

XVIII. High Priest of the New Covenant

May 29/30/31, 2018

Hebrews 8:1-13

Aim: To rejoice in the glorious promises of the New Covenant, inaugurated by Jesus Christ: 1) that the law of God is written in our hearts; 2) that He is our God, and we are His people; 3) that we have a personal relationship with and knowledge of God; and 4) that our sins are forgiven and remembered no more.

MacArthur: The primary focus of Hebrews 8 is on the New Covenant.

A. The Priest of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:1-6)

1. The Priestly Ministry (8:1-3)

a) *The Priesthood of Christ (8:1-2)*

Bruce: Having established the superiority of the high priesthood of Christ, our author now proceeds to relate His high priesthood to the themes of covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice, with which the Aaronic priesthood was closely bound up. As the Aaronic priesthood gives place to the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, so the old covenant gives place to the new, the earthly sanctuary gives place to the heavenly, and sacrifices which were but temporary tokens give place to one which is effective and of eternal validity.

(1) Such a High Priest (8:1a)

¹*Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest... ..*

Schreiner: The ‘main point’ (*Κεφάλαιον, Kephalaion*) of the preceding is now set forth for the readers. The main point is: ‘We have this kind of high priest.’ What the author means by this is that Jesus matches the description of the Melchizedekian priest in chapter 7. He is the ever-living one, the one who always did the will of God, and the one whose sacrifice accomplished forgiveness of sins. The oath and promise of Ps. 110:4 find their fulfillment in Him.

MacArthur: ‘The main point’ (*kephalaion*) means just that—the main, or chief point—not a summary as the KJV suggests. What is given here is the primary thrust of what has been said so far in the letter. A great many things have been presented and explained, but they all relate, directly or indirectly, to Christ’s high priesthood

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews wants us to focus not on any earthly ministry—not on ourselves and not on an earthly priest—but on Jesus Christ in heaven. It is His person and work that we have been exalting since our author began expounding Christ’s priestly office at the beginning of chapter 7. And it is to Christ that the author draws our attention in verse 1: ‘The point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest. The final section of Hebrews 7 served as the climax of a crescendo that had been building all through that great chapter. Hebrews 7 leads us upward in our understanding of Christ’s ministry as heavenly high priest. Now, at the beginning of chapter 8, we are on a plateau, regrouping and ordering ourselves for the next climb up to a higher level still. The chief point the author wants us to grasp before moving onward is the superiority of Christ’s priestly ministry in heaven.

Phillips: Chapter 7 concludes by saying that Christ ‘has been made perfect’ (v. 28). Now Hebrews 8 begins by saying, ‘We have such a high priest,’ that is, a perfect one. Whereas the

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earthly priests of Israel were imperfect, Christ is perfect. The writer of Hebrews has emphasized Jesus' becoming perfect or becoming complete several times, so this is obviously an important matter to him (see 2:10; 5:9; 7:28). Christ completed or perfected the work needed to qualify Him as our high priest. In this He is superior to any earthly priest. Earthly priests can share our suffering, but cannot transcend it; while they are able to sympathize with our weakness, they are likewise under sin's ruthless grip. Jesus alone has shared in our humanity while adding the power of His own divine nature, so that His work is superior. In a word, it is perfect.

(2) Seated in Heaven (8:1b)

one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven...

Schreiner: In addition, what is written in Ps. 110:1 points to Jesus. He is David's Lord and sits at God's right hand until His enemies are made His footstool. The author alludes to Ps. 110:1, affirming that Jesus sat down at God's right hand in the heavens. Jesus is the reigning and ruling priest-king and exercises authority as the messianic king. The words 'Majesty in the heavens' point to God's awesomeness and His transcendence. Since Jesus sits at the right hand of one who is so great, He also exercises transcendent power.

Hughes: The precise point here is that Christ's priestly session in Heaven is transcendentally supreme and superior to the old earthly priesthood of Aaron. Apart from its unspeakable glory, the supremacy of His priesthood is seen in that Jesus is *seated* at the right hand of the Father (cp. 1:3). His posture points to His completed work. It is the physical expression of His triumphant cry from the cross, 'It is finished' (Jn. 19:30). Because in His person He brought finite man and infinite God together, He could then do what no one else could—He could bear all our sins in a single cosmic sacrifice. In contrast, no earthly Levitical priest ever sat down (cp. 10:11).

MacArthur: The Levitical priests never sat down (10:11). The priest's job was never done, because the sacrifices he offered were never permanently effective. They had to be repeated over and over again. In his ministering at the altar, therefore, the priest never rested, because he was never through. No place was provided in the Tabernacle or the Temple for the priests to sit down. The mercy seat in the Holy of Holies was not really a seat at all. When Jesus Christ offered His sacrifice, however, He sat down (cp. 1:3). He was qualified to sit down because His work was done. Among the last words on the cross were, 'It is finished.' He accomplished in one glorious act what all the priests of the Old Covenant had not accomplished and could never have accomplished—forgiveness of men's sins and therefore their reconciliation with God. What a marvelous and wonderful thing it is. He did it all in one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Himself. As far as our salvation is concerned, He 'has taken His seat.' The right hand of a monarch symbolized honor, exaltation, and power. To stand at His right hand was an honor, but to sit there, supreme honor. Christ sat down at the 'right hand of the throne' of thrones, God's heavenly, eternal throne.

Phillips: The second feature demonstrating that Christ's ministry is superior is that He is both priest and king. We have such a high priest, we read, 'who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.' In other words, Jesus has taken His royal place at heaven's throne. This was never true in Israel; the men who ruled as king were not the men who served before the Lord as priests. The character of a king has consequences for his kingdom. What a blessing it is, then, to find that the One who ascends to the throne over us, the One who comes to play such a pivotal role on our behalf, the King who single-handedly determines God's attitude toward all His kingdom, is none other than our great high priest, Jesus Christ. His kingdom is an

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everlasting kingdom, and He will reign forever and ever. That is good news for us, because we need not fear a change in regime. With Him as our king forever, we will be forever blessed.

Phillips: The third item that draws attention to the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry comes through the words, 'We have such a high priest, one *who is seated*.' This is the second time such a statement has been made in this letter, the first time having occurred in 1:3. There is a contrast here with the Levitical priests of the Old Testament, who never sat down inside the tabernacle. There were no seats there, so they were not invited to do so. Furthermore, the symbolism here has to do with the finished work of Christ versus the unfinished and therefore ongoing sacrifice of those earthly priests. Their work was not finished, their sacrifice was not sufficient, their atonement was not actual but only pointed forward to the better one to come. That is why they did not sit down. But Christ's work is finished. His sacrifice of Himself is sufficient to reconcile us to God, and His atonement actually takes away our sin forever. This is why He entered into the heavenly sanctuary, completed His sacrifice once for all, and then sat down at God's right hand to signify that all is finished.

