



The New Covenant Pt. 2

Hebrews 8:1-13

^{ESV} **Hebrews 8:1-13**...Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ 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." ⁶ 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. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

⁸ 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, ⁹ 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. 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 laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." ¹³ 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.

Now last week we began to look at the new covenant as it comes up in Jeremiah 31. We did that because this passage here from the New Testament in Hebrews 8 is taken directly from Jeremiah 31. What I wanted to do is to establish the context of the original passage and then move on to show you how it is used in the New Testament.

Now you should remember that the context of Jeremiah 31 was one of impending judgment and destruction. Let me say that another way. The historical context or perhaps it is better to say that the thing that was happening in Jeremiah 31 was that the nation was about to have the hammer dropped on it by Almighty God. It was about to be beaten flat on the anvil of judgment by an incensed and a covenantally jilted God.

You see, as the arm of His judgment, God had pushed the Babylonians to advance right up the gates of the city of Jerusalem. They were the most powerful kingdom and army in the ancient world and they had grown tired of messing with an upstart nation like Israel. They had demanded tribute and submission and they had been denied both and they had come to Israel to put things straight. They were banging on the gates of the city of Jerusalem and the way things looked...the way things were...made it look like the candle of the life of the nation was just about to be snuffed out. And in the midst of very dark and bleak historical moment the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and said to him, "Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah..."

Now I am not so sure that in the initial moment of that promise that the news would have been all that welcome.¹ What I mean is this, “The initial covenant made with the nation of Israel...the Mosaic Covenant or Sinai Covenant of Exodus 24 had caused things to turn out the way they had. Why would a new covenant be any better? There certainly was the possibility that it might even be worse.”

That is why the opening announcement regarding the new covenant has the negative aspect that it does. Jeremiah starts his prophecy by saying this new covenant it won't be like the old one. Jeremiah focuses on the fact that the new covenant which is about to be revealed in this word from God will...

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:32**...not *be* 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, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.

Now the comparison is to the covenant in the wilderness...at Sinai. It is not the covenant with Abraham or with David. It is the covenant that occurs in Exodus 24 when Moses takes hyssop and blood and sprinkles the nation in the rite of the blood covenant. But this new covenant is not going to be like that one. Instead, it would be different. And when Jeremiah finally makes that point he quickly explains to the inhabitants of Israel that this new covenant will indeed be a positive thing...a very positive thing. You can see that in verse 33.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:33**...But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

You can see there that the covenant will reestablish the relationship between Israel and YHWH and it will do so by taking that which was external the law of God...the law written on tablets of stone and rewriting it on tablets of flesh. The reason that that will be so positive and such a wonderful change is explained in Jeremiah 31:34.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:34**...And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Now I want you to notice the nature of the promise. That is, I want you to notice what it means to have the law written on one's heart. It looks like to me that the promise to have the law written on one's heart contains two specific elements:

- (1) no longer shall each one teach his neighbor/brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...
- (2) I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Now I have been moving slowly and inexorably toward this point for a number of months and I want to at last come it and as I do I want to be as plain spoken and as practical as I know how. Because it is on this particular point that Presbyterians and Reformed Baptists part company with regard to the administration of the sacrament of baptism. Now the historical Presbyterian view is pretty simple. Presbyterians believe that baptism is the initiatory sign of the covenant. Because they believe that baptism is the initiatory sign of the covenant, Presbyterians believe that the purpose of baptism is to envelop or incorporate

both new believers and the children of covenantal believers into the covenant community.

Obviously, we do not believe that baptism saves. That is, we do not believe that baptism in and of itself regenerates. The idea that baptism in and of itself saves is called baptismal regeneration. Presbyterians part company here with both Catholics and Lutherans. Still we do believe that baptism is the initiatory sign of the covenant and is important and is a means of grace. We believe that when believers see the sacrament of baptism administered it has a positive impact on their spiritual life and growth in exactly the same way participating in the Lord's Supper does.

Now we believe that believing baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. That is we believe that baptism has replaced the Old Testament sign of circumcision given to Abraham as the sign or mark of God's people and their children. Now the logic of the connection is not that hard to follow.

Abraham was chosen to be the father of God's covenant people. That is he was chosen to be the father of all those that believe and he was given a sign to mark his faith, his children, and even the people of his house as people in a covenant relationship with God.

^{ESV} **Romans 4:11**...He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Now this covenant with Abraham was mostly one-sided but there were some obligations on his part and on the part of those in the covenant. One of those obligations was circumcision. It marked his descendants...his descendant baby boys...as members of God's covenant people. They were to be circumcised and then they were to be taught until the day that they themselves embraced the covenant God of their parents through faith.

Now in that regard, I guess you could say Abraham received believer's circumcision and Isaac and Esau and Jacob and all the rest that followed infant circumcision.

Now God warned that any child or household member of a covenant family that was not circumcised would be cut off from His covenant people. That it, the sign of circumcision then became a sign of judgment...no longer indicating that that child had the mark of the covenant but that that child had been cut off from God. Obviously then, the Israelites took the rite of circumcision seriously.

Still, it was possible and it did certainly happen that sometimes covenantal children grew up and rejected the covenant God of their fathers and when they did they were rejected by God as a part of His covenant people even though they had the mark of circumcision. When such children...grew up and rejected the God of their fathers they were considered covenant breakers and I think as a whole they were considered to be even worse than those that had never embraced the covenant or been circumcised in the first place.

Now as Presbyterians we believe that since God has been gracious to us he is apt to be gracious to our children. We certainly do not presume on God in this

matter but seek to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord in such a way that they will love the God we love...the God who has redeemed us and called us with a holy calling.

Now we do that and we apply the initiatory sign of the new covenant, baptism, to our children because we believe that baptism has replaced circumcision. As a result, of course, we take baptism quite seriously. We ask believers and parents both to make a number of vows and promises when we baptize them.

We do not baptize the children of unbelievers...that is, we don't baptize the children of just anyone...but only the children of those who are believing members of the new covenant. That is why we only baptize the children of church members...people who we know have made a profession of faith and given some evidence of conversion.

If you were to ask us where the sign of circumcision was replaced with baptism we would say the book of Acts and a number of other places in the New Testament. Clearly, the apostles did not want the introductory covenantal sign of circumcision applied to Gentiles. In fact, Paul and others lobbied as hard as they could against doing any such thing. But they did baptize new converts and when they did those new converts were incorporated into the people of God.

That seems to be the whole point of Ephesians.

^{ESV} **Ephesians 2:11**...Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the

covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

And it is the same point elsewhere where God makes it perfectly clear that we are not turned into a new tree of God but rather that we are grafted into an existing tree of God.

^{ESV} **Romans 11:17**...But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. ²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; ²⁷ "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

So we get our idea that baptism has replaced circumcision as the initiatory sign of the covenant from the New Testament in general both because circumcision is denigrated and baptism is promoted and because Gentiles are incorporated into the covenant people of God through faith and through baptism. Baptism is the only initiatory rite that is mentioned in the New Testament.

Now it goes without saying that the baptism that is mentioned in the New Testament is more inclusive than circumcision both because includes not only Gentiles as a group but women as well. So the covenant people of God in the New Testament become a broader group not a narrower one.

Of course, the New Testament is replete with a number of household baptisms and those of you that know the argument from the Presbyterian side will know where those references are found.

There is Lydia in Acts 16.

^{ESV} **Acts 16:14**...One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Then, of course, there is the Philippian jailor right after Lydia also in Acts 16.

^{ESV} **Acts 16:29**...And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of

the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Now it seems to me that if you take all that into account along with the fact that both Mary and Zechariah argue at the beginning of Luke as Paul does later at the beginning of Romans that the coming of Jesus is the direct fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, you pretty much wind up having to admit that the fulfilled covenant of Abraham and the new covenant point to exactly the same thing. And if they do both ought to have...will have similar rites of initiation into the covenant.

And, of course, there is Colossians 2:11-12 where the text flatly says that Gentiles were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands in their baptisms in Christ.

^{NIV} **Colossians 2:11**...In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Now it seems to me that the direct connection of circumcision, the Old Testament sign of covenant initiation, and baptism, the New Testament sign of covenant initiation, in one verse pretty much puts the matter at rest. At least it does for me. It also seems to me that if the Holy Spirit had wanted to end the giving of the initiatory rite of the covenant to children he would have said so.

