

The Promise of a New Covenant

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Preacher: Dr. Rhys Bezzant

[0:01] Friends, it's a great delight for me this morning to have been asked by the pastoral team to preach from Hebrews chapter 8. I've come to Trinity on and off now for the last seven years. Whenever I'm in town, I come here to church.

It's my spiritual home in the US, so to preach this morning is a great gift to me, and I pray for you as well. We're reading from Hebrews chapter 8, and I'll read from verse 1 to give us some context, though the sermon will be on the second half.

So from Hebrews chapter 8, verse 1. Now the point in what we are saying is this. We do have such a high priest.

Now if he were on earth, he wouldn't be a priest at all.

Since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law, 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.

[1:40] 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's enacted on better promises.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there wouldn't have been occasion to look for a second. 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.

Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers, not 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 didn't continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

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

[2:59] And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. 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. So let me pray. Our gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, please this morning wing these words to the deepest places of our lives.

Please give us gifts that we're not expecting. Please surprise us with thoughts which are from you. Please may we learn this morning how to be your people in this world.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. We all yearn for something bigger.

[4:19] We all try to connect to something bigger than ourselves. It's like the cinema in Melbourne where I live, which has been shaped like an Egyptian temple.

Now, I think it's probably not like an Egyptian temple, actually, but there was an architect who was probably cheap on the day, and he made a movie house that is as good as he thought an Egyptian temple should be.

You arrive and there are carvings of gods above the door. You walk through the long passageway and there are icons of movie stars leading you to the actual cinema.

And, of course, when you get into the cinema, it goes dark and you're connected into a story much bigger than yourself. If it's not movies for you, perhaps it's that you like buying your coffee at Blue State and getting those wooden tokens and putting them in the jar afterwards and supporting some local cause.

Or perhaps you think if you drink enough coffee you'll be able to alleviate world poverty. At least they know, selling us the coffee, that you want to buy into something bigger.

[5:32] Or you can buy pairs of glasses, which the companies give half of what you're spending to some worthy cause. The glasses are probably overpriced in the first place, but at least they know you want to buy into something big.

Or it might be sporting fixtures, attending a football game with thousands and thousands of others screaming around you.

The closest I get to that is turning up to a cricket match with 100,000 others each summer and turning up five days in a row with nothing happening. It's just brilliant.

We want to connect into something bigger. It's part of the way we are as human beings. And I know as we've been reading through the book of Hebrews, the language is foreign.

The details are odd. We've learned of priests and sacrifices, sabbaths, angels, blood, covenants. But effectively, in the end, though, this isn't the vocabulary we might choose to use day by day.

[6:38] The big theme of the book of Hebrews is this is the way you connect into something bigger. This is how you ought to worship. This is the way we're introduced to the transcendent, the eternal, the universal, the perfect, the things that make life worth living.

The book of Hebrews is teaching us how to connect into something big. And as we heard last week, we have a great high priest seated at the right hand of God, ministering in the holy places.

Even today, we are connected into the heartbeat of the universe at this very moment because, friends, we have a great high priest.

We all need a great high priest. Everyone in the room today needs a great high priest. And the wonderful, bold claim of Christian faith is that we have been given a great high priest in the person of Christ.

But not everyone hearing these words from Hebrews 8 first read would have been entirely happy.

[8:01] For the first Hebrews who read this letter or who had it read to them loved their covenant. They had a God who had made a deal with them, who had handed down his law to his people, who gave order to the life of the nation, who gave them a constitution.

And not only was this God giving to his people a gift of the law, God himself was committing to live by it himself. To be predictable.

If you obey me, this will be the blessing. If you disobey me, this will be the curse. So when the first hearers were presented with this text, which reminds them from the prophet Jeremiah that God will establish a new covenant.

Indeed, has established a new covenant through the Lord Jesus. You can imagine there's some muttering in church. What's been wrong with the way we've been living?

Don't we have a special relationship with God anymore? Has God changed his mind about what he wants to do in the world? We're God's chosen nation.

[9:16] Surely we're God's treasured possession. We're the apple of his eye. How can he do this to us, pulling the rug out from under our feet? This new covenant that the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 8 describes wouldn't necessarily have been heard with overwhelming joy by many of its first hearers.

