

HEBREWS 8

THE GLORY OF THE NEW COVENANT

There is one theme in particular I wanted to connect in light of reading Deuteronomy last month. Remember one of the main themes of Deuteronomy: the old covenant was destined to fail, for it had no power to change hearts or give ears to hear (Deuteronomy 29:4). As God commanded Israel to live in obedience to him in a certain way, they were unable to do so—for their hearts were of stone and rebellious. God commanded them to circumcise their hearts and not be stubborn (10:16), but we saw repeatedly that was impossible, for they (and we) are unable to self-remedy our own sinful situation. Thankfully, we read the promise of the new covenant, where God would circumcise their hearts, giving them a new heart that could and would love him with all their heart and soul (30:6). This is the hope of the new covenant.

This reality has come with the coming of Jesus. He has completed the work—through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and death-defeating resurrection—to usher us into the new covenant. Hebrews 8 unpacks some of the ways we should understand what is both similar and different now that the old covenant has passed away and the new has come. In a longer section showing how Jesus is better than the Old Testament events and institutions, the author of Hebrews turns his focus to the old covenant in particular. He makes a strong claim in 8:6-7 saying, **But as it is, 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. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.** It's a strong claim—that the ministry of Christ in the new covenant is better, with better promises, for the old one had its faults. We've seen the faults of the old covenant (namely, that it could not produce obedience or heart change), but what about the new covenant is better?

The author then goes on to quote from Jeremiah 31—one of the most famous promises looking forward to the new covenant. Why would he look to the past and not talk about the present? His point is that what was promised has come—and now these realities are what make the new covenant to be better than the old. Here are several that are pointed out. **First**, this covenant will be an eternal covenant. The citation of Jeremiah 31 is quoted in Hebrews 8:9 saying, **“not like the covenant that I made with their fathers...For they did not continue in my covenant...”** The new covenant is unique in that those who are truly covenant members (saved) will be in the covenant forever. One of the common designations for the coming new covenant in Ezekiel is that it is an everlasting covenant. This is wonderful—it reminds us of the security we have in Christ in the gospel message. We are not secure because we are great at continuing in the covenant, but because he will keep us safely in his covenantal love and not cast us out (see John 6:37).

Second, this covenant will be written on our minds and hearts. Verse 10, **“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts...”** Instead of the law being written on tablets, it will be written on human hearts. Which means that instead of the law being unkeepable (for our hearts haven’t been changed); our hearts will now be renewed and reconstituted based on the character and law of God. We will have new, changed, circumcised hearts. So now, in the new covenant: we don’t have the command “go and be better,” we have the command “live in obedience to God based on the changed he has made in your heart!”

Third, this covenant will achieve the goal of all things—to know and enjoy God. Verse 10, “... and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” This is called the covenant formula, for it gets at the heart of the covenant relationship. No more glorious words can be conceived—for this is the goal of humanity that was ruined at the fall, and that God has been working to restore. This was true of the old covenant—and yet it wasn’t perfectly, for the people only knew God at a distant (in the tabernacle or temple). But now, there will be real, genuine relationship with him because of Christ’s work. He is our God, we are his people. **Fourth**, this idea continues on with a point in verse 11, **“...for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”** Here is more on how knowing God will be different. The old covenant was a mixed covenant. There were unregenerate (not true followers of God) and regenerate (true followers of God) members of the covenant—because the covenant was both spiritual and physical (the nation of Israel). Now, that is not the case in the new covenant. Notice the language—**“for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”** All the members of the covenant, all those saved, will enjoy the personal relationship with God that is described in verse 10. This is truly a wonderful thing. There are no second-class members of the new covenant—all know God in relationship, for that is what it means to be in the new covenant. **Fifth** (and finally), the new covenant will bring about forgiveness of sins. Verse 12, **“For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”** What a blessing: sin forgiven, no longer remembered because it has been dealt with by Christ in his death on the cross. Instead of seeing covenant-transgressors in the old covenant, the new covenant members will be seen as covenant-keepers. Not because we perfectly keep the covenant; but because Jesus has kept the covenant in our place. Therefore, we get to enjoy the freedom, the lightness of having our sin forgiven and knowing our God in gratitude.

From these five points we can see: the new covenant is truly better, for it is a better work that God accomplished through it. This is important to understand as we seek to put together our Old and New Testament. But even more: it is important to understand so that we glorify God for what he has done for us in Christ. He has brought us to faith in him, to know him, to be known by him, and to have our sin forgiven—all by giving us a new heart. That is who you are as a believer, and it is a great reason to praise God and follow him.