



Sunday School Lesson for July 11, 2004.
Released on: July 6, 2004.

Study: Hebrews 8:6-12. A Better Covenant
Questions and answers are found below.

TIME: About A.D. 67
PLACE: unknown

Hebrews 8:6-12

6 But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.

7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.

8 For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah:

9 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.

10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

11 And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.

12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student should be able to:

1. Contrast the elements of the old covenant God had with Israel with the new covenant God has with Christians.
2. Explain how the new covenant is superior to the old.
3. Identify one person to whom he or she can explain the benefits of the new covenant (personal response).

LESSON BACKGROUND

There are two contrasting approaches to living a godly life. Some people think of a God-pleasing life primarily as living by a set of rules that He has set forth. If we keep these rules, we will be accepted by Him. In the other approach, a person receives God's acceptance by grace and also receives empowerment to know Him.

As a result, he joyfully lives out a godly life because he has a vital relationship with the Lord.

Hopefully, the second of these two ways sounds better to you! The latter way is, in essence, the way of the new covenant. The truth of the matter is that God never intended the old covenant, the one He established with Israel at Sinai, to be an end in itself.

Believers today can still sometimes fall into the trap of trying to earn God's favor or of thinking of Christianity as being simply a bunch of external rules to follow. That is one reason why it is helpful to learn more about the great blessings of the new covenant. Our hearts will be encouraged and instructed as we see what Christ has done for us.

EXPOSITION AND QUESTIONS

Inadequacy Of The Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:6-9)

1. How is Christ's priesthood superior to that of the old covenant priesthood (Hebrews 8:6)?

The author of Hebrews had just been explaining how Christ is a priest far above the Old Testament priesthood (vs. 1; 7:22-28). The Old Testament priests and the tabernacle (and later the temple) in which they served were but types that foreshadowed the ministry of the One who was to come (8:5).

Whereas the Old Testament priests lived and ministered on earth, "death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:23-26).

Christ ministers from a position of power at the right hand of God the Father in heaven (v. 1).

As "the mediator of a better covenant" we can think of Jesus as a "go-between" (1 Timothy 2:5). The old covenant priests ministered in an imperfect replica of God's temple; Christ dwells in the heavenly original (vs. 4,5). All of this shows the superiority of Christ.

The biblical writer went on to declare that the new covenant is based on "better promises" (Hebrews 8:6), that is, on promises that bring much richer blessings and power. He elaborated on these blessings in verses 10-12.

2. In what ways have you personally benefited from Christ's "more excellent ministry"?

The most obvious blessing is, of course, eternal life (John 5:24). Beyond that we have, under the new covenant, much more revelation from God than any of the Old Testament prophets had (1 Peter 1:12). What a privilege to be able to hold the

entirety of God's Word in our hands! How we choose to benefit from that Word is, of course, up to each of us individually.

We also have the ability—even the boldness—to approach God without the need of a human intercessor (Hebrews 4:16). Again, we must take personal advantage of this blessing.

3. What is the most obvious argument for the superiority of the new covenant (v. 7)?

The most compelling argument for the superiority of the new covenant is an obvious one. If the old covenant had been adequate to meet the needs of God's people, it would not have been necessary to institute a new one!

In no way was the biblical writer implying that the precepts of the old covenant were morally blameworthy. In fact, the law of God is worthy of great praise. As David declared, "The law of the Lord is perfect, . . . The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Psalm 19:7-8). Elsewhere, the psalmist exclaimed, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day" (119:97).

Why, then, is the old covenant not considered "faultless" (Heb. 8:7)? Our chief clue comes in verse 8, where we read that the Lord found "fault" with the people of Israel. The fault of the law did not lie in itself but in its inability to deal with the faults of the people and bring about a lasting intimacy between them and God.

The Apostle Paul discussed this inadequacy of the law in Romans 7. Anticipating that some might take his teaching as an attack on the moral character of God's law, he stated emphatically that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (v. 12). The problem was that the law revealed sin without providing the power to overcome it (see Romans 7:7-11, 14-17).

The real purpose of the law was to reveal our desperate condition apart from the grace of God, which was ultimately revealed in Christ (Rom. 7:18-25; Gal. 3:24).

4. God "found fault" with those who lived under the old covenant (v. 8a). Today, do you think that God is "finding fault" with you as you live under His new covenant? Why, or why not?

Even after receiving Christ as Savior, Christians unfortunately continue to sin. How we deal with that sin can go a long way toward determining whether or not God finds fault with us. Remorse, regret, and repentance keep us in God's love and forgiveness (definitely see 1 John 1:9). A resolve to live a holy life is important, because God Himself is holy (1 Peter 1:15,16).

