

A Superior Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

Today we're going to talk about the expectations we should have in our relationship with God. When you think about it, healthy relationships involve reasonable expectations that each person accepts. The expectations have to be reasonable (vs. unreasonable). And the expectations have to be mutually accepted (vs. only one person having buy in).

For example, the relationships in my woodworkers club are really very healthy. That's true in part because we have some very basic expectations that everybody accepts. I don't expect the guys in the Kansas Quality Woodworkers' Association to pray for me or to mow my grass; those expectations would be unreasonable. I mainly expect them to be friendly to me and to consult with me on woodworking projects if they have the time and the expertise.

As another example, I performed a wedding yesterday in which the bride and groom promised to love each other "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . until we are parted by death." They were basically saying, "You can expect that when things get tough, I'm not going to abandon you for an easier life." That expectation is good and right in the context of marriage. If their relationship is going to be healthy, they both need to accept/own that expectation.

What about our expectations of God? What is reasonable for us to expect God to do for us? I think you'll agree that if we have unreasonable expectations of God, our relationship with Him will be unhealthy. If, for example, I expect God to make my life easy and comfortable . . . or if I expect God give me the same things He's given to others . . . or if I expect God to snap His fingers and take away all my sinful desires . . . I'm going to be disappointed and disillusioned because God hasn't promised to do any of those things in this life. If my expectations of God are accurate, my relationship with Him can be healthy and nourishing.

This morning as we continue our series in Hebrews, we are going to consider a passage in which God lays out very clearly what we should expect Him to do. God is on record as saying, "I will do ***these things*** in your life if you come to Me through faith in Jesus Christ." My encouragement to each of us is to listen to Hebrews 8 which spells out what God promises to us in the "new covenant" and then set our expectations accordingly. To "run the race with endurance" we need accurate expectations of God.

Jesus has mediated (for us) a superior covenant. (Hebrews 8:1-7) A covenant defines the relationship and the expectations between two people (or groups of people). Verse 1 is a summary statement of the "main point" the author has been making.

1 Now the main point in what has been said *is this*: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.

Previous chapters have explained that Jesus is unique as a high priest. He is not standing in an earthly temple before the ark of the covenant; He is **sitting in the heavens** at the right hand of the throne of God. This means at least a couple of things. **First**, the fact that He is seated means that His work is finished/complete. There were no chairs in the earthly holy of holies because the high priest went in, offered the sacrifice, and went out. By contrast, Jesus is seated permanently in the heavenly holy of holies because His work is finished.

Second, the fact that Jesus is seated in the heavens means that He is “a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.” In the OT God dwelt temporarily above the ark of the covenant in the earthly tabernacle, but He dwells permanently in the true, heavenly tabernacle. The fact that Jesus is seated in the true tabernacle means that His ministry is superior.

3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so it is necessary that this *high priest* also have something to offer.

His point is simply that every high priest has to bring some sacrifice or offering to God when entering the tabernacle. Jesus is no exception. It was necessary for Him to bring something also. We saw last week in 7:27 that Jesus offered **Himself** as the perfect sacrifice (see also 9:11-14, 10:1-15). Verse 4 makes an interesting point:

4 Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law;

The Law stipulated that priests had to be of the tribe of Levi. Since Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, He wasn't qualified to be a priest in the earthly tabernacle. But that's not a problem (the author says in verse 5) because the earthly tabernacle was merely a “copy and shadow” of the heavenly. Speaking of earthly priests, the author writes:

5 who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned *by God* when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, “See,” He says, “that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.”

We tend to think of physical objects as substantive and real, whereas “heavenly things” are vague and unreal. The Hebrews probably thought of the earthly tabernacle as substantive and real, whereas the idea of a heavenly tabernacle might have seemed rather vague and unreal. The author of Hebrews quotes from the book of Exodus in order to point out that the earthly tabernacle was actually “a copy and shadow” of the heavenly tabernacle. The earthly tabernacle was the replica; the heavenly was the original.

This discussion of the heavenly and earthly leads to the conclusion stated in verse 6. Because Jesus offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice and is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the **heavenly** tabernacle, the author says:

6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

The author's overall conclusion is that Jesus' ministry is superior because He is "the mediator of a better covenant" (see also 9:15 & 12:24). Whereas Moses was the mediator of the old covenant (the Law - Galatians 3:19), Jesus mediated the new covenant. The mediator is the go-between or intermediary between the two parties in the covenant. Through His death, resurrection, and exaltation, Jesus enacted a better covenant with better promises. Down in verse 13 the author goes further and says that the first covenant is now obsolete:

13 When He said, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

This is why we state in the strongest of terms that the new covenant isn't now a supplement to the old covenant (as if we're expected to keep as many of the Levitical commands as we can pull off). No, the new covenant has replaced the old covenant because it's now obsolete.

The intervening verses (verses 7-12) explain why this is so. These verses spell out the specific things that God has promised in the new covenant. If we want a healthy, nourishing relationship with God, we need to conform our expectