

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

New and Improved

Hebrews 8:7-13

After the death of Elvis Presley it became fairly common to read headlines in the Tabloids such as: “I was Elvis’ Love Child” or “Elvis’ Ghost is My Father”. Many people claimed to be related to “The King” either for the prestige of wearing his name or possibly to try and get a share of his inheritance. In the heat of all this activity, a Detroit radio station advertised that for just \$2 and a self-addressed, stamped envelope, YOU TOO could be Elvis’ child. For that sum you could receive an authentic birth certificate from the radio station signed by a Radio Disk Jockey named Dick Puritan. The certificate claimed it entitled the bearer to “appear on any talk show in the country.” About 2000 people sent in their envelopes and became “children of the King.”¹

What a sham! Of course, those people were no more Elvis’ children than I am the son of Bill Gates. The Bible, however, says that Jesus actually had the authority to make us God’s children! And it doesn’t happen by sending in \$2 and a self-addressed envelope. It takes place through what is called the “new covenant.” That’s why the speaker says this in Hebrews 8:6:

But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. Hebrews 8:6

Before going any further, we need to ask: Just what is a “covenant?” A covenant is not a “contract.” As mentioned last week, I’m in the process of signing a contract on a house. But that contract is conditional. If I decide to sell the house, I can do that. If, on the other hand, I don’t make the payments, I could face foreclosure. But the biblical covenants are not like that. A covenant is an unalterable and permanently binding agreement. And when between man and God, it is rooted in God’s unfailing love:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. Deuteronomy 7:9

Of course, we know that Israel – with whom this covenant was made – did not love God and keep his commands. That’s why verses 7-8a say:

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... Hebrews 8:7-8a

You see, there was the need for something “new and improved.” “New and improved”...that’s the big idea. The covenant God made with his people Israel when he led them out of the land of Egypt and gave them the written law was totally inadequate to change their hearts. The old covenant told people what to do, but it didn’t give them the power to do it. It circumcised people in the flesh, but not in their hearts.

One reason the law given by Moses was inadequate is because it was never intended to bring us salvation, but rather to show us our sin. As we went through Romans several years ago, we pointed out the Old Testament law is like a mirror. When you get up in the morning, one of the first things you might do is look in the mirror. Do I need to shave? Do I need to put on some makeup? (Not me, but you women!) You might notice that you need to wash your face. That's cool. But what if you took down that mirror off the bathroom wall and began to wipe your face with it? That's ridiculous; who would do that? The mirror is intended to show you your dirty face, not wash it. To wash your face, you take soap and a washcloth. The Old Testament law is like that. It was given to show us our sin, not to save us from our sin. In fact, it can't save us from our sin. But it can show us just how sinful we are.

But there's another reason the first covenant needed to be replaced. Notice what it says in verse 8: "God found fault with the people..." In other words, the people could never live up to the law that was given. Paul puts it this way, "The Law is holy, just and good, but man is sinful" (Romans 7:12). And elsewhere he says, "For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Galatians 3:21).

Not only can you and I not live up to the law, but sometimes the law actually prompts us to sin.

I am told that several years ago a high-rise hotel was built in Galveston, Texas, overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, they sank pilings into the gulf and built the structure out over the water. When the hotel was about to have its grand opening, someone thought, *What if people decide to fish out the hotel windows?* So they placed signs in the hotel rooms, "No fishing out the hotel windows." Many people ignored the signs, however, and it created a difficult problem. Lines got snarled. People in the dining room saw fish flapping against the picture windows. The manager of the hotel solved it all by taking down those little signs. No one checks into a hotel room thinking about fishing out of the windows. The law, although well-intentioned, created the problem.ⁱⁱ It's like the pastor who told his people there were 365 prohibitions in the law – one for every day of the year – and a half-a-dozen people wrote in for the list!

