

Hebrews 8:7-13 "Living under the New Covenant" [***](#)

Main Idea: In Hebrews 8:7-13, we learn about the wonderful privilege of living under the new covenant. In this passage, which includes a quotation of Jeremiah 31:31-34, God predicted two important truths regarding the new covenant.

I. God predicted the need for the new covenant (7-8).

- A. Change is necessary when the old isn't working.
 - 1. The problem wasn't with the covenant.
 - 2. The problem was with the people.
- B. Change is necessary when a better way has come.
- C. Change is necessary when the original purpose has been fulfilled.

II. God predicted the nature of the new covenant (9-13).

- A. It's not like the old covenant (9).
 - 1. The old resulted in unfaithfulness.
 - 2. The old resulted in loss.
- B. It depends on God, not man (10).
 - 1. God puts His laws in our minds.
 - 2. God transforms our hearts.
 - 3. God enters into a personal relationship with us.
- C. It results in people truly knowing the Lord (11-12).
 - 1. A person could belong to the old covenant and *not* know the Lord.
 - 2. Sadly, a person can belong to a church and not know the Lord.
 - 3. Everyone who has experienced the reality of the new covenant knows the Lord.
 - 4. Everyone who has experienced the reality of the new covenant has experienced the mercy of God.
- D. It replaces the old covenant (13).

The Bottom Line: Since the new has come, why go back?

- 1. Put your trust in God's work, not your own.
- 2. Praise the Lord for His new covenant!

This past week I finished a book by Gordon MacDonald entitled, *Who Stole My Church?* It's a good read and a timely one for the church in America. The subtitle reads, "What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the 21st Century." It's actually a fictional account about a church in New England that's struggling with change, and shares what the seventy year old pastor did to navigate through the troubled waters. He began meeting with the church veterans, and asked them to voice their concerns. He didn't have to ask twice.

"I don't see why these new people feel that they have to change everything that we've done for so many years. I never know what to expect when I come to church. And, I'll be frank, if you want to know the truth, I can't get used to you not wearing a suit and tie. We were taught that you honor God by the way you dress in church."

That was the first response, and others quickly joined in. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That's what I always say," John Sanders, the one-time building committee chairman said. "These guys around here want to fix stuff that isn't broke as far as I'm concerned."

"They're worried about loudspeakers when what we really need," said Ted Patton, once an elder in the church, "is to get Wednesday night prayer service started again. Prayer meetings are the true test of how much a church loves the Lord. Why, we used to fill the whole sanctuary with people on Wednesday nights."

"Now really, Ted," Lillian Seamonds retorted. "How many times did that happen? The sanctuary get filled for a prayer service, I mean. I can only remember the one time...when Cliff McGinnis was dying."

"What bothers me is that we don't have Sunday School any more," said Yvonne Padula.

Ernie Yost jumped in, "Missions is really going downhill in this church...We haven't had a missionary conference for...um, at least twenty years."

"I wish there was more doctrinal preaching," Russ Milner stressed. "How are these young people going to grow in the Word if they don't get some good solid teaching."

Others had comments about the changes in music, both style and song selection. Finally, the lady in the story named Yvonne said with great sadness, "All I know is that someone stole my church and I'd like to get it back."^[1] Hence, the title of the book... *Who Stole My Church?*

You'll have to read the book to find out what happens, but I will say this. It's amazing what happens when the older and younger generations in the church actually get together, speak the truth in love, work hard at listening to each other, and laying aside personal preferences, seek together to do what will most exalt Christ.

I suppose we all, to some degree, struggle with change. The book of Hebrews was written to address a situation where change had occurred, and some were flat out opposed to it. Fourteen hundred year traditions were being set aside, and folks were wondering *why*.

The fact is, new isn't always better, but this new is...the *new covenant*. The new covenant wasn't established by man, but by God Himself, and specifically His Son who announced, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you (Luke 22:20)."

Today we who know Christ are living under the new covenant. I don't think most of realize just how radical the change was from the old covenant to the new covenant, nor do we appreciate as we ought the wonderful privileges that are ours under the new covenant. But Hebrews 8:7-13 can help us this morning. In this passage, which includes a quotation of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34, God predicted two important truths regarding the new covenant.

I. God predicted the need for the new covenant (7-8).

Verses 7-8 "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. 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.'"

