

The Book of Hebrews, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: A Better Covenant

Hebrews 8:1–13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter brings the writer's argument to its central claim and turns it toward the new covenant. The doctrinal stakes are clear and central to the whole letter and to our heritage. First, Christ ministers in the true, heavenly sanctuary, of which the earthly tabernacle was only a copy and shadow. The entire old system, tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifice, was a divinely designed model pointing to the heavenly reality now fulfilled in Christ. Second, and most importantly, Christ mediates a better covenant, enacted on better promises, which has made the first covenant obsolete. Citing Jeremiah, the writer shows that God Himself, centuries before Christ, promised to replace the old covenant with a new one. The old was not a failure of God's plan but a deliberate stage in it, always meant to give way to the better covenant in Christ's blood.

This teaching is foundational for understanding how Christians relate to the law of Moses. The old covenant has been fulfilled and set aside; we now live under the new covenant in Christ. This does not mean the Old Testament is worthless, for it remains God's inspired word, full of instruction, promise, and the foreshadowing of Christ. But the old covenant as a binding legal system, with its sacrifices, priesthood, festivals, and ceremonial law, has reached its end. Help the class see that to return to the old law as binding is to cling to what God has declared obsolete, and to miss the glory of the new covenant that fulfills it.

The new covenant's blessings are the heart of the chapter's comfort, and the teacher should dwell on them: God's law written on the heart rather than merely on stone, an internal transformation; a personal knowledge of God available to all His people, from the least to the greatest; and the full and final forgiveness of sins, remembered no more. Aim to send students home rejoicing that they live under this better covenant, marveling that their sins are not merely covered but forgotten by God, and longing to know personally the God who has written His law on their hearts.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 and 2 the writer says the main point is that we have a high priest who is seated at the right hand of God and ministers in the true heavenly sanctuary. Why does the writer call this the main point, and what does it establish about the ministry of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Note that the writer himself signals importance here. After chapters of argument, he says, now this is the main point: we have such a high priest. He is summing up everything he has been

building toward. The point is not merely that Jesus is a priest, but that He is a priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God and who ministers in the true, heavenly sanctuary.

Draw out the significance of seated at the right hand. This is the language of completed work and royal authority. Our high priest has finished His sacrifice and now reigns. He is not an earthly priest confined to a tent of skins, but the exalted Son ministering in the very presence of God.

Establish what this means for His ministry. Christ's priestly work is heavenly, not earthly; complete, not ongoing in the sense of repeated sacrifice; and royal, joined to His reign. The whole earthly system was a shadow of this heavenly ministry. The main point is that our priest serves in heaven itself, which makes His ministry supreme over every earthly counterpart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the exalted high priest seated at God's right hand.
- The heavenly, true sanctuary in which Christ ministers.
- The completed and royal character of Christ's priestly work.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the writer call this the main point of his argument?
- What does it mean that our high priest is seated rather than standing?
- How does Christ's heavenly ministry surpass every earthly priesthood?

Question 2

Student Question:

The writer describes Jesus as seated, His work complete, ministering for us in heaven itself. How does it steady your daily life to know that your high priest is not anxiously laboring but reigning, and is ministering on your behalf right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the image of the seated, reigning priest into daily assurance. Many believers carry an anxious, restless faith, as if everything depended on their own effort and as if God Himself were uncertain or distant. The seated Christ answers that anxiety. His work is finished, and He reigns.

Help students feel the contrast between their hurried hearts and His settled reign. We strive and worry; He sits in completed authority, ministering for us. The steadiness of our lives can be drawn from the steadiness of His finished work and present rule.

Apply it concretely. Ask where anxiety most grips them, and invite them to set that worry next to the reigning, interceding Christ. The One who holds all things is, at this moment, ministering on their behalf. This is meant to produce a settled, unhurried trust in the midst of an ordinary, pressured week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The settled reign of Christ as an answer to anxious faith.

- Assurance drawn from Christ's finished and royal ministry.
- Trust and steadiness in daily life grounded in the exalted Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does anxiety most grip your daily life?
- How does the reigning, seated Christ speak to that anxiety?
- What would an unhurried trust in His finished work look like for you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verses 3 through 5 say the earthly priests served in a sanctuary that was a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, made according to the pattern shown to Moses. What does this teach about the relationship between the old earthly system and the heavenly reality it pointed to?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Explain the relationship of copy and shadow to reality. The earthly tabernacle was not random; God instructed Moses to make everything according to the pattern shown him on the mountain. The earthly sanctuary was a deliberate model, a scaled copy, of the heavenly reality. It was real and God-given, but it was a shadow, not the substance.

Help the class grasp the implication. A shadow is cast by something solid; it has the shape but not the substance. The whole old system, with its priests, sacrifices, and sanctuary, had the right shape because it was patterned on heavenly things, but it was never the reality itself. It pointed beyond itself to what God would do in Christ.

