

The Book of Hebrews

Lesson 8: A Better Covenant -- Hebrews 8:1-13

There is a difference between a contract written on a wall and a promise written on a heart. A rule posted on the refrigerator can tell a child what to do, but it cannot make the child want to do it. A law carved in stone can command, but it cannot transform. For centuries God's people lived under a covenant written on tablets of stone, and the stone was holy and good, but the stone could not reach inside them. It stood outside them, telling them what was right while their hearts remained unchanged. And God, who knew this all along, promised something better. He promised a day when He would write His law not on stone but on the human heart.

The writer of Hebrews now reaches the high point of his argument. Here is the main thing, he says: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. The earthly priests served in a sanctuary that was only a copy and shadow of the heavenly one. Moses was told to make everything according to the pattern shown him on the mountain. The whole earthly system was a model of a greater reality, and Jesus now ministers in the true and heavenly sanctuary itself. He has obtained a ministry as much more excellent than the old as the covenant He mediates is better.

And then the writer quotes one of the most beautiful prophecies in all the Old Testament, the promise of the new covenant from Jeremiah. The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant, not like the one I made with their fathers, which they broke. This is the law I will make: I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They shall all know me, from the least to the greatest. And here is the heart of it all: I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. The God of stone tablets had always meant to be the God who writes on hearts.

Notice the quiet weight of the writer's conclusion. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete, and what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. This is not a small adjustment. The old covenant, which served faithfully for its season, has reached its end. The new covenant in the blood of Christ is not the old one improved. It is the better thing the old one was always pointing toward, a covenant of internal transformation, of intimate knowledge of God, and of sins remembered no more. If you are in Christ, you live under that better covenant now. The law is being written on your heart, and your sins are not on file in heaven. They are gone.

Group Discussion: God promised a new covenant in which He would write His law on hearts rather than on stone, and would remember sins no more. What is the difference between having a rule imposed on you from the outside and having God's desires written within your own heart?

Personal Reflection: God promises in the new covenant, I will remember their sins no more. Is there a sin from your past that you keep dragging back into the present? What would it mean to truly believe that God has chosen to remember it no more?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Jeremiah 31:31–34, the original promise of the new covenant written on the heart; 2 Corinthians 3:2–6, the new covenant of the Spirit that gives life, not the letter that kills; Luke 22:20, Jesus inaugurating the new covenant in His blood; Ezekiel 36:26–27, the promise of a new heart and a new spirit; Colossians 2:13–14, God forgiving all our trespasses and canceling the record that stood against us.