



Hebrews 8:3-13  
Hebrews: Seeing Jesus Clearly  
“A Better Covenant”

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Pray. You may have noticed over the years a growing loss of keeping a promise. A person's word just isn't what it once was. Yours might be. I'd like to think mine is...but on the whole a handshake agreement or a pinky promise just isn't what it once was, and even signed contracts have escape clauses.

In the early 2000's I was on staff at a church in charge of their athletic ministry in a brand-new gym they had built — they were still painting the lines when I was hired. One thing I did that was not athletic-related but utilized the gym was to bring the Christian rock band Skillet in for a concert as part of their tour supporting their third or fourth album.

When you bring a band like that into your venue, a large part of the contract you sign is called the Rider. The Rider details everything the band needs that you as the promoter must supply — electrical loads for amplifiers and lights, the minimum stage size, how high off the ground it needs to be, safety requirements...it goes on and on. Get any of this wrong and they could, in theory, negate the contract.

In the middle of Skillet's Rider was an item specifying they wanted Red Gatorade. Or it might have been green — I don't recall the exact color. What I remember is that it was very specific. This is actually a common tactic in the music touring industry going back 45 years or more — not so much an escape clause as a quality control mechanism to see if you read the Rider carefully. If they show up and you have blue Gatorade or no Gatorade at all, you clearly didn't read the contract closely.

It happens in life all the time that someone's word doesn't mean very much — that there's an escape clause, either stated up front or frequently not.

But there is one whose word has never failed. He has made a covenant — a contract — that cannot be broken — because he keeps both sides of it. So, as

we continue in our series on Hebrews, let's turn to **Hebrews 8:3-7**, and then we'll read verses 8-13 in a few minutes. This is all God's word to you and me this morning...

In verses 3-5 — which actually picks up from verses 1-2, themselves something of a summary of chapter 7 — the point being made is that the Old Covenant was real, but always a copy and a shadow of the one to come.

**That Old Covenant is symbolized here by the tabernacle — the portable worship space crafted and used by the Israelites under Moses.** Later, the temple became a fixed version of it. The tabernacle is the original, associated with Moses, the greatest leader of Israel, and with the Old Covenant, so the author is taking his readers back to the very foundation of the Jewish faith. And as verse 5 says, it was always a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.

We also see a connection to last week in verse 4, where it says if Jesus were on earth he would not be a high priest, since there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. This alludes to the fact that Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi — the tribe from which the Old Covenant prescribed earthly priests must come. Jesus wouldn't qualify as a priest in the Old Covenant. This connects to the whole Melchizedek priesthood we discussed last week, and the point Hebrews makes in chapter 7 that Jesus is a high priest and king in the order of Melchizedek. He's outside the prescription of the old law. He transcends it.

**So: The Old Covenant, the tabernacle, and the priesthood — all wrapped up together — were always like a signpost pointing to the new covenant that would eventually come.** We don't want to confuse the signpost with the destination. If you plan a trip to Disneyland and show your kids or grandkids a video of it, that's not the same as going there. And if on the trip you drive past a sign that says "Disneyland" with an arrow, you're not going to stop and tell them you've arrived. Even if you pull into the parking garage and camp out there all day, you're missing what Disneyland really is. Signposts, copies, and shadows point to something greater.

Verse 6 tells us that Jesus has a superior ministry — a superior covenant, of which he is the superior mediator — founded on a better promise. That brings us back to where we started: words and promises.

**A covenant is, in a nutshell, a binding promise between two parties.** A marriage covenant, for instance, is about remaining faithful — physically, emotionally, relationally — and sticking together whether sick or healthy, poor or rich. We don't say, "I think I will be mostly faithful and love you most of the time, especially when things are smooth and easy and there's something in it for me." That's not a covenant. A covenant is binding and black and white.

The Old Covenant came from God through Moses to God's people, and they all agreed to it. We read that in Exodus 24, where the people agree to the terms of the covenant and say, "We will do everything that the Lord has commanded." That covenant became their binding document as a nation and a religious people.

But they didn't keep their side of it. When verse 7 says "if there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant," it doesn't mean the covenant itself was flawed — what was wrong was the people's upkeep of it. Verse 8 (we'll read it in a moment) makes that clear: "But God found fault with the people..."