Draw the conclusion. Christ ministers in the true sanctuary, the heavenly reality the earthly one only pictured. This means the old system was always intended to be temporary and representational, fulfilling its purpose by pointing forward. To understand the old correctly is to see it as a shadow whose substance has now come in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The earthly tabernacle as a divinely patterned copy of heavenly things.
- The relationship of shadow to substance.
- The old system as temporary and pointing forward to Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did God have Moses build according to a heavenly pattern?
- What is the difference between a shadow and the substance that casts it?
- How does seeing the old system as a shadow help us understand its purpose?

Question 4

Student Question:

The old system was a shadow pointing to a greater reality in Christ. Where in your faith are you tempted to settle for shadows, for outward religious forms, when God is inviting you into the substance of knowing Christ Himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the shadow and substance distinction to the life of faith. Just as the old system could become an end in itself rather than a pointer to Christ, so our religious practices can become mere forms, performed outwardly while the heart remains far from Christ.

Help students examine where they may be settling for shadows: attending worship without engaging God, knowing doctrine without loving the Lord it describes, going through spiritual motions while their hearts are elsewhere. The forms are good, but they are meant to lead us to Christ Himself, not to replace Him.

Point toward the substance. The whole purpose of every form is communion with the living Christ. Encourage students to identify one religious practice that has gone cold or formal, and to ask how they might pass through the form into the substance of actually knowing and loving Christ this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of resting in outward religious forms.
- Forms as pointers to Christ, not substitutes for Him.
- Moving from external practice to communion with Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has a good religious form become a mere shadow for you?
- What would it look like to pass through that form into knowing Christ?
- How can outward practices lead you deeper into the substance of faith?

Question 5

Student Question:

Verse 6 says Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant He mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. What makes the new covenant better than the old, according to this passage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set up the comparison the writer makes. The excellence of Christ's ministry matches the superiority of the covenant He mediates. The new covenant is better, and it is better because it is enacted on better promises. The rest of the chapter, quoting Jeremiah, spells out those promises.

Identify the better promises that follow. The new covenant offers God's law written on the heart, not merely on stone; a personal knowledge of God available to all His people; and the full

forgiveness of sins, remembered no more. These are the better promises that make the covenant better.

Explain why these surpass the old. The old covenant commanded from the outside but could not transform the heart, gave knowledge of God largely through mediators, and provided sacrifices that covered sin without finally removing it. The new covenant accomplishes inwardly and finally what the old could only point toward. Christ as mediator secures these better promises by His blood.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new covenant as better because of better promises.
- Internal transformation, personal knowledge of God, and full forgiveness.
- Christ as the mediator who secures the better covenant.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the better promises that make the new covenant superior?
- How does each promise surpass what the old covenant could give?
- Why is Christ's mediation essential to these better promises?

Question 6

Student Question:

The new covenant rests on better promises. Which of the promises in this chapter, God's law written on your heart, knowing God personally, or your sins remembered no more, do you most need to lay hold of right now, and why?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites personal application of the three great promises. Each addresses a different need. The law written on the heart speaks to those who struggle to obey from mere duty. The personal knowledge of God speaks to those who feel distant or who know about God without knowing Him. The forgiveness of sins remembered no more speaks to those weighed down by guilt.

Encourage students to identify which promise meets their present need most directly. The point is not to choose one and neglect the others, but to lay hold of the specific grace God is offering them now. Naming the need allows the promise to do its work.

Help them move from identifying to laying hold. To lay hold of a promise is to believe it, rest in it, and act on it. Encourage one concrete way each person will take their chosen promise to heart this week, whether by repentance, by drawing near to know God, or by releasing a guilt God has already forgotten.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The three great promises of the new covenant applied personally.
- Identifying which promise meets one's present need.

- Laying hold of God's promises by faith.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the three promises speaks most to your present need?
- Why does that promise matter so much to you right now?
- How will you lay hold of it this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verses 7 through 12 quote Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, in which God writes His law on hearts, all know Him from the least to the greatest, and He remembers their sins no more. What does this prophecy teach about the nature and blessings of the new covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Establish the significance of the quotation. The writer reaches back to Jeremiah, written centuries before Christ, to show that God Himself promised a new covenant long ago. The new covenant is not an afterthought but the fulfillment of an ancient promise. God always intended to do this.

Walk through the blessings the prophecy names. First, God writes His laws on minds and hearts, so that obedience flows from within rather than being imposed from without. Second, all God's people know Him personally, from the least to the greatest, so that relationship with God is no longer mediated only through priests and prophets. Third, God is merciful toward their iniquities and remembers their sins no more, so that forgiveness is full and final.

Draw out the nature of this covenant. It is internal, personal, and forgiving. Where the old covenant was largely external, mediated, and provisional in its dealing with sin, the new covenant transforms the heart, gives direct knowledge of God, and removes sin completely. These are the blessings every believer in Christ now enjoys.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new covenant as the fulfillment of an ancient promise through Jeremiah.
- God's law written internally on the heart.
- Personal knowledge of God for all His people.
- The full and final forgiveness of sins.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that God promised the new covenant centuries in advance?
- How does each blessing of the new covenant transform the worshiper?
- Which of these blessings most amazes you, and why?

