

## A Better Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

The first time we ever had to deal with toll roads was when we moved to Chicago back in 2005. Nebraska doesn't have toll roads. But Chicago did, and anytime we needed to go to the airport or go into the city, we were always scrambling to find change for the tolls. I'm sure a lot of you can relate to that here.

For four years we did this. And every time we did, we always saw the signs advertising the I-Pass (the equivalent of EZ-Pass here). But I never looked into it. We had our system down, and as inconvenient as it was, we knew how it worked and how to get by with it. So we never thought further about it.

Until one day, four years later, I finally looked into it. And not only did I discover that the tolls were actually cheaper than what we'd been paying in cash, the convenience was unparalleled. No longer having to pull off the Interstate every few miles to throw some coins in a bin, but being able to just keep driving while the state of Illinois silently took less of our money. It was a better deal. Less time and less money.

And I remember kicking myself. Why did we wait four years to do this? And the answer I think was twofold: *fear* and *familiarity*. We were comfortable with the system that we were living under, and we were afraid what the new system would really be like. That it would somehow be worse.

It shouldn't be hard to tell the difference between an okay deal and a better deal. But so often it is. And that was another challenge facing the early church to whom the book of Hebrews was written. Through the pressure that they faced from those who wanted to see them abandon the gospel and go back to Judaism, they were forced to wrestle between the deal they had received in Christ—the new covenant with God, and the deal Israel had received at Sinai—the old covenant. Which one was better?

If you've been paying attention so far in this book, the author's answer will be of no surprise whatsoever: *Jesus is better*. He's a *better* high priest who mediates a *better* covenant that brings *better* promises to bear on God's people—promises of a renewed heart and lasting relationship with God, promises based on mercy not performance.

This is his burden in ch. 8—to help us see and appreciate the superiority of the new covenant we have in Christ. And not just to appreciate it as in, 'isn't that a great deal; Walmart's running some really good specials.' But to lock ourselves into it: to come to God through it; to base our relationship with God on it; and to live according to it, treasuring God and following him with hearts renewed by his grace.

But how do we know? How can we be sure that the new covenant in Christ is truly better?

To convince us, the author picks up right where he left off at the end of ch. 7, continuing his conversation about the superiority of Christ's priesthood. Verse 1: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: *we have such a high priest . . .*" The priest we've just been describing—one whose office is based on the more ancient and abiding order of Melchizedek (the great Priest-King of Genesis 14), and *not* on the Law or the family line of Aaron—that's who Jesus really is. A priest who can't be contained by the categories of the Law, of Israel's old covenant, and therefore one who continues forever as priest and is uniquely able to complete God's work of salvation in us (cf. 7:23-28). We have such a high priest.

But not only does this priest break the categories of Israel's old covenant law. He at the very same time mediates a *new* covenant between God and his people—a new and better deal. And this is what the author shows us in ch. 8 by comparing it with the old and looking back at promises of the new.

But to understand this, and what the author of Hebrews wants to say about it, we need to understand a little more about the old covenant God made with Israel. What was the old deal like?

### **The Old Deal: The Sinai Covenant with Israel**

So once again, Hebrews takes us back to the Old Testament. And first we find ourselves in the book of Exodus. Keep your thumb in Hebrews, but turn with me to Exodus 19.

Now if you've been part of Westgate for a bit, you'll remember that we studied the book of Exodus last year. It's the story of how a handful of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's descendants went into Egypt as seventy people and came out 400 years later as a great nation and the special people of God. They had gone into Egypt as refugees, seeking shelter from a famine. As they multiplied, the King of Egypt began to see them as a threat to be managed and suppressed, ultimately enslaving them under hard labor and harsh persecution. Until Israel cried out, and God raised up Moses, through whom God performed great signs and wonders—the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea—and ultimately led Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness, en route to the land God promised Abraham in Canaan.