You might ask (in fact, let's read together): **If God is omnipotent and knew from the beginning the first covenant would fail, why make it at all?** That's a great question, and I'm glad you all asked it! 😊 It is a question theologians have wrestled with for centuries — Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries, Calvin in the 16th, and many others. Let me offer a few answers briefly, all supported by Scripture:

1. **If Jesus had come earlier — during Abraham's time, for instance — there would have been no context for his ministry.** There'd be no Levitical priesthood, no sacrificial system, no Day of Atonement, no

tabernacle or temple. The Old Covenant had to be established to give context to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

2. **God's revelation of himself isn't limited to its conclusion at the cross and empty tomb.** His grace, power, and presence are revealed throughout history — in Israel's failures as well as successes, in prophecy, and more, including in the Old Covenant.
3. **The Old Covenant was never meant solely to save — it was also meant to diagnose.** Just as the specific Gatorade color in Skillet's contract was a quick diagnostic of whether the rider had been carefully read, the Old Covenant diagnoses a problem. It reveals the gap between us and God: The holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity. We can't even keep up our end of a covenant. We desperately need grace. Something radical must be done for us to become the Creation God intended from the beginning.

The problem isn't a lack of information or opportunity to be right with God. It's deeper. It's a problem of the heart. That brings us to the final verses of today's passage, where Hebrews quotes Jeremiah — the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament. **Hebrews 8:8-13.**

**These verses from Jeremiah, originally written somewhere between 626 and 580 B.C., speak of a new covenant God will establish.** The context matters: Jeremiah wrote as Israel was falling apart — Babylon rising, the last Israelite kings cycling through, Jerusalem falling in 586 B.C. Everything was collapsing.

And in the middle of that collapse, after some 800 years of Israel living by that Old Covenant, he writes of a new covenant. We saw something similar with the quote from Psalm 110 last week about a new priest coming in the order of Melchizedek. Both passages are a prophetic word about something new God is going to do that's a change from their current, well-established religious system.

And Jeremiah didn't write in a season of national confidence when things were going well, but in the rubble of Israel's demise. That gives it an extraordinary quality — it's not a celebration of Israel's faithfulness but a

promise made by God precisely because their faithfulness had finally, completely collapsed. In spite of that, a new covenant is coming.

**Jeremiah says: God is still faithful.** This new covenant won't be written on stone tablets. It will be written on hearts and minds. It's not about following rules for their own sake; it's about living as God calls us to because his ways are written within us. There's an interior work being done.

**What is crucial here is that there is no “if you do this...then I will do that.”** That’s the language of the Old Covenant: “If you sacrifice, I will forgive.” There are no directives in this new covenant for the people to maintain their side. God covers both sides — which is what so much of the rest of Hebrews is about: Jesus offering himself as the once-for-all sacrifice we discussed last week.

Notice also that in this new covenant, knowledge of God is available to all. Verse 11 says, “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” No hierarchy, no earthly priestly mediator between people and God. We are all on equal footing through this covenant that Jesus fulfills.

Let me close with a few applications. Grab what hits home for you.

**First, if you feel like you keep failing God and aren't worthy of his forgiveness: this passage reminds us that God's forgiveness is not conditional on your track record.** “I will remember their sins no more” is not contingent on a performance review. Instead, if you are in Christ through faith—through trusting him—then the covenant holds because Jesus holds it on your behalf. Repentance and faith in Jesus are our response and the doorway to life with God — not the foundation or condition for God to do something. God had fulfilled both sides, and we trust that.

**Second, if you tend to treat faith as rule-following, allow God’s word to sink into your heart and transform you from the inside out.** A performance-based approach keeps God at arm’s length. God wants our hearts — to love him, to love his ways, and to live from that place rather than mere

rule-keeping. This is why coming to worship service on Sundays is such a joyful and anticipatory event: God has taken care of both sides of the covenant, and we *get* to come on Sundays and praise him, not *have to*. We wake up Sunday mornings, and we're *stoked* to get here at 9:50 for a 10:00 service...because our hearts are transformed and we realize that we *get* to do this in freedom and response to God's goodness, rather than an obligation and rule following.

**Third, there's a calling to make and keep our own covenant promises.** A little bit later this spring we'll introduce new Covenant Partners (members) here at Rose Hill. That word "covenant" is central to our denomination (it's in our denominational name) and to what it means to be part of one of our churches. Here at Rose Hill, we covenant with one another to lead people — including ourselves — toward Jesus. That's counter-cultural (the covenanting, and the leading toward Jesus). And it plays out in the covenants we make with others: in marriage, at work, in our neighborhoods. So, keep your covenants. Keep your promises. It reflects the character of God into the world.

This passage conveys the core of the good news. **Jesus has brought a new and better covenant — not written on stone but on the heart — grounded entirely in God's faithfulness, offering complete forgiveness and true knowledge of God to all who trust in him.** In a culture where promises mean little and contracts have loopholes, the good news is that this covenant depends not on our resolve, but on God's unbreakable word—his faithfulness—secured by the blood of Jesus.

We have a response — that's what faith is — but it's not an if/then arrangement for God to do something if we move first. It's in response to what he has already done. We trust his word and his work, and with transformed hearts we seek and desire to live like Jesus. We will fall short, but the forgiveness is already there. And one day, on the other side of the grave, we will truly live like Jesus, fully alive in his presence. Let's pray...Amen.