

Chapter 13 – Inheritance required a new Covenant - Hebrews 8

In the first century the principal controversy amongst Jews concerning the claims made by Christians was over the place of the Law of Moses. Christ's claims to be the Messiah and His death on the cross in atonement for men's sins were well within the scope of their Messianic expectations. The thing that got Christians thrown out of the synagogues was their insistence that the Law of Moses was now obsolete. The author of this letter deals with this controversy head on. If Christians had claimed Christ as the head of a new Priesthood with a renewed Mosaic covenant they would probably have been accepted by the Jews, but the apostles understood that our inheritance was more radical than that. In the next three chapters the author demonstrates both the need for, and the biblical expectation of, a completely new Covenant for God's people rendering the Mosaic one obsolete.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 7 and look forward to studying chapter 8.

Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 8 by reading through and noting any surprises. These are the surprises that strike me in chapter 8.

- V2,5 What do we know about the true tabernacle?
- V6 What are the two sets of foundational promises?
- V9 In what way did God turn away from His people?
- V10 How does God put His laws in our minds and hearts?
- V11 What does it mean that we will not teach our neighbours to know the Lord?
- V12 Is this a promise of forgiveness for everyone, regardless of their faith?
- V13 Is the Law of Moses completely obsolete? What about the Ten Commandments?
 When will the Law disappear?

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Ex 25 and Jer 31 which are referred to in this chapter. Additional background is found in Ex 19-20.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was "We have a new superior covenant which replaces the Mosaic covenant."¹

Chapter 8 continues the discussion about Jesus' priesthood, showing that the new priesthood comes with a new covenant.

My fine-brush structure is:

- V1-2 The author's main point: Jesus is our Priest in the true tabernacle in heaven.
- V3-6 Jesus has a better ministry based on a better covenant.
- V7-9 The need for a New Covenant.

¹ See chapter 4

V10-13 Scriptural promise of a New Covenant.

Argument

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 8:

Having established the need for a new Priesthood, its legitimacy and that God has appointed Jesus as the High Priest (in chapter 7), the author shows that His ministry is in the true tabernacle in heaven and He serves the promised New Covenant.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 8.

Heb 8:1-2

⁽¹⁾ 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.

In chapter 7 the author made the observation that the Law is “weak and useless” because it “made nothing perfect” but that through Jesus’ new high priesthood “we draw near to God” and “He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him because He always lives to intercede for them.” This is the main point amidst all the detailed argument for the New Covenant and its associated ministry: We do have such a high priest. The author’s repeated appeal is to heed His word, believe His promises, draw near to God through Him and follow His example. We must be confident that we do indeed have such a high priest who ministers in the very presence of God.

the true tabernacle

Jesus is “The true light that gives light to every man” (Joh 1:9), “the true bread from heaven” (Joh 6:32) and “the true vine.” (Joh 15:1) He is now the true High Priest ministering in the true tabernacle in heaven.

In the next chapter the author discusses in detail the true tabernacle and its foreshadow, the Mosaic tabernacle, so we will leave discussion of this until then.

Heb 8:3-6

⁽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. ⁽⁴⁾ If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁽⁵⁾ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” ⁽⁶⁾ But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

The logic of this section surrounds the fact that Jesus is priest of the *true* sanctuary / tabernacle in heaven. Thus Jesus brings His offering (His own blood, discussed in detail in chapter 10) in heaven. The earthly service is, of necessity, a copy and symbol of the true heavenly service, having its own copy-priests and its own copy-sacrifices. Jesus did not come to perpetuate the copy but to establish and reveal the true heavenly ministry. That is why He did not serve as a priest on earth.

...something to offer

Much argument has surrounded this phrase over the centuries. Does the author mean that Jesus has an offering which He makes in heaven? And is this a once-for-all offering or a repeated one? The Roman Catholics have taken this to mean a repeated offering brought in heaven. They say that through the breaking of bread, which they believe is made into the real body of Christ, Christ makes a repeated sacrifice before God in heaven. Some have argued that the aorist tense of “to offer” shows that the offering was made once in the past. But this is based on a misunderstanding of the aorist tense. It actually gives no indication of the time or duration of the action. However, the repeated assertions elsewhere in Hebrews surely indicate that the offering was made once for all. His death occurred on earth, but his blood was brought to the heavenly sanctuary. His priesthood is based upon a single sacrifice just as motherhood is based upon a single birth.

