



Important Covenant Passages

(3) Hebrew 8

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This is the third service in which a baby will be baptized since September 9 and I thought we would have a little mini-series of sermons in connection with these baptisms, each one dealing with a key covenant passage in Scripture. Baptism is a reminder that we and our children belong to God's covenant people and I thought it would be good if we be reminded about some of the key aspects of what that means. So, we have considered Genesis 15 which teaches that one of the key purposes of God's covenant with his people is to confirm the promises that he has made to us. God likes to make promises that look like they will never be fulfilled, and he has graciously taken account of the weakness of our faith to confirm those promises with a covenant oath. We also looked at Genesis 17 which teaches that the covenant relationship also includes requirements for God's people and that God has given a sign of the covenant to remind us both of God's promises and our obligations.

The key idea of the covenant is that it is a formal relationship that is intended also to be an intimate relationship and that the formal promises and oaths taken by both God and his people are intended to strengthen and maintain the relationship - just as the formal oaths and obligations of the marriage relationship are intended to strengthen and maintain that relationship. One way of summarizing the purpose of the covenant relationship is that it helps us to know where we stand in our relationship with God – it is about being secure in the relationship. God's promises are reinforced with oaths. Our obligations are spelled out and formalized. And so, the relationship is secure. The only place where there is insecurity is from our part – because we are not willing

and able to be faithful to our side of the covenant relationship. But the purpose of the whole arrangement is to strongly encourage us to do so.

Today we are going to consider what God is teaching us about the covenant from Hebrews 8. Hebrews 8 teaches us about the new covenant and in doing so it teaches us about some differences between the covenant relationship between God and his Old Testament people and the covenant relationship between God and his New Testament people.

God's plan of salvation is a long-term progressive plan. It is not all revealed and implemented all at once and there is progression so that the covenant relationship between God and his New Testament people is richer and fuller than the covenant relationship between God and his Old Testament people.

One of the reasons for this is that God has designed human beings to learn things incrementally – one step at a time. Children, in grade one, do not learn to read a grade twelve textbook. But they learn things that begin the process that will one day enable them to read that grade twelve textbook. What is true for individuals is also true for the human race as a whole. Throughout the Old Testament period, God was laying the ground work for understanding and appreciating Jesus Christ and his mission. Paul says in Romans 5:6 that “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” The timing of Jesus and his mission was important because God was preparing the human race to understand the need for Jesus and his significance through his interaction with the people of Israel from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ.

That is why there are different covenants in Scripture. There is the covenant that God made with Abraham and his offspring. There is the covenant that God made with the people of Israel through Moses. There is the covenant that God made with David. And there is the new covenant. Behind all these covenants is the idea of progression. They are all related to one another and the older ones lay the ground work for the later ones until we come to the new covenant of which Jesus is the mediator.

I make this point because it is important for our understanding of the new covenant. And all this talk of covenant is not just theological jargon, but it has to do with comforting us and encouraging us and helping us in our walk with God. The covenants are about the gospel – they are about salvation and they are about helping us to experience the blessings of salvation and so they are relevant for our spiritual growth and wellbeing.

The passage that we are going to look at this morning speaks about the new covenant as a more excellent covenant than the old covenant was. The comparison is between the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses and the covenant that God makes with us through Jesus Christ. Listen to how the author of the letter to the Hebrews puts this in verses 6-9. “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no 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, 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 did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.’”

So, the new covenant is more excellent than the old covenant. It is better than the old covenant. It has better promises. The old covenant had its faults. That does not mean that the old covenant was bad. It means that it was not adequate. There was something missing. It did not provide all that was necessary. And that was not an oversight on God’s part. It was all part of his plan to prepare for Jesus.

What was missing? How was the old covenant inadequate? To fully answer that question, we would have to go through the whole book of Hebrews because that is what the book of Hebrews is about. But we will look at the things that come into focus in this chapter.

What was the problem with the old covenant? Nothing from God’s side. The problem was from the people’s side. They were not able to keep it. The problem, according to verse 9, was – “For they did not continue in

my covenant....” There was not adequate provision in the old covenant for the people to keep it. That becomes clear when we see what the new covenant promises. Verse 10, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law into their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.”

This is one of the key differences between the old covenant and the new covenant. In the new covenant God promises to put his law into the minds of his people and write them on their hearts. This is one of the better promises. In the new covenant God promises to enable his people to keep his laws in a way that he did not do in the old covenant. This is a major thing that God promises to us in the new covenant. He promises to change our hearts. He promises to change our inner person. He promises to renew us from the inside out. That is what he means when he says that he will put his laws unto our minds and write them on our hearts.

Now this raises the question of the nature of the salvation of believers in the Old Testament period. It raises the question of whether God put his laws into the minds of Old Testament believers and wrote it on their hearts. It seems to be the implication of the promise to write his laws on the hearts of his people in the future that he did not do that in the period between Abraham and Jesus. To draw that conclusion, however, would be wrong. The Bible will not allow us to conclude that the way of salvation was essentially different during any period in the history of salvation.