A covenant is an agreement entered into by two parties. When God establishes a covenant, however, the two parties are not on equal footing, as Barclay explains, "In the biblical sense of a covenant, the whole approach comes from God. Man cannot bargain with God; he cannot argue about the terms of the covenant; he can only accept or reject the offer that God makes."^[2]

Fourteen centuries before Christ, God established a covenant. The writer here calls it "the first covenant," and says if nothing had been wrong with it, another would not have been necessary. But there was a problem, and that problem led to a change in covenants.

When it change necessary? In the case of the new covenant, we discover three situations in which change is necessary.

A. Change is necessary when the old isn't working. In Gordon MacDonald's story we heard the old adage from the character, John Sanders, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." That's good counsel to a point, but what if it is? What if it *is* broke and consequently isn't working? Then it's foolish to hold on to the old.

For instance, last week I heard a loud chirping sound piercing the night air in our house. As I lay there in bed, I knew instantly what it was. The battery in the smoke detector had gone bad. So what did I do? I *changed* the battery. Did I feel badly about the change? Not at all. I had absolutely no sentimental attachment that made it difficult to part with the old battery. It was as simple as, "If the old isn't working, it's time to change."

That's the way it was with the old covenant. The old wasn't working. Why not?

1. *The problem wasn't with the covenant.* Actually, the old covenant was a good thing. God, who is good and gives only good gifts to His people, gave this good gift to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The old covenant, sometimes referred to as the Mosaic covenant, included detailed instructions concerning the Levitical priesthood and a host of sacrifices God required His people to offer for the covering of their sins. For over fourteen centuries God expected His people to keep the terms and conditions of the old covenant, for their good and His glory.

And therein lay the problem. They couldn't. The problem wasn't with the old covenant. Rather...

2. *The problem was with the people.* Notice the beginning of verse 8, "But God found fault with the people." The old covenant functioned like a yardstick. It revealed God's standard, and consequently, it revealed man's shortcomings.

That's the story of the Old Testament. As you read the account, it hits you again and again. The people keep missing the mark. Not just the riffraff either. Even the good guys miss it. Moses can't contain his anger and misses the promised land. David can't control his lusts and commits adultery and murder. Isaiah the prophet acknowledges he has a dirty mouth and says, "Woe is me!"

B. Change is necessary when a better way has come. We no longer use a pot-bellied stove in our church. Our forefathers did. When they constructed our first facility in 1878, they heated it by burning coal in a pot-bellied stove, right in the sanctuary.

We don't heat our church building that way any more. Why not? A better way has come that's more efficient and effective, not to mention cleaner.

One of the key words in Hebrews is the word "better." In Christ we have a *better hope* (7:19), built on *better promises* (8:6). We have *better possessions* (10:34) and are looking forward to a *better country* (11:16). And 7:22 says boldly, "Jesus has become the guarantee of a *better covenant*."

Please realize that Christianity didn't pop into existence out of thin air. It's built on the foundation of Judaism. This was key for the first readers to hear, as Raymond Brown observes, "Our author does not want any Jewish reader of this letter to regard Christianity as a completely new religion; it is an essential realization of the Old Testament promise. The Lord Jesus is the direct and only fulfillment of all the sacrifices and ceremonial and priesthood of the old covenant."^[3]

Again, just because something is new doesn't necessarily make it better. But when God makes something new, it is better! And the new covenant, for reasons our text will momentarily spell out clearly, is *better*.

C. Change is necessary when the original purpose has been fulfilled. When both of our daughters were infants, they started out the way we all did, not on solid food (because they couldn't handle it), but on *milk*. And how a baby loves its milk! Its life revolves around (and so does your life as parents) getting that precious milk. As time progresses, however, the child's diet changes from milk to soft food and eventually to solid food.

Is that change necessary? Absolutely. When the original purpose has been fulfilled, it's time to change. The purpose of a milk diet for a child is temporary, to help facilitate the necessary growth and development that moves the child from infancy to eventual maturity.

That's the way the Law worked in the old covenant. As Galatians 3:24-26 (KJV) explains, "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."

The purpose of the first covenant has been fulfilled, and so consequently, there's been a change. The new covenant is now in place.

Please realize this change didn't just "happen" either, for God predicted this change through the prophet Jeremiah some six hundred years before it happened.

By the way, what makes the new covenant *new* anyway? In Greek there are actually two words for "new." There's *neos* which identifies something new in time. Then there is *kainos* which means new in quality. If I said I just bought a *new* car, it's *neos* for it's new to me, but it's not *kainos*, for there are a lot of other cars like it. The new covenant that Jesus established is not merely *neos*, but *kainos*, for it is different in quality from the former covenant.^[4]

In what way is the new covenant of a different quality when compared to the old? That brings us to our second point in the text. First, God predicted the need for the new covenant. Second...

