks into the present. And that is a very different age. Jesus does warn, however, that there will be a time when He will be taken away from them, verse 20, a time when fasting will be appropriate. A reference, no doubt to His arrest and crucifixion which would be a time of great grief and mourning for His disciples, a very appropriate time for fasting. Maybe also a reference to His ascension, when He is no longer physically present so that the church will at times need to seek guidance from God with fasting as we saw in Acts, when the church will at times have huge amounts of grief over sin and there will be those solemn occasions when a great deal of public repentance is needed, and so on.

But while the Lord is physically present with His disciples, giving them that guidance and healing in the way that brings such joy to them, the joy of the bridegroom’s presence they will not want to fast and they will not do so.

This highlights the other new thing with Jesus’ coming. And that’s the joy it brings. The joy it brings at the revelation of God’s salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. The joy that comes with seeing the outpouring of grace in the New Testament times. John could only speak of that as ‘future’. He could only speak of salvation as ‘future’. While he is busy putting his emphasis on, and warning about judgement and avoiding comfort and avoiding situations that are particularly joyful to a large extent. But the Lord Jesus comes, bringing that promised salvation to sinners with great joy. And therefore He attends weddings – occasions of joy. And He attends banquets – such as the banquet at Levi’s place. And He eats and He drinks with sinners as He tells them of this wonderful great news – this joyful news.

Remember in the series on Ezra and Nehemiah that Nehemiah and Ezra told the people not to fast but to eat of the fat and drink of the sweet at the festival time because that was a day of joy and not a day of grief. And then immediately after that when the people remember their sins and confess them, that is the time that they put on the sackcloth and fast. The contrast between Neh. 8 and 9. Those festivals pointed to the joy of salvation in Christ and taught God’s people in the Old Testament that when you are close to Him that is not a place for grief. Close to Him is not the place for grief to dominate. And even though the Lord Jesus is now in heaven with respect to His human nature, we as His people are still close to Him, through word and spirit, the bridegroom is still present with us. And therefore the joy of the bridegroom’s presence ought to characterise us today. But if we, through sin, draw away from Him, if because of our sin we become distant from Him, then there is reason for grief on our part. As long as we are still His, the joy ought to out-weigh the grief.

One day, of course, there will only be the joy left. At the moment we live in the mixed situation in a way. One day only the joy will be left and there will be no grief at all. And that will be the time when all the remaining sin is finally stripped away.

Well, we have seen something of what the old and the new are. But in our third and final place what is the relationship between them? How do we understand the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. Old and new covenant. Is the Old Testament simply fulfilled and now it is like an old set of clothes that no longer fits you or it’s worn out, so you take it and throw it in the bin. Well, the Lord tells two short parables to help explain this relationship because talking about the bridegroom and talking about fasting – this raises these questions – the old and the new. How do they relate? The first parable in verse 21 involves an old garment that needs patching. But if you take an old garment that has already been washed and dried so many times it has shrunk pretty well as much as it is going to and then you patch that with a different kind of cloth – one that is unshrunk – then you are going to get problems. As the patch shrinks it will tear loose and things will be even worse than they were before as the parable explains.

The point is, you can’t take a little bit of what Jesus offers, a little bit of the newness that He offers and somehow patch that onto the Old Testament system, the Old Testament mentality, and expect that to work. You must take all that the Lord Jesus offers, and live as a new covenant person. You cannot live as an Old Covenant person today. That time is past. You have to live in light of the New Covenant as well and understand the Old Covenant in light of the new. Because that is the time in which we live.

A similar point is made in the second parable in verse 22 which involves the storing of wine in goats’ skins. You can’t put new wine in an old wine skin because the new wine ferments and it produces carbon dioxide and that causes the skin to expand, but an old skin has already done all the expanding it can – so you put new wine in it and those gases are produced and that old skin will not be able to handle it – it will burst and you will lose everything – skin and wine alike.

The point being, that just as you can’t take a little bit of what the Lord Jesus offers in the new covenant and somehow patch that on, but basically operate as an old covenant person, with just a little bit of the new testament stuff added in – in a similar way you cannot take the whole of what Jesus offers and the whole of what the old covenant offers and hold them together as if somehow you can have a foot in both covenants. You can be an old covenant person AND a new covenant person fully at the same time. In other words, you cannot say, I am going to believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation, but at the same time I am also going to require circumcision because the old covenant does. Or I am going to believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation, but I am also going to say that you must fast on the Day of Atonement, as the old covenant required.

