

Small Group Guide

A Better Priest, A Better Covenant · Jeff O'Harra · October 18, 2026

Hebrews 8; Jeremiah 31:31-34 · Series: Out of The Shadows · Bernal Church

Overview

This week's sermon explored Hebrews 8 and the promise of a new covenant that God established through Jesus Christ. The central message is that many believers live like soldiers still fighting a war that has already ended: striving, performing, and carrying guilt for sins that God has already forgiven and forgotten. The new covenant is not built on human effort or willpower but on God's own promise: "I will." This guide is designed to help your group move from head knowledge to heart transformation.

Before You Meet

Read the following passages on your own before the group gathering:

- Hebrews 8
- Jeremiah 31:31-34
- Ezekiel 36:26-27
- 1 Peter 1:3-9

Key Takeaways

Use these points to ground your discussion before diving into the questions.

1. Jesus sat down because the work is finished. The Levitical priests never sat down in the temple because their work was never complete. When Jesus ascended, he sat down at the right hand of the Father. His finished work is the foundation of the new covenant, not our performance.

2. The old covenant failed not because of God but because of us. The law was good. The problem was that the human heart could not keep it. God's response was not to demand harder effort but to promise a new covenant written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

3. God made the covenant and God keeps it. Just as God alone passed between the split animals in Genesis 15 while Abraham slept, the new covenant rests entirely on God's "I will," not on our "we will."

4. Full forgiveness means God remembers our sins no more. This is not wishful thinking. It is a direct promise from God, quoted in both Jeremiah and Hebrews. Carrying forgiven sin is not humility; it is refusing what God has already

given.

5. We are not waiting for a room in heaven; we are waiting for the presence of God forever. The hope ahead of us is not primarily about comfort or reward. It is about being fully known and fully in the presence of God without the interference of sin, flesh, or the enemy.

Discussion Questions

Work through as many of these as time allows. Do not feel pressure to cover every question.

Opening Question

When was the last time you held onto something longer than you needed to (a grudge, a worry, an old habit) simply because letting go felt unfamiliar or even unsafe? What finally helped you release it?

Understanding the Text

The sermon opened with the story of Hiroo Onoda, the Japanese soldier who kept fighting for 30 years after World War II ended because no one he trusted told him the war was over. In what ways does that image describe how some Christians live out their faith? Does any part of that story resonate with your own experience?

Hebrews 8 describes the old covenant as a “copy and shadow” of the true heavenly reality. What does it mean to live in the blueprint rather than the house? Where do you see people, or yourself, doing that in the Christian life today?

The sermon pointed out that in Jeremiah 31, God uses the phrase “I will” seven times when describing the new covenant. Why is it significant that God takes full ownership of the covenant rather than placing the responsibility on the people?

The writer of Hebrews says God “found fault with them,” meaning the people, not the law. How does understanding that the law was never the problem change the way you think about rules, discipline, and obedience in the Christian life?

Going Deeper

The sermon described several ways believers live as though the war is still going: confusing conviction with condemnation, trying to pay their own penance, relying on second-hand faith, and carrying lingering guilt over forgiven sins. Which of these patterns feels most familiar to you personally? What does it cost you to keep living that way?

Genesis 15 tells the story of God passing between the split animals alone while Abraham slept. The sermon connected this to the cross: when the covenant was broken by human sin, the judgment fell on Jesus rather than on us. How does that image change the way you think about your failures and shortcomings before God?

The sermon made a distinction between obedience driven by fear and obedience driven by gratitude. What does each of those look like in everyday life? Which one tends to drive your own spiritual habits?

Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:8 that believers love and rejoice in someone they have not physically seen. How do you personally navigate faith in a God you cannot see, especially during seasons of suffering, doubt, or exhaustion?

Personal Reflection

The sermon asked: how many of us are still beating ourselves up for something we already asked forgiveness for? If you feel comfortable sharing, is there something you have intellectually handed to God but emotionally are still carrying? What would it look like to actually set it down?

The Barna research cited in the sermon showed that 42 percent of non-believers stay away from faith because of hypocrisy; they do not see a genuine internal change in Christians, only external behavior that eventually fails. What does that statistic stir in you? How does the new covenant's promise of internal transformation speak to that concern?

Practical Applications

These are individual commitments to carry into the week. Each person should choose at least one.

1. Stop trying to earn what has already been given. When you catch yourself thinking that God must be disappointed in you after a bad day, pause and say out loud: "Jesus sat down. It is finished. I am forgiven." Then get up and keep going, from rest, not from guilt. Write this phrase somewhere you will see it daily this week.

2. Ask God to change your want to, not just your behavior. Identify one area where you keep struggling: a temper, a habit, a grudge, a fear. Instead of simply resolving to try harder, pray each day this week: "Lord, change what I want. Make me love what you love." Notice whether your desires begin to shift even slightly by the end of the week.

3. Know God yourself, not second-hand. Set aside ten minutes each day this week for a direct, personal conversation with God. Read a short passage of Scripture, speak to him honestly about your actual life, and then sit quietly and

listen. Resist the urge to fill every moment with words. Come to the next group meeting ready to share one thing you noticed during that time.

Closing Reflection

Read 1 Peter 1:3-6 aloud together as a group before closing in prayer. Peter describes a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus, an inheritance that cannot be destroyed or taken away, and a joy that exists even in the middle of trials and suffering.

After reading, take a moment of silence. Then invite anyone who wants to share one word or phrase from the passage that stood out to them.

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by praying specifically for the following:

- That each person would experience genuine rest in the finished work of Christ this week, not just understand it intellectually.
- That God would do the internal work of writing his law on the hearts of each group member, changing desires rather than just behavior.
- That the group as a whole would be an honest, grace-filled community where second-hand faith is not enough, and where each person is growing in their own direct knowledge of God.

For Further Study

If your group wants to go deeper during the week, consider reading the following:

- **Jeremiah 31:31-40** – the full context of the new covenant promise quoted in Hebrews 8
- **Ezekiel 36:22-32** – God's promise to give a new heart and a new spirit
- **Romans 8:1-17** – Paul's description of life in the Spirit under the new covenant
- **Hebrews 4:14-16** – the invitation to approach the throne of grace with confidence