II. God predicted the nature of the new covenant (9-13).

Again, God made this prediction through the prophet Jeremiah who served in Jerusalem at a very difficult time in Israel's history. Again and again God's people had violated God's commands, and as God Himself clearly stipulated in the first covenant, if that were to happen He would get their attention by sending them into captivity. And so He did. It was Jeremiah's task to announce that God was bringing the Babylonians to conquer disobedient Judah and take the Jews into captivity.

But towards the end of his book, in chapter 31, Jeremiah made a Spirit-revealed prediction. The writer of Hebrews records that prediction beginning in verse 8, "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."

Notice the mention of both the house of Israel *and* the house of Judah. God chose Israel to be His people, but the nation divided into two kingdoms after Solomon died, and stayed divided for two hundred years (931-722 BC), often fighting with each other until the northern kingdom went into captivity. Yet through Jeremiah God announced that the new covenant would include both sides of the divided house.

What kind of covenant is the new covenant? If we'll examine carefully God's prediction, we'll learn four things about the nature of the new covenant.

A. It's not like the old covenant (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."

Remember, God is speaking here through Jeremiah, and God is giving His assessment of the old covenant. He mentions two outcomes...

1. *The old resulted in unfaithfulness.* The old covenant began, the Lord says, when He took Israel's forefathers by the hand, like a dad leading His toddler child, and rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He was kind and gracious to them—He even gave them the promised land. But they didn't return His love. "They did not remain faithful to my covenant," says the Lord. Consequently...

2. *The old resulted in loss.* "I turned away from them," declares the Lord. He must. A holy God cannot fellowship with unholy people.

That was the problem with the old covenant. It revealed man's sinfulness, but couldn't change it.^[5] But the new covenant is different, and here's one of the primary things that makes it different...

B. It depends on God, not man (10). "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord." Stop there for a moment. *I will do it*, said the Lord. In fact, He repeats that phrase again and again, "*I will make this covenant... I will put my laws in the minds... I will be their God... I will forgive their wickedness.*" The new covenant depends on the Lord Himself, not on man.

Notice carefully. With whom did God say He would make the new covenant? "This is the covenant I will make *with the house of Israel.*" That raises a question...

If the new covenant was predicted for *Israel*, how do we explain its effect on the *church*? Or, as Wiersbe puts it, "How can God promise these blessings to the Jews and then turn around and give them to the church?"^[6]

That's a critical question, and there are different answers being offered in our day. Some solve the dilemma by saying that the church is "spiritual Israel" (citing texts like Gal 3:13ff which indicate that present day believers are the "spiritual seed of Abraham"). But does the truth that believers are Abraham's spiritual seed lead to the conclusion that the church has become the "spiritual Israel"? I don't think so. Verse 8 again specifically predicts that the new covenant will be made with the house of Israel and Judah. As Wiersbe summarizes, "Once we are permitted to make such plain words as 'Israel' and 'Judah' mean something else, there is no end to how we might interpret the Bible!"^[7]

Other Bible students say the new covenant has no present fulfillment in the church, that it's strictly future and will be fulfilled only when the Jews are regathered and their kingdom established. In other words, it won't happen until Christ returns. But Hebrews 9:15 clearly states that Christ *is* the mediator of a new covenant, present tense, a truth mentioned again in 12:24. As Wiersbe rightly observes, "To affirm that there are *two* 'new covenants,' one for Israel and one for the church, is to create more questions!"^[8]

The solution, I believe, at least in part, is to remember what the church is. Jesus announced, "I will build my church (Matt. 16:18)." And that's what He is doing. The book of Acts tells the story. He began in Jerusalem and Judea, and for the first ten years or so of its existence, the church was comprised of Jewish believers in Christ. It's not until Acts 8 that the church moved beyond "Jewish soil," reaching Samaritans, and then began to incorporate Gentiles beginning in Acts 10. When Paul preached the gospel, he says he

preached it "to the Jew first, then to the Gentile (Rom. 1:16)." In the church, Gentiles who were once "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise," as Ephesians 2:12 puts it, "have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

So can Gentiles benefit from the new covenant blessings? Yes! Where? In the church. Does that mean that the church has replaced Israel and that God is through with Israel? Not in my estimation. Romans 11 indicates that Israel has "experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved (11:25-26)."

