

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews
SERMON: *Why Do We Need a New Covenant?*
SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 8:1-13
SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
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Our topic this morning in Hebrews 8 is on the new covenant. It is a difficult topic, but it has a very basic purpose. In the Bible a covenant is generally initiated by God for the sake of establishing a relationship between God and his people. But a covenant is a certain kind of relationship. I've heard someone say that a covenant is a "pledged and defined" relationship.¹

I want to start out this morning by asking a question that I hope you will think about throughout our time in Hebrews 8. How is your relationship with God? Are you drawing near to God? Is the grace of God growing in your life?

Some of you, I trust, are really growing in your relationship with God; you're spending time reading his Word and in prayer; when things get hard you're putting your trust in him; when you mess up you're running to him for forgiveness instead of from him in shame; your affections for him are growing; and obedience is a joy to you and not a burden.

Some of you may be brand new to the Christian faith and are very excited about your new relationship with God. Some of you may not have a relationship with God at all. I pray the explanation of the new covenant will be used by God to draw you into a relationship with Jesus this morning.

Some, however, are probably drifting in your relationship with God. If that's where you are today I pray our text this morning will make you want to draw near to Jesus, and stop drifting.

That's why the book of Hebrews was written. The Hebrew Christians were drifting away from God. The writer of Hebrews is exhorting his readers to persevere in the Christian faith, to draw near to Jesus and stop drifting; quite simply he wants them to grow in their relationship with God for the glory of God.

The author has warned them multiple times of the danger of drifting, but warning them has not been his primary method so far. His primary method of exhortation has been to focus deeply on the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He draws his readers' attention to many aspects of Jesus' supremacy: Jesus is greater than the prophets, he's greater than angels, he's greater than Moses, and he's greater than Joshua. But he spends the most time dealing with the supremacy of Jesus' high priesthood and the new covenant he mediates.

He actually spends almost half of the letter on these two topics (chapters 4-10). This is a lot of material and it's difficult to track with sometimes, but we can't afford to lose the forest for the trees; we have to remember why this was all written. And the writer makes it really clear why he's explaining all of this. He does it by bracketing the whole section with two commands.

¹ Mike Andrus, 1989.

Let's look at these two commands. The first comes in Hebrews 4:16 right after he introduces the high priesthood and new covenant section.

Hebrews 4:14, 16 *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

The second comes in Hebrews 10 right after he finishes the high priesthood and new covenant section.

Hebrews 10:21-22a *and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...*

What is the author trying to accomplish in this section on the high priesthood and the new covenant? He's trying to get his readers to draw near to God – he's trying to get them to continue in their relationship with God. That's why this section is bracketed by these two commands to “draw near to God.” And how does he do it? By fixing their eyes on Jesus; the supremacy of his high priesthood and the new covenant that he mediates. And so that's what I want to do this morning.

I want you to draw near to God because the new covenant offers immediate and guiltless access to God.

Let's look at this new covenant in **Hebrews 8**.

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,² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.*

³*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. ⁴If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵They 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." ⁶But 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.*

⁷*For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸But 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.*

⁹*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.*

¹⁰*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.*

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

¹²*For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."*

¹³*By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*

The author is clearly establishing the superiority of the new covenant here. I'd like to organize our time this morning by looking at two reasons why the new covenant is better than the old covenant.

1. The New Covenant is Eternal.

When the Bible speaks of the Old Covenant it is speaking specifically of the covenant God initiated with Moses in Exodus 19. The rest of Exodus and a large portion of the Pentateuch spell out this covenant and define the relationship God made with his people. The Mosaic covenant is often referred to as the Law. Now the Law contained commandments for the people of God to follow, but that is not all the Law contained. The Law also contained all sorts of information about how to build the tabernacle, about priests, and about sacrifices. So the Mosaic covenant gave the people commandments so they would know how to live in relationship with God, but it also made provision for the people of God when they failed to follow those commandments. We have to bear this all in mind as we continue.

Verse 6 tells us that the new covenant is better than the old covenant. And verse 7 says there was something wrong with the old covenant. So what made the new covenant better and what was wrong with the old covenant?

Verse 6 is explicit in telling us that the reason the new covenant is better than the old is that it is founded on better promises than the old. Those promises are found in Jeremiah 31, which is quoted extensively in verses 8-13. Essentially those better promises are of a relationship with God and forgiveness of sins. But the old covenant provided both of those to some degree, so what was wrong with the old covenant? The main problem with the Mosaic covenant was it was temporary; it was never intended to be a lasting covenant.

There are 325 occurrences of the word covenant in the Bible, and I felt compelled to look at all of them this past week. I found that there are three main covenants – the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses, and the covenant with David. The covenants with Abraham and David are frequently referred to as everlasting covenants, but I don't see any references to the Mosaic covenant being everlasting.

