

Sermon Summary #22

A Celebration of the New Covenant in Christ Hebrews 8:1-13

I did not plan for our study of Hebrews 8 to fall on the last Sunday of the month, the day on which we regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper. ***I can only attribute that to divine providence!*** Of course, some of you may not immediately recognize the connection between the New Covenant, about which Hebrews 8 says more than any other passage in the NT, and our celebration of the Lord's Supper. If that is true, I would simply remind you of the words spoken by Jesus when he celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples just before his betrayal and crucifixion.

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the ***new covenant*** in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20).

You can hardly miss the connection now! Jesus is clear: ***when he offered up his body on the cross and poured out his blood so that we might be forgiven of our sins, he was inaugurating and establishing the New Covenant.*** And when we gather to eat the bread that symbolizes his body and drink from the cup that points to his blood we are remembering and celebrating and experiencing all the blessings that are now ours because of this New Covenant in Christ Jesus, a covenant in which all who believe in Jesus are members.

Now immediately the word "***new***" in the phrase New Covenant suggests that there was an "***old***" covenant. That "old" covenant, of course, was the covenant that God established with Moses and the people of Israel after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. You see this stated explicitly in Hebrews 8:9 where our author says that this New Covenant will "***not***" be "like the covenant" that God made with their fathers when he delivered them from Egypt.

But what ***need*** is there for a New Covenant between God and his people? ***Why wasn't the Mosaic Covenant good enough for all people and for all time?*** In saying that the Old or Mosaic Covenant wasn't "good enough" I'm not saying it wasn't "good". It was. It was an unprecedented blessing for the people of Israel. It provided them with laws to govern their behavior. It promised them spiritual and material and even military blessings if they obeyed that law and remained true to the covenant. God even instituted in that covenant the office of high priest so that the people would have someone to offer sacrifices on their behalf and represent them in the presence of God. That old covenant provided a sacrificial system in which the blood of bulls and goats at least temporarily enabled them to remain in fellowship with God. The Old Covenant under Moses was filled with grace, mercy, longsuffering, and love.

But the Old or Mosaic Covenant had three fundamental flaws. Thus, it wasn't that the Old Covenant was bad. Rather, it was *inadequate*. It perfectly fulfilled the purpose for which God established it, but it fell short in three primary ways.

First, although there was a high priest who would regularly offer an animal sacrifice for their sins, such sacrifices could never fully and finally secure their forgiveness. This is what we read in Hebrews 10:1-4.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb. 10:1-4).

Second, the law of the Old Covenant that came through Moses was unable to supply the power that people needed to fulfill and obey it. The Law of Moses was very clear in stating, "Thou shalt not" or "Do this and live" or "Be ye holy." But there was nothing in the law itself that could empower the people to obey it. The Law of Moses told the

people of Israel what they should and should not do but it was never capable of supplying them with the internal energy or the spiritual power to obey.

I have no idea who wrote this statement, but perhaps you've heard this explanation for the difference between the *Old* covenant and the *New* covenant, or the difference between the *Law* and the *Gospel*:

“To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands.
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings!”

The point here is that with the New Covenant that Christ established and the gift of the Holy Spirit who indwells all its members, we not only know what to do, we also have been given the power and strength to do it. I'll have more to say about this in just a moment.

Third, the Old or Mosaic Covenant was temporary. It was designed by God with a *built-in obsolescence*. God never intended for the Old Covenant to last forever. He never intended for it to be the final revelation of his will for mankind. We know this from several things, but I'll mention only three.

In the first place, we read in Hebrews 8:5 that everything Moses did in constructing the Old Covenant tabernacle, together with its rituals and sacrifices, was only *“a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”*

We also know the Old Covenant was temporary because of what the OT prophet Jeremiah said in the 6th century b.c. in chapter thirty-one, verses thirty-one through thirty-four. And what he said is what the author of Hebrews quotes here in Hebrews 8. We read in Hebrews 8:8-9 that God always intended to establish a new covenant with his people that would be different from the one he made with Moses and Israel following the exodus from Egypt.

If there is any lingering doubt in your mind about God's temporary design in the Old Covenant it should be forever put to rest from what you read here in *Hebrews 8:13* – “In speaking of a new covenant, he [God] makes the first one [the old covenant] obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”

Some believe this is a reference to what would soon occur in the year 70 a.d. when the Roman armies under Titus would destroy the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. The sacrifices of the old covenant then ceased. The priesthood of the old covenant then ceased. There was no longer a temple in which the rituals of the old covenant could be exercised.

But we should probably read this from the perspective of Jeremiah in the 6th century b.c. In other words, when Jeremiah prophesied the coming of a new covenant, at that very time it rendered the old covenant obsolete. It was “ready to vanish away” from the time Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant that was coming. The old covenant was actually abolished and replaced by the new covenant at the time of Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Some Crucial Contextual Matters

Before we look directly at the blessings of the New Covenant, let me make several important observations.