Phillips: The fourth evidence of the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry is the power with which He presently reigns. Hebrews 8:1 says He sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, that is, of God the Father Himself. That is a seat of power and authority, which He exercises for our blessing. This is where our assurance is grounded—that Christ is seated in heaven for us. He is there as our forerunner; since we are in Him, we are seated in heaven. He guarantees our place (cp. Eph. 2:6). We, too, can be confident of our salvation because we are in Christ, who is seated in heaven, and also because Christ is in us, working with power. The Christ who is at work in us is the One who had been crucified; dead to sin's influence, He is victorious over sin. He is alive with resurrection power and is reigning with authority and power.

(3) The True Tent (8:2)

...²*a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.*

Hughes: The fact that Christ is seated must not be interpreted to suggest priestly inactivity, because He also serves as 'a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.' This willingness to serve others runs counter to the natural grain of humanity, because those in exalted positions characteristically view their role otherwise.

Schreiner: Jesus serves as the minister in the holy place, i.e., God's sanctuary. God's sanctuary where Jesus serves is also described as 'the true tabernacle.' Jesus sits at the right hand of the one who rules in the heavens (v. 1), and the true tabernacle is not earthly but heavenly. Here we see an example of the writer's spatial and eschatological theology. On the one hand the earthly is not ultimate; it points up spatially to what is heavenly. At the same time there is an eschatological dimension to the writer's thought, for the tabernacle erected in Israel pointed forward to the tabernacle Jesus would enter upon His death and resurrection. Hence the earthly tent is not 'false' but rather temporary and points to something greater. When the writer says the Lord 'pitched' the tabernacle, he is scarcely suggesting that there is a literal tabernacle in the heavens. The language is analogical. The true tabernacle, then, designates the presence of God, the place where God reigns and rules.

MacArthur: The 'sanctuary' in which Jesus is a minister is infinitely superior to the one in which the Jewish priests ministered. As would be expected, the superior Priest ministers in a superior sanctuary. When the book of Hebrews was written, the Tabernacle had not been used for a

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thousand years, and the Herodian Temple would be standing for less than five more years. But Jesus' sanctuary is 'in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man' and which can never rot or crumble or be destroyed. The word 'true' is not used here as the opposite of false. The true Israelite tabernacle is not being contrasted here with the false tabernacles, or temples, of her pagan neighbors. Nor is the idea that the Israelite tabernacle itself was in any sense false. It was temporary and inadequate, but it was not false. 'True' is used here as opposed to the shadowy or unreal. The comparison is between the typical and temporary and the real and permanent.

Bruce: By contrast with all material sanctuaries, this one is called the true or 'real' (*ἀληθινός, alēthinos*) sanctuary' (NEB), the only one which is not an imitation of something better than itself, the only one whose durability comes anywhere near to matching the eternity of the living and true God whose dwelling-place it is. This 'real sanctuary' belongs to the same order of being as the saints' everlasting rest of chapters 3 and 4, the better country and well-founded city of 11:10, 16, the unshakable kingdom of 12:28.

Phillips: The fifth and final feature of Christ's superiority is laid out at the end of verse 2. This theme is picked up in verses 4-5, which expand the idea. To say that Christ serves in the true tabernacle is not to say that the Israelite temple service was false. The contrast is between the true—that is, the final, the real, the ultimate—and the 'copy and shadow' that was on earth. It is not true versus false, but true versus temporary and illustrative.

b) The Ministry of Priesthood (8:3)

³*For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.*

Schreiner: Jesus is the minister of God's true tabernacle, but a minister must carry out a specific ministry, and 8:1 and 7:1-28 emphasized Jesus' priestly ministry. The author reflects generally here on the responsibility of high priests. They were ordained in Israel to offer gifts and sacrifices, both to express thanksgiving to God and to atone for sins committed in Israel. Since Jesus is a priest, He must also offer a sacrifice, for it is the nature of a priesthood to offer a sacrifice to God. The author's side comment here is illuminating, for it clarifies that the fundamental role of the priest in his estimation is to procure access to God through sacrifices.

Bruce: But if Jesus ministers as high priest in this authentic sanctuary, what is the nature of His ministry? A high priest, as has been said before (5:1), is appointed to present 'gifts and sacrifices for sins'; therefore, this high priest must also have something to offer. The nature of His offering, however, is not stated until 9:14 (although it has been mentioned already in 7:27), because in the meantime there are further points of contrast between the old order of worship and the new which have to be elucidated. In passing we may note that it is not implied that Jesus is continually or repeatedly presenting His offering; this is excluded by 7:27; which contrasts the daily sacrifices of the Aaronic high priests with the offering which the Christians' high priest has already presented once for all.

MacArthur: Verse 3 begins to take the argument from the general to the particular. His sacrifice is finished; His atoning work is finished. But all of His priestly ministry is not finished. If 'every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices,' then Jesus Christ, as perfect High Priest, can do no less. He is truly a ministering priest. Jesus has already ministered the one final blood sacrifice that is sufficient for all people for all time. This work of His is completely finished, because there is no need, and there will forever be no need, for any additional sacrifice for the cleansing of sin. But the need for His redeemed people to come to dedication and

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commitment and thanksgiving is not over. These gifts of praise and thanksgiving Jesus continues to minister for us before the Father. It is obviously necessary for Jesus to continue to minister in our behalf. He continually brings the gifts—the worship, the praise, the repentance, the dedication, the thanks—of the hearts of His people before the Father.

2. The Place of Ministry (8:4-5)

a) *The Earthly Sanctuary (8:4)*

⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.

Bruce: That Jesus' high-priestly ministry must be exercised in the heavenly sanctuary is further shown by the fact that there would be no room for Him to exercise it in the earthly sanctuary. In the earthly sanctuary, whether we think of the earlier tent-shrine or the later temple in Jerusalem, the high priesthood was confined to one family; and far from belonging to that family, Jesus did not even belong to the tribe from which it came. On earth, Jesus was a layman, excluded by the law from all priestly functions. But to our author, this simply emphasizes the dignity of Jesus' high priesthood; for a high priesthood exercised in any earthly shrine is far inferior to that heavenly high priesthood which depends for its exercise on a perfect sacrifice offered once for all and consequent admission to the sanctuary above.

