

A Better Covenant

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[0 : 00] Our Bible reading this morning is Hebrews chapter 8, page 1206 in the Church Bibles.

Now the main point of what we are saying is this, we do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven and who serves in a sanctuary the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were here on earth he would not be a priest for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle. See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain. But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is the mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors and when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them in their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbours or say to one another, know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. By calling this covenant new, he has made the first one obsolete.

And what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Ruth, for reading. If you keep your Bibles open for me, that at page 1206, that would be helpful as we look at that together. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you'd like to see where we're going and follow along. But let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we hear the Spirit's voice speaking to us. Let's pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, it's the World Cup, as you all know. And it's the World Cup, I think, perhaps even more this year than I've noticed before. It's a tournament of heroes. There are a number of teams there where you think if it wasn't for that one key player, they would be absolutely nowhere. And so it's a big focus in the World Cup. And there's been Argentina, big focus on them, and Messi, and this big thing about their losing. And is it Messi's fault? Because they all thought Messi would win them the World Cup. And then there's Portugal, and all the eyes are on Cristiano Ronaldo, and he's basically doing really well. So Portugal's doing well because of him, and they're all looking at him.

[4 : 07] And then there's Denmark. They're perhaps the biggest example of this. Christian Eriksen basically does everything for Denmark. The rest of the team do nothing. In fact, they had this t-shirt that the fans were wearing at the game the other day. Match tactics for Denmark. And it goes as a flow diagram. Kick off, Pastor Eriksen. Did he score? Yes. Kick off, Pastor Eriksen. Did he score?

No. Pastor Eriksen. Did he score? No. Pastor Eriksen. That's basically how the nation works. He's the one they're all watching. You fix your eyes on him. Now, we've been in a series at St. Silas in the book of Hebrews, and the whole letter basically is one magnificent sermon. There's just one big idea working right through the whole letter. And if you wanted to summarize it in one word, you could do this with your Bible at home. You could cross out Hebrews in the title and just write better.

Better. Because Jesus is better, you stick with him. He's the man to fix your eyes on. He's the hero that we watch, and we stick with, and we trust, and we keep faith in him. So in chapters one and two of Hebrews, we heard that Jesus is the better word from God. All over the world and all over history, people have been searching out to find God. And here at last, God's eternal son, seated in victory in heaven, has spoken. And God's spoken through him. So you stick with him because he's a better word.

Then we heard in chapters three and four that he offers us a better rest. And all around us today, people are searching for something, aren't they? They're searching for meaning in life, for fulfillment, for satisfaction, for purpose, for peace. And that's the rest that God promises us through Jesus.

It's promised for the future, for everyone who trusts in Jesus, a better rest. Then in chapters five and seven, five to seven, we hear that Jesus is a better priest. That is that under the old covenant, God gave his people a sacrificial system where there was a tabernacle, like a tent, that symbolized the presence of God among the people. The temple became the fixed point for the tabernacle. And the priests went into the tabernacle, and they could go into the holy place. And then only one of them, the high priest, could go into the most holy place that was seen as where God was specially present.

[6 : 30] And he could only go in once a year. And the priests offered sacrifices so that a holy God could dwell with a sinful people. That's how the system worked. And in Hebrews, we've heard now that Jesus is the permanent priest appointed by God forever. He is a better priest than all those Old Testament shadows. And today, the main subject comes in chapter eight, verse six. In chapter eight, verse six, he says, but in fact, the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. It's about a better covenant. And then we get this quote. You can see where it becomes a quote because the indentation changes in your Bible. And this is the longest quote in the whole New Testament from the Old Testament. It's the longest quote. And it's a quote from the prophet

Jeremiah, so about 650 years beforehand, when God promised a new covenant. A covenant is a relationship between people that's based upon binding ongoing promises to each other. So the most familiar example we have in our culture today of a covenant is the marriage covenant. Marriage is not a contract.

It's a covenant as two people promise to love each other and they bind themselves together for better or for worse in sickness as well as in health. That's a covenant promise. And God, the living God who made us, relates to us through a covenant. It's the covenant we remember when we have the Lord's Supper together. That's the sign that Jesus gives us to remind us of the promises made in the covenant. And here in Hebrews 8, we see three things about the covenant. The need for a new covenant, the basis of the new covenant, and thirdly, the good life of the new covenant. So first of all, the need for a new covenant. There was something wrong with the old covenant. He says that in verse 7.