...the pattern shown you on the mountain

Many have wondered what exactly was Moses copying? Is there a literal tabernacle in heaven which Moses was shown in order to make a copy on earth? This does not seem to be the meaning. There is no indication that Moses had a vision of heaven, but simply that he was shown a plan from which to construct the tabernacle.² The question of the nature of the heavenly tabernacle will be left to the next chapter where it is discussed in some detail.

...founded on better promises

The Law of Moses was based on the promise that God gave to Moses after they passed through the Red Sea:

“If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.” (Ex 15:26)

God expanded upon this later, as recorded in Deuteronomy 6. The condition of blessing was obedience to the Law:

“If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers.” (Deu 7:12)

The New Covenant is based on God’s forgiveness:

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:34)

All God’s promised blessings are now founded on this promise to forgive, whereas under the Old Covenant they were based on the requirement of obedience. What a radical change!

Heb 8:7-9

⁽⁷⁾ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁽⁸⁾ But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ⁽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.

The author now demonstrates that the Hebrew scriptures not only point to the new priesthood, but also call for and point to a new Covenant. The rest of this chapter is simply a quote of Jer 31:31-34 followed by a brief statement that the Old Covenant is therefore obsolete.

² See Ex 25:40, 26:30 and Num 8:4.

The first covenant

The “first covenant” is not the one made with Abraham which was discussed in chapter 6, but the covenant made with Moses which included the Law. It was not in fact the first covenant, but the fifth of eight. The covenants God made with men are with Noah and all mankind (Gen 9), Abraham (Gen 12-17), Lot (Deut 2), Jacob (Gen 28), Moses (Ex 19-24), Aaron’s descendants (Num 18:19), David (2 Sam 7) and the New Covenant.

The covenant with Moses was so dominant in Jewish religion and culture that it was known simply as *the covenant*. It was renewed four times before the exile: by Moses (Deut. 29), by Joshua (Josh 24), by Jehoiada (2Kings 11:17) and finally by King Josiah (2Kings 23:2-3). It was seen as eternal³ and had become synonymous with the Law.⁴

Nevertheless, the Abrahamic covenant was not forgotten. It was held onto as the guarantee of Israel's redemption and renewed salvation.

“I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. They will pay for their sins because they rejected my laws and abhorred my decrees. Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD.” (Lev 26:42-45)

As we see from this passage in Leviticus, even at its inception the weakness of the Mosaic covenant was foreseen. The people would reject His laws. But God would remain faithful to His covenant with Abraham and so Jeremiah speaks of a New Covenant whereby God’s laws would be written on our hearts.

...with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah

The New Covenant is made with both Israel and Judah. The reunification of Israel and Judah is a recurring theme of the Old Testament prophecies looking forward to the New Covenant. The original nation of Israel was divided after Solomon into ‘Judah’ – comprised of Judah, Benjamin and the Levites - and ‘Israel’ comprised of the rest of the tribes. Judah continued to worship at the temple in Jerusalem whilst Israel worshipped at Dan and Bethel where golden calves were erected. Despite the years of idolatry in Israel, God never abandoned them, sending many prophets who spoke God’s word and there were times of revival. Samaria became the capital of Israel and by Jesus’ time the remnant of those tribes still living in the area, who intermarried with other peoples who settled there, were known as the Samaritans and looked down on by the Jews as impure. The identity of the ten tribes of Israel has been lost. The literal fulfilment of these promises is therefore very problematic. However, there is an echo in this promise of the wider promise, again found in many places, that the gentiles will also be brought into the family of God’s people. My reading is that these promises concerning the reunification of Israel and Judah are symbolic of the union of Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ and that the New Covenant will bring unity to all God’s people. One day there will be no division between Christians as the fullness of God’s eternal kingdom is realised in all its glory.

³ “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites for ever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.” (Ex 31:16-17)

⁴ e.g. “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.” (Ps 25:10)

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31 is the only place in the Old Testament where the New Covenant is mentioned by name, although the contents of this New Covenant are found across the Hebrew scriptures.⁵

In those days, as is the case today, Jews understood this New Covenant as being the laws of the Mosaic covenant written upon men's hearts, not a new set of laws or a different kind of law. They expected the new covenant to be a new God-given passion for the Law of Moses such that God's people would joyfully and completely obey it.⁶ The New Testament authors, however, took more careful notice of the statement that it would "not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers." They understood that the Mosaic Law was weak, had been fulfilled by Christ and was now obsolete, being replaced by a radically new way of knowing and pleasing God.