Even though the covenant made with Moses was never intended to last forever it did serve a purpose. For one, it was the basis of the relationship between God and his people for 1,500 years. But more importantly it served as a shadow of the new everlasting covenant God would make with his people when he sent his Son Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews speaks specifically of the tabernacle as a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary. The tabernacle and later the temple were at the center of the old covenant relationship between God and his people because they were the great meeting place between God and his people; the very presence of God was in the tabernacle.

In verse 5 it says that the tabernacle needed to be made *according to the pattern shown on the mountain*. The reason for this was that the tabernacle in some way was a copy of the eternal tabernacle in heaven. The priests under the old covenant served in the tabernacle. But Jesus our high priest serves in the very presence of God for eternity. The priests under the old covenant were always changing, but Jesus' high priesthood is eternal.

So the problem with the old covenant was that it was temporary. But one of the benefits of the old covenant was that it was a tangible expression of an eternal reality. I think the tangible nature of the old covenant was a major reason the readers of Hebrews were tempted to drift back into Judaism. They failed to see that it was necessary for Jesus to enter into the heavenly sanctuary and serve as their high priest. They were going through a hard time and Jesus, newly resurrected and ascended, just seemed so far away. Judaism offered them something tangible that they could experience with all of their senses: they could see it, they could smell it, they could hear it, and they could touch it.

When I was living in Chicago I would sometimes go two weeks without seeing my family. I had pictures of my family in my dorm room, but these pictures were only a copy of my real family members. And a picture cannot replace a person. There was no substitute for spending real time with my family. These Hebrew Christians were being tempted to substitute a copy of the eternal for the real thing. In Jesus' absence they were tempted to go back to the tangibility of the old covenant and leave behind eternal reality; they were tempted to substitute a picture for a person. The problem with that was the old covenant had been made obsolete when Jesus came (v. 13).

When we're going through hard times in our life or we are in a dry season, Jesus can seem distant from us as well. And it's easy to drift towards things that are more tangible than it is to draw near to Jesus, who can seem so distant. And so we settle for something less than Jesus himself.

Some people draw near to people here on earth instead of Jesus. Some people spend inordinate amounts of time at work so we can make more money because we don't trust that God can take

care of us. Some people find comfort in food, possessions, and sex, but don't seek comfort in Jesus. And most of us have at some time probably sought the tangible even in our religious lives by spending a disproportionate amount of time "doing things" for God instead of spending time with God. These are all examples of tangible things that we might drift to instead of drawing near to God.

The problem with seeking the tangible things here instead of Jesus is they are temporal and not eternal. They may fill the void for a time, but they won't last.

The other problem is these things don't further our relationship with God. In the new covenant we have immediate access to God now. Verse 10 says God has written his covenant on the hearts and the minds of his people. We don't access God in the tangible ways that Jews did under the old covenant; we access God by faith. This access is always available, but we have to draw near to God if we want to grow in our relationship with God.

We need a relationship with Jesus that is based on an eternal covenant. Life is hard here as we wrestle with the temporary struggles in our life, but we have an eternal inheritance that awaits us. If we really believe that reality, we can endure.

That's why Hebrews puts such a strong emphasis on faith especially as we will see in chapter 11. Our relationship with Jesus is often contested now and we're easily distracted, but one day we will be with him forever (Revelation 21). We have to believe that truth if we're going to persevere in our relationship with God.

Jesus may not be as tangible as we would like him to be sometimes, but he's real. These other more tangible things may seem like they can fill us, but they offer no real hope. Our only hope comes from the promise we have of an eternal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The second reason the new covenant is better than the old is...

2. The New Covenant is Mediated by Jesus

I mentioned that the problem with the old covenant is it was temporary. But there was another problem with the old covenant. It was dependent on the faithfulness of man. It was dependent on God's people keeping his commandments and the priests mediating the covenant when the people failed. If you look at the initiation of the old covenant in Exodus 19 you see that from the beginning the covenant was conditional upon the faithfulness of God's people.

Exodus 19:5 *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*

The old covenant was conditional, and verses 8-9 make it clear that God's people failed to meet the conditions.

8:8a *But God found fault with the people*

8:9b *they did not remain faithful to my covenant*

And if we read the prophets (especially Ezekiel) we know that the priests failed to mediate the old covenant. We see a hint of it in Jeremiah too. Look at Jeremiah 31 as it is quoted in verse 11.

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

These verses are implying that the priests under the old covenant failed. But the new covenant is better than the old covenant because it is not dependent on the faithfulness of human priests. Under the new covenant we don't need these priests because we have immediate access to God through Jesus, the great high priest who doesn't fail.