He says, if there'd been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But the covenant came from God. It was God's idea. So how can there have been something wrong with it? Well, the answer comes in verse 8. But God found fault with the people. That's what was wrong with the covenant. God had rescued the people from slavery. They were Israel. They were his people.

He was there to be their God. And his covenant relationship that he established with them through Moses at Mount Sinai. Through that, they were meant to receive the blessing of God. And as that happened to those people, that blessing would go to the world as people saw a group of people living for God, blessed by God, and were drawn in. But instead of bringing blessing for God's people, the old covenant brought curse. It brought catastrophic exile upon the people. They had to leave the promised land. They were conquered. It was horrific what happened. Why? Why did it go wrong? Well, it went wrong because the people had hard hearts. God shows us that in verse 9. He says, the new covenant will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them. They had to keep trusting God. They had to keep faith in God. And because of that faith, they would obey God.

[10:05] But instead, they weren't faithful because their hearts were hard, hardened against God. In Jeremiah 5, 23, he says this, but these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts. They have turned aside and gone away. It's a heart problem. In chapter 18 of Jeremiah, God tells Jeremiah to go and warn the people to turn back to him. But he tells Jeremiah what will happen. He says, but they will reply, it's no use.

We will continue with our own plans. We will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts. And Israel behaved like that, not because they're different to us, but because they're exactly the same as us. That's the key thing about Israel. They behaved exactly as we would have behaved. The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Our hearts are bent on rejecting the living God.

That's our problem. Why is that? Why are our hearts like that? It's because left to ourselves, we cannot stand the idea that there is a God who made us, who can make the rules. A God to whom we're accountable. Because it means that we can't say, I get to decide what's right and wrong. We have to accept, no, God made me. And he gets to decide what's right and wrong. So all of us have said to God, get out. I make the rules around here and not you. That's what we all feel for ourselves. And we even indoctrinate our children in that as a culture. So when we were looking around, when Kathy and I were looking around primary schools for our children, in one of the schools we looked around and there was a poster on the wall and it was a poem. It's on the screen there. This was the poem. For the children to read and live by, there is a voice inside of you that whispers all day long, I feel that this is right for me. I know that this is wrong. No teacher, preacher, parent, friend or wise man can decide what's right for you. Just listen to the voice that speaks inside.

That is awful. And we need to recognize that about ourselves, that our culture indoctrinates us to think nobody has the right to tell me what's right and wrong. I get to decide that in myself.

Of course, it's an absolute joke as well. It's a ridiculous idea that there is an innate self not influenced by anybody else that we can listen to to decide what's right and wrong. And the truth is as well, it leads to a terrible trap that we're in as a culture. And the trap is this, that each of us defiantly wants to believe that for ourselves. I get to decide what's good and bad, what's right and wrong. But we know when we look at other people that they can't be trusted to think that.

[12:50] We just think, is there anybody anywhere in the world today doing something that you think is wrong even if they think it's okay? Of course there is. That's why the world's in such a mess.

And with poems like that as part of our education system, no wonder the world's in such a mess. But our longing to be autonomous, to throw off the shackles that we think God would put on us, that longing is so strong, we are dead set against him. And that means that our situation, like Israel's, is a hopeless one. It doesn't matter how good God is, and he is perfectly good, that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter about his character. It doesn't matter how many good things he does for us. You just think about Adam and Eve in the garden. They're put in this absolutely beautiful garden. It's paradise. And in our children's Bible, when God says there's this tree and you can't eat from the tree, it's the only tree you can see. But when you read the Bible, there must have been millions of trees in the garden. They can have any one of them.

There's just one tree. There's just one tree. Don't eat from that tree. Because if you don't eat from that tree, then it shows that you'll let God be God, and he can make the rules. So they eat from the tree. On our own, you and I are incapable of responding rightly to God.

