

**The Better Covenant**  
**Hebrews 8:6–13**  
**February 18, 2024**

I can barely spell entrepreneur, but let's imagine a product for your home. It's free. It's *not* listening to you all the time. But, this product, once safely activated, can deliver *anything* to your home in three minutes. So, the children drank all the milk again. Walk over and type your favorite brand in. You need some new shoes. Type it in. Three minutes later the shoes are on your feet. Furthermore, this product has the most generous of return policies. If the shoes are snug, send them back at no charge. And speaking of charges, *everything* this product provides is *half* the price of what you can find at the store or online.

I purchased that ad spot in my introduction for this reason. *If* this product were a possibility, and we were describing it to someone, we *might* call it “a better Amazon.” And when I use that language, I doubt a single one of you think I'm talking about the river or the rainforest. All of you have proper categories for that description, linking it to purchase and delivery.

But, of course, that descriptor hasn't always made sense. When I was my children's age, that company didn't exist.

To understand the book of Hebrews, much of the labor has been to try and conceptualize concepts that are a bit foreign to us. Even if we've grown up hearing the Old Testament, we haven't grown up *in* the Old Testament—living it, breathing it, experiencing it. That's why Jim kicked off the study by considering the three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king. That's why last week we spent a number of minutes trying to visualize the layout and the purpose of the tabernacle. In the chapters ahead, we'll be reliving a holy-day we've never participated in: the Day of Atonement. And today we'll consider yet *another* concept that might be a bit foreign to us, at least in the way it's found in the biblical world: the idea of covenant.

I hope by the end of today it'll be less foreign *and* that we'll desire something of what it might mean to live under one and experience the blessings of it. We'll study this passage under three headings: (1) The Old Covenant; (2) The New Covenant; (3) The Better Covenant.

### 1. The Old Covenant (vv. 7-9)

In chapter 7, the author considered Melchizedek and the *priest* he pointed to. And then, in chapter 8, he considered the tabernacle and the *place* it pointed to. Last week's text ended by saying *that* priest in *that* place had **obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.** That's where verse 7 picks up: **For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.**

Our passage is about two covenants. But before we get into *either*, a refresher on the concept itself might help us. The word “covenant” is all over the Old Testament. Since I've known Hebrews 8 was coming for a while, I've noticed it repeatedly in reading this year. When Laban and Jacob made an agreement not to harm each other in Genesis 31, they made a covenant with one another. David and Jonathan made a covenant of loyalty in 1 Samuel. We could list more. A covenant might be described as a chosen<sup>1</sup> relationship in which two parties make binding promises to one another.<sup>2</sup>

But, though those examples of Jacob and David help us grasp the covenant as an oath-bound agreement, today we'll consider something a good bit more sweeping in that world. In the

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to natural.

<sup>2</sup> Jason DeRouchie, *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 144.

Ancient Near East, international relations were often governed by treaties between great kings and the *less* great vassal kings. Those treaties took the form of a covenant,<sup>3</sup> which detailed the binding relationship *between* those parties. We might think, “Is this similar to a contract in our day?” While there are certainly similarities, there are important differences. For example, these covenants weren’t necessarily made between equals. The great king didn’t *negotiate* aspects of it with the lesser king, debating who would pay closing costs. The great king offered protection and blessing. The lesser pledged loyalty.

So, what did this oath-bound agreement between two parties look like? It often included a preamble (listing the parties involved), a prologue (listing what the greater party had done to deserve loyalty), the stipulations of the covenant itself, and *then*—importantly—it would conclude with a list of blessings should the covenant be kept, and a list of curses should it be broken.<sup>4</sup> Again, I’m describing this like I would describe Amazon.com to someone in 1994. We need to have categories for what a covenant was to rightly grasp Hebrews 8.

Though we could say *so much* more, let me note one other important matter. In the Old Testament Scriptures, the covenant ritual almost always involved the shedding of blood.<sup>5</sup> This was how the covenant was ratified,<sup>6</sup> as something of a sign and seal. Therefore, one man defined a covenant as not merely a bond, but “a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.”<sup>7</sup>

That’s a brief overview of what a covenant is. How many covenants are there in the Bible? It depends on who you ask. The covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption are *broad* categories theologians use. To speak of particular covenants, we might note the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic.

That’s a five-paragraph insufficient glance at the idea of covenant in the Bible. This sermon won’t come close to exhausting the topic. In fact, the more you read, the more you realize there is no bottom to the subject. This is, of course, a good thing. We always have more to learn on how it is God has chosen to relate to His people.

Yet today, as a *slice* of the overall conversation, we’ll focus on what Hebrews 8 says about covenants. It focuses on two of them, contrasting one I mentioned with one I didn’t. First, it speaks of the Mosaic Covenant. How do we know that’s the covenant Hebrews 8 references? In this contrast, verse 9 says what’s to come is: **Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.** That’s not a general or vague reference. Verse 9 describes a particular setting when a particular covenant was enacted. And it’s clearly *not* the Abrahamic, Davidic, or Noahic covenant.