I find Wiersbe's explanation helpful, "Today the blessings of the New Covenant are applied to individuals. When Jesus comes in glory to redeem Israel, then the blessings of the New Covenant will be applied to that beleaguered nation. Read all of Jeremiah 31 to see what God has planned for Israel, His people."^[9]

Now back to our point. What makes the new covenant unique from the old? It depends on God, not man. How so? What is it that God does for His people under the new covenant? He mentions three benefits in verse 10.

1. *God puts His laws in our minds.* "I will put my laws in their minds." Where were His laws in the old covenant? He wrote the ten commandments on stone tablets. The laws were exterior to the people. But if you know Christ as your Savior, if you are living under the new covenant, God has put His laws in your mind. The second benefit is related to the first...

2. *God transforms our hearts.* "I will put my laws in their minds *and write them on their hearts,*" says the Lord. God isn't interested merely in externals. It's not enough to have a Bible on a coffee table, or a Bible verse on a wall hanging. It's not even enough to sit in church listening to God's Word. What's needed is for His Word to be internalized. And that's what God Himself does for those who put their trust in Christ. He puts His laws *in our minds* and writes them *on our hearts*.

My friend, it's not enough to have God's Word *out there*. It must be *in here* (the mind and heart). But how can it get there? Only God can put it there.

Five hundred years ago, John Calvin, commenting on this passage, emphasized this point, "God calls us to Himself without effect, as long as He speaks only with a human voice. He certainly teaches and commands what is right but His words fall on deaf ears. If we seem to hear anything, our ears are struck merely by the outward sound but our hearts, being full of wickedness and stubbornness, reject all sound doctrine. In short the Word of God never reaches our hearts, since they are iron or stony until they are softened by Him. Indeed, they have a contrary law written on them and they are ruled by perverse passions which drive us to rebellion. Therefore God proclaims His law by human voice in vain unless He writes it on our hearts by His Spirit, that is, unless He forms and fits us for obedience."^[10]

That's exactly what God does in the new covenant. He puts His laws on our hearts.

Last week I was burdened for a man I've known for years, a man who doesn't know Christ. I went to see him and asked him if he thought much about what it will be like to stand before the Lord. "No," he replied. "Not much." I asked if he'd like me to share with him how he could be ready to stand before the Lord. His response was *no response*. That dear man is exactly where I once was.

I don't think we realize how severe our predicament is as sinners. We do not enter the world neutral. We enter the world with hearts that freely and firmly resist God.

Calvin explains, "It is clear from this how much force free will has, and what rightness there is in our nature before God renews us. We will and we choose, and we do so of our own accord, but our will is carried away by an almost raging impulse to resist God and cannot in any way submit to His justice. So it comes about that the Law is fatal and deadly for us as long as it remains written on tablets of stone, as Paul says in II Cor. 3.3. In short, we accept God's command obediently when He changes and corrects the native wickedness of our hearts by His Spirit; otherwise He will find nothing in us but evil passions and a

heart wholly given to wickedness. It is clearly laid down that a new covenant is to be made by which God will write His laws on our hearts, because otherwise it will be of no effect."^[11]

We are so privileged to live in new covenant times! Under the new covenant God puts His laws in our minds, and He transforms our hearts. But there's more!

3. *God enters into a personal relationship with us.* "I will be their God, and they will be my people." God's not interested in mere religion. In fact, He despises it. What He desires, indeed what He makes a reality in the new covenant, is to enter into a *personal relationship* with people like us, so that He becomes our God and we become His people.

We might think of it this way. The new covenant works *top-down* and *inside-out*. *Top-down*, meaning He initiates the work. And *inside-out*, meaning He changes our hearts and minds first, then our lives.^[12]

That's quite a change, isn't it? Think about it. Under the old covenant a person might obey God, not because he loved the Lord, but merely because he didn't want the consequences of *not* obeying God. Parents, you understand this dynamic. You give your children rules for their good because you love them. But they may obey your rules, not because they agree that your motive is good, and not because your love has gripped their heart and they want to please you. A child can obey just because he doesn't like the alternative, the hard things that would result from his disobedience.

Under the new covenant, God's people want to please Him. That's the desire He has put there. He is their God, and they are His people.

In Jeremiah's prophecy God made a third prediction concerning the nature of the new covenant...

C. It results in people truly knowing the Lord (11-12). Notice verse 11, "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Is this saying we don't need to submit ourselves to the teaching of God's Word any longer? No, notice carefully. Jeremiah's prophecy didn't say that under the new covenant a man will no longer teach his brother. He said that a man won't teach his brother, saying, "*Know the Lord.*"

Think of it this way...