MacArthur: During His earthly ministry, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, preached on the hillside and in the synagogue, forgave sins, and called Himself God's true Son. But He never claimed the right to minister in the Temple. He did not venture one step closer to the inner sanctuaries than any other Jew of His day who was not a priest. He was not of the priestly tribe, and therefore was not qualified for the old, earthly ministry. God never mixes the shadow with the substance, the type with the antitype. Jesus could not minister the old offerings in the old, earthly sanctuary. He ministers the new offerings in the new, heavenly sanctuary—built by God, not men (v. 2).

Schreiner: The author characterizes Jesus' priesthood in a fascinating way, saying that 'if He were on earth, He wouldn't be a priest.' Jesus' humanity is a major theme in Hebrews (cp. 2:5-18), and in that sense His priesthood had an earthly dimension. Indeed, as Hebrews regularly affirms, he suffered and died on earth. Still, the author asserts that Jesus was not an earthly priest. It is apparent, by way of contrast, that an earthly ministry was exercised by the Levitical priests who offered sacrifices in accord with the Mosaic law. Jesus, on the other hand, ministers in the true tabernacle, the heavenly tabernacle where God rules. Levitical priests offered their sacrifices at the earthly tabernacle, which is ultimately not the true tabernacle. However, Jesus was not an earthly priest, i.e., He was not a priest in accord with the Mosaic law. His priesthood had a different location (heaven) and is thus more effective.

Phillips: This statement fends of a criticism that was leveled against Christians by the Jewish community, namely, that Christians had no priest. This might seem to be a sign of inferiority, in comparison with the earthly priesthood of Judaism. But the writer of Hebrews insists that this is not a sign of weakness, but rather of Christianity's superiority. We do have a priest—but not on the earth. Indeed, the earthly priesthood is nothing more than a 'copy and shadow' of the true priestly ministry in heaven, which is the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

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b) *The Heavenly Pattern (8:5)*

⁵*They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”*

Schreiner: Earthly priests serve at the earthly sanctuary, at the tabernacle God commanded Israel to build (cp. Ex. 25-31; 45-40). The earthly sanctuary, however, was never meant to be ultimate. It served as ‘a copy and shadow’ of the heavenly sanctuary. We see again the spatial or vertical thought of the author; the author views the earthly as an inferior reflection of what is heavenly. Once again, however, what is vertical is also eschatological. The law and the earthly tabernacle were intended to be in force under the old covenant; they were set in place for a limited period of salvation history. We see here the role of the divine author in the history of revelation. When Moses was instructed to complete the tabernacle, he was commanded to make everything ‘according to the pattern shown to you on the mountain.’ The typological role of the tabernacle is communicated through three different terms: ‘copy’ (*ὑποδείγματι, hypodeigmati*), ‘shadow’ (*σκιά, skia*), and ‘pattern’ (*τύπον, typon*). The original plan for the tabernacle (Ex. 25:40) reveals from the beginning that it signified a greater reality, that the earthly place of God’s residence figuratively represented His residence in the heavens.

Bruce: For the earthly sanctuary from the outset was designed to be nothing more than a ‘copy (*ὑποδείγμα, hypodeigma*) and shadow (*σκιά, skia*)’ of the heavenly reality. This is how our author understands the divine injunction to Moses, regarding the details of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. 25:40). This ‘pattern’ (referred to also in Ex. 25:9; 26:30; 27:8) was something visible; it did not consist merely of the verbal directions of Ex. 25-30. It may have been a model for which the verbal directions served as commentary; it may have been the heavenly dwelling-place of God which Moses was permitted to see. The tabernacle was intended to serve as a dwelling-place for God in the midst of His people on earth, and it would be completely in keeping with current practice that such an earthly dwelling-place should be a replica of God’s heavenly dwelling-place. This, of course, is how our author understands the situation. The high priests of Aaron’s line ministered in the earthly sanctuary; Jesus exercises His high priestly-ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, of which the earthly one was but a replica.

Hughes: The warning to follow ‘the pattern’ (quoted from Exodus 25:40) was given in the midst of minute instructions about the ark, the table, the lampstand, and the size, shape, and materials specified to build the tabernacle (Ex. 25-31; cp. 25:9; 26:30; 27:8). The word ‘pattern’ meant something more than verbal instruction. Very likely it denoted a model along with verbal explanation. Moses may have been privileged to view a model on Sinai, then was given personal instruction.

MacArthur: The Tabernacle build under Moses’ direction ‘according to the pattern’ was not the original model, the type that set the pattern for the more elaborate Temple and then the immeasurably still more elaborate heavenly sanctuary. The heavenly sanctuary is not an enhanced, improved version of the earthly. Just the opposite. The earthly was but a shadowy, a barely suggestive copy of the heavenly—which preceded the earthly by all eternity. The gifts, the sacrifices, the sanctuary, and even the priests themselves served as copies and shadows of their heavenly counterparts. A ‘shadow’ has no substance in itself, no independent existence or meaning apart from what it is a shadow of. It exists only as evidence of the real thing. Why, then, should anyone be satisfied with a copy when he can have the real thing? Why should the Jew be satisfied with the old priesthood and the old sacrifices—which are only copies and

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shadows of forgiveness and reconciliation—when he can have real forgiveness and real reconciliation in Jesus Christ? And what Old Covenant priest could compare with the High Priest of the New Covenant?

Phillips: To say that Moses was required to make everything according to the pattern shown to him does not mean that the earthly tabernacle described in Exodus physically depicts heaven, but that its elements symbolize the realities of Christ's coming ministry in heaven. Christ's ministry is not inferior but superior, because it is the real, the final ministry that was pictured by the old. Now that the new has come, the old must give way. Verse 5 clues us that this letter was written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and thus at a time when the priestly service in the temple was still active, because the text says 'they serve' at a sanctuary. That is in the present tense. It must have been a burden to be denied access to the great temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus Himself had stood and taught. In response to that burden, the writer assures his readers that they have the reality and the substance of what on earth is only typical and temporary, that the real sanctuary is not on the earth but in heaven, where the true and real high priest, Jesus Christ, serves on their behalf.

Hughes: The substance, the ultimate reality, of the tabernacle is where Jesus is—at the right hand of God. This being so, what must the real sanctuary and His priestly ministry be like? Imagine the multi-faceted shadow of the glorious tabernacle, and then imagine the ultimate heavenly reality! Remember that the heavenly counterpart is free from the spatial and material limitations of the earthly tabernacle and temple. If such was the shadow, what must be the substance? Do not fail to employ your imagination, because however grand and wondrous your imagining is, it will not exceed the reality of Christ's heavenly tabernacle and priesthood!