The weakness of the Law

Yet having God's law in one's heart and mind was nothing new. The Law itself commanded that it should be memorised so that it was always before the people.

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deu 6:6-7)

Even circumcision of the heart was called for in the Law:

"Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." (De 10:16)

The Law was put in their mouths and hearts so that they would obey it:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it. (De 30:11-14)

But knowing and even loving the Law does not enable us to keep it. Paul wrote about his frustrating experience before salvation of delighting in the Law and yet being unable to keep it.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom 7:22-24)

Something far more effective than the Law is required. The weakness of the law can hardly be overemphasised. I have been in situations where "laws" have been put in place to protect leaders from falling into serious moral sin. Leading men were supposed to be in "accountable relationships" with peers who would keep each other from sin and they were forbidden from ministering to or visiting women alone. Despite this some leaders had adulterous relationships. Neither *knowing* what is right nor having rules *saying* what is right make people *do* right. Learning the rules off by heart does not make much difference. Having the rules in our hearts and minds does not produce obedience, which is why Paul writes,

"Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." (Col 2:20-23)

⁵ See especially Ezek 11:19-20, 16:60-63, 36:26-29, 37:26-28, Isa 54:10,13.

⁶ See for example www.jewishencyclopedia.com

Something far more radical than better known or better phrased law is required. That is what the New Covenant promises.

...I turned away from them

The author has already discussed the time when God turned away from the people, swearing an oath against them in the desert. Since then, there were many occasions when God acted on the basis of the covenant, bringing troubles upon the people because of their stubborn disobedience. It is amazing that just before Israel finally entered the promised land, God told them they would rebel and be sent into exile as slaves again (Deut 4:25ff). Yet although God often turned away from them, He never abandoned them. He always remembered and remained faithful to His covenant with Abraham, and we are the beneficiaries and inheritors of that promise of unconditional blessing.

Heb 8:10-12

⁽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 neighbour, 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.

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts

When God says he will put His laws in our minds and write them on our hearts he means much more than putting them in our consciousness. As we have already seen, the Law had already achieved *that* much. Never was there a people more conscious of the Law than those Pharisees in Jesus' day. The meaning of this promise is far more radical, as Ezekiel shows us.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. (Eze 36:25-28)

We see here how the New Covenant deals with the problem of our rebellious hearts by changing them and giving us God's Holy Spirit. The promised result is that we will choose freely to obey God and will inherit the promises given to Abraham.

This begs the question, "Why then do I still struggle with sin if I have been given this new heart and God's Holy Spirit?" Paul offers the answer in Romans 6 where he says that those who have been baptised into Jesus' death and raised to new life with Him are no longer slaves to sin and so should stop offering ourselves to sin and instead offer ourselves to God for righteousness for we are not under Law but grace. In Gal 5:16 Paul says, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh."

There is an important truth here: if we sin it is because we present ourselves to temptation. Sin does not mug us! Satan would have us believe we are still his slaves, but if we have the Holy Spirit that is a lie. Some Christians become enslaved to sin through repeatedly offering themselves to sin, in which case they may need help and prayer for deliverance. But if we walk in fellowship with the Holy Spirit we will not deliberately sin.

Many Christians suffer from a guilt complex even when they are not subject to legalistic leadership or teaching. Perhaps this is the work of Satan or a hangover from the fall. Whatever the cause it is debilitating and should be aggressively dealt with. Romans 8 is a good place to find encouragement. The Holy Spirit works in our conscience to bring joyful release from sin, not introspective joy-killing self condemnation. Yes, we should examine ourselves lest we be harbouring rebellion or

unforgiveness, but our preoccupation should be with the apostle and High Priest of our faith, Jesus Christ.

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

The promise “I will be their God, and they will be my people” is repeated many times in scripture and finds its ultimate fulfilment in Revelation 21:1-4.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

This is the age long desire and purpose of God; that he should dwell with His people in eternal peace and glory. God is so excited that the day has finally come that he says it three times: “the dwelling of God is with men”, “he will live with them” and “God himself will be with them and be their God.” That our eternal destiny is found on earth rather than in heaven may come as a surprise to many, but that is what all the scriptures teach – though it will indeed be a new earth, redeemed from creation’s current enslavement to decay.

It is the foretaste of this full-blown presence of God that we enjoy now under the New Covenant. He is with us by faith and by promise whenever we gather together for prayer or worship, and His indwelling Spirit is always with us. Sometimes His presence is unfelt and unseen but sometimes it is so powerful we cannot stand or speak. He is with us in times of great rejoicing but also in our darkest times of despair. Let us be secure in the knowledge that He is our God and we are His people. He is always with us and for us, working to bring us to the day when we see Him face to face.