Was the Mosaic covenant the *first* one made? No. A covenant of works was made in the garden. Blessing: do this and you’ll live. Curse: If you eat of it, you will surely die. Then, when they broke it, *another* covenant was made, a covenant of grace. Future redemption was promised; the serpent’s head would be crushed (Gen. 3:15).<sup>8</sup> So, no, the very *first* covenant wasn’t the one with Moses.

However, the Mosaic covenant was the first one made with Israel as a nation.<sup>9</sup> And *that* particular covenant has been the context of the book of Hebrews. The building of the tabernacle, the laws for the priesthood, were all under that particular covenant. To understand Hebrews 8, we need to be clear on which covenant the author refers to.

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, 56ff for a good explanation.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 75.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Sproul, 76. See Genesis 15:17-21, Jeremiah 34, etc.

<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 4ff.

<sup>8</sup> See article VII in *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*.

<sup>9</sup> A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 442.

Verse 7: **For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.** If this line of reasoning sounds familiar, it's because it was in chapter 7. Recall that in 7:11, the author wrote, **If perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the law) what further need was there for another priest to arise?**

For so many reasons, perfection wasn't possible under *that* priesthood. The priests themselves had to sacrifice for their *own* sins (7:27). They couldn't make *us* something they weren't. Further, in that system, not a single priest couldn't secure anything lasting. Why? Because they kept dying. A new priest *kept* having to be appointed. The sacrifices kept needing to be repeated. So, knowing that institution's inability to effect what God desired, God made a promise in Psalm 110. There would be another Priest. What they needed would be provided.

The logic of *that* is the logic here, almost exactly. Verse 7 again, **For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant."**

Do you see the parallels? The priesthood couldn't bring about perfection. Which, by the way, meant the full forgiveness and forever transformation of His people.<sup>10</sup> Yet, that's what God desired for them. So, He promises Psalm 110. See the same progression here. The covenant wasn't faultless. God desired better for His people. So, He made promises in Jeremiah 31.<sup>11</sup>

It's worth pausing and considering the mercy. This isn't a covenant between equals. He does not *have* to pursue us. We've earned nothing we've been promised.

And if I might remind you of something, there's a word that pervades the Old Testament—the Hebrew *hesed* or *chesed*. One of its most significant uses is in Exodus 34 when the Lord passes before Moses and reveals Himself. The word is used—or sang—in the Psalter 123 times. It's often translated "lovingkindness," "steadfast love," "mercies," and even, "*covenant* loyalty."<sup>12</sup> Dale Ralph Davis describes this as "not merely love but loyal love, not merely kindness but dependable kindness, not merely affection but affection that has committed itself. . . a love that refuses to let go."<sup>13</sup> Is it important to study God's covenants? Only if you want to grasp what steadfast love means.

Verse 8 makes plain that though God had pursued, delivering them out of Pharaoh's hand, calling them unto Himself, establishing them as His people, He'd found fault with them. He'd made a covenant with them. Yet they'd broken it before the ink was dry.

Yet, though He'd found fault with them, He'd promised another. Verse 8: **For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.** Like Psalm 110 acknowledged concerning the priesthood, the Old Testament Scriptures recognize that the Mosaic covenant wasn't adequate.<sup>14</sup>

God's people knew what the covenant demanded. They knew the blessings and the curses that accompanied it. By the time Jeremiah wrote, it was abundantly clear that they *hadn't* kept it. That's what Jeremiah wrote, and what verse 9b says, **For they did not continue in my covenant,**

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 216.

<sup>11</sup> This is the only place in the New Testament that quotes Jeremiah 31.

<sup>12</sup> See Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*.

<sup>13</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Slogging Along in the Paths of Righteousness*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Schreiner, 250.

**and I did not care for them, says the Lord.** That last clause is another way of saying that because they didn't keep the covenant, they experienced the curses it detailed.<sup>15</sup>

We can open to quite a few pages in the Old Testament and see that unfold. The kingdom was divided. Both Israel and Judah were conquered. Rather than in God's place under God's rule, they were scattered as exiles.

Knowing the effects of the broken covenant, Jeremiah knew and wrote of a new one.

## 2. The New Covenant (vv. 10–12)

Those that read Jeremiah were given an imperative; they were to **behold** something. Those who'd broken the covenant were to take note of—to *see*—a different covenant, one to come. It would *not* be like the one made with those delivered from Egypt.

It's important that we think of this covenant in the way verse 13 describes it, as “new.” It's *not* merely a renewal of the old.<sup>16</sup> To point out the *newness*, we'll divide these three verses into three categories: (1) a new person; (2) a new people; and (3) a new provision.

