

6/28/26 The Covenant That Changes the Heart *Hebrews 8:1-13*
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Are any of you enjoying watching or following the FIFA World Cup? Since confession is good for the soul, I'll admit that soccer isn't my favorite sport to watch, but I enjoy the passion, enthusiasm, and joy that the fans from different countries bring to the cities and stadiums where the World Cup games are being played. It was fun to see the impact Scotland's Tartan Army made in the greater Boston area. There can be some confusion between what the rest of the world calls **football** and what Americans call football. What the rest of the world calls football is a game where you use your feet, except when you use your head. Americans call that soccer. Football, for Americans, is a game where you use your hands, except when you kickoff, punt, or attempt a field goal. American football is a game where you throw and carry the ball with your hands, and what we call soccer is a game where you carry the ball with your feet. Another difference is that soccer players spend 90 minutes pretending they're hurt, while football players spend 60 minutes pretending they're not.

Have you ever seen a tabletop soccer game? A tabletop version is played with plastic figures an inch or two high. There are many variations, including one called "foosball." However, if you've ever been to a real soccer match, you'd never mistake the tabletop game for the real thing. Imagine, for a moment, if someone gave a tabletop game to a family who had not only never seen a real soccer match, but who didn't know that such a thing existed. They might think the tabletop version was all there was – that it was reality and as good as it gets. They wouldn't know that it was a small and inadequate copy of the real thing, and it gained its meaning – and its appeal, for most people – because it reminded them of the true version.

Something like this, only more so, is at the heart of the contrast *Hebrews 8* draws for us between the old covenant and the new covenant. Listen to *Hebrews 8*.

Hebrews 8:1-5

"Now the main 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 the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest

also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’”

Hebrews 8:6-13

“**But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.** For if that **first covenant** had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. God finds fault with them when he says [quoting *Jeremiah 31:31-34*]: *‘The days are surely coming, says 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 ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; **for they did not continue in my covenant**, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: **I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.** And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” **for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.**’* In speaking of ‘**a new covenant**,’ he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.”

As I shared last week, the word “better” appears repeatedly in Hebrews. Jesus brings a better priesthood. A better sacrifice. A better hope. And today we hear about **a better covenant. A better promise.** When you read the Bible, it’s helpful to look for repeated words or phrases – and a key repeated word in *Hebrews 8* is the word “**covenant**”, which occurs seven times. I encourage you to underline or highlight that word every time it appears in your Bible in this chapter. In *Hebrews 8*, “covenant” refers to a solemn, divinely binding agreement or **testament**. It translates a Greek word *diathēkē* (διαθήκη), which functions more like a “*last will and testament*”, rather than a two-sided business contract. It signifies an irrevocable arrangement established entirely by God, carrying God’s promises, blessings, and obligations.

Hebrews 8 contrasts the old covenant, established by God through Moses on Mount Sinai, with the new covenant, established through Jesus Christ. It highlights three benefits of the new covenant: **internal transformation, personal relationship with God, and the permanent, total forgiveness of sins. That’s a covenant that changes the heart.**

The Need for Internal Transformation

Hebrews 8:7 says: “*For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.*” The problem was not that God's law was bad. The law was holy. The law was righteous. The law revealed God's character. The problem was us. Human beings couldn’t keep the covenant. Verse 9 says: “*They did not continue in my covenant.*” The law could tell people what was right; it couldn’t make them love what was right. It could command obedience; it couldn’t create obedience. It could reveal sin; it couldn’t remove sin.

Think about the Ten Commandments. The commandments are good. But simply reading, “*Honor your father and mother*” doesn’t automatically produce children who honor their parents. Reading, “*Do not lie,*” doesn’t make a liar truthful. Reading, “*Do not covet,*” doesn’t eliminate greed. Rules can restrain behavior, but rules rarely transform hearts.

Many of us have experienced this reality. A parent can tell a child to clean his or her room. The child may clean the room while grumbling the entire time. The behavior changes. The heart does not. An employer can threaten consequences. An employee may comply outwardly, while quietly quitting and remaining resentful inwardly. External pressure can modify behavior. Only God can change the heart.

That’s why God promised something new. Not because God’s standards were lower. Not because holiness no longer mattered. But because humanity needed something deeper than another set of rules. We needed transformation. We needed new hearts. We needed grace.

Beginning in verse eight, *Hebrews* quotes one of the most important promises in the entire Old Testament — **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. Six hundred years before Christ, God promised that a day was coming when He would establish **a new covenant**. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where a new covenant is mentioned. And this covenant

would be different. Listen to verse 10: ***“I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts.”***

Under the old covenant, God’s law was written on stone tablets. Under the new covenant, God’s law is written on human hearts and minds. This is the difference between external religion and internal transformation. God doesn’t simply want people who know God’s commands. God wants people whose desires have been changed. God wants people who increasingly love what God loves. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

When a person comes to Christ, God begins an inward renovation, and changes our thinking, reshapes our desires, and transforms our priorities. Not instantly. Not perfectly. But genuinely. The Christian life is not merely trying harder. It’s becoming new. The gospel is not self-improvement. It’s heart transformation.