So because the first covenant was inadequate, God says this (and here the speaker quotes from the prophet Jeremiah):

"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. 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. Hebrews 8:8-9

There are basically three views concerning whom this new covenantⁱⁱⁱ is made with. Some believe that this New Covenant is yet future and will be made only with Israel as verse 8 seems to imply: "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." A second view is that God made this covenant at the cross with the Church which has replaced Israel in God's plans. A third view is that God made this covenant at the cross, and that the Church (you and I as believers today) enter into the benefits of this covenant, but do not replace

Israel who will yet experience the literal fulfillment of this covenant when Christ establishes his kingdom on this earth.

I hold to this third view. It seems to me that God made this New Covenant with Israel when he died on the cross and that someday the nation of Israel will come to repentance and enter into the full blessings of this covenant relationship. In the meantime, however, we as believers in the church also experience the blessings – particularly the spiritual blessings – of this covenant.

Recently, Bill Gates has been in the news. And various people have speculated about what the world's wealthiest man is going to do in his retirement. I've suggested that he give a little of his wealth to Central Bible Church and Joy Central. I have yet to hear back from him on that one! But let's suppose that Bill Gates prepares what is called a Charitable Lead Trust under the Internal Revenue Code of the US. In his will, he bequeaths millions of dollars to various charitable organizations that would benefit millions of people all over the world. But let's also suppose that he writes into his will that when his son reaches the age of 21 he himself would inherit billions of dollars. But what if Bill Gates dies before his son reaches that responsible age? Let's say his son is only 15 when Bill Gates dies. For six years, until his son reaches the age of 21, he doesn't enter into his father's inheritance. However, during this same time, millions of dollars immediately go to charity to help people all over the world.

I believe this illustrates what God has done for us in the New Covenant established at the cross by Jesus Christ. We could say that God's "Last Will and Testament," with all of its inherent blessings is the New Covenant. This will was "notarized" so to speak when Jesus shared that last supper with his disciples. When Jesus died, his "estate" became available to all those named in his will. And who is named in this will? All those who believe in Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile.

However, there is a special blessing reserved for God's chosen people, His son, Israel. Israel will not enter into her unique inheritance until the appointed time when Christ establishes his sovereign rule on this earth. Blessings for all of us began immediately after the death of Christ. Blessings for Israel will not begin until God's appointed time.^{iv}

Let's look at this from another angle. Let's suppose that we are with the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel in a dark tunnel. As we look with them toward the light at the end of the tunnel, we see God making a new covenant with his people Israel. We move on through the "tunnel" of the ages and finally emerge into the light. What do we see? Well, we see the same scene we saw before, God making a covenant with his people Israel. But we see more than this. Because we've stepped out of the tunnel, our peripheral vision is expanded. To either side of us we see what we are incapable of seeing while in the tunnel. We see now that the many blessings of this covenant entered into with ethnic Israel are also shared with all nations all over the world. The Old Testament prophets weren't wrong, they just had tunnel vision. God has not done *other than* what he promised in the Old Testament. He has just done *more than* he promised.^v

Just what does this New Covenant include? What are its benefits for you and me? Four specific benefits are listed in verses 10-12. First, there is an *inner inclination to obey God*.

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. Hebrews 6:10a

John Fischer put it like this: “Do this and live the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. A better word the gospel brings, it bids me fly and gives me wings.”

The old covenant, the law, was outward and physical. But the new covenant of grace is inward and spiritual. God doesn't settle for superficial outer conformity. He wants authentic inner transformation.

Jeremiah wasn't the only Old Testament prophet to talk about his inner change. Listen to these words from Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:25-28

In the New Testament, Paul states it this way, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). When a person is converted to Christ, he or she doesn't simply adopt a new creed, or a new way of thinking, or a new moral code. All of these are relatively external to the inner person. No, when we place our faith in Jesus Christ, there is a radical, supernatural, life-changing re-birth that takes place. Our hearts are changed and we are given an inner inclination to obey.

What does this come from? It comes from the next benefit mentioned in this passage – *the establishment of a relationship with God*. This is seen in that later part of verse 10:

I will be their God, and they will be my people. Hebrews 8:10b

Someday, when Christ establishes his Kingdom on this earth, this will be true for the nation of Israel. The prophet Zechariah speaks of this when he says:

On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity...I will say, “This is my people,” and they will say, “Jehovah is our God.” (Zechariah 13:1, 9).