The grace of God is not a license to sin (Romans 6:1-4; Jude 4). If we live under the illusion that it is, we can expect God's displeasure.

5. Most of our lesson text is a quotation from what prophet (v. 8b)?

Returning to our text, we find the author of Hebrews explaining what God had planned to deal with the shortcomings of His people. The author introduced at this point an extended quotation from the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). In fact, this quotation takes up the remainder of our lesson text (Hebrews 8:8b-12).

The writer of Hebrews did not mention Jeremiah's name. The emphasis is on the fact that this is a message from God Himself. The importance of this message is signaled by the word "Behold." The people of Jeremiah's day were to pay attention,

for they were about to hear important news. They had been caught in a constantly repeating pattern of sin and disobedience.

The time was coming, however, when God would fully reveal a better way for man's relationship with Him.

The blessings of this new covenant are promised to Israel and Judah. This fact may well have been a comfort to the largely Jewish readership of Hebrews. But it is important for us to realize today that apart from all the discussion of how these covenant blessings will one day be fulfilled for the nation of Israel, the promises of the new covenant have a clear application to the church.

This is apparent even from this epistle (12:23,24).

We must remember that God had promised Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3) and that all those who have faith in Christ are the true children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). This is why Paul referred to the Galatian believers as the "Israel of God" (see Galatians 6:16).

Every believer is the beneficiary of the new covenant (from which we get the name "New Testament"), and we commemorate this each time we observe the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:23-25). By God's grace all believers have become part of a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet. 2:9).

6. How did Israel fare under the rules of the old covenant (v. 9)?

Jeremiah explained that the new covenant would not be like the one that had been established at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-8) with the ancestors ("their fathers") from Israel and Judah. The Jewish believers in New Testament times could rightly see themselves as being among the beneficiaries of this promised new covenant.

They no longer had to fear the cycle of failure their forefathers had experienced.

This is not to say that God had not been gracious with Israel in the past. By His grace He had taken the initiative and, like a father with his children, led them by the hand out of their harsh bondage in Egypt. This great act of redemption was the foreshadowing and type of His ultimate redeeming work of salvation in Christ.

Israel, however, did not remain faithful to the Lord. They continually violated the law that God had given them, thus violating the terms of the Mosaic covenant. Jeremiah himself, like many other of the Old Testament prophets, laid out the case against Israel (see Jeremiah 7:24-26).

As a result of Israel's rebellion, God "regarded them not" (Heb. 8:9); that is, He turned away from them, and they faced a future without protection from their enemies. In fact, these enemies would be the instruments of God's judgment upon them. The old covenant clearly had proved inadequate in producing a godly people.

The Blessings Of The New Covenant (Hebrews 8:10-12)

7. What change would occur in the spiritual life of God's people under the new covenant (v. 10)?

The word "for" indicates that Jeremiah would now explain how the new covenant would be different from the old one.

More than five hundred years before the writing of Hebrews, the prophet Jeremiah had predicted that after a certain length of time (after those days) the new covenant

would go into effect. This prophecy is fulfilled in the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

The new covenant is not a covenant written on tablets of stone (Exodus 20).

Rather, it is a covenant in which God puts His "laws into their mind and in their hearts."

The only way the people's hearts and minds could truly be godly was by receiving a new heart. As Ezekiel prophesied, "I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you" (Ezek. 11:19). This is a picture of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer.

The transforming power of the Holy Spirit is what makes the blessings of the new covenant possible, producing a new creature in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

God's promise to His people was always that they would be His children and that He would be a Father to them (Exod. 6:7). Under the new covenant, this promise would be more fully realized through union with Christ (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:5,6). God's people look forward to the day when the evidence of this relationship will become fully manifest (Rev. 21:3).

8. The new covenant must lead to a commitment, and commitment must lead to action. What actions are typical of one who has made that commitment? How could an observer notice by your actions that you have accepted the new covenant?

This is not an attempt to list the acts one must perform in order to "ratify the covenant." Such an attempt would suggest we become part of the new covenant by doing works, and that is faulty thinking. But the Bible does teach that we are known by our actions (Matthew 7:16-20). Once that covenant is written on our hearts, it should find expression in loving deeds.

It should be seen by the choices we make.

9. What do the phrases "they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother" mean in verse 11?

The phrases "they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother" mean that people will have direct access to God under the new covenant. We do not need to go through the human intermediaries—the priests of the levitical system—that was a feature of the old covenant (Isaiah 54:13; John 6:45; Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-22).

Because of the Holy Spirit's presence within us and the new nature that everyone who belongs to Christ possesses, the believer can have a genuine understanding of who God is and enjoy a close fellowship with Him.