That is bad enough, but it is even worse if you try to combine a belief in the Lord Jesus with the works righteousness mentality that was a perversion of the Old Testament by the Pharisees. As if you would say, I am going to believe that Jesus saves and I am going to say that you must be circumcised and you must fast, and then I am going to say, that if you do those things that will save you. That’s the Pharisaic perversion.

Does that then mean that we toss away the Old Testament? Not at all. It is equally God’s word. As fully, every bit as much, as the New Testament. Much of the Old Testament is carried over into the New Testament, more or less, as is. Such as the moral law – the Ten Commandments. And even those things that have not been carried over for practise, such as the ceremonial law, even those things are given to us that we study them and we learn from them and in fact, we learn from them about the Lord Jesus. As we look at the relationship between the Old and the New Testament there are things that continue and there are other things that have ended because they have been fulfilled.

When the parables here speak of not mixing and matching the old and the new, what they are really talking about is if we would try to somehow deal with the new things that Jesus brings, but from an Old Testament mentality. Whereas what is required of us, is to deal with the Old Testament from a new covenant mentality. So that we look at the Old Testament and we understand how it is a foreshadowing pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is something that requires work. If you don’t study these things, if you don’t study how the Lord Jesus in the New Testament fulfils the Old Testament, what remains the same and what things have been fulfilled – if you don’t study those matters which requires work – then it is going to be hard to understand how the new and the old relate.

In areas like this greater focus on joy – now that we have this day of salvation. To understand that – there was joy in the Old Testament – in what sense is there greater joy in the New Testament – you have to study that to understand.

Bringing the gospel to outcasts – the ceremonial law of the Old Testament says keep away from the outcasts. But we understand as we study these things in the New Testament, why it was necessary and right and good for the Lord Jesus to dine and recline with these people in order to bring that gospel to them.

Perhaps one of the biggest tests is whether you have then this new wine in the new skin, whether you have the whole new robe from the Lord Jesus Christ, the white robe, or whether you are still thinking in an Old Testament mentality, as many do, one of the biggest tests of that is whether you have that joy that we spoke about before. The joy of the bridegroom. The Lord Jesus came with salvation and if you have that and you know what that means then there ought to be a joy that exceeds that of the saints of the Old Testament. Sure they had that joy, but when Christ came, His people understood much more the fullness of it because the day had arrived. If you live in the futility of works righteousness, like the Pharisees, there is no joy there. There is no joy in that. If you live in terror of judgement – there is no joy in that either.

As I mentioned, the lads at the stag party and the families at weddings, they will know that that is no time for long faces; it is a time for joy. Hopefully they are not all sitting around glum at these parties, and shaking their heads and saying – the ball and chain, this is bad news for you. They are sitting there having a celebration.

If they can celebrate at a wedding, how much more ought this joy to characterise God’s people today, knowing that the day of salvation has come – the New Covenant is come. The Lord Jesus Christ has come. And that joy is a far bigger test of where you are in these things than many realise. Joy is often under-rated as a test of how well we understand these things. And this is not to say that we ought not to be grieving over our remaining sins as God’s people. It is essential that we do grieve over our remaining sins. But the thing is that the sorrow that we have over our sins in light of what we understand from the whole of the Bible – that sorrow drives us all the more to the Lord Jesus and helps us see all the more clearly in this age in which we live – the great cause we have for even greater rejoicing. AMEN

Let us Pray

Heavenly Father, we thank You that we live in this time after the coming of the Lord Jesus in the day of salvation. That You have enabled us to know the outpouring of grace, that Your Son has brought. Father, would You help us to respond to that as we should by rejoicing greatly in it, though without forgetting that we are still sinful and that we still experience some of the misery that sin brings. Father would You enable us to grieve over our sins without this taking from us, the great joy that we have in the Lord. On the contrary, that as we grieve over our sins that our joy in being delivered from them would be all the greater. We pray this in Jesus name, AMEN.