And there in the wilderness, God made a covenant with Israel. He made a *deal*—that he would be their God, and they would be his people. We see the introduction to that deal in Exodus 19:4-6:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

And there are four things here we should notice about this old deal. First, *it was founded on grace*. It's common when thinking about the old covenant law, to assume that Israel's covenant was basically legalistic. In other words—that Israel's favor before God was based on their works or obedience to God. And that's simply not what we see in the story of Exodus. God rescued Israel and made them his people by his grace. "You yourselves have seen what I did to the

Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (19:4). God didn't come to Israel in the midst of their slavery, say, 'Here is my law; keep these rules and I'll come back to get you.' Rather, he rescued them by his grace—by his compassion and divine election, and in faithfulness to his promises to Abraham—and only after that does he give them his law to keep. So the first covenant was founded on grace.

Second, *it is fulfilled through obedience*. Though entering into that covenant was not based on Israel's work or obedience, receiving the promised inheritance of that covenant did in fact require obedience. "Now therefore, *if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant*, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine" (19:5). Part of the deal God makes with Israel is that they must keep his Law, the essence of which is expressed in the Ten Commandments, but that's expanded on throughout Exodus through Deuteronomy. And the importance of obedience to the law is spelled out in further detail in Deuteronomy 28, where God through Moses lists out the specific blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience—including the ultimate curse of exile, being kicked out of the land God promised to give them.

So while Israel's covenant wasn't founded on obedience, it does require obedience to fulfill it and inherit the promises. Which means that the promises are not guaranteed. They can be forfeited through covenant unfaithfulness. Like a modern contract, which becomes void if one party fails to uphold the terms—if you agree to make monthly payments on your car but then stop making them, the bank gets to take the car—so Israel's covenant with God could be voided through their rebellion. And this was possible not just for the nation, but for individuals within the nation. Not everyone born into God's covenant people Israel finished as a member of the covenant.

And the third thing we need to notice about this deal is that *it was designed with a purpose*. There's a reason God gave his people instructions to keep—not to trip them up, but because as his special people they had a special job: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Israel was to function as God's representatives on earth. What Adam failed to do in the garden in reflecting God's image and filling the earth with his glory, God sought to restore and through his covenant people. Which is why obedience was so important—if they failed to keep God's law, they misrepresented God to the nations and deprived him of his rightful glory.

And God doesn't just give Israel his law here; he gives them himself. That's the fourth observation; the whole point of the covenant is *relationship*. "I . . . brought you to myself. . . . you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples" (19:4-5). And the chief expression of that relationship was God's presence with his people through the tabernacle—a tent-like, portable temple that he gave Moses instructions for. As he says later in Exodus 29:46, "And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt *that I might dwell among them*. . . ." The point of the covenant is relationship: I will be your God, you will be my people.

Now of course Israel doesn't make it very far at all before they break the covenant. They don't even make it out of the book of Exodus. They break the second commandment in making an image of God, and the whole deal is almost off. Moses intercedes for them, and God in his mercy renews the covenant. And he also makes a concession—he gives them priests in order to maintain the covenant by offering sacrifices for Israel's sin, that God might continue to dwell

among an unholy and sinful people. The book of Leviticus explains all of this, and it's a pretty involved system. The tribe of Levi is set apart for tabernacle service, and the sons of Aaron (Moses' brother) are appointed as priests to offer daily sacrifices as well as special annual sacrifices in and around the tabernacle to maintain God's presence with the people.

That's the old deal: founded on grace, fulfilled through obedience, designed to represent God, focused on relationship, maintained through priestly sacrifice. It's not a bad deal. It worked for centuries. But it's not a perfect deal, either. No one could keep it perfectly. People slipped through all the time. And in comparison with Christ, it's not a deal worth clinging to any longer.

### **A Better Deal: The New Covenant in Christ**

So what about the better deal in Christ? If you come back to Hebrews ch. 8, there are two main arguments the author makes to show us how much better the new covenant is: first, that Jesus has better access to God than the Levitical priests, and second, that the new covenant is enacted on better promises than the first. First, better access . . .