No longer will a man teach his neighbour...

A long cherished hope of the prophets was that one day the task of stirring up faith and obedience amongst the people would not fall only upon the prophets and priests, but that each one would teach his neighbour and his brother:

Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” (Isa 2:3)

But Jeremiah speaks of an even more wonderful day when even this will be unnecessary because all will know the Lord from the least to the greatest. The meaning here seems to be that knowledge of God’s will under the New Covenant is given directly by God through His indwelling Spirit. No longer is obedience and faith to be dependant upon teaching the Law. The Spirit Himself bears witness in our hearts:

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” (Ro 8:16)

We walk by faith not by sight and live according to the Spirit, not the flesh. God teaches us how we should live:

“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.” (1Th 4:9)

“As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.” (1Jo 2:27)

Of course this does not mean that we should no longer teach and exhort one another. The point is that the New Covenant brings each one into direct relationship with God so that His Spirit becomes the *principal* instructor in the glory and the ways of God.

... they will all know me

Some people think that everyone will eventually go to heaven (except perhaps Hitler and Saddam Hussein). This based on a narrow selection of scriptures such as “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:9-11) and “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2Pe 3:9) They argue that if anyone fails to acknowledge Christ and perishes then God’s will has not been accomplished and God is not sovereign. They believe that at the point of death everyone comes to faith in Christ and is saved. This view, known as Universalism, was mentioned in the last chapter. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the matter, but suffice to say that the promise that “they will all know me” is addressed to God’s people, not to the world at large.

I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more

We have already discussed the foundation of the New Covenant: God’s forgiveness. It cannot be stressed enough that the foundation of our salvation is the mercy and forgiveness of God. Although this may be taught every week in church and sung about in every worship song, it is a fact that many Christians fail to find peace and security in God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness. We remember things which God has forgotten. Central to the appeal of this letter is the fact that by one sacrifice Christ has obtained eternal forgiveness for all our sins and brought us into peace with God. We can and should come to Him with boldness, confident in Christ, and find grace and help in all our needs.

Heb 8:13

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.

600 years after Jeremiah prophesied the coming of a new covenant, Jesus prophesied the destruction of the temple. It seems certain that this letter was written before that event since the writer says here that the Law will “soon disappear” without any reference to the destruction of the temple.

...he has made the first one obsolete

Throughout this letter the author has taken pains to show how the “great salvation” which was “spoken by the Lord” is foreseen in the Law and prophets and is their fulfilment. Even the demise of the Old Covenant is foreseen in Jeremiah. Indeed, it was not the Law that was faulty, but it was the people that God found fault with (v8). As Paul says, the Law is good and holy. It is nevertheless insufficient.

The New Testament teaches that the New Covenant has surpassed and replaced the old. All Christians are agreed that there is no longer a place for the sacrificial law. But what of the moral law? Can that be separated from the Law of Moses and thus retained? It has been argued for centuries that the Ten Commandments and other moral aspects of the Law still bind Christians. I think this is wrong and completely misses the point of the New Testament teaching about Law and grace and the process of sanctification. This view is now quite widely held and is powerfully argued by Fee in his book “God’s empowering presence”. In Jesus’ sermon on the mount He clearly teaches that the new standard of morality far exceeds the Law of Moses and Paul teaches in his letter to the Galatians that those who walk in the Spirit will exceed the requirements of the law. The Law is a suitable standard for unbelievers, but Christians are called to live in a completely different

kind of relationship with God. Grace is the foundation for this relationship, not repentance, obedience or any other kind of human attainment. Repentance and obedience are produced by grace and proceed from it rather than leading to it.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that the Hebrew scriptures foresee the coming of a New Covenant which will replace the Mosaic Covenant and shows that the Mosaic tabernacle was a foreshadow of the true tabernacle in heaven where Jesus serves as High Priest.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 8

- V1 How does the knowledge that Jesus serves as High Priest before God encourage you?
 - V2 How does the knowledge that there is a true tabernacle in heaven affect your view of our earthly churches with their patterns of worship and leadership structures?
 - V7-9 What is wrong with the Old Covenant way of setting laws?
 - V10 What “laws” has God written on your heart?
 - V11 How do you know you “know the Lord”?
 - V12 Are you confident and joyful in the knowledge that God does not remember your sins?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?