This helps explain why some people can follow religious rules for years, while remaining far from God. Their behavior may look respectable. But God is after more than compliance. God desires hearts that belong to the Lord. This promise gives tremendous hope. Perhaps, there are areas of your life where change feels impossible. Patterns of anger. Fear. Pride. Addiction. Bitterness. Discouragement. The promise of the new covenant is that God can do what we can’t do for ourselves. God writes on our hearts. God changes us from the inside out.

A Personal Relationship with God

The better promise continues in verse eleven, with the opportunity **to have a personal relationship with God in the new covenant**: *“And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, ‘**Know the Lord,**’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”* This doesn’t mean that teaching is unnecessary. Hebrews, itself, is teaching. Rather, it means that, under the new covenant, every believer can know God, personally. In the old covenant, there were layers of separation. Priests represented the people. Sacrifices had to be offered, repeatedly. Access was limited. But through Christ, we’re invited into direct relationship with God. The least and the greatest. The young and the old. The educated and the uneducated. The wealthy and the poor. All of us may know – and have a relationship with – God.

The Christian life is not primarily about knowing facts about God. It’s about knowing God. Many people know information about Jesus. Fewer know Jesus,

personally. The invitation of the gospel is an invitation to a relationship. Because of Christ, the door is open, and we can draw near to God.

We Are Completely Forgiven

Then, we come to one of the most beautiful promises in the Bible, a promise of the permanent **and total forgiveness of sins**. Verse 12: ***“For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”***

Notice the foundation beneath every other promise. **Forgiveness**. Without forgiveness, there can be no relationship. Without forgiveness, there can be no transformation. Without forgiveness, there can be no peace. God says, ***“I will remember their sins no more.”*** This means that God chooses not to hold our sins against us. Guilt has been removed. The penalty has been paid. The record has been cleared, through Christ. Many people carry burdens of shame for years. They replay old failures. They revisit old regrets. They wonder whether God has truly forgiven them. This verse answers that question.

I like the story about a priest who was loved by his congregation, but he carried a heavy burden from a secret sin he committed in seminary. He had earnestly repented, but still lacked peace, and struggled to feel forgiven. In his parish was a devout woman who claimed to experience visions and speak directly with Christ. The skeptical priest decided to test the authenticity of her divine conversations. He told her, “The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask Him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary.” The woman agreed. A few days later, the woman returned. The priest asked, “Well, did you ask Him what I did in seminary?” She replied, “Yes.” Anxious, the priest asked, “What did He say?” The woman answered, “He said, ‘I don't remember.’”

If you belong to Christ, your sins are forgiven. Past sins. Present sins. Future sins. The debt has been paid. The record has been canceled. The accusation has been silenced. God remembers your sins no more. What freedom, peace, and hope there is in that promise.

The chapter closes in verse 13: *“In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete.”* The old covenant was never the destination. It was the signpost. The shadow. The preview. The preparation. Now, the reality has come.

Jesus is our Great High Priest. Jesus serves in the true heavenly sanctuary. Jesus mediates a better covenant. Jesus provides better promises. Jesus transforms hearts.

Jesus invites us to a personal relationship. Jesus forgives sins. The question for us is: Are we settling for the shadow, or are we embracing the reality? Are we relying on external religion, or are we experiencing inward transformation? Are we merely modifying behavior, or are we allowing God to change our hearts and lives?

Do you have a personal relationship with God, and the assurance and peace that your sins are forgiven? Do you want to live with the love, joy, and freedom that come from knowing that God accepts just as you are, yet isn't satisfied with you remaining the same? When you accept the invitation to embrace the new covenant in Christ, the Spirit will continue to change you from the inside out.

The good news of *Hebrews 8* is that God offers more than rules. God offers relationship. More than obligation. God offers transformation. More than guilt. God offers forgiveness. More than religion. God offers Jesus Christ. And through Christ, God establishes a new covenant that changes your heart and mine forever.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How does *Hebrews 8:1-6* describe the present and continuing role of Jesus?
2. *Hebrews 8:10* says that God will write His laws on our hearts. What do you think that looks like, in everyday life?
3. Why do you think external rules alone are not enough to produce lasting spiritual change?
4. Verse 12 emphasizes God's forgiveness: "I will remember their sins no more." How does this promise affect the way we relate to God?
5. Do you find that external constraints (like the law or the Ten Commandments) or internal changes (of heart and mind, as in the new covenant of *Jeremiah 31:31-34*, which *Hebrews* quotes) better help you to do what is right? Why?
6. What areas of your life reveal a need for heart transformation, rather than simply behavior modification? How can we pray for and help one another to know and serve the Lord more wholeheartedly?