

Sermon 23: Hebrews 8:7-13: The New Covenant

OUTLINE

The problems of the Old Covenant
The solutions of the New Covenant

INTRODUCTION

If you had to ask me what the main difference between the old covenant with Israel and the new covenant is, I would answer God does not divorce His people in the new covenant. In Jer. 3:8 we see that God issues a decree of divorce to first Israel and then Judah because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant. God had been gracious to Israel saving them from Egypt and putting them into a covenant with Him. They promised to keep God's laws or bring down curses upon themselves. They broke the covenant provoking the punishment of God against them resulting in exile. What hope is there for sinful man? If Israel, the only nation that was covenanted with God could not help but bring the wrath of God upon themselves, what hope is there for sinful man to have a saving relationship with God without bringing the judgement of God upon ourselves? There is nothing we can do, but God promised a new and better covenant that would not result in divorce, what we call the new covenant. This is promised in two places in the OT, Ezek. 36 and Jer. 31. Both of these texts are spoken to the people of God after the judgement of God has fallen upon them and they are experiencing exile. Heb. 8:7-13, our portion for today is the longest quote of the OT in the NT and a quote from Jer. 31:31-34.

You will remember that the author of Hebrews is demonstrating the superiority of Christ. But his arguments are like pulling on a piece of string that pulls the whole garment of the OT apart. He has shown how the superiority of Jesus as our high priest requires a superior sacrifice, a superior tabernacle, and now a superior covenant. As we come to an explanation of the new covenant we come to the heart of the gospel. What Israel failed to do in the OT, what the law could not fully accomplish in the Old, God promises and does in the New. We will consider firstly, the problems with the old covenant; and the solutions and the new covenant.

The problems with the old covenant

V7-9, 'For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he 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, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.'" Hebrews 8:6 has just made the point that Jesus mediates a better covenant with better promises with his better priesthood. The question that the author is anticipating is: what do you mean a new covenant? The author now draws on the promise of a new covenant made by God Himself to prove that the old was always intended to be replaced. The author uses an argument that he uses several times in this letter. If there is a promise or a prophecy in the OT of a different or better priesthood for example, 7:11, then God is communicating that He intends to replace the present one. He will make the same argument

concerning better sacrifices in chapter 10. Here he uses it to prove a new and better covenant with better promises. His point is simple, if the first was enough why speak of a second; if the first was good enough why promise a better covenant?

We should be clear that when the author speaks of the 'first' covenant he is referring to the Mosaic covenant. This is made clear when v9 talks about the covenant that God made after bringing them out of Egypt. There are several covenants before the Mosaic; there is the Abrahamic covenant; the Noahic; the Covenant of Grace promised at Gen. 3:15; and God's covenant with Adam in the garden. The word first here is being used in a relative sense comparative to the new covenant that is said to come after it. Just as Adam in the CoW broke the law of God and brought the curse and a second covenant needed to be made where God had to provide salvation and forgiveness; so a first legal covenant has been failed yet again by man and yet again a second saving covenant established by God must come to the rescue.

Here we have Jeremiah 31:31-34 quoted. We have given a little context but let's put more meat on the bone. The 10 northern tribes have long been taken into exile in 722 BC. Here we are just before the Babylonian exile of the southern tribes with the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jeremiah the weeping prophet has the hard ministry of telling Judah about her unfaithfulness, read Jer. Chapters 2-3 to get a sense of how bad they had sinned. The prophets had the role of covenant prosecutors where they spoke for God charging Israel with her violations of God's law and called her to repentance, promising judgements in keeping with the mosaic covenant if she did not. Jeremiah was hated and persecuted for his ministry because he would not give the false comforts of the false prophets, he was mistreated but he was faithful. He spoke about the southern tribes going into exile; their calling to live as faithful exiles while in exile; and the promise of the Lord returning them to the land. But this leaves a question doesn't it. What good is it, to be returned to the land if the people of God are going to just break the law again and provoke God to judge again? This is where the promise of the new covenant comes in, God promises to make a new and better covenant that will solve this problem.

You see the problem in the old covenant was not that God had not been gracious. We see in v9 that God had been gracious, He brought Israel out of the house of bondage; He exercised His power to save them pouring out the ten plagues; He divided the Red Sea and drowned Pharaoh's army; He provided for them in the wilderness. The problem with the Old Covenant was not God, but sinful man. 'they did not continue in my covenant,' is highlighted as the key problem. Now yes the covenant was temporary and so the sacrifices were only adequate to cover not fully cleanse of sin; the priesthood was inferior to Christ's priesthood; the administration was filled with types that were intended to be replaced, but the key problem was the sin of God's people. Despite all His love and good gifts, they were unfaithful, and so God judged them. The soft words 'I showed no concern for them' are very hard words as God handed them over to their enemies, did not have pity, and gave them what was threatened in the law.