3. The More Excellent Ministry (8:6)

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.

Schreiner: If one word were to summarize this verse, it is the word 'better.' There is a 'better covenant' (*κρείττονος...διαθήκης, kreittonos...diathēkē*), 'better promises' (*κρείττοσιν...ἐπαγγελίαις, kreittosin...epangeliais*), and 'a superior ministry' (*διαφορωτέρας...λειτουργίας, diaphorōteras...leitourgias*). The last phrase, of course, uses a different term, but it carries the same idea (cp. 1:4).

a) Better Ministry (8:6a)

Schreiner: Jesus has a ministry that is more excellent than the ministry of Levitical priests, for the preceding verses have clarified that His ministry is carried out in God's presence, in the true sanctuary.

Bruce: It is, then, in no earthly replica of the heavenly dwelling-place of God that Jesus ministers as His people's high priest, but in the heavenly dwelling-place itself; His ministry according is far superior to any earthly ministry.

b) Better Covenant (8:6b)

Schreiner: Jesus' better ministry is tied to a better covenant of which He is the covenant mediator. The better covenant is the new covenant, as the author will make plain in the subsequent verses (vv. 7-13). Jesus' role as the covenant mediator is effected through the sacrifice of Himself. On two other occasions the author refers to Jesus as the mediator of the

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new covenant, and in both places His role as a mediator is tied to His death. Such a connection reflects the Gospel traditions where Jesus inaugurates the new covenant by shedding His blood (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20). Moses mediated the old covenant, but we have already seen that Jesus is superior to Moses (3:1-6), and this is no surprise since He as the Son of God establishes the covenant by sacrificing Himself.

Bruce: His ministry is superior besides because of the superiority of the covenant in the power of which it is exercised—the covenant of which Jesus is Himself the Mediator. He has already been called, in passing, the ‘guarantor of a better covenant’ (7:22); the present description of Him is as ‘mediator of a better covenant.’ The Greek word translated ‘mediator’ (μεσίτης, *mesitēs*) is shown by the papyri to have been a common business term in the sense of *arbiter* or *go-between*.

MacArthur: ‘Mediator’ (*mesitēs*) means someone who stands between two people and brings them together, a go-between in a dispute or conflict. He must represent both parties. In religion a priest is the mediator between God and men. The Old Covenant with Israel had its mediators. In ceremonial matters those were the priests, and only the priests. Moses, however, also acted as a mediator—of the Old Covenant (Gal. 3:19; Ex. 20:19; Dt. 5:5). In a sense, the prophets were mediators—of God’s Word to Israel. The Israelite mediators, assuming they were legitimately doing God’s work, were not false mediators, as are those of other religions. Yet they were not true mediators either, in the same way that the earthly tabernacle, though not false, was not true (v. 2). The Israelite mediators were true only in the sense of being proper, of being and doing what God wanted them to be and do. They were not true, however, in the sense of being effective. They could not bring men and God together. They were not real mediators, only reflections of the true Mediator who was to come. They, too, were but copies and shadows.

c) Better Promises (8:6c)

Schreiner: The reason the new covenant is better is because it is established on the basis of better promises. The better promises are revealed in the terms of the new covenant, for God will write the law on the hearts of His people (v. 10), all covenant members will know the Lord (v. 11), and sins are forgiven fully and definitively (v. 12).

Hughes: The old covenant was flawed, not in what was spelled out in the Law’s requirements, for the Law was good (cp. Rom. 7:12), but in that it was ‘weakened by the flesh’ of the people (Rom. 8:3). Because of this, it could not deliver on its wonderful promises. But the new covenant is founded on ‘better promises,’ both because of their extent and because of the covenant’s ability to bring them to fulfillment in the lives of sinful humanity. The new covenant could deliver!

MacArthur: The New Covenant not only has a better Mediator but ‘better promises.’ All covenants are based on promises. Promises are always involved. As far as God’s covenants are concerned it is always *His* promises that are significant. Men break their promises, God does not. The benefits and the power are always from God’s side, and therefore the significant promises are always from His side. Consequently, it is God’s promises in the New Covenant that here are called ‘better.’

Phillips: Hebrews 8:6 wraps this up by saying that Jesus’ ministry is superior because His covenant is superior, having better promises. This *is* a better covenant—a better way of salvation—better than anything we have ever known before. It is superior because Jesus is superior, because His work actually saves us. He doesn’t give us the chance to be saved, to save

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ourselves, or to be saved by others if we are fortunate. He saves us. He wins our salvation by His perfect and finished work, a work so finished that He sat down. He applies that salvation to us with His power and authority, ruling over us and in us and for us so that His kingdom will be established. And He awaits us in heaven, not merely passively, seeing if we will make it. No, He draws us to Himself by His divine power (cp. Jn. 14:18). Such is our complete and sure salvation if we trust in Jesus Christ. His ministry is superior in every way, because He saves to the uttermost.

B. The Promises of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:7-13)

Schreiner: In 8:6 we are told that Jesus is a mediator of a better covenant, and in vv. 7-13 the author explains why the new covenant is better than the old, citing Jeremiah 31:31-34.

1. The New Covenant Is Necessary (8:7)

⁷*For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.*

Schreiner: The ‘better covenant’ is identified here as the ‘second’ one. By way of contrast, the ‘first covenant’ was faulty. We encountered this line of argument previously in Hebrews. If the first covenant was adequate, a second one would not have been instituted. The same line of reasoning was used relative to the priesthood. If the Levitical priesthood truly brought perfection, there would have been no need for a Melchizedekian priesthood (7:11). Or, if sacrifices offered according to the law truly brought forgiveness, there would be no need for Christ’s sacrifice (10:1-18). Each one of these matters is closely related, of course, for the old covenant, the Levitical priesthood, the law, and animal sacrifices are intertwined.

Bruce: Indeed, the covenant of which Jesus is Mediator may be inferred to be a better covenant from the simple fact that it is a *new* covenant. If the old covenant had been perfect, it would not have needed to be superseded by a new one. And the new one must be better, for there would have been no point in replacing the old covenant by another no better than itself.

Phillips: ‘I will be your God and you will be My people,’ was always the expression of the purpose of the covenant. Jeremiah 31 shows that a new covenant will come to bring that to pass; the writer of Hebrews points out that this proves the deficiency of the old covenant. Now that the promised new covenant has come, it would be the gravest folly to go back to the old one it supplanted.