But the writer points out that we've needed, or the people of God needed a new covenant because the first covenant had been faulty.

There was something about it that didn't yet achieve God's purposes, according to verse 7. Indeed, verse 8, he finds that his God finds fault with them when he says.

The old covenant wasn't perfect because it couldn't make people perfect. It gave those who were following no power.

It gave them a path for living, but not yet the power to live it out. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I'll establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

[10:33] Not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. God had certainly taken the initiative.

God had certainly reached out compassionately his hand. God had certainly taken them out of the grip of Pharaoh and brought them through the Red Sea into the promised land. Certainly God had shown his great love and compassion.

But we read on in verse 9. But they didn't continue in my covenant, so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

Though God gave the lead, the people didn't follow. And so they were punished, as we heard would be the condition in Jeremiah 7.

Indeed, in verse 13, more explicitly, the writer says, in speaking of a new covenant, God makes the first one obsolete. And what's becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

[11:51] There's no clearer verse describing the relationship between the old and the new. But please, please recognise that it's not because the first covenant was bad workmanship or a wrong plan.

It was the right plan, but just the first phase of production. The old covenant wasn't God's mistake.

It was God's beginning to renovate the world. A few years ago, there was a Rembrandt exhibit in Melbourne, where I live.

And as you walked in the door of the gallery, there were some Rembrandt charcoal sketches. Glorious in themselves. The figure of Jeremiah, or the figure of Peter, or the figure of Paul.

And looking as you came in the door at these wonderful outlines, you were already taken by the expression on the face or the posture, the mood of the person being depicted.

[13:03] But so cleverly, the curators of the exhibit, after you walked past the charcoal sketches, you saw the actual portraits in full colour, three times larger, hanging on the wall.

Rembrandt wasn't mistaken by first sketching a charcoal outline of his painting of Jeremiah.

It wasn't in error that he did that. In fact, he had to do that first, in order that he had a better sense of how he might then construct the full-blown, full colour, large portrait with all its detail.

You see, the covenant has built-in obsolescence. The old covenant is the sketch.

The new covenant is what was planned from the outset. The full-blown, three-dimensional, glorious gift that the old covenant just in some small way pointed to.

[14:07] And we get, living in a consumer society, that built-in obsolescence is part of the way marketers do their work. I'm told, though you might be able to correct me, that Apple computers, the icon of our age, actually are designed with built-in obsolescence.

Because we want to choose cheap and light, they make the circuitry in a way that responds to our demands, though, of course, we know that if you get five years out of your laptop, you're doing well.

Light bulbs have built-in obsolescence, so they could design them to last forever, or at least for a longer time. No, they're built in such a way that we will buy a new one when it blows.

The pair of shoes I'm wearing I bought just three months ago in the US, and already the soles are worn down. The leather uppers are fine, but the shoe manufacturers know that they don't want me to have these shoes too long, or at least they want me to buy another pair.

They all have built-in obsolescence. They're designed to last a certain time and then to give over to the better model. But lots of Christians find this very difficult to believe.

[15:20] I was on a committee a few years ago with a Roman Catholic nun, and she placed the argument in the room that all religions are basically the same, that really Jews are Christians, though they don't know they're really Christians.

Muslims are Christians, though they don't really know they're Christians. Christians. I was horrified by her call, the argument she was mounting.

One, it's pretty arrogant to tell to a Jewish neighbour, a Muslim neighbour, that they're really ignorant and they don't know that they're worshipping Jesus. I think that's just pure imperialism.

But more than that, she hadn't recognised from Hebrews chapter 8 that it's the Jewish prophet Jeremiah himself who says that the covenant will one day be obsolete.

It's not like it's a Christian saying to a Jew that the covenant is inadequate. No, it's one of the greatest Jewish prophets of all time who's making this call.

[16:35] And, of course, you could turn to Ezekiel 36 for the same kind of argument, that God one day will put a new heart within the people, a new heart that wasn't achieved under the old law.

The Old Testament has within it built in obsolescence. It came home to me starkly a few years ago when I did a tour of the Holy Land of Israel and Palestine.

Our tour leader, whose name was Anani, had been a Jew but was converted to Christ. He was a Messianic Jew. This is his story.