The Bible teaches that we are all conceived and born in sin. The Bible teaches that it is impossible for anyone to love God and serve God without a change of heart. The Old Testament does not place a great emphasis on God changing hearts in the Old Testament period, but there are some hints. The main reason that we must conclude that believers were saved in essentially the same way as believers are saved in the New Testament period is reasoning back from New Testament passages.

The New Testament makes it clear that apart from the transforming grace of God, no one is able to turn to the Lord and love and serve him.

Let me give you just one verse as an example. Romans 8:5 says “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” Clearly there were people in Old Testament times who set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Just think of the people of faith mentioned in Hebrews 12 who are held up as examples for us. They could only trust and serve God by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

There is much more than could be said, but we don’t have the time to do that. But what I have said, gives you a taste of the kind of reasoning that leads to the conclusion that the way of salvation in both testaments is essentially the same. It is inconceivable in the light of the biblical teaching about sin and salvation that Old Testament believers could serve the Lord without receiving the renewal of heart that is described in our text by the language of God writing his law upon the hearts of his people. There is no way in the light of biblical teaching that the Psalmist of Psalm 119, which is all about his love for God’s law, could have that love without God writing that law on his heart. This is a very important point for our understanding of the Old Testament. If true believers in the Old Testament did not experience the inner change that is expressed by the idea of God writing his law on their hearts, the whole Old Testament would be of little value to us. And the implication of that would be that those who did serve the Lord did so without God changing their heart which is impossible in the light of the biblical teaching about our natural sinfulness and what is necessary for salvation.

But that raises the question, what then is better about the new covenant, for clearly this text and many others teach and emphasize that the new covenant is far superior to the old covenant. The New Testament writings teach that there is a great contrast between the old and the new covenants. Hear again verse 8 of Hebrews 8. “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.” What then is the difference if the way of salvation is essentially the same?

The difference has to do with the degree of God's transforming power after Jesus had accomplished salvation and the difference is huge according to the writers of the New Testament. One of the authors that I read compared it to the difference between a water hose just dripping and the water hose gushing water. God did transform true believers in the Old Testament, but the extent of his transforming activity was far less than it is after Pentecost. Before Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was active in the lives of some of the covenant people, but after Pentecost he has been poured out upon the church. The prophecy from Joel that was fulfilled at Pentecost said that in the latter days the Spirit of God would be poured out upon all flesh. We find that language in Joel 2 and Acts 2.

So, the covenant relationship that God has established with us and signifies and seals in baptism is much better than the old covenant because it is enacted on better promises. And one of those better promises is quoted here in this passage. It is the new covenant promise that comes from Jeremiah 31:31-34. And it includes the promise "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts."

This work of inner transformation – God writing his law on our hearts – receives much more emphasis in the New Testament on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Old Testament says a lot about the necessity of keeping the law, but there is not a lot about how Israel would be able to keep the law. And the Old Testament is largely the story of Israel not keeping the law. The old covenant was not adequate and the proof of that is in the fact that the majority of the people of Israel did not keep God's law. What is promised in the new covenant is a much greater transforming power to enable God's people to obey. That idea is expressed in this new covenant promise by the idea of God putting his "laws into their minds and writ[ing] them on their hearts."

This is an important part of what is promised to us in the new covenant. This is one of the better promises. And it is sealed to us in our baptism. The covenant relationship obligates us to keep God's law, but its promises promise that God will put his law into our minds and write them on our hearts. And you find this emphasis all over the place in the New Testament. Because Christ has come and lived and died and rose

from the dead – because Jesus has broken the power of sin - those who believe in him are transformed in their inner being so that they are empowered to keep the law and love and serve God.

Listen to how Paul puts this in the end of Ephesians 3 and the beginning of Ephesians 4. Ephesians 3:20-21, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” And then he continues in Ephesians 4:1, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called....”

You see, this is one of the better promises of the new covenant that is signified and sealed in your baptism. God promises to work in you with a power “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” He promises to put his law in your mind and write it on your heart. And on the basis of that he calls you to obey him and serve him. This is a huge emphasis in the New Testament. And it is the basis for the commands. Because God promises to put his law in our minds and write it on our hearts – because he is working in us by the power of Jesus’ resurrection – therefore we are urged “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called.”

This is one of the things that your baptism means. Your baptism signifies and seals the better promises of the new covenant. And so, our baptism is intended to be a tremendous encouragement in the life of obedience. God has given each of us a personalized oathbound promise that he will put his laws into our minds and write them on our hearts. That promise is never fulfilled automatically apart from our response to it. The way of participating in any of God’s promises is through faith and repentance. But baptism is intended to encourage us to believe and encourage us to live the life of faith and obedience by assuring us of God’s abundant provision for us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

One of the greatest killers of zeal and effort in the Christian life is discouragement and despair. The Christian life is hard, and it involves struggle. God does not hide that from us. God’s abundant provision does not mean that we just sail along without any effort on our part.