This covenant with Israel amplifies the problem that we as human beings fallen in Adam have in sin. It is not only Israel that has received God's good gifts and scorned them. All of humanity lives by the goodness of God. And Romans 1 makes very clear that instead of giving thanks to God we turn from Him, we prefer to serve gods of our own making, to be ruled by our desires than by His good ways. Every human being has violated the law written on their hearts. The

story of Adam; the story of Israel; is the story of every human being. There is no hope for us to try and save ourselves by lawkeeping, our problem is too deep, we need God to intervene and this is what He is promising to do in the new covenant, in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The solutions of the new covenant

There is a list of benefits that then quoted from the OT promise, v10a, '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.' First before we list the benefits let's address the object of the promises, our text says 'the house of Israel'. So is this promise for Israel only? Is this only to be seen as applying to Jewish but not Gentile believers? Some dispensationalists would say that it applies spiritually to the church in this age but is still awaiting literal fulfillment in the millennium. They wrongly separate the physical from the spiritual under the umbrella of an inaugurated eschatology, the already but not yet. The trouble with this view is that they fail to understand that Israel is not the original son of God; Adam was; and all OT sons including Israel are types of Jesus who is the true Israel and Son of God. All the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus the obedient Son, in Him we are no longer strangers to God's household. All believing Jews and Gentiles who are one with the Seed (singular) of Abraham are children of Abraham; the Israel of God; a royal priesthood; the dispersion; elect exiles, etc. Those who have believed in Jesus do not get a second rate version of the new covenant, a spiritual copy of a literal counterpart, we are the inheritors of this better covenant in Christ, along with all believing Jews.

The first benefit speaks of the superior internal nature of the NC where God Himself, by a work of regeneration will write the law, not only on stone; and not only on the hearts of the remnant, but on the hearts of all. There will be no mixed multitude where a percentage of the people of God can still provoke His wrath. Ezekiel has another version of this promise and puts it in these terms, 36:26-27, '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. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.' We are dead in sin and this sort of self-heart surgery is beyond the power of sinful flesh. This is a sovereign work, God takes the initiative; gracious work, it is freely given as a gift and not bought as a reward through some good deed; supernatural work, it is a work of the Holy Spirit and not the product of a motion of our will or affections; a monergistic work, the work of the new birth is not a cooperation; like your own birth you did not help; like resurrection from the dead God works alone by His power to bring about this act. And it is an enabling work from which flow new affections, and a new will to believe and repent. This inward working of the Spirit of God happens during the preaching of the word of God; while the preacher is calling on the unbeliever to repent and believe outwardly, the Holy Spirit is resurrecting us and drawing us to saving faith inwardly. This heart change by God produces faith and repentance, it is not a case of faith and repentance producing the new heart.

The law written on our hearts is not the ceremonial law but the moral law. The law that was written on Adam's heart to fit him to walk in God's ways which has been eroded by sin is renewed within us. This law along with the inner dwelling and working of the Spirit is a new engine for holiness in the people of God. God now works in our hearts both to will and do; and we work by the grace of God

that is within us. Good works; progressive sanctification, a continual warring against the sin in our members; perseverance; a continual hatred of sin; and though we fall into it at times, that deep desire to return, this is the inner working of the Spirit that is part of the new covenant.

But didn't the work of regeneration also take place in the OT? You might want to ask. And we would say yes of course it did. There can be no faith, no obedience, no holiness without it, it is not within the power of fallen flesh to do these things, the Spirit is needed to produce these spiritual fruits. The difference is this. In the OT, the covenant community was a mixed community of believers and unbelievers, it was defined along national lines. The principle of corporate representatives was present. Salvation, which is through Christ and those who are united to Him, was typologically presented through Abraham and those who were united by blood to him. This principle was further active when a king, pointing to the first Adam and the last Adam, if he was good brought good upon the people, believers or not; but if he was evil, he brought cursing on the nation. And if the majority of the nation turned to evil, the good remnant were swept up in the national body and suffered with the wicked, like Daniel being taken off into exile. But in the NT God changes this; the people of God are not those born of blood, but by faith are born by the Spirit and are now the children of God.

Here is the key way we apply this. If you are a born again believer you are wired to be holy. The Spirit is within and new heart has fitted you to hate sin and pursue holiness, so be what you are. Do not go back to living as if you were still dead and trapped in sin. In the OT the nation of Israel were under the law but it was not in all of their hearts, this resulted in punishment for them. Now there is a danger we have to avoid here. We must not structure the NC in a legal way. In other words, we must not say that God saves us by His grace and we earn the blessing of eternal life by following the new law within our hearts relying on the Holy Spirit to do good works which keep us in the new covenant. Christ has satisfied all the conditions of the law; and won all of the benefits of God's promises by His obedience. We pursue holiness but not as if our lives depended upon it, but because we are now alive.