It's quite remarkable. He was reading the law, Exodus and Deuteronomy, which describes how a servant could choose to live in the household of his master, even after his freedom has been granted, by allowing an awl, a sharp metal object, to be pierced through the lobe of his ear against the frame of the door.

And Anani was reading these texts in the law and had no idea what it could mean that a servant's ear might be pierced with an awl.

[17:55] So he decided he had to read on and he read beyond the law and got to the end of the Old Testament scriptures and he was still frustrated. He still hadn't found what the point of this law was.

And so in a moment that could only be described as inspired by God, he decided that he had to read the Christian scriptures as well and see if they provided some resolution to his question.

And he did. And he became a Christian. He read on and discovered the climax of the story.

Indeed, from Hebrews in the early chapters, I think it's chapter two, that Christ was a servant over all the household of God, unlike Moses, finding their understanding of what it might mean that the awl pierced the servant's ear.

Friends, we ought to be praying for our Jewish friends and neighbours to read on in the story and discover its climax.

[19:11] But it's not just that God has big plans for the world and the language of covenant, the conceptuality of covenant, is part of that package describing God's great purposes.

It's not just that God has a great plan, a big plan, it's that God's big plan is also about the depths of my heart.

It's not just that God's plan is big for the whole world, it's that God's big plan for the whole world is anchored in me. For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws into their minds, I will write them on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

It's not merely that God wants to work in history, he wants to work in you. In our hearts, in our minds, writing our law there, living there, just like God lived in the Holy of Holies above the tablets of the law.

[20:30] God wants to get in, God wants to get close, God wants to get intimate, God wants to get personal with me. I will be their God and they shall be my people, he says, drawing on some phrases which are scattered throughout the Old Testament.

There's only really one covenant, a relationship with the Lord. But this new phase of the covenant sees God getting really, really close.

And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest. And this new heart knowledge of God is not merely an understanding of law.

This new heart understanding of God is not something academic presented to our ears, but it's personal experience of God in our hearts for everyone from the least to the greatest, such that there'll be no need of an elite class of people to do the teaching.

Indeed, the book of Hebrews is itself teaching us. The writer to the Hebrews is himself explaining and teaching. He doesn't think that there's going to become a day when you don't need people giving sermons or leading discussions.

[22:03] It's just that in that day, everyone has a responsibility together of making sure that God's word is heard and obeyed. there's no elite priesthood anymore.

Everyone can know God. And in a sense, in our age, we hear this language of intimacy and closeness and most of us feel encouraged.

We live in a world where close connections are desired. But just remember that for those hearing Jeremiah speak these words for the first time or the writer to the Hebrews speaking them later, they felt differently about closeness than we might.

We kind of like the thought of intimacy. But in the Old Testament, intimacy with God, closeness with God was very, very dangerous.

They'd remember Uzzah who touched the ark of the covenant when he stumbled and died. Or they might remember Nadab and Abihu who offered unauthorized fire in the temple, in the tabernacle, I beg your pardon, in Leviticus 10 and were consumed.

[23 : 25] No, you can't get too close to God. Getting close to God is dangerous. Our God is a consuming fire. Yet the promise is closeness.

How can we have closeness and safety? Well, the prophet explains it in verse 12.

For I will be merciful towards their iniquities and I will remember their sins no more. I will be merciful towards their iniquities.

I will remember their sins no more, says the Lord. God comes close and it's safe for God to come close because he's made a promise under the new covenant that when he comes close, he will always forgive our sins.

He will always show his mercy towards our iniquity. He will never remember our sins and hold them against us. Our conscience is cleansed as the writer of the Hebrews says in a number of other places.

[24 : 45] We're washed. Sin's not remembered. It's wiped. When Christ died on the cross, he called out, it is finished.

Tetelestai. Tetelestai being the word that you stamped on contracts in the ancient world meaning paid in full. Sin has gone.

It's been dealt with. It will not be remembered by the Lord. God. Now this imagery of being washed, cleansed in our conscience in the deepest part of our life is for me such an important and passionately held belief.

I didn't grow up in a Christian home. My parents were God fearers but they weren't Jesus believers. It was first at high school I was 13 I think 13 or 14 when I was introduced to Christ.

It was a lunchtime Bible discussion and a video was being played. In fact it wasn't a video because we didn't have videos then but it was a reel-to-reel Super 8 movie if that means anything to anyone.