Later on, in the book of Hebrews the author will exhort us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1) In that context he tells us to look “to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith.” One of the great encouragements to do that is this covenanted promise that on the basis of Jesus’ death and resurrection, God puts his law in our minds and writes them on our hearts. We have what we need to live the life of obedience and to grow in obedience because of what is promised to us in the new covenant and sealed to us in our baptism. And so, our baptism should function in a real and meaningful way in our lives by assuring us of the provision that God has made for our obedience in the new covenant – a provision that is based on what Jesus has accomplished for us by his life, death and resurrection.

There are two more promises mentioned in the new covenant promise that is quoted in Hebrews 8. Verse 11 says, “And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” The new covenant promises a level of knowledge of God and intimacy with God that is far greater than that experienced by the old covenant people of God.

The Old Testament saints knew the Lord and had a relationship with him, but there was also a sense of distance and separation as symbolized by the temple. God’s presence was focused on the most holy place in the temple and the people only had access to that place once a year and then only through a representative, the high priest. But with the death of Jesus and the inauguration of the new covenant the veil of the temple was torn open and believers are now invited into the most holy place into the very presence of God in a way that was never possible in for the Old Testament people of God. So, in Hebrews 10:19 the author of Hebrews teaches us that “we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus....” That was inconceivable under the old covenant. And it is one of the better promises of the new covenant.

And so that too is promised to us in our baptism. God promises that through faith we can know God in a very personal and intimate way. God is still God and we are still created beings so there must be respect

and reverence, but at the same time there is closeness and intimacy. We see this particularly in the New Testament teaching of adoption in which the Holy Spirit gives us the spirit of sonship and we cry Abba Father. This is one of the better promises of the new covenant and our baptism is a reminder and a seal of that promise.

And finally, the new covenant promises forgiveness of our sins in a way that was not possible under the old covenant. Verse 12, “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

Now God did forgive the sins of believers under the old covenant. But the book of Hebrews gives us wonderful insight into the difference of the experience of forgiveness between the old and the new covenant. The first part of chapter 10 deals with this. It makes the point that the Old Testament animal sacrifices did not really atone for the sins of the people. That is why they had to be offered again and again. Hebrews 10:4 says, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The Old Testament sacrifices were temporary symbols that pointed ahead to Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. They taught the people about sacrifices and atonement for sins, but the people understood that they did not actually take sin away. And that registered in their consciences.

But listen to how Hebrews 9:14 speaks of the effect of the sacrifice of Christ. “[H]ow much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” The sacrifice of Christ actually atoned for our sins and that registers in our consciences. Not only is God satisfied with the sacrifice of Christ; our own consciences are satisfied because the sacrifice of Christ actually took away our sins once and for all. That is why it does not have to be repeated.

That is what is promised to us in the new covenant and sealed to us in our baptism. Our baptism reminds us and confirms to us that through faith our sins are actually dealt with once and for all time. The forgiveness that is signified and sealed to us in our baptism is based on the reality of Jesus fully and finally paying the penalty for our sins.

Because God's justice has been served by Jesus's death, that same justice requires that our sins can never be counted against us. And that registers in our own consciences so that the peace that we experience is much deeper and more profound than what was possible under the old covenant relationship between God and his people.

The writers of the New Testament greatly emphasize the superiority of the new covenant compared to the old. And that comparison is very important. It is God, who, in the history of salvation, and in the way it is expounded in his word, who leads us in these thoughts of comparing the old covenant with the new covenant. This is all part of the way that God reveals to us the glory of what is offered to us and given to us in the new covenant through Jesus Christ. We learn, understand and appreciate the glories of the new covenant by comparing them with the old. By that comparison we see and understand things that we would not see and understand without that comparison. This is how God teaches us. This is how God helps us to appreciate the wonder of what we have in Christ.

And all of that is tied to the meaning of our baptism. Baptism is a sign and seal of the new covenant. It replaces circumcision that was the sign and the seal of the old covenant. Our baptism is a reminder and a seal of the much better promises of the new covenant. We have looked at how those promises are better. God promises to "put his laws into [our] minds and write them upon [our] hearts." He promises to be our God and hold fast to us as his people. He promises that we will all know him from the least to the greatest and he promises "to be merciful towards our iniquities and [to] remember them no more."

And he tells us to be baptized and to baptize our children so that we will be constantly reminded and assured of these promises.

There is nothing more precious than these things. I'm reminded of the term "quality of life." You know what that means. People who are suffering are considered to have a diminished quality of life. There is some truth to that and a lot that is wrong and ungodly. But when it comes to quality of life – what we have been thinking of this morning is the key. This is the abundant life that Jesus promised. A life lived with and for God is life of the highest quality even if there is suffering and

hardship – because it is life as it is meant to be lived. It is truly being alive because truly being alive is living with God and for God. Our baptism is given to help us live that life – to help us to trust in God's covenanted promises and to live life trusting in them. May it so function in our lives.