(1) We read in Hebrews 8:6-7 that the very existence of this New Covenant is just one more proof or demonstration that the high priesthood of Jesus is superior to the high priesthood of Aaron and his descendants. The priestly “ministry” of Jesus is better than that of Aaron because the “covenant” he established and now mediates is better than that which came through Moses. Notice he also says the “promises” of this new covenant are better and in a moment we'll look closely at what those promises are.

(2) I'm not happy with how the opening line of v. 8 is translated. I'm going to take issue with the ESV here, although I should point out that they make reference to this other possible translation in a footnote. ***Hebrews 8:8a should read, “For finding fault with it, he says to them.”*** God found fault with the covenant, not with the people.

He just mentioned in v. 7 that the first or old or Mosaic covenant was not “faultless.” That is why there was a need for a second or new covenant. That point is then reaffirmed in v. 8a.

(3) One final thing we must address is the identity of those with whom this new covenant is made or established. In v. 8 he says the new covenant is established or made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” But wouldn’t that mean that we, the Church of Jesus Christ, have no membership in this covenant and can’t benefit from its blessings? After all, most of us are Gentiles and have not descended physically from Israel or Judah. No, it means no such thing!

This is a huge theological question that I can only address briefly. So let me say just a couple of things.

First, when the apostle Paul quotes the words of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11 and tells the **Church** about its responsibility to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, he explicitly mentions that this is the celebration of the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31. That makes no sense unless Jeremiah’s prophecy is applicable to the entire Body of Christ, the entire Church, which is comprised of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

Second, in 2 Corinthians 3:6 Paul explicitly says that we are the recipients of and ministers of the New Covenant.

Third, the blessings of the prophesied New Covenant, those described here in Hebrews 8 and throughout the rest of the NT, are identical with the blessings that Christians in the Church receive and enjoy: forgiveness of sins, the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the knowledge of God inscribed on our hearts.

Fourth, the people to whom the book of Hebrews was written are members of the Church! His point in this epistle is, “You now have and are participants in the new and better covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 and established by Jesus through his death and resurrection; so why would you ever want to go back under the old covenant and its inferior ways?” If the members of the church in Rome, to which this letter was addressed, are not also members of the New Covenant, nothing in this entire book makes any sense at all.

Fifth, according to Hebrews 8:6 the new covenant “is” better (present tense) and “has been enacted” (perfect tense) on better promises. And those better promises are precisely what he describes in vv. 10-12 that apply to us, the Church.

Sixth, in Hebrews 10:15 our author says that the Holy Spirit bears witness to “*us*” the Church that God has made this new covenant with us!

Seventh, you should keep in mind a couple of things about the reference to the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah” in v. 8. *First* of all, who was present in the upper room when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant and established the Lord’s Supper as the ordinance by which we celebrate it? Jews! The only people present were the disciples and their close friends, all members of either the house of Israel or Judah. *Second*, according to **Galatians 3:16** and **3:28-29** (and numerous other texts) anyone who believes in Jesus Christ is now the “seed” of Abraham and thus an heir according to the promise. In other words, the Church of Jesus Christ is the true Israel of God.

That doesn’t mean believing Jews are excluded or replaced as heirs of the promise made to Abraham. All ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus are members of the New Covenant. But so too are ethnic Gentiles who believe in Jesus. The blood in your veins no longer matters for anything. The only thing that matters is the faith in your heart: ***if you trust in Jesus, whether you are male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, you are the seed of Abraham, the true Israel of God, and thus members of the New Covenant.***

We are now prepared to celebrate and enjoy the blessings of the New Covenant that Christ died and rose again from the dead to secure for us. There are four of them.

The Blessings of the New Covenant in Christ

What we find here is perhaps the best ***summation of the essence of Christianity*** to be found in the NT. Where we go wrong is in identifying Christianity with external rituals and rules and activities or perhaps with the local church you attend or the denomination of which you are a part. Now, are there certain rituals and rules and activities to which

God calls us? You bet there are. But they flow out of an already existing relationship of love and intimacy and forgiveness with God. We must be careful that in our zeal for doing what is right and representing Christ to a lost world we not externalize the faith as if it can be reduced to where we go and what we watch and with whom we hang out.

(1) *The promise of an internal power.* “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10b).

People during the time of the old covenant could obviously memorize the law of God, and many did. But this in itself didn't come with a promise of power to obey what the law commanded. When he speaks about God himself writing the law on our hearts he means that our obedience will flow from a transformation that has occurred within us, by virtue of a power that God has himself provided. Please note carefully: we are being told here that every member of the New Covenant has been regenerated and has had the law of God placed on their minds and written on their hearts. This is precisely what the OT prophet Ezekiel was referring to when he wrote down these words from God:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

In the new covenant, the will of God is inscribed on our heart, internally, experientially, in the sense that ***whatever God requires of us in terms of our obedience he provides for us in terms of the Spirit's internal, enabling power.***

(2) *The promise of a personal relationship.* “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8:10c).