Question 8

Student Question:

The new covenant promises that you can know God personally, from the least to the greatest, not merely know about Him. What would it look like for you to move from knowing about God to actually knowing Him more deeply this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the promise of personal knowledge of God into practice. There is a vast difference between knowing facts about God and knowing God Himself, just as there is a difference between reading about a person and being in relationship with them. The new covenant promises the latter to every believer.

Help students assess honestly where they are. Many can articulate doctrine, recite verses, and explain theology, yet sense that their actual relationship with God is thin. The promise is that all of us, from the least to the greatest, can know Him personally, not just know about Him.

Point toward the means of deepening that knowledge: prayer that is honest and unhurried, Scripture read to meet God and not just to gather information, worship that engages the heart, and obedience that walks closely with Him. Encourage one concrete practice this week that moves them from knowing about God toward knowing Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between knowing about God and knowing Him personally.
- The new covenant promise of direct relationship with God.
- Practices that deepen personal knowledge of God.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense the gap between knowing about God and knowing Him?
- What practice might deepen your personal knowledge of God this week?
- What would knowing God more intimately change in your daily life?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verse 13 says that in speaking of a new covenant, God makes the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. Some still look to the old law of Moses as binding today. Using this passage, how would you explain that the old covenant has been replaced by the new covenant in Christ, and what that means for how Christians relate to the law of Moses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so handle it with clarity and care. Begin with the plain force of verse 13. The very fact that God promised a new covenant declares the first one obsolete. The writer says it directly: in speaking of a new covenant, He makes the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. The old covenant is not merely supplemented or updated; it is superseded and on its way out.

Explain what this means for the law of Moses. The old covenant, with its priesthood, sacrifices, festivals, dietary laws, and ceremonial regulations, was the legal arrangement under which Israel lived. With the coming of Christ and the new covenant in His blood, that old system has been fulfilled and set aside. Christians do not live under the law of Moses as a binding code; we live under the new covenant, under the lordship of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. Paul makes the same point when he says the legal demands were nailed to the cross, and that the old festivals and regulations were a shadow, while the substance belongs to Christ.

Guard against two misunderstandings. First, this does not mean the Old Testament is worthless or uninspired. It remains God's word, profitable for teaching, rich with promise, and full of the foreshadowing of Christ. We read it, learn from it, and treasure it, even as we recognize that the old covenant law is not our binding code. Second, this does not mean Christians are lawless. We are under the law of Christ, and the moral character of God revealed in the old covenant is upheld and deepened in the new. The change is from an external, provisional covenant to the internal, permanent covenant Jeremiah foretold.

Address those who would bind the old law today. To insist that the law of Moses, with its sabbaths, sacrifices, or ceremonies, remains binding is to cling to what God has declared obsolete. It misunderstands the whole argument of Hebrews, which is that the old was always a shadow pointing to Christ. Once the substance has come, to return to the shadow is to step backward from the better covenant into the very thing God said was passing away.

Close with the positive and joyful truth. We are not impoverished by the passing of the old covenant; we are immeasurably enriched by the new. We have God's law written on our hearts, personal knowledge of God, and complete forgiveness of sins, all secured by Christ our mediator. The vanishing of the old is the dawning of something far better, and we live in the full light of it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The old covenant declared obsolete by the coming of the new.
- The law of Moses fulfilled and set aside as a binding code in Christ.
- The continuing value of the Old Testament as God's inspired word.
- Christians under the new covenant and the law of Christ, not the old legal system.
- A clear answer to those who would bind the old law today.
- The new covenant as a gain, not a loss, in its better promises.

Discussion Prompts

- How does verse 13 show that the old covenant has been replaced?
- How do we honor the Old Testament while recognizing the old covenant is fulfilled?
- How would you respond to someone who says the law of Moses is still binding?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. The writer wants you to rejoice that you live under a better covenant, mediated by a better priest, resting on better promises. Name one specific way living under the new covenant changes how you walk with God this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the chapter's joy into a personal response. The whole point is not merely to win an argument about covenants but to help believers rejoice in the better covenant they now enjoy. Resist letting the answers remain theoretical.

Help students connect the doctrine to daily walk. Perhaps living under the new covenant means obeying from a transformed heart rather than mere duty, drawing near to know God personally, or finally releasing a guilt that God has chosen to remember no more. The better promises are meant to change how we actually live.

Close by returning to the wonder of the chapter. The God of the stone tablets always meant to be the God who writes on hearts and remembers sins no more. Send students home rejoicing in the better covenant, walking with God in the freedom and intimacy it brings.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living daily in the reality of the new covenant.
- Obedience from a transformed heart rather than external duty.
- Resting in full forgiveness and personal knowledge of God.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way the new covenant changes how you walk with God this week?
- How does living under better promises reshape your obedience?
- What does it mean for you that God remembers your sins no more?