2. The New Covenant Is Glorious (8:8-12)

Bruce: The speaker in this oracle of the new covenant is God: it is to Him that the repeated pronouns of the first person singular—I, me, my—refer. Our author, as is his custom, ignores the fact that it was delivered through Jeremiah; the divine authorship is all that he is concerned with.

Hughes: In verses 8-12, the writer quotes at length from Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is a direct quotation from God in the first person—‘I,’ ‘Me,’ ‘My.’ The quotation dates back over six hundred years to Josiah’s reign, when after the rediscovery of the Law, a national time of repentance, and a public covenant to keep the Law Israel again failed. In the midst of this dark failure, God promised a new covenant—not conditional like the old, but unconditional—totally dependent upon the work of God.

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MacArthur: Hebrews 8:8-12, with the exception of the first few words of verse 8, is a direct quotation from Jeremiah 31. The writer is saying, ‘Look what your own Scriptures have to say about the advantages of the New Covenant. You should have been expecting a New Covenant to come, and you should already have known that it would be superior to the Old. One of your greatest prophets told you this hundreds of years ago.’ Yet millions of Jews even today are hanging on tenaciously to the Old Covenant, even though their own Scriptures, through their own beloved prophet, have been telling them for well over two thousand years that a new one was to come.

Phillips: Verses 8-12 present the new covenant as foreseen in Jeremiah 31, and particularly the promises that make it better. A study of these promises helps us understand Christianity by way of contrast to the old covenant.

a) *The Need for a New Covenant (8:8-9)*

(1) The New Covenant Promised (8:8)

⁸*For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...*

Schreiner: The new covenant was instituted because God found fault with Israel, and hence He prophesies that a new covenant will be instituted with Israel and Judah. The spiritual state of Israel, i.e., their endemic refusal to do God’s will, showed that a new covenant was necessary. The author cites Jer. 31:31-34 to support the notion that a new covenant is mandatory. The new covenant text comes from Jeremiah 30-33, where Jeremiah promises hope and restoration for the people after exile. Exile is not the last word, for the Lord will bring Israel back to the land and will fulfill the promises made to Abraham and David.

Schreiner: The old covenant and the new covenant are different. The covenant made with Israel on Mount Sinai had gracious elements. It would be a mistake to identify it as a legalistic covenant. The summons to keep the law was given *after* the Lord had saved them from slavery to Egypt (Ex. 20:1). The call to keep the Lord’s commandments was to be in *response* to the Lord’s gracious intervention on their behalf.

Phillips: First we need to understand what was wrong with the old covenant. This was not a no-fault divorce, and the blame is clearly assigned in our passage. It is sometimes said that the problem with the old covenant is that it was not a covenant of grace. But the old covenant was given amidst the greatest manifestation of grace in the entire Old Testament, namely the exodus. God saved Israel by grace. He led His people out of Egypt and only then brought them to Mount Sinai to receive His law. The problem was not a lack of grace in the old covenant. What, then, was the problem? Verse 9 tells us plain. The problem with the old covenant was the infidelity of the people. Read the Old Testament and you will find a continuous history of idolatry and faithlessness (e.g., Jer. 3:2).

Bruce: ‘Finding fault with the people’ refers to the terms in which the oracle itself charges the Israelites with breaking God’s earlier covenant. In Jeremiah’s oracle the new covenant is to be made ‘with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.’ In the New Testament fulfillment, it is not confined to them, but extends to all believers of every nation—and indeed, in the Old Testament itself indications are not lacking that it was to have this all-embracing character (cp. Is. 42:6; 49:6).

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MacArthur: The New Covenant in Christ, the Messiah, is based solely on God's sovereign terms. 'I will effect a new covenant,' the Lord told Jeremiah. Just that the covenant in Christ is 'new' and is better makes it obvious that it is different to some extent. But it is not just an enhancement or modification. It is not slightly different, but radically different, from the old one. God effected a 'new covenant,' which was 'not like the covenant which I made with their fathers' (v. 9).

Schreiner: Israel's hope is not rooted in their piety, but in the Lord's transforming grace, in His changing the hearts of His people by His power. The promise in Ezekiel that the Lord will put His Spirit in Israel and cause them to obey the law (Ez. 36:26-27) runs thematically along the same lines. The significance of the prophecy in Jeremiah should be noted, for the OT Scriptures themselves recognize that the old covenant was inadequate. The author doesn't invent the notion of the new covenant, for the OT promises that new days are coming to Israel and Judah. A new agreement, a new administration, would be enacted with Israel and Judah.

(2) The Old Covenant Failed (8:9)

...⁹not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

Schreiner: Even though the Sinai covenant wasn't legalistic, it was still defective and is inferior to the new covenant. Israel had to keep the stipulations of the covenant to be blessed. If Israel obeyed, they would receive the blessings of the covenant; but if they disobeyed, they would experience the cursings of the covenant (Lev. 26; Dt. 26-28). By the time Jeremiah wrote, it was apparent that Israel 'did not continue in My covenant.' The northern kingdom of Israel had already been exiled by Assyria in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom of Judah experienced the final hammer of exile to Babylon in 586 BC. The claim that Israel and Judah did not keep the covenant was not an abstract theological proposition. Both kingdoms faced exile because of their disobedience; the curses of the covenant had become a reality. The consequence of Israel's disobedience is that the Lord 'turned away from them' (NIV). God's 'not caring' (*ἡμελησα, ēmelēsa*) for them is another way of saying they experienced the curses of the covenant.

MacArthur: The blessings of the Old Covenant were conditioned on Israel's obedience to the law that God gave with the covenant. Because Israel did not continue, God 'did not care for them.' Under the law, His care depended on her continuance. Her disobedience did not abrogate the covenant, but it forfeited all the blessings of it. It was a covenant of law. Not so the New Covenant.

Schreiner: Israel and Judah were responsible for their disobedience, and at the same time their disobedience reflected the inadequacy and limitations of the old covenant. Israel, of course, returned from exile. Still, the fundamental problem with Israel remained, for the people didn't obey the Lord and the covenant promises weren't realized. When the NT opens, Israel is under the dominion of Rome and is not experiencing the freedom and joy promised by the Lord, and their dismal state is due to their sin.