We'll deny that he's there. We'll ignore him. We make it an intellectual game. We look for reasons why we don't believe he's there. But the reality is, it's because our hearts desire is to be independent from him. That's what we long for. And if we continue like that, God says he'll give us what we've asked for, and he'll shut us out of his presence and his goodness forever. This is why the old covenant failed, because of hard hearts. So what does God do about that? Well, that's our second point, the basis of the new covenant. And the answer is the work of Christ. That's the basis of the new covenant. God is still absolutely committed to his purposes for the world, that he's going to put the world right. It's going to be perfect forever. He's absolutely committed to people, that there will be a people that he'll call his people, and that through them, the world will be blessed. So in Jeremiah 31, he promised this new covenant. But how can he justify that and wipe the slate clean only by sending his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the fulfillment of all those Old

Testament shadows? He is the priest that we need. We saw that last week. And if you weren't here last week for Hebrews 7, very helpfully, we get that amazing summary in verse 1 of the whole of chapter 7. Chapter 8, verse 1, the main point of what we're saying is this. We do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven. He stands in the gap. That's what a priest does. They stand in the gap between a perfect God and imperfect people, and they represent the people before God. And he is a better priest because his temple is better. We see that in verse 2. We hear that this priest serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. And at that time, you know, they're thinking about the great temple in Jerusalem, which was absolutely awesome. It was one of the ancient wonders of the world. It's the kind of building where it's just hard to understand how they built that building without modern technology. Absolutely enormous stonework, this incredible building. And it gets dismissed in verse 5. They, those priests, serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what's in heaven. That is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle, see to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown on the mountain. In other words, the Old Testament temple and tabernacle, they were a copy of what heaven really looks like with God on the throne. And now Jesus, alive again after he died, ascended into heaven, that's where he's gone, completely without sin. So that he doesn't just go into a temple that's somewhere on earth that's just a copy. He goes right into the throne room of heaven and he can stay there. He doesn't just go in one day a year. He sits there all the time because he's perfect. And in that better sanctuary, he offers a better sacrifice. That's the theme of chapters 9 and 10. And the writer just flags it up here in verse 3. He says, every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. And so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. So you picture that Old Testament temple, amazingly beautiful on the outside. Inside, it was like an abattoir. There was blood everywhere. The priests were there every day, killing animal after animal after animal as people came to seek to be put right with God for their sin.

[17:51] And Jesus comes and gives us the sign of the new covenant and he hands out that wine at the last supper and he says, this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. And now he is in the presence of God in heaven, able to plead his own sacrifice once for all for all of our sins, past, present and future. All our wrongdoing, all our mistakes, all our rebellion against God. It's all dealt with. It's paid for. And he pleads that sacrifice in heaven. So the direction of human religion is all from us to God. Man-made religion, thinking about God. We say, what can I offer to God to put things right with him and get blessing from him? But the direction of the new covenant is from God down to us. As he says, we can't earn anything from him.

But moved by his love for us, he's provided the offering that we needed so that he can overwhelm us with his blessings. You just imagine if you're a Christian in the first century. Imagine a first century Christian and they meet a pagan neighbor. They're chatting over the garden fence about their different religions. And the pagan says, what religion are you? And he says, I'm a Christian. And he says, oh, I've not heard of that one, the Christian religion. Where's your temple? I've not seen the temple.

And the Christian says, oh, well, we don't have a temple here on earth because our temple is the throne room of God in heaven. Oh, right. So where do your priests work then? Where do they serve? Oh, well, that's the thing. We don't actually have priests here on earth because we've just got one priest, the high priest, and he's already gone into heaven for us. So he's in the throne room of God and he's our priest and that's all that we need. All right. So, well, where do you go then to offer your sacrifices and offerings? Well, we don't do them either because the thing is our priest, Jesus Christ, he actually, before he became our living priest, he died for our sins and he's made that once for all sacrifice. So we don't have to make them anymore. He just pleads that one before our God in heaven. And what does the Roman pagan think? He says, that's not a religion. That doesn't sound like a religion at all. And the Christian, I guess, says something like, exactly, because Jesus Christ has come to get rid of human religion. He's done away with it and he's fulfilled it all and done everything we need. So that paves the way for the new covenant promises. And that's our third point, the good life of the new covenant. And we're just going to go through this. There's quite a lot of material in here, but I guess just try and think which one or two of these am I really going to think about and reflect on this week? The first thing is about the new covenant is the new covenant means access, not barriers. Because Jesus is in the true sanctuary of heaven and his sacrifice was once for all, we can access God anywhere. So that by the end of chapter 10 of Hebrews, we're told the application is, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