But until that time, you and I as believers also share in the benefits of being the “people of God.” Peter tells us that we are “a chosen people...a people belonging to God...once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

You see, Christianity as based on the New Covenant, is not at all about *religion*. It is rather all about *relationship*. Many in the world have religion. Far fewer have a genuine relationship with God through Jesus Christ. What about you? Do you have the person of Christ living in you and guiding your life, or do you have mere “religion.” Religion is all about man trying to get to God. Relationship is all about God coming down to man in the person of his Son.

A third characteristic of this New Covenant is *the widespread knowledge of God*. That’s found in 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. Hebrews 8:11*

Can you imagine what it will be like when the earth is filled with the knowledge and glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas? Again, this promise has not been completely fulfilled; but it will be.

I’ll never forget flying back from South Korea several years ago. I was sitting next to a Jewish man on the plane. His eye caught my Bible and we began to talk. I had the chance to share with him the most awesome prophecies of the Old Testament about the first coming of the Messiah, as well as his future coming. I encouraged him to “know the Lord,” because he didn’t know him. But someday, so many Jews like him will recognize who the Messiah is and will know the Lord intimately.

Such a widespread knowledge of God is mankind’s only hope. We as believers are never called to “reform” society. We can’t! And to the degree that we try, we are merely imposing a “band-aid” solution to societies’ problems.

Jesus once said: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Eternal life is not only longevity of life, i.e. life that lasts forever. It is also a certain quality of life. It’s the quality of life described by Jeremiah and as cited here in Hebrews 8:11. And how does that quality of life come about? It comes through “knowing” Jesus Christ. Not knowing *about* him; but *knowing* Him. Knowing him intimately, personally, daily, continually. The idea of “knowing” here refers to the intimate personal knowledge that comes from two people who are wholly committed to one another. It touches mind, emotion and will.

The fourth and final characteristic mentioned in this passage is *the forgiveness of sin*.^{vi} This is founding verse 12:

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
Hebrews 8:12

I took my family out to eat this last week at a DQ and when the bill came, I gave them this credit card and signed a piece of paper. Tell me, had I paid for my meal? The restaurant thought so. I

didn't have to wash dishes. But did "I" really pay for my meal? No. I won't pay for that meal until the end of the month when I receive the bill.

So also, the sacrifices of the Old Testament paid for people's sins... but the bill came due at the cross. If Jesus hadn't died on the cross for our sins, all the sacrifices of the Old Testament would have been worthless.^{vii}

But he did die, and he does forgive, and he doesn't remember our sins anymore. That's why this new covenant, this "new agreement" that he has established is new and improved in comparison to the Old Covenant.

[Communion Service, Luke 22:14-20]

ⁱ Contributed to SermonCentral.com by Jeff Strite

ⁱⁱ Submitted by Ken Langley to www.preachingtoday.com; source: Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Baker Academic, 2001), p. 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Six New Testament verses refer specifically to the New Covenant: Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8; 9:15; and 12:24. In other references the full name is not used, but they refer to the New Covenant. These include Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Romans 11:27, and Hebrews 13:20.

^{iv} Tom Constable,

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} There are other benefits that accompany the New Covenant. These include the continued national existence of Israel (31:35-37), Jerusalem to be rebuilt, never again to be demolished (31:38-40), restoration to the land (Ezek. 36:24, 28, 33), cleansing from sin (36:25), a responsive heart guaranteed (36:26), indwelling of the Spirit (36:27), motivation and ability for obedience (36:27), personal relationship with God (36:28), material prosperity and fruitfulness of the land (36:29-30, 34-35), and a large population in the restored land (36:37-38). Only the spiritual aspects of new-covenant promise are now inaugurated in this age, the territorial and political aspects, though part of God's new-covenant promise, await future fulfillment. See Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July – September, 1995).

^{vii} Jeff Strite, SermonCentral.com