Now I have taken the time to explain the underlying logic of the Presbyterian view of baptism as the initiatory right of the covenant because this passage in Hebrews 8 has been, as I said earlier, the very place where Reformed Baptists and Presbyterians part company. Reformed Baptists have historically argued that Hebrews 8 demands that only those that believe are participants in the New Covenant. That is, they believe there is a radical distinction between the New Covenant all the other covenants that have gone before.

Now what I don't want to do in the remaining time that I have is to create some sort of straw man representation of the Reformed Baptist argument and then proceed to knock it over and then say, "There, I have settled the question once for all and there is something wrong with you if you can't see that." Nor do I want as an ordained Presbyterian minister to give you the idea that I think the Reformed Baptist view of the New Covenant is secretly right. I don't think it is. But Reformed Baptists are our friends. They serve the same Lord that we do and without question many of the best preachers in America are Reformed Baptists. So I think you ought to understand how they understand the New Covenant.

They understand the New Covenant as given in Jeremiah and in Hebrews to include only those who are of faith. They get that idea from verse like this:

^{ESV} **Hebrews 8:10**...For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."

They would argue that the clear understanding of the passage is that New Covenant members actually have the law written on their minds and hearts. Because they see it that way, they argue that unbelievers are precluded from the New Covenant. "How could an unbeliever, even a believer's child, have the law of God written on their minds and hearts without the regenerating work of the Spirit?" they ask. They would argue that they cannot.

And, of course, they argue that verse 11 contains the idea that it won't be necessary to instruct New Covenant members to know the Lord because they already know Him and because they already know the Lord...they must, in fact, already be converted.

And then they argue that verse 12 clearly says that the members of the New Covenant already have their sins forgiven and they point out that no honest Presbyterian claims such for their baptized babies. In fact, they would argue that Presbyterians go out of their way to catechize their children...to teach their children to know the Lord and that when they do they are admitting that their children are not yet entered into the blessing of the New Covenant.

And then they go back through the passages I mentioned in Acts and argue that the phrase "household baptism" doesn't necessarily include unbelieving children and they argue that if the Lord had wanted us to baptize our babies he would have said so explicitly. They argue that our position is an argument based on silence in much the same way that we argue that their argument is one based on silence. They say, "The biblical text doesn't say to baptize your babies." While we say, "The biblical text doesn't say to stop administering the covenant sign of initiation."

Now, of course, in arguing their position they do not argue that there is no need for Christians to be taught at all. I am making the point because there were some in Calvin's day that did argue that there was no longer any reason to teach the Bible because now the Spirit of God was giving direct revelation to every Christian. He writes:

Fanatical men take hence the occasion to do away with public preaching, as though it were of no use in Christ's kingdom; but their madness may be easily exposed. Their objection is this: "After the coming of Christ every one is to teach his neighbor; away then with the external ministry, that a place may be given to the internal inspiration of God." But they pass by this, that the Prophet does not wholly deny that they would teach one another, but his words are these, They shall not teach, saying, Know the Lord; as though he had said, "Ignorance shall not as heretofore so possess the minds of men as not to know who God is."²

Of course, the whole point of Hebrews is that the Hebrews have not absorbed much of the teaching regarding the person of Christ that they should have. You can see that in passages like Hebrews 5.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 5:11**...About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

But to be fair, no self-respecting Reformed Baptist would argue that we need to do away with teaching. In fact, many of the really great Bible teachers of our time are Reformed Baptists. What they argue the text says is that the text says that members of the New Covenant won't have to teach each other "to know the Lord" because they will already know Him.

So then that raises the question, “Are we simply stuck then these two different understandings of Hebrews and the New Covenant can never be resolved?”

I don’t think so. I think the thing that will help us to understand how to resolve the difference between the two views will be to understand that there is both a now and not yet aspect to the New Covenant and that there is such a thing as apostasy.

We’ll talk about both those things next week. Are there any questions?

Let’s pray.

¹ Richard Pratt, “Jeremiah 31: Infant Baptism in the New Covenant” from [IIIM Magazine Online](#), Volume 4, Number 1, January 7 to January 13, 2002.

² John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Ch. 8:7-13.