

## ECF 4<sup>th</sup> December 2022 A Better Covenant Hebrews 8:1-13

Last year Ulster Bank and KBC both announced that they were going to shut down their banking service in Ireland. Since then, customers have received numerous letters and e-mails telling them about this closure and how to transfer their accounts to another bank. There have also been countless adverts warning people and urging them to move their accounts.

And some have responded. As of last month, nearly 400,000 accounts had been closed with many people opening new accounts in other banks. As you know, as a church we've done that.

But that has left more than 850,000 accounts that are still open and yet to have been transferred over! And that has forced the banks to extend some of their deadlines to give people more time.

So why have people been so slow in moving to a new bank and opening a new account? Why have they stuck with those banks even though they are closing down?

Well, probably it is partly because of the hassle of it all. It is a pain having to do it. But maybe also because most of us just don't like to change. We resist it. We're scared of it. And so we get stuck in our ways, and want things to stay the way they were.

I think this is what the original readers of Hebrews were struggling with. They had believed in Jesus. And yet, they were uncomfortable with all the changes that this had brought into their lives. And so some of them were being tempted to go back to the Judaism they had come from, with its' rules, regulations and rituals.

And so the writer wrote to tell them that that system was based on an old covenant that was flawed, out of date and would soon disappear. But that in Christ they had something better - a new covenant, based on better promises that bring greater blessings. And that was the reality that he wanted them to live in more and more.

And this is still relevant for us today. That's because there are still many people who're still stuck in an old covenant-like religious system. And there are believers in Jesus who are living as if they are still bound by those old covenant rules and regulations.

And so we also need to leave behind that old system and live in the freedom and joy that Christ came to give us through a better covenant.

Hebrews 8:1-13: "The 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, <sup>2</sup>and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. <sup>7</sup>For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. <sup>8</sup>But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. <sup>9</sup>It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers 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. <sup>10</sup>This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

<sup>11</sup> No longer will a man teach his neighbour,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest.

<sup>12</sup> For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more."

<sup>13</sup> By calling this covenant "new", he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear."

## 1. God's Covenants With his People

Covenants are crucially important in the Bible. They give structure to the story of it. If we want to understand God's Word, we need to understand what they are and how they work.

A covenant is a contract, a binding agreement. Like what we sign when we buy a house, get a job or get married. It defines things like the basis of the arrangement, what each person is to do, how long the contract will last for, and the consequences if it is broken.

Throughout the Bible, God makes different covenants with different people, like Noah, Abraham and David. Those covenants establish his relationship with them, the conditions of that relationship and the consequences if those conditions are unmet.

The covenant in view in this passage is the Mosaic covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. This covenant defined how Israel would live as God's chosen people.

- It provided the tabernacle, with its priesthood, rituals and sacrifices.
- And promised incredible blessings if they carefully followed all of the commands in the Law.
- But it also warned them of curses if they didn't.

In response the people promised, "We will do everything the LORD has said." Exodus 19:8 But they didn't. Again and again they disobeyed the Lord. They went after other gods. And so God kept his part of the agreement and they ended up in defeat, exile and separation from him.

### a) A New One Was Prophesied

And that's why God said through the prophet Jeremiah:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord,  
when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.

<sup>9</sup> It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their forefathers  
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." Hebrews 8:8-9

This new covenant is the proof that there was a problem with the old one. "If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." Hebrews 8:7

If God's agreement with the nation of Israel on Mount Sinai had provided them the basis of an intimate, secure and lasting relationship with him, then he wouldn't have promised a new one. But the prophecy of this new covenant, proves that God found fault with the old one.

Not because he didn't keep his side of the agreement. But because of their sinful nature, Israel couldn't keep theirs.

### b) The Old One is Passing Away

And so the writer concluded, "By calling this covenant "new", he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear." Hebrews 8:13

The presence of this new covenant shows that the old one is out-dated. It has passed its' sell-by date. And soon it will pass away completely.

At that time, the rituals and regulations of the old covenant were still being followed in Jerusalem. However, very soon, it would all stop in 70 A.D. when the temple was destroyed by the Romans.

But that was ok, because God is now relating to his people through a new covenant and the writer gives three reasons why this new covenant is better.

## 2. Mediated by A Superior Priest

First of all, it is because it is mediated by a superior priest. [“We do have such a high priest.”](#) Hebrews 8:1

This refers back to the last few chapters. For as long as they lived, the Levitical high priests served in a vital role of representing the people in the old covenant.

But as a priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is better. He has a permanent priesthood, guaranteed by God’s oath and he has made a sufficient sacrifice for our sins. And this superiority is demonstrated by the elevated position he now enjoys as he [“sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.”](#) Hebrews 8:1

This is the repeating theme throughout this book. Our great high priest is none other than the King of the Universe, the Messiah, God’s ultimate anointed one!

### a) Through his Blood

And he is the one who is the mediator of the new covenant. As Jesus declared at the last supper when he instituted communion which we’ve just remembered, [“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”](#) Luke 22:20

Through his once and for all death on the cross, Jesus has brought us into this new covenant with God, paid for with his blood.