Another reason the new covenant is better than the old is it is not dependent on our faithfulness to God's commandments; it's only dependent on the work of Jesus. Many of you are familiar with Matthew 5:17.

Matthew 5:17 *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

Remember that when the Bible speaks of the Law it is referring to the old covenant. And remember that the Law refers not only to the commandments in the Old Testament, but also the provision made for transgressing the commandments (priesthood, tabernacle, and sacrifices). When Matthew 5:17 says that Jesus came to fulfill the Law, it means that he fulfilled the entire old covenant.

Jesus perfectly obeys all of the commandments. Jesus perfectly fulfills the priestly duties. Jesus became the perfect sacrifice. And he even serves as the new tabernacle or temple. Look at Revelation 21:22.

Revelation 21:22 *I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*

Jesus perfectly mediates the new covenant. He came to earth and lived the life we were commanded to live, but which we have failed to live. He then offered himself as the sacrifice for our failure and our sin by dying on the cross. He then ascended to the throne of God and offers that sacrifice to God as our great high priest. And he will one day return and become himself the great meeting place between God and man for all eternity; our eternal tabernacle.

Look at Hebrews 9:15.

9:15 *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*

This new covenant is defined entirely by the work of Jesus; it is not dependent on man's faithfulness; as a matter of fact the whole point of the new covenant is to deal with man's unfaithfulness to the old.

In some ways the old covenant was like a contract between two parties, God and man, but man failed to keep his part of the contract. But the new covenant is more like a will. The conditions of a will are not determined by two parties; they are established entirely by one person, and the other party cannot alter them but only accept or refuse them.²

The part we play in the new covenant is not to fulfill the conditions, for they have already been fulfilled by Jesus. Our part is to accept them by faith; to trust by faith that Jesus has fulfilled the entire covenant.

We have seen one reason we fail to draw near to God is because Jesus doesn't always seem tangible enough for us, and so we drift towards more tangible things. But another reason we fail to draw near to God is we are ashamed to be in his presence; we feel guilty because of our sin.

We tend to buy into a false belief that a relationship with God is dependent upon what we do. That is what all other religions are based on, but Christianity is based on what Jesus did, not what we do. We say we believe that we are saved only by faith in the work of Christ, but a lot of the time what we really believe is that we have to be "good" to be in relationship with God.

When I used to screw up and commit some major sin I would run away from God for days, sometimes weeks, sometimes even months before I would gain the courage to go back to God. A good friend helped me to see the gospel more clearly. My relationship with God is not dependent on what I do; it is solely dependent on what Jesus has done for me. My friend taught me to run *to* God when I fail instead of running *from* God.

And the reason we can do that is because the new covenant promises us eternal forgiveness of sin. The new covenant isn't conditional.

8:11b-12 *they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*"

If it is true that we can know God regardless of whether we're one of the least or one of the greatest then why do we not spend more time getting to know him? If it is true that God forgives our sin completely then why do we shy away from his presence in shame when we fail him?

Are you buying into a lie that says your relationship with God is dependent upon what you do for God? Then I challenge you to spend some time really contemplating the gospel this week; spend some time thinking about what Jesus has done for you. If you need some help in this area I really recommend a little book by Milton Vincent called *The Gospel Primer for Christians*.

Here are a few suggestions that might help you draw near to God if you are struggling in this area. Turn off the television this week and spend some time in his Word; spend some time in

² Mike Andrus, 1989

prayer; and enter into the presence of God. Turn off the radio in your car this week and spend some time in prayer or meditating on Scripture. Evaluate your calendar and your ongoing commitments. You may need to cancel some of the things that are crowding out the time that is needed to grow in your relationship with God.

The letters WWJD were everywhere for a couple years – What Would Jesus Do? I think it is by and large easier for us to think about what Jesus would do than what Jesus has done. And the reason for that is our “doing” is something tangible. And while I think there is some value in considering what Jesus would do in any situation I think the priority should be given to a new set of letters, WDJD - What Did Jesus Do? If our identity is saturated in what Christ has done for us then I’m convinced that will overflow into Christ-like behavior.

Are you shying away from the presence of God because of some sin in your life that you just can’t seem to kick? You can draw near to God right now, because the new covenant offers us guiltless access into his presence. When we put our faith in Christ then God doesn’t look upon our filthiness any longer; he looks upon his Son’s righteousness. That is why Jesus sits at the right hand of God and lives to make intercession for us. Now I don’t believe that Jesus will leave us in our sin. He wants to make us more and more like himself every day. But we can’t become more like Jesus if we’re not spending time with him, so *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.*

Why do we need a new covenant? The new covenant is the basis for our relationship with God. Draw near to God because the new covenant offers you immediate and guiltless access to God.

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