In Revelation 21:3 we are told of what life will be like in the new heavens and new earth in eternity future: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and *they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.*’” But the glory of the new covenant is that we get to experience that now! What will come in utter and eternal perfection when Christ returns has already become our experience in the present day.

God isn't *just God*. He's not *just there*. He's not simply the omnipotent, infinitely kind and gracious supreme being who created all things and upholds all things. What we rejoice in isn't simply that God *exists*. Rather, he is **my** God! He is **your** God! He belongs to you. And I'm not just a human being. I'm more than a creature. God says of me: “Sam is mine!” God says of you: “Amy is mine! John is mine! Dustin is mine! They all belong to me!”

All of this points to the glorious truth that God will never leave us nor forsake us; he will always be present; he will never turn a deaf ear to our prayers; no matter how horrific life may become; no matter how great the loss may be; no matter how deep and penetrating the pain may feel, God will never let you go; he will never permit anything to destroy you or sever you from his love.

(3) *The promise of an intimate knowledge.* “And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Heb. 8:11).

During the time of the Old Testament or Old Covenant, the people of God were a ***mixed community***. That is to say, Israel was composed of both believers and non-believers. Not everyone who was circumcised in his flesh was circumcised in his heart. Again, this simply means that not everyone who received the physical sign of the old covenant was born again or regenerate.

This is why members of the nation Israel had to be exhorted to “know” the Lord. But under the New Covenant we encounter an entirely different situation. Every member of the New Covenant is a believer. Every member of the New Covenant has been born again. Notice what our author says: “*they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*” (8:11).

This promise that every member of the new covenant will experience personal and first-hand intimate saving knowledge of God is one of the main reasons we don't baptize infants at Bridgeway. Let me explain.

We must remember that God's covenant with Israel was *theocratic* in nature. Israel was not only the people of God; Israel was also a *political entity*. Therefore, all those who were circumcised physically were members of the covenant community whether they ever came to saving faith or not. That's not true in the New Covenant. Only those who come to saving faith are members of the new covenant community.

This may upset some of you, but listen closely. *The Church is not a political entity. The Church is not a geopolitical state. The Church is a spiritual organism united to Christ.* That doesn't mean the Church shouldn't be involved in the political process. The degree to which you as individual Christians participate in that process is entirely up to you. I love my country. I'm as patriotic as the next guy. But *the United States of America is not in a covenant relationship with God.* It never has been and it never will be. I'm not talking about whether or not it is correct to describe the U.S. as a "Christian nation." What I *am* saying is that men cannot institute or establish a covenant with God. God alone can initiate and establish a covenant with human beings. *And he has done that only with the members of the body of Christ, the Church.*

The Church is made up of men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation across the expanse of the globe. You and I have a deeper and more vital unity with a Christian living in the Sudan or in Germany than we do with any non-Christian who is a card-carrying citizen of the United States.

To say that every member of the New Covenant knows the Lord doesn't mean that there aren't in our midst people who claim to know Christ but don't. But those who are genuinely saved and genuinely members of the New Covenant are all born again and justified by faith in Jesus.

Here is the primary argument that *paedo-baptists* make (paedo-baptist being the common way of referring to those who believe you should baptize the infants of believing parents). They say: since in Old Testament times circumcision, as the sign of the covenant, was applied to all, even though many never came to saving faith, baptism, as the sign of the New Covenant, should be applied to all, even though many who are baptized will never come to saving faith.

But as I've pointed out, the Old and New Covenants differ significantly and thus the analogy breaks down. Unlike in the OT, *everywhere in the NT we read that members of the New Covenant are born-again, justified believers in Jesus.* Therefore it is only to them that the ordinance of baptism is applied. *Members of the New Covenant are those who have the law of God written on their hearts; they are those who belong to God in a relationship of personal intimacy; they are those who know God; they are those whose sins have been forgiven. That is why we do not baptize infants at Bridgeway. Infants who have not as yet trusted Christ for salvation are not members of the New Covenant.*

(4) The promise of final forgiveness of sins. "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12).

The forgiveness of sins was not a new idea when Jeremiah recorded this prophecy. The people of Israel were quite familiar with the concept that God graciously wipes us clean of the guilt of our sins and refuses ever again to bring them up or to use them against us. If you have any doubts about this, read Psalm 51 or Psalm 103.

But under the old covenant forgiveness was never final and forever. One had to return year after year after year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) so that the high priest could continually slaughter an animal and place the blood of the sacrifice on the altar in the Holy of Holies. For an OT believer, it was wonderful to experience forgiveness for sins previously committed. But each person knew that with future sins there was a need for another, future sacrifice. The blood of bulls and goats could never perfectly purge their consciences. But in the new covenant, established by the shedding of Christ's blood, our sins are altogether and forever forgiven: past, present, future.

Therefore, I now invite all who are born-again, all who trust Christ alone for salvation, which is to say *I invite all members of the New Covenant* to join with us in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the ordinance given to us by Christ himself by which we remember and rejoice in these glorious blessings that are ours because Jesus lived, died, and rose again on our behalf.