## 3. Ministered in A Superior Place

But this covenant is not only better because it is mediated by a superior priest. It is also because it is ministered in a superior place.

### a) Not an Earthly Copy

The Levitical priests [“serve in a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.”](#) Hebrews 8:5

The tabernacle and later the temple was another one of those types in the Old Testament. They resembled and pointed forward to a greater and deeper reality.

This is the reason why God told Moses, [“See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”](#) Hebrews 8:5

This shows how special the tabernacle of the old covenant was. Moses was not allowed to use his creativity and ingenuity in designing it, because it was designed by God to reflect and point to his true sanctuary in heaven!

### b) But the Heavenly Reality

But the new covenant is better, because Jesus does not serve in an earthly copy. Instead, he [“serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.”](#) Hebrews 8:2

The tabernacle that Moses made was temporary, just like the Levitical priesthood. But Jesus’ ministry is not passing away because even today, he is serving in heaven for us!

## 4. Based on Superior Promises

So this new covenant is better because it is mediated by a superior priest and ministered in a superior place. But it is also because it is based on superior promises.

### a) An Internal Change

The old covenant was regulated by 613 laws. These determined how the people of Israel should behave in relationship with God.

But they could not keep all those laws. They all fell short of that standard. And so by Jesus’ time, many had tried to limit these to external observance.

That's what they Pharisees did. In order to be able to arrogantly claim they'd kept the law, they reduced it to external, rather than internal, obedience. That's why Jesus called them hypocrites: "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.<sup>28</sup> In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." Matthew 23:27–28

And many fall into that trap today. They try to establish their own righteousness by conforming to rules that dictate where they go, what they do and what they say. But they forget that God sees right into their hearts.

But the new covenant is not about external rules. Instead it is about an internal change. "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts." Hebrews 8:10

This is God's promise. That he will change our hearts from inside out. That he will give us the desire and the ability to live in a way that pleases him.

That transformation will not be complete until we see Jesus face to face. But this is the power of the Holy Spirit living in everyone who trusts in Jesus. "We... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory." 2 Corinthians 3:18

### b) An Intimate Relationship

The second promise of this new covenant is an intimate relationship with God: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." Hebrews 8:10

#### i) For all nations

In the old covenant, it was the people of Israel and Judah who were God's chosen people. The rest of the nations were excluded from that privilege.

But the wonderful truth of the new covenant is that this relationship is offered to all nations, both Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus' commission to his disciples was "Go and make disciples of all nations." Matthew 28:19

#### ii) For all individuals

But this is privilege is not just for all nations, it is for all individuals who trust in Jesus.

In the old covenant, some people had a greater privilege of intimacy with God than others. When Moses received the Law, he went up Mount Sinai to speak with God, but "The people remained at a distance." Exodus 20:12

And this distinction continued in the tabernacle as only the priests were allowed into the Holy Place and only the high priest into the Most Holy Place. The old covenant was a faith-community where some people had greater access to God than others.

But that's not the case with the new covenant. The promise is that

"No longer will a man teach his neighbour,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest." Hebrews 8:11

True Christianity doesn't have a clergy/laity distinction. The majority don't need to rely on the insight about God and intimacy with God of a few. Instead, all of us who have trusted in Jesus are welcomed into the intimate presence of God. "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." Ephesians 2:13

This was powerfully demonstrated at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the church! In the Old Covenant the Holy Spirit came upon specific people, for a specific time to empower them for a specific ministry. But at Pentecost: "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.<sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." Acts 2:3–4

That day all of them received the Holy Spirit, because all of them were brought into this intimate relationship with God. And we can experience the very same.

### c) An Incredible Forgiveness

And that is possible, because of the final promise of an incredible forgiveness.

The old covenant only provided a limited level of forgiveness in limited situations. And so the law could never declare anyone righteous in God's sight. Instead it showed how far short of God's standard everyone fell: "No-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." Romans 3:20

But the new covenant promise is full, free and complete forgiveness for everyone who puts their faith in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Hebrews 8:12

Of course, this doesn't mean that God forgets what we have done. Instead it is that he will never hold it against us ever again. All our sins have been forgiven once and for all. Our guilt has been wiped from our record.

And so God will never deal with us on the basis of what we have or haven't done. Instead he accepts us completely and fully on the basis of what Jesus has done. We are declared perfect in his sight, dressed in the righteousness of Christ and welcomed into his holy presence.

This is what Jesus won for us on the cross. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Ephesians 1:7

### Conclusion

So this is the promise of the new covenant that we're brought into through faith in Jesus, our great high priest who ever lives in heaven for us.

So why would anyone want to live in an old-covenant like religion?

- Why would we want to focus on external rules and regulations, when Jesus offers us an internal change to empower us to live for God?
- Why would we want to be part of a system where some are elevated above others when Jesus came to give us all an intimate relationship with God?
- And why would we depend on empty religious rituals and sacrifices, when Jesus died to give us an incredible forgiveness, so that we can be right with God, now and forever?

The new covenant is better by far. So let's make sure that each of us have put our faith in Jesus and are living in the joy and freedom that he alone can give.

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