Phillips: Hebrews 8:9 shows the chilling cause-and-effect relationship so well displayed in the Old Testament: 'They did not continue in My covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.' That is what happens when people reject God—He turns away from them. The result for Old Testament Israel was military defeat, the vast destruction of their society, and

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national enslavement. If salvation meant deliverance from slavery in Egypt, rejection of God meant a return to bondage in the form of the Babylonian captivity. The same principle applies today. People think that rejecting God opens the door to freedom. They can do what they want without fetters or restrictions. But this is not the case, because they are not free from the consequences of their sin. Western culture is a vast illustration of this principle: having rejected God, we now are left to deal with godlessness on a vast scale. This is the worst thing that could ever happen to any people, entailing both the withdrawal of God's special care and the visit of sin's terrible wages.

b) The Promises of the New Covenant (8:10-12)

Phillips: The blame for this broken covenant lay squarely on the unfaithful people. Yet the point of this passage is to show the inadequacy of that old covenant. Its main problem was not that it lacked grace, but that it was an external administration of salvation. That is, it did not convey to the people the inward power needed to fulfill its demands. It is in this respect that the new covenant is better, and is able to succeed where the old one failed. The new covenant works internally; it transforms those who come to God through it.

Bruce: It is in Jeremiah's prophetic ministry that the oracle finds its proper life-setting. The days were dark; national life was in collapse; it was 'the time of Jacob's trouble' (Jer. 30:7). But the people's life would be reconstituted on a new basis, and a new relationship between them and their God would be brought into being. This new relationship would involve three things in particular: a) the implanting of God's law in their hearts; b) the knowledge of God as a matter of personal experience; and c) the blotting out of their sins.

(1) The Law of God (8:10a)

¹⁰*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts...*

Hughes: First of all, the new covenant promises superior inwardness. The problem with the old covenant was, it was patently external. Its laws were written on stone (Ex.32:15-16). They provided no internal power to live them out. To be sure, there was great benefit in memorizing God's Word (cp. Dt. 6:6-9; Ps. 119). But the writing on the heart was beyond the power of unaided man. Something far more radical was needed—a spiritual heart operation. We still have the same heart, but it is radically new. God has written His laws within us. He had made His people partakers of the divine nature (2 Pe. 1:4). True, we still battle with our fleshly nature, but through baptism into Christ's Body, God's laws suddenly became perfectly suited to our own spiritual inclinations (cp. Jn. 14:15-17; 16:12-13; 1 Cor. 12:13). They are no longer external and foreign, but internal.

Schreiner: The new covenant is distinct from the old in that God inscribes His law on their hearts and minds. Under the old covenant Israel knew the law as a written statute external to them, but knowing the commands did not give them any inclination to keep what God commanded. Jeremiah complained that they had an uncircumcised heart (Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26). The new covenant is an entirely different state of affairs, for now God circumcises the hearts of His people in accord with the promise of Deuteronomy 30:6. God's commands are not an onerous burden but reflect the desires of their hearts since God has imprinted the law upon their hearts. The fundamental flaw in God's people has been remedied, for now they delight to do the will of God.

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Bruce: a) The implanting of God's law in their hearts means much more than their committing of it to memory. Ample provision for memorizing it had already been made in the prescriptions of Deuteronomy (Dt. 6:6-9). Even the memorizing of the law of God does not guarantee the performance of what has been memorized. Jeremiah's words imply the receiving of a new heart by the people—as is expressly promised in the parallel prophecy of his younger contemporary Ezekiel (Ez. 11:19ff.; cp. 36:26ff.) When first they heard the covenant-law they said: 'All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient' (Ex. 24:7). But they did not have the moral power to match their good intention. Hence the necessity arose of repeatedly returning to their God and His covenant, only to turn aside to their own ways once again. The defect did not lie in the covenant-law; it was good in itself but, to borrow Paul's language, 'it was weakened by the flesh' (Rom. 8:3)—by the inadequacy of the human material upon which it had to work. What was needed was a new nature, a heart liberated from its bondage to sin, a heart which not only spontaneously knew and loved the will of God but had the power to do it.

MacArthur: The New Covenant will have a different sort of law—an internal not an external law. Everything under the old economy was primarily external. Under the Old Covenant obedience was primarily out of fear of punishment. Under the New it is to be out of adoring love and worshiping thanksgiving. Formerly God's law was given on stone tablets. Even when the old law was given, of course, it was intended to be in His people's hearts (Dt. 6:6). But the people could not write on their hearts like they could write on their doorposts. And at this time the Holy Spirit, the only changer of hearts, was not yet given to believers. Now, however, the Spirit writes God's law in the 'minds' and 'hearts' of those who belong to Him. In the New Covenant true worship is internal, not external, real, not ritual.

Phillips: In the old covenant, God gave the people His law, but that covenant did not give them the ability to receive it, love it, or keep its demands. In Romans 8:3 Paul says the old covenant law was compromised by the weakness of human nature; this is why the relationship between God and His people broke down. But in the new covenant, God makes provision for human weakness, promising not only to give the law but actually to place it within us. This points to the work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus sends Him to His own. Every true Christian has personal acquaintance with this. If you possess eternal life through faith in Christ, you have experienced at least something of this. You start wanting to do things you never wanted to do before, while old pleasures seem disturbing. You find yourself eagerly attending church, praying, reading the Bible, serving others, while shunning evil more and more as Christ leads you and God writes His law upon your heart.

Phillips: Hebrews 8:10 also tells us something important about saving faith: 'I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts.' There is a progression here, beginning with the mind and moving to the heart. In contrast to the old covenant administration, which was given externally on tablets of stone, the new covenant is applied by God to the hearts of men and women. This tells us that faith takes place in both the mind—our thinking facility—and in the heart, which includes our will and affections. First we have to understand truth, and then we have to embrace it, commit to it, and love it in our hearts. This is how saving faith works. Both the head and the heart are necessary. People say, 'I want heart religion, not head religion,' but this is impossible. Certainly it is possible to have understanding in the mind that makes no impression on the heart. But such bare knowledge or even assent to truth does not constitute saving faith. Until knowledge pierces the heart, wins us to Jesus Christ, and begins to reshape our lives and our lives, then we have not known saving faith. It is equally wrong to pursue

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emotional warmth without understanding. If you say you have love for God, it must be in response to what God has revealed about Himself, to the salvation He has revealed in His Word, and which most certainly has doctrinal or propositional content. Many people have religious emotionalism and yet are not saved because they have not known the God of the Bible.

Phillips: The promise of God's inward work makes the new covenant a better covenant. God promises that He will work faithfulness into us. What the old covenant could not do—give us a heart to obey and glorify God—the new covenant can do. This means that if you have faith in Christ, if you are saved under this new covenant, God is doing this in you (cp. Phil. 2:13). Genuine, saving belief in Christ will always affect our will and our affections, or else it is not the faith that saves us by means of the new covenant. Our passage promises that God will do this, without telling us how it happens. Paul, however, explains this very clearly (Rom. 12:2). God changes us by His Word, applying it to us, illuminating our hearts, and regenerating our will by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is by God's Word that He saves us and changes us. You say, 'I cannot change my heart,' and that is true. But you can give your mind to the Word of God, you can seek the light that shines forth from Scripture—and as your mind is transformed, God will shine that light into your heart, warming it to the things of God.