The second benefit is, 'and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' Now technically God was Israel's God; and they were His people. This statement is part of the original covenant with Moses. But what we have in the new covenant, is an extensive inclusion to all in the covenant; and deepening of the experience of what this means as God takes up residence within us, and adopts us as His children putting our acceptance with Him above question; and because of the superior way in which we are saved in Christ, there will be no end to this relationship. It begins in this age; it cannot come to an end as no one can separate us from the love of God in Christ; and will only deepen further in the new creation as all that separates us from God is removed. The superior way in which we experience this cannot be overstated. He strength is turned against all our enemies; His riches are stored up for us; His ear is open and willing; His providence directs all things for our good; His never departing presence is our consolation; His grace is sufficient for every need. We are the apple of His eye; and He will never break a promise to us. We are His and He will accept no challenge to safety.

The third benefit, v11, '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.' In the OT, it was prophets and those anointed into

office who had special knowledge and spoke with God directly. The main difference is that in the NC the Spirit is poured out on all flesh; we are all anointed, we are all royal priests. Joel 2:28-29, 'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.' The Holy Spirit really is the key to these three benefits, He is the one who gives us a new heart, Ezek. 36:27 says that God will put His Spirit within us. He is the source of our new heart; God making His dwelling and temple in us; and now being taught by God. This is not a denial of the teaching ministries of the church, God has given gifts of teaching and pastoring for a reason; but here we see that there is a true spiritual experience that every covenant member has. If you do not have the Holy Spirit you are not a new covenant member. Some think that you can be united to the body without being attached to the head. No, we are one with one another, individually members of each other because we are first united by the Spirit with Christ who is the head.

It is the nature of the NC that makes me Baptist. The Reformed paedobaptist view insists that children are members of the NC but this verse says otherwise. When asked to answer how they can include children when it says all have the Spirit they say that the inclusion of children is part of the already but not yet nature of the NC. Now we agree that the NC is truly arrived but not in its fullness. However, all covenant members participate truly though not fully. It is true that in the New Creation these promises will be penultimately fulfilled but now every covenant members partakes in the inbreaking of resurrection life and has union with Christ by the Spirit now. We are taught by God to see Christ as Savior, having the eyes of our hearts opened by regeneration, though we wait to know as we are known. We know truly though not completely. We know mercy and forgiveness in justification and sanctification though we await glorification. We know fellowship with God though not as we will then. And we have our hearts aligned with God's law though we still have the flesh to contend with until resurrection. You cannot say that the inclusion of children/non-regenerate members/ unbelievers is part of the not yetness of the new covenant. We grant that there is a challenge to know who is saved and to admit to baptism and church membership; but this is an epistemological challenge not grounds to order the administration of the NC to include the non-regenerate.

The final benefit is what makes it possible, even though we are not completely sinless that God remains in covenant with sinners in the new covenant, v12, 'For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.' This point will be opened up at more length in chapter 10 when Christ's sacrifice is shown to be greater than OT sacrifices. His sacrifice does not merely cover sin; nor does it only pay for past sin. No, Heb. 10:14 speaks well of the greater effectiveness of God's dealing with sin by the sacrifice of Christ, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' We are being sanctified but by His one sacrifice all of our sins have been paid for and we are perfectly righteous in God's eyes. The word mercy here is the same word we use to describe the mercy seat, the ark of the covenant where the blood would be sprinkled to propitiate God's just wrath towards the sin of His people on the day of atonement. And forgetting sin is one of the great ways in which God talks about dealing with our sins. Think about marriage of a moment, what is one of the biggest problems in our marriages? We don't forget the sins against us. We remember, and we allow bitterness and anger to restir our souls to a feeling of indignation and seek revenge. We remember and tell ourselves the story of how

badly we have been treated and justify our bad behavior as an understandable reaction to the way we have been mistreated. We justify our sins against our spouses by remembering what they have done to us and counting our sins as smaller, understandable, justified. God remembers our sins no more.

These are the blessings of the NC. We are regenerate; God is our God and we His people; we each have the Spirit; and all of our sins are dealt with. The weak link of our sins has been dealt with; the weak link of hearts that do not keep God's law, He has provided where He has commanded. We are now in a covenant where there is no condemnation and nothing can separate us from God's love. God's marriage to His OT people could experience divorce; God's marriage to His new covenant people cannot.