[26 : 09] And a magician took a dirty cylinder and placed over the top of it a scarlet blood-coloured cylinder and then removed the outer cylinder and the internal cylinder was white as snow.

And he explained that's what happened when Christ died. You were made white. You were made clean on the inside.

Now no one had ever explained that to me. Why had no one ever explained that? I knew that Christ had died because I'd seen people wearing crosses around their neck with a man on it.

But no one had ever explained to me why Christ died. To make me clean in the deepest parts of my life. So I went home that night and knelt by my bedside and prayed that Christ would wash me on the inside.

And I became a Christian. Oh happy day, oh happy day, you washed my sin away. Oh happy day, I will never be the same forever I am changed.

[27 : 37] When I stand in that place free at last, meeting face to face, I am yours, Jesus, you are mine. What a glorious day, what a glorious way, what a glorious name.

Oh happy day. It's why I describe myself as an evangelical Christian.

For evangelical Christians in the last few hundred years have worked really hard to keep reminding the church that the internal life, the life of our heart, must be addressed and protected.

We aspire to godliness with power, not merely trusting in outward forms or outward religion.

We have been washed and forgiven so that we are no longer merely observers at a cricket match or observers at the movies.

[28:48] Friends, we are no longer observers, we are participants. We are deeply connected to the life of God now and forever.

But too often, you and I and people we meet are content with just watching the world, observing life go by. But we've actually not been invited just to stay on the sidelines watching the game.

We've been invited down onto the victory lap with the team that we've been supporting. We might not have ourselves contributed to the victory, but the victory having been won.

We're invited to participate with the team and enjoy the great glory that comes with being connected to Christ. God's big plan for the universe will succeed, but God's big plan for the universe involves your heart.

Intimately, gently, deeply, satisfyingly, wholly. decide today to be a new covenant believer.

[30:04] Decide today to be a new covenant believer. For it's a glorious life.

It's a glorious life living in this way. for if you belong to the new covenant, if you have placed your trust in that great high priest, if that great high priest has written his law in your mind and in your heart, you are free.

It's quite extraordinary that when Paul describes the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3, it's the freedom language he turns to. I think I should read it.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3, 6, God has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter of the spirit, for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

Reading on from verse 7, now if the ministry of death carved in letters on stone came with such glory that the Israelites couldn't gaze at Moses' face, because of its glory which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the spirit have even more glory?

[31:18] For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all because of the glory that surpasses it.

For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, how much more will what is permanent have glory? glory. And from verse 17, now the Lord is the spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Important, isn't it, that Paul, when describing the ministry of the new covenant, has to conclude with a description of the freedom that we enjoy belonging to the new covenant.

covenant. And Paul, as well, if you go to Romans 8, describes our life, no condemnation for those in Christ because we've been set free from the law of sin and death, free from external temples, for we are the temple, free from an elite priesthood because we have a great high priest, free from sin because we have a sacrifice who has been enough.

friends, we are free. Of course, the alternative is slavery and despair.

[32:47] But the new covenant wants to spare us that great evil. But we're not just free, we're also therefore bold.

We're bold because we're free. We're bold to approach the throne of grace. We're bold to come to God. We're bold to come even to God's table this morning. We're bold because look at all the things that God has done.

He says in this passage, I will make this covenant. I will engrave my laws. I will be their God. I will teach them all. I will make myself known to the least and to the greatest. I will be merciful.

I will forget their sins. If God has done all that, what is holding us back? For if one of the great distractions of the Christian life is despair because of slavery, another great distraction in the Christian life is panic because of timidity.

humility. When we panic, we stumble. When we panic, we don't keep our eye on the goal. When we panic, we express our fear that there's something bigger than God in this world.

[34 : 09] Please, friends, don't pretend that your timidity, sorry, don't pretend that your humility, no, I've got it right the first time. Please don't pretend that your timidity is really just humility.

humility is one thing, but being fearful and timid is quite another. We are free, we're free to be bold, confident to come to God in full assurance of faith without wavering to find the life that's worth living.

And indeed, by taking the bread and the wine this morning, you can enjoy the closeness of God. For Christ said, this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Bold by the blood. Bold by the blood. Bold by the blood.

blood. This is the message of Hebrews 8. Amen.