1. *A person could belong to the old covenant and not know the Lord.* You entered the covenant family merely by being born a Jew. That meant the nation of Israel, which was God's chosen people, was made up of both saved and lost people. And if you were a saved person in Israel, that is, you'd come to know God personally as your Savior by grace and through faith in the coming Messiah, you wanted others to know Him, too. And so you would go to your neighbors and kinsmen, and teach them saying, "Know the Lord!" Again, the reality was that a person could belong to the old covenant and *not* know the Lord. Know this...

2. *Sadly, a person can belong to a church and not know the Lord.* I've heard it said that one of the greatest mission fields in America is the church itself. Church roll after church roll contains the names of people who are religious, yet dead in their sins. They've never been born again by the Spirit. They may know that Jesus died on a cross to pay sin's penalty, but they *don't know Jesus*. Here's the bottom line...

3. *Everyone who has experienced the reality of the new covenant knows the Lord.* That's what God Himself predicted. "They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." An eight year old child can enjoy new covenant blessings every bit as much as an eighty year old retiree. The only requirement? You must *know the Lord*. Not know *about* Him, but *know Him*.

But how can a finite creature, a sinner no less, ever come to know God? God Himself answers that question in verse 12, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." That indicates that...

4. *Everyone who has experienced the reality of the new covenant has experienced the mercy of God.*

The NIV begins the verse, "For I will forgive their wickedness." Literally God says, "I will be merciful to the unrighteous." The word is "merciful" is *hileos*, and it's related to the term 'propitiation' (*hilasmos*; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), as well as the word for 'mercy seat' (*hilasterion*; Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5). The reason God can extend mercy to undeserving sinners is because His Son took the just penalty that rebel sinners deserve to pay. Christ satisfied, Christ *propitiated* the divine demands for sin's punishment. It's on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross that God now offers free and full pardon and forgiveness to those who were once His enemies.

And everyone in the new covenant has experienced just that. They've experienced the mercy and forgiveness of God. Do you remember brothers and sisters? Do you remember the joy that God gave you when He forgave you through faith in His Son? If that's not happened in your life, you're outside the covenant. And if that's your situation, my friend, you need a change today.

As soon as the writer cites Jeremiah's words about forgiveness, he stops the quote and will transition in chapter 9 to a fuller explanation of what makes forgiveness possible, namely the shed blood of Christ. But there's one more distinctive he wants us to know about the new covenant.

D. It replaces the old covenant (13). "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear."

Christ actually made the first covenant obsolete on the weekend He died for sinners and left the tomb. That was around the year AD 30. Soon after, many Jews received Messiah Jesus as their Savior—3,000 did in Acts 2, a couple thousand more in Acts 4, and many more in Acts 5 and beyond.

Yet even though God was through with the old covenant system, some die-hards dug in their heels and kept it running for another forty years. When this writer wrote Hebrews, it was in the 60s, just a short while before the Romans, in AD 70, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple with its sacrificial system. The writer saw it coming. *What is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.* Indeed, that's exactly what happened.

The question of the hour is this...

The Bottom Line: Since the new has come, why go back?

That's what some folks were thinking about doing in the first century, going back to the safety and security of their old ways in Judaism, and that's why this book was written. But whether we're Jewish or not, all of us must face this issue. Are we going to *go back* to our old ways, or are we going to say, "Christ is all I need." My challenge to you today is simply this...

1. *Put your trust in God's work, not your own.* God alone can do for you what needs to happen. He alone can put His law on your mind and in your heart. He alone can bring you into a relationship with Himself. And that's what He will do if you will repent of your sin and put your faith in Jesus Christ. The God of the Bible is the One who makes things new.

If He has done that in our lives, how should we respond? By doing this...

2. *Praise the Lord for His new covenant!* Praise Him with your words and with your life. Cherish the blessings He's given us. And share them with others. Let the world know about the new covenant!

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church?*, p. 6.

[2] William Barclay, p. 91.

[3] Raymond Brown, p. 148.

[4] See W. Barclay for a helpful explanation of the words, p. 92.

[5] A word to parents... Our kids need more than a list of do's and don'ts. That's the old covenant approach. Yes, they need do's and don'ts, but don't stop there. They need what you need, a Savior!

[6] Warren Wiersbe, p. 306.

[7] Wiersbe, p. 306.

[8] Wiersbe, p. 306.

[9] Wiersbe, p. 306.

[10] John Calvin, pp. 110-111.

[11] John Calvin, p. 111.

[12] The old covenant worked *outside-in*

can enable you to do it. In the new covenant, God puts His commands in our minds and hearts. He works *inside-out*. And it happens *top-down*.