#### ***Better Access (vv. 1-6)***

Look again at Hebrews 8:1-2. And notice what the author emphasizes about Christ's new covenant priesthood: it's the *location* of his ministry. "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated *at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven*, a minister *in the holy places*, in the *true tent* that the Lord set up, not man." Jesus' ministry operates in the heavenly realm, in the very presence of God in heaven. He is like other priests in that he offers a sacrifice (v. 3)—something the author will elaborate on in the next chapter. But he is unlike other priests in that his ministry operates in the heavenly realm, not the earthly realm that accords to Law (v. 4). If his priesthood were like the earthly ministry of the Levites, based on the Law, he couldn't be priest, because he's not a Levite.

But their ministry is inferior. Not least because of its location. Verse 5: "They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'" That tabernacle God gave Israel in the Old Testament was incredibly special. It was designed to mirror God's very throne room in heaven. The earthly counterpart to God's heavenly temple. That's one of the reasons it was so sacred—no one was allowed to enter in, except the high priest, and that just once a year offering a sacrifice.

But as special as that tabernacle was (and later the temple that replaced it), it was but a shadow. A copy meant to point to the real thing. It's like the difference between a picture of the Grand Canyon, and the Canyon itself. You can see the beauty and guess at the majesty through the picture, but nothing can prepare you for the immensity or majesty of the real thing. And Jesus sits at the right hand of his Father in the real thing—the heavenly temple. And when you have a priest like that who is able to move beyond the shadow into the reality, isn't his representation of us so much better? So much closer? Think of the difference between trying to broker a deal through email versus face to face. You can genuinely communicate through email, but negotiating is a whole lot harder. There are constant delays between messages, you can't read body language or tone, you're prone to misinterpret or misunderstand. Similarly, the old covenant priests had real access to God. But it was mediated, distant. They were on earth while

he is in heaven. Jesus sits at the Father's right hand. He is in such a better position to secure our salvation and relationship with God.

Such is the better access of our high priest, and therefore the better ministry. Verse 6: "But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises."

And in affirming the superiority of Jesus' access to God, the author then shifts to the superiority of the new covenant itself. And he specifically points out that it's better because it's enacted on better promises. That brings us to vv. 7-13. The new covenant is better than the old, because it brings better promises to bear on God's people.

### ***Better Promises (vv. 7-13)***

And it's not like the new covenant is something that the church or the New Testament made up. This was promised long ago even while the old covenant was still in operation. And that's the point the author starts on in v. 7: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second." If the old covenant was capable of accomplishing all God's purposes of salvation, then why does God promise multiple times in the Old Testament to one day establish a new covenant with his people—in places like Isaiah 54, and Ezekiel 36, and the passage our author quotes here—Jeremiah 31?

The old covenant was imperfect. Not in that it was designed poorly; it did exactly what God designed it to do: it revealed his will, it exposed our sin, and it pointed us forward to Christ (cf. Rom. 5:20-21; 7:4-6; 8:3-4; Gal. 3:15-29). It's imperfect in that it isn't capable of doing everything we often try to do with it in our relationship with God. It was meant to give way to the new. It was meant to be fulfilled in Christ (cf. Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4).

And so the author says in v. 8: "For he [that is, God] finds fault with them when he says: 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . .'" The old covenant was meant to give way to the new; the shadow was designed to point us to the reality. And we should live according to that reality.

And it's here in his quotation of Jeremiah 31 that we see exactly what these better promises are according to the new covenant. Three of them to be precise. First, there's the promise of *a renewed heart*. Verse 10: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts." Rather than God's law written on tables of stone, standing outside us and ultimately testifying against, through Christ God gives us a new heart and a new mind, and writes his law within it. So that his law is not some foreign burden we're unable to bear by the flesh; it's an internal compass we joyfully obey by the Spirit who lives within us (cf. Ezek. 36:25-27; Rom. 7:4-6; 8:2-4; Gal. 5:13-18).

That doesn't mean we no longer sin under the new covenant. It does mean that for the Christian, sin is a burden we struggle against, rather than a joy we delight in. And it does mean that as we grow in Christ, sin gets less and less of a foothold. The Spirit who is in us applies the Word to our hearts as we put to death the sin that remains (cf. Rom. 8:12-13). As John puts it in 1 John

5:3, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” The new covenant promises a renewed heart.