So any of us, anywhere, anytime can draw near to God and we're told to do that. So let's be liberated from thinking that there are places where God cannot be accessed and special places where he can. Sometimes I hear Bible-believing Christians talking about thin spaces, places that you should go to because you encounter God there. I remember having an argument with an evangelical bishop about this where he was doing this paper about pilgrimage and him thinking there are special thin places where God is specially there. You've got to go to Iona to experience God or you've got to be led by a certain worship leader to be led into the presence of God. The way a certain person speaks about God and plays their guitar, that will lead you into the presence of God. Friends, let's be liberated from that because that's old covenant living, erecting barriers that you have to overcome to find God's presence. Under the new covenant, you and I can draw near to God anywhere we like and we can do it anytime.

And that means that you can be in prison for being a Christian, you can be in a labor camp in North Korea and you can be in God's presence. You can draw near to him and enjoy communion with him with full confidence just by praying. We're not Sunday Christians who come to church to find the presence of God and then remember that experience through the week and just hope it lasts, the memory. No, we can draw near to him at home, in the office, in the classroom, in the staff room, wherever we are. It's freeing.

[22 : 45] It's the whole pattern of life where we can enjoy communion with God, access to him. The next thing we see in the new covenant is holiness, not defeat. If you just have a look with me at verse 10, he says, this is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time.

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. So instead of writing the commands and the blessings and curses on stone tablets and reading them out to hard hearts that couldn't respond, instead of that, wonderfully, God gives us by his spirit new minds and new hearts where the laws can be written. In other words, he will work by his grace in us to soften our hearts because that's been the biggest problem with humanity. And as he changes our desires, we are moved to trust him and obey him. And that promise can only come about through the gift of the spirit. As far as I can see it, as I read the Bible, the epic new thing that comes in the new covenant is the gift of the spirit in all believers. The big problem was the hard-heartedness. So as Jesus ascends to be our high priest, he sends his Holy Spirit and the spirit transforms us and reshapes our hearts and our minds so that we can respond rightly to him in faith and live obedient lives for him.

And that means that with the spirit in us, you don't have to sin anymore. I remember talking to a Christian about a battle I was having with sin, as I have, still have, but I was talking about a particular besetting sin in my life and him saying to me, have you told yourself the truth that you don't have to sin anymore? It's important to remember that. You don't have to sin.

We are free from the penalty of sin. Jesus has died for us. We're free from the power of sin. You don't have to sin. And one day we'll be free from the presence of sin. We're not free from that yet.

So I don't want to kind of overstate it. We will still sin, but we don't have to. And we can see the miraculous work of the spirit all around us. This morning, if you look around you, the very fact that we are here this morning is a miraculous work of the spirit of God. On our own, without the spirit's help, we would never have come here on a sunny day, gathering indoors to celebrate the resurrection and reign of Jesus with a diverse group of people, hearing God speak to us. That desire to gather is a miracle of the Holy Spirit, writing his laws on our hearts. And as you look at your life, whenever there's been anything you've done in your life that you wouldn't have done if it wasn't for what you believe about Jesus, the spirit is at work in your life, reshaping your heart and mind.

[25 : 37] So that looking ahead, there is hope for you in your battles, whatever those battles are this week against sin. I don't know what your besetting sin is. What is your besetting sin that you need to fight against this week? Whatever it is, claim that truth that you don't have to sin anymore because the spirit has come to write the laws of God on your hearts. We're free from the penalty of sin, we're free from the power of sin, and one day we'll be free from the presence of sin.