(2) The Presence of God (8:10b)

...and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Hughes: Next, the new covenant promises a superior relationship. This was one of the formula expressions of the goal of the old covenant (Ex. 6:7). The Old Testament echoes this repeatedly, though it was only fulfilled in some of the hearers. But this is perfectly fulfilled in all who partake of the new covenant, in which believers actually become God's possession and possess God. 'I will be their God' means He *gives* Himself to us. And 'they shall be My people' means He *takes* us to Himself.

Bruce: The new covenant was a new one in that it could impart this new heart. It was not new in regard to its own substance: 'I will be their God, and they shall be My people,' quoted here from Jer. 31:33, was the substance of the covenant of Moses' day (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; cp. 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). But while the 'formula' of the covenant remains the same from age to age, it is capable of being filled with fresh meaning to a point where it can be described as a *new* covenant. 'I will be your God' acquires fuller meaning with every further revelation of the character of God: 'you shall be My people' acquires deeper significance as the will of God for His people is more completely known.

Schreiner: The covenant formula would, under the terms of the new covenant, become a reality. God would be their God, and Israel would be His people (cp. Gen. 17:8; Ex. 6:7; Jer. 30:22; 32:28; Ez. 11:20; 36:28; 27:23, 27). God would meet every need of His people, protecting and guarding them from all that would harm them. At the same time, Israel would be the people of God. In the NT, this promise is fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ, which is understood to be the new Israel.

Phillips: The last promise culminates and results from the previous two (vv. 10a, 12). This promise also has two parts, the first of which is God's promise to be our God. Personal, direct fellowship with God: this is the crowning blessing of the new covenant. The condition of such fellowship is holiness, for God is holy—and He now promises to write His law on our hearts. The threat to such fellowship is our sin—and He has promised to forgive and forget it completely

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through Jesus Christ. Therefore, this crowning blessing can be given and received: ‘I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’

(3) The Knowledge of God (8:11)

¹¹And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Hughes: Superior inwardness and superior relationship are followed by a superior knowledge. The old covenant of Sinai was corporately entered into by a nation, including many who did not know God personally. But those who experience the new covenant come one by one as they are born into a relationship with God. So those who are partakers of the new covenant all know God, ‘from the least of them to the greatest.’ No one needs to say, ‘Know the Lord’ to such persons, though at the same time this is a command and invitation to a lost world. For those on the outside, God’s command is ‘Know the Lord!’

Bruce: The knowledge of God as a matter of personal experience is evidently regarded in Jeremiah’s oracle as something beyond what the old covenant provided. There was a sense in which the people of Israel knew their God, because He had revealed Himself to them, by contrast with the nations which did not know Him; but even Israel tended to forget Him. It is a personal knowledge of God, such as marked Jeremiah himself, a personal knowledge of God to be possessed by each individual member of the covenant community, because of the new heart received by each. Such knowledge of Him by whom they are known, increasing until it attains its consummation in knowing even as they are known (cp. Gal. 4:9), is the essence of that ‘perfection’ to which our author invites his readers to press forward.

Phillips: The second part of this promise constitutes our responding vow to God, which He also promises. This promises an affirmation from God’s purchased and betrothed people, each of them and all of them, their acknowledgement that He is their Lord and God. This is what God desires: an expression of fidelity, of marital commitment and intimacy, the loving cry of the faithful wife: ‘I know Him—He is my Lord.’ What God desires from us, what He requires from us, He bestows upon us by grace in this new and better covenant. Not only will He say and fulfill His vow, but all His own will speak and faithfully fulfill their vows to Him.

Schreiner: Another dimension of the new covenant over against the old comes to the forefront here. The old covenant people of God were a mixed community. In other words, Israel under the old covenant was composed of both believers and unbelievers in the covenant community. Hence members of the covenant community had to be exhorted to know the Lord, for many were unregenerate. Under the new covenant an entirely new situation is envisioned. There will be no need to summon a ‘fellow citizen’ (*πολίτην, politēn*) or ‘brother’ to know the Lord, for every member of the covenant community will know the Lord. In other words, every member of the covenant community ‘from the least to the greatest’ will be regenerate.

Schreiner: Under the new covenant, the political dimension of the people falls away, which is to say that the church isn’t a theocratic entity; it isn’t a church and state combined together. The church consists of believers from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. To say that every new covenant member knows the Lord doesn’t deny that some claim to be believers and do not truly belong to Christ. In fact, such claimants are not truly and genuinely members of the new covenant, for the new covenant by definition means the law is inscribed on one’s heart, that one has been given new life by the Holy Spirit (cp. Ez. 36:26-27). The genius of the new covenant,

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then, is that the Spirit causes new covenant members to obey the will of God. They won't apostatize since the law is implanted within them, since the Spirit has regenerated them. Hence, no one who is truly a new covenant member will ever fall away, and all new covenant members are regenerate. So, if someone does not know the Lord, then, by definition, they are not members of the new covenant. The text is clear here: all the members of the new covenant, from the greatest to the least, know the Lord.

(4) The Forgiveness of God (8:12)

¹²*For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.*"

(a) *Forgive (8:12a)*

Hughes: Finally, there is the promise of superior forgiveness in the new covenant. This is precisely what the old covenant could not do. Under the old covenant, sins were never completely forgiven because they were never truly forgotten. They were covered, awaiting and pointing to the true forgiveness through Christ's death. Forgiveness is the most important of the qualities we have discussed, for it is the basis of the other three.

Schreiner: The 'for' explains the basis upon which God's people truly know the Lord, giving the reason they are regenerate. Their new life finds its roots in the forgiveness of their sins, and when sins are truly forgiven, they are remembered no more. The author will expand upon this matter in some detail in the following chapters: old covenant sacrifices do not fully and finally forgive sins. By way of contrast, Christ's sacrifice brings genuine and lasting forgiveness. The new heart implanted in believers is based on the sacrificial work of Christ, on the forgiveness secured through His atoning death. Such forgiveness was never accomplished by OT sacrifices. Indeed, the OT cult could not accomplish forgiveness (10:4).