Second, it’s the promise of a *lasting relationship*. What God intended through the first covenant he will fulfill in the new. Middle of v. 10: “and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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” (8:10-11). No more will some covenant people fail to finish and receive the promises. This covenant isn’t like the old one God made with Israel when he took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, and they didn’t continue in his covenant, and so he showed no concern for them (8:9). Rather, in Christ, *all* who belong to the covenant will know God, and all will receive the promises. Because receiving the promises is no longer based on *our* obedience, but on *Christ’s* obedience for us. And as the perfect Son of God who fully kept the Law and never sinned, he has already won the prize. There is no insecurity for the Christian as to whether we will make it home; Jesus has secured the inheritance for us. We don’t have to freak out whenever we approach God, worried that we won’t have enough change on us; Christ has given us his EZ-Pass, fully paid in advance, that we might approach God freely and confidently, and make it all the way home. In Christ, we have a better promise of lasting relationship with God.

Which brings us to the third point: the better promise that this relationship is based on mercy, not performance or obedience. Verse 12: “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” Again, whereas under the old covenant, fulfilling the covenant required obedience; in the new covenant it’s based on mercy. On grace. Not because obedience no longer matters for fulfilling the covenant, but because (again) Christ has obeyed for us, and he has taken the just punishment for our sin. All the covenant curses of the Law were poured out on him in our place on the cross, so that God could deal justly with sin, and mercifully with sinners (cf. Rom. 3:21-26; Gal. 3:10-14). As Hebrews 9:15 summarizes, “Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”

We are still called to obey God and represent him. The New Testament uses the same language as Exodus to describe our vocation as God’s people (see 1 Pet. 2:9-12). We are saved *for* obedience, but not by obedience. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ (cf. Eph. 2:8-10).

And because this new covenant in Christ is so much better, there is absolutely no reason to go back to the first, as the persecutors of the Hebrews would have them do. Nor to leave it behind for some cheap alternative today. Nor to remain uncommitted, as though perhaps a better deal has yet to come along. Whether for fear or familiarity, it makes no sense to leave this deal on the table. *There is no better deal*. Because there is no better Savior. Take hold of Christ today.

And for those of us who have already taken hold of Christ by faith, we should live as though this better deal is true, with confidence and joy and Spirit-fueled obedience. We cannot live under the new covenant in Christ as though it operates like the old. As though our security before God is based on our performance instead of Christ’s. That’s really easy to do. To interact with God as though our relationship is a performance, as though we’re removed from God by a great

distance; as though every time we mess up we have to somehow make it up to God. That's how so many Christians live their lives. But as the apostle Paul reminds us:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4)

As a better priest, Christ mediates a better covenant that brings better promises to bear on God's people—promises of a renewed heart and lasting relationship with God based on mercy not performance.

We need to leave the old covenant behind once and for all. Stop rummaging for coins in the ashtray when the EZ-Pass is already installed. We need to move out of the shadow and rest in the reality of Christ, both in our faith and our practice. After all, as the author concludes in v. 13: "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

Don't hold on to what's already vanishing. Hold onto Christ; he will never let you go.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Opening Question

1. What is your general impression Old Testament Law or Old Covenant with Israel? When you think about it what comes to mind?

### Questions for Study and Understanding

2. In terms of context, what has the author talked about in previous passages that help us understand what he's talking about now?
3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
4. According to vv. 1-6, what makes the new covenant in Jesus better than the old covenant? What specific distinctions does the author draw between the two?
5. According to vv. 7-13, what makes the new covenant better than the old? What are some of the specific promises of the new covenant that are "better"?

### Questions for Reflection and Application

6. As you consider these two systems (old and new covenants), which system more accurately describes your functional relationship with God (that is, how your relationship actually operates, regardless of how it ought to)?
7. What difference should the “better promises” of the new covenant make in our relationship with God and daily life?
8. What needs to happen for the new covenant relationship to become increasingly true of your life and ministry? Are there truths to believe, lies to reject, sins to repent of, habits to cultivate, conversations to have, etc.?