This verse is not talking about head knowledge alone but rather about a relational knowledge like the kind a person has with a close friend or family member.

The verse is also not saying that there is no need for formal Christian education. The Bible clearly teaches that God has granted the gift of teaching to certain of His people (Eph. 4:11). But every believer under the new covenant is a priest and has access to direct fellowship with God.

What a great blessing it is for each individual believer, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, that he can come before the Lord God and, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, have a direct personal knowledge of Him!

10. How has God always made provision for dealing with His people's sins (v. 12)?

God has always made provision for dealing with His people's sins. He set up a system of sacrifices for the people of Israel that allowed them to continue in relationship with Him even when they sinned. As David declared, God "hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10).

But the old covenant did not provide a decisive remedy for the problem of sin. This point is made clear in Hebrews 10:1-4. The fact that the sacrifices had to be offered continually was a constant reminder that sin had not been dealt a deathblow. Verse 4 states unequivocally that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."

The old covenant sacrificial system was intended to foreshadow and prepare the way for Christ's redeeming work.

11. What does God see when He looks upon a believer?

God determined in His great grace to grant permanent forgiveness. Because Christ takes the sin penalty upon Himself, God takes away the "sins" of His people. What a privilege to serve a God who no longer remembers our "iniquities!" When He looks upon a believer in Christ, He sees that person clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This is the crowning joy of the new covenant.

12. Even though the Bible tells us that God will "remember no more" our sins and iniquities, many Christians live and labor under a sense of continuing guilt. While they have been told they are forgiven, on some level they don't really believe it. They still have a picture of God weighing their lives in a balance, and the scale is tipping the wrong way! How would you counsel a fellow believer who just can't shake his or her sense of guilt?

God is not holding a scale against those in Christ. When God says He will remember our sins no more, this is not a case of God's contracting amnesia! God has knowledge of what we do wrong, but He does not count these against the Christian. Our trust in Christ is "credited" to us by God as righteousness, based upon the fact the Son died for our sin (definitely see Romans 4:20-25).

Any scale that God holds has been tipped forever in the favor of Christians by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is an example. He had persecuted the church, and he remembered that fact with remorse throughout his life (1Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13). Yet he also knew of God's forgiveness. May we realize that "as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

CONCLUSION

Change is Threatening

As we look back to the first century, when Christ came bringing the good news of salvation, we may wonder why everyone did not immediately respond to this wonderful message. Through His teaching, His miracles, and especially through His resurrection, Jesus gave ample proof of His identity.

There are several reasons why not everyone accepted the message that Jesus brought. Those most violent in their rejection were the religious leaders. They

enjoyed prominent positions in their nation and the perks that went along with those positions. They were respected by most of the people, and they were able to live comfortably above the poverty-level experiences of many others.

Those leaders were not always happy with the Roman rule that had been imposed upon them, but they had learned to make the necessary concessions to live with the situation.

In their security they took a dim view of anyone who might threaten this delicate balance (John 11:48).

There were others who, though also not especially happy with the power arrangements as they existed, were unwilling to accept the gospel because it meant making a personal change. Most of us, especially as we grow older, find ourselves resistant to change. We have grown comfortable where we are. Change brings the threat of the unknown.

For many throughout history, the unknown seemed to be more dangerous than the situation they were in—even if they are not entirely happy with the present situation.

This may have been the case with many of the Hebrew Christians who may have been considering going back into Judaism.

Some who might have been interested in becoming Christians undoubtedly were deterred by the threat of persecution. They had seen what had happened to others who had been beaten, imprisoned, and even killed. Their hearts may have been touched by the blessings offered by the new covenant, but the price was too high.

Some who were interested in becoming Christians were persuaded by friends or family against taking that step.

Human nature has not changed in the two thousand years since Christ walked the earth. Some refuse to surrender to the call of Christ because they do not want to risk their places of prominence or profit. Others are afraid of change of any kind. While most of us are not kept from becoming Christians because of fear of persecution, there are places in the world where that is a real threat.

The parable of sower (Matthew 13:1-9) still confronts us today. What type of "soil" are you?

PRAYER

We give you thanks, O Lord, that You have allowed us to live under the new covenant. Help us gain a better understanding of both the responsibilities of the new covenant and the blessings that we can enjoy under it. May we never yield to the temptations to abandon it and the wonderful personal relations with You it affords us. In our Savior Jesus' name we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

May others see in us the joy of the new covenant!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our lesson next week we will take a close look at the whole concept of faith and how it changes the way we look at the Christian life. It is impossible to please God without this crucial dimension. Study Background Scripture: Hebrews 11.

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