Bruce: The blotting out of His people's sins is essential to this new relationship into which God calls them with Himself. This indeed was not a novel idea when Jeremiah proclaimed it: the God of Israel was incomparably a pardoning God, passing over transgression, unwilling to retain His anger, delighting in loving-kindness, treading His people's iniquities underfoot, casting all their sins into the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:18ff.). When the God of Israel proclaimed His 'name' in the ears of Moses, this note of forgiveness was emphasized, alongside the note of retribution for the impenitent (Ex. 34:6ff.).

Phillips: A second great promise actually comes third in the passage, but logically comes next. The reason this promise of forgiveness comes last is that it is the great and climactic promise and the basis for the superiority of the new covenant. There are two parts to this promise, and both of them are wonderful good news. The first is that God will forgive our wickedness. This was foreseen by Jeremiah as he looked forward to the future when Jesus Christ would come and die upon the cross. The word 'merciful' (*hileōs*) is the root of the word that is used in the description of the mercy seat that sat atop the ark of the covenant. In Greek, it was called the *hilastērion*. This was the place where the blood of the sacrifice was brought by the high priest on the day of atonement. We might well read the promise of verse 12, therefore, as saying, 'I will be mercy-seated toward your iniquities.' This is how God forgives our sin, by the blood of a spotless sacrifice. In writing this, Jeremiah looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (cp. Jn. 1:29). God is merciful toward our wickedness when we acknowledge our sin and put our faith in Christ's blood that was shed for us. It is because of Jesus' death, received by faith, that God promises, 'I will forgive their wickedness.'

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(b) *Forget (8:12b)*

Phillips: The second part of this promise is that God will remember our sins no more. How, we might well ask, is it possible for God to forget? How can God, on the one hand, know all things, be perfect in knowledge, and yet, on the other, forget the wicked things we have done? The answer is found in the prior statement. God's forgetting is based on His forgiving. He has forgotten your debt because He has received full payment. That is what has happened with God in His perfect justice toward the debt of our sin. It has been fully satisfied, fully paid, and God can declare that He remembers our sins no more. He has forgotten all the dreadful things we have done. That is what Psalm 103:12 celebrates: 'As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.' How far is the east from the west? Infinitely far! This is the great promise of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. God has forgiven us and so our sin is no more!

MacArthur: Here is the capstone of the New Covenant. Here is what men need more than anything else—and what the Old Covenant pictured but could not give. The promise of the Old Testament is finally fulfilled! Under the Old Covenant, sins could never really be forgotten, because they were never really forgiven. They were only covered, foreshadowing and anticipating true forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But for those who belong to His dear Son—whether they believed under the Old Covenant or the New—God forgets every sin.

Bruce: But now the assurance of forgiveness of sins is written into the very terms of the covenant in the most unqualified fashion: 'I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more.' For the Hebrew, 'remembering' was more than a mental effort; it carried with it the thought of doing something to the advantage, or disadvantage, of the person remembered. If people's sins are remembered by God, His holiness must take action against them; if they are not remembered, it is because His grace has determined to forgive them—not in spite of His holiness, but in harmony with it. Under the old sacrificial system, there was 'an annual reminder of sins' (10:3); if there is no such recalling of sins to mind under the new covenant, it is because of a sacrifice offered up once for all (7:27).

Hughes: Here forgiveness is tied to memory. God never forgets anything. In fact, He cannot forget *unless* He wills to do so. Any sin He remembers must be punished because He is holy. And when sins are not remembered, 'it is because His grace has determined to forgive them—not in spite of His holiness, but in harmony with it' (F. F. Bruce). The new covenant brings total forgiveness! God does not just forget our sins. It is impossible for God to remember them!

3. The New Covenant Is Here (8:13)

¹³*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.*

Schreiner: The prophecy of a new covenant entails the obsolescence of the old. The author doesn't envision a situation where the old and new coexist. The two covenants are not complementary to each other in that sense. Instead, they are successive. The Sinai covenant is designated in this verse as 'first' (*πρώτην, prōtēn*). Three times it is described as 'old.' Clearly the old isn't better but inferior. The old has been superseded and 'is about to disappear.' Jeremiah's prophecy that the old was about to disappear has now become a reality, and thus Hebrews is not suggesting that the old covenant still exists and is close to disappearing. Its days as a legally binding contract are over.

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Bruce: The very words ‘a new covenant’ antiquate the previous one. In saying this our author does not go beyond Jeremiah, who explicitly contrasts the new covenant of the future with the covenant made at the time of the Exodus, and implies that when it comes, the new covenant will supersede that earlier one. And if the covenant of Moses’ day is antiquated, our author further implies, so must be the Aaronic priesthood, the earthly sanctuary, and the Levitical sacrifices, which were all established under that covenant. The age of the law and the prophets is past; the age of the Son is here, and here to stay.

Phillips: Verse 13 points out that the old covenant religious system would soon be done away with altogether. It is possible that this reflects an awareness of the events of 70 AD, which were perhaps about to take place, when the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple once and for all. The argument in Hebrews, however, is simply that the new covenant necessitates the abandonment of the old.

MacArthur: By His merely saying that a new covenant was coming, God rendered the old one ‘obsolete,’ no longer valid. In fact, it would disappear. The human writer of Hebrews could not have known how literally this truth would be fulfilled within a few years of his writing. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem, he destroyed the Temple—which had been completed only for a short time. Without the Temple, there was no altar, no Holy of Holies. There could therefore be no sacrifices and no ministering priesthood. And without a priesthood and its sacrifices, there could be no Old Covenant. It was finished. When verse 13 was written, the ‘obsolete’ covenant was ‘ready to disappear.’ In less than five years, it had completely disappeared.

Bruce: But, our author goes on, if the earlier covenant, with all that accompanied it, is antiquated, it is ready to vanish away. It cannot be proved from these words that the Jerusalem temple was still standing and its sacrificial ritual still being carried on. They could simply mean that by predicting the inauguration of a new covenant Jeremiah in effect announced the impending dissolution of the old order. They do indeed have that meaning. But if in fact the Jerusalem temple was still standing, if the priests of Aaron’s line were still discharging their sacrificial duties there, then our author’s words would be all the more telling. Jesus (Mk. 13:2; Jn. 2:19), and shortly after Him Stephen (Acts 6:14), had foretold the downfall of the temple. Thirty years and more had elapsed since then, and it might have been thought that the event had belied their prediction. But now that prediction is taken up by another Christian, who in many respects stands within the tradition of Stephen, and shown to be logically involved in Old Testament prophecy. If the end of the temple and its ministry had been imminent thirty years before, it was more imminent now that the forty years of probation were more than three-quarters of the way toward their end.

For next time: End of Bible Study. Summer break!