Holiness, not defeat. Thirdly, I think it's the third one, community, not isolation under the new covenant. In verse 10, he promises, he says, I will be their God and they will be my people. Now that's a promise that's been said already in the Bible and it gets elaborated and built on until in Revelation and the final new earth as everything's put right. We learn that the people will be God's people and he will be their God. It gives us a new identity that whatever your job is or whatever your job isn't, whatever your achievements or whatever your failures, whatever your embarrassments or disappointments, you belong to God. You're part of the people of whom God says, I'm their God and they are my people.

And that identity gives you a new community to be part of. And the marks of God's new covenant community should be reflecting the marks of God's new covenant that's come about through his faithfulness and his grace. So he calls us to display that grace and faithfulness to one another.

So you don't give up on your church because someone sins against you. You don't stop going because somebody sinned. You don't go looking for a church that will be full of people who you really like because God calls us to commit and be faithful to a church family and be gracious to each other because those are the principles on which he formed us. And we're to look out for each other so that in chapter 10 of Hebrews, he says, let's not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let's encourage one another and all the more as we see the day approaching.

The next thing under the new covenant we have is intimacy and not formalism. That comes in verse 11. The Lord says, no longer will they teach their neighbors or say to one another, know the Lord, because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. That is that whatever class you are or other people might think you are, there's no class snobbery or inverse snobbery in God's new community. We all know God individually in the new community. So it's good to ask yourself, is this true of me personally? Are you somebody who has personally spoken to God, turned from your life away from living away from him and asked him for the gift of knowing him personally under the new covenant? If you've never done that yourself, you could do that today.

[28 : 44] Today would be a great day to do that. Jesus has cleared the way for you to do that. And for those of us who do know God, it's worth asking, am I really making the most of that? Are you living out a personal relationship with God as the pattern of your life? The old covenant believer, they looked on at the inner courts of the temple and the priests going in and out and the priests did things for them, but there was that distance between them and God. And then Jesus comes and he says, you can call God your father. But sometimes we prefer the externals of old religion, external religion, turning up to church, saying set prayers, ticking the boxes, but without living our lives, knowing God personally and offering our whole selves for him and his glory. It seems more straightforward to go for external religion. It makes us think, well, maybe I can keep parts back of my life. But the reality is that if we think like that, we're missing out on the joy of new covenant life. I was talking to a Christian friend this week, we were talking about this passage, and he said to me, looking back, he thinks there was definitely a phase of a few years in his life where basically what he really loved was a doctrinal system rather than loving Jesus Christ. So he was great at arguing about doctrine, and if you wanted to find an extremely sound church that got its theology right, he was the man to talk to. But actually, he wasn't very good at speaking warmly of Jesus as his brother and his rescuer and his friend, and just spending time enjoying knowing Jesus.

That's what we're promised in the new covenant, intimacy. So under the new covenant, there's access to God holiness by his spirit-changed hearts, community with his people, and intimacy with him.

And all of that is given to us because of the foundation of the new covenant, and that's in verse 12. If you just have a look at verse 12, it starts with that four, that connecting word, and God says, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. The devil is determined that you won't believe that this week. He wants you to feel that you shouldn't pray because you've let God down. Call yourself a Christian, and you've done that again. But under the new covenant, you never access God on your own merit. You access him thanks to the merit of Christ, and those merits are the same every day. In other words, God is forgetful about you. If you notice that in verse 12, God's forgetfulness, I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. That sin that you've been beating yourself up about, that holds you back from approaching God, God has forgotten about it.

It's forgotten. So just approach him assured. So as we come to the Lord's table together, we should take ownership of this new covenant life, the life that God has given us under the new covenant. It's the good life. Let's pray together.

Father God, we praise you for your eternal plan to glorify your name by displaying your grace in bringing your blessing to a hard-hearted people. Lord Jesus, we praise you that you are our high priest, serving in the heavenly tabernacle, pleading that wonderful once-for-all sacrifice at Calvary for our sins. We thank you for your love shown us at the cross. Holy Spirit, we thank you for the gift of new hearts, that when we were powerless to respond rightly to the gospel, you moved us, that we would accept this gift of grace, and you are patiently reshaping us day by day. So gracious God, may you give us a greater grasp of these new covenant promises, that our whole lives will be reshaped by these gifts of new access to you, new hearts, new community, new intimacy, and complete forgiveness for our good and for your glory. Amen.