Verse 10 begins the description of it. Note, first, that this new covenant makes possible a new person. Verse 10: **For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts.** In the Mosaic covenant the law was written on tablets. In that sense it was somewhat *external*. That is, though commands might be known, or read, that did not *necessarily* give the inner inclination to *keep* that which God commanded.<sup>17</sup>

However, in the new covenant—the covenant of grace promised—God promises to give the grace. We might say that, though He commands what He wills, He grants what He commands.<sup>18</sup> In the nature of the new covenant is a new person. He writes His laws *into* minds and *on* hearts. The parallel passage to Jeremiah 31 in Ezekiel 36 says as much: **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you . . . I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes** (Ez. 36:26-27). The new covenant is not concerned primarily with what's external. It's concerned with transformation. It gets at the perfection the priests under the Old Covenant couldn't accomplish.<sup>19</sup>

Note, secondly, that this new covenant—in making a new *person*—also makes a new *people*. Verse 11: **And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for all will know me, from the least to the greatest of them.** Under the Mosaic covenant, because the circumcised were *also* considered members of the covenant community, the Old Testament people of God were a mixed community. By mixed, we mean the community was made up of *both* believers and unbelievers.<sup>20</sup> Because of *that* reality—the unregenerate being *among* the regenerate—members of the community had to be exhorted to “Know the Lord.”

To be clear, there are certainly parallels between Israel and the New Testament church. But there is also *significant* contrast. The New Testament church isn't a mixed community. The church is

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiner, 251.

<sup>16</sup> See Richard Lucas for a helpful article on two approaches to Baptist Covenantal Theology, “The Past and Future of Baptist Covenantal Theology: Comparing 1689 Federalism and Progressive Covenantalism,” in the SBJT 26.1 (2022), 130. For a more concise version with a chart, see here: <https://shorturl.at/qvEL0>

<sup>17</sup> Schreiner, 251.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/all-gods-commands-are-possible-with-god>

<sup>19</sup> In fact, some would say this promise of what God does *within* also points to the cleansed conscience of chapters 9 and 10 to come. Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 227; Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 204.

<sup>20</sup> Schreiner, 252.

defined as those that have believed. Paul doesn't speak of categories *within* the church. He calls them all saints. Jeremiah promised, and Hebrews 8 confirms, that in the *new* covenant people, **all will know me, from the least to the greatest of them.** Least and greatest indicate totality.<sup>21</sup> He's able to save fully *all* the new covenant people (7:25).

New *persons* become a new *people*. The end of verse 10 spoke to this: **and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.** I'd imagine you recognize that formula, from Genesis 17 to Exodus 6 to Exodus 19 to Leviticus 26 to Deuteronomy 4 to Deuteronomy 7 to Hosea to *on and on* we could go. In fact, we could trace that phrase all the way to Revelation 21, when a loud voice from the throne says, **Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people** (Rev. 21:3). He saves *fully*. And He dwells among those He's saved *forever* (7:25). Like the *better* priest, and the true tabernacle, this covenant is concerned with matters of eternal good.

But *how* does this new person and this new people come about? Verse 12 gives the basis, beginning with the causal word "for": **For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.** How might we be called God's people? How might He dwell *among* us, and *in* us? How could *any* of these promises be ours? God must have chosen, in grace, to forgive.<sup>22</sup> In fact, His promise to remember sins **no more**—His mercy toward His people's iniquity—is the *basis* of this new covenant. If the Lord should mark iniquities, who could stand? (Ps. 130)

*Those* are the promises. And enacted on these *better* promises (v. 6), it is, without question, a better covenant.

### 3. The Better Covenant (v. 6 and 13)

Again, it's not as if it's close. External laws chiseled on stone, priests that perish, sacrifice after sacrifice—*or*—transformed hearts among a transformed people dwelling forever with their merciful God?

Verse 13 continues, **When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.** The Mosaic Covenant was *never* intended to be the *absolute* rule and law of life and salvation to the church.<sup>23</sup> It was a subservient covenant, a temporary one, a means to an end.<sup>24</sup> Its aim was to lead us to Another. Which is the One to whom verse 6 already pointed, writing that, **now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant.**

### Conclusion

There were two parties. They were not *close* to equals. If they were to be reconciled, the greater *must* move toward the lesser. And He has. The radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of His nature (1:3)—He—*better* than the angels, became *lower* than the angels (2:9). In this better covenant, God *became* like us—*truly* Man—so that He might be the mediator *between* God and man.

Not unlike other covenants, this bond would be ratified. So, around a table, the Lord Jesus said, **This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood** (Luke 22:20).

The next day, for those that broke the covenant—like us—He bore the curse. So that we, *as if* we were covenant keepers, might receive the blessing.

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<sup>21</sup> Harris, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Morris, *Hebrews/James*, EBC, 79.

<sup>23</sup> See John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (W. H. Goold, Ed., vol. 23, 77–100).

<sup>24</sup> See Lucas, 137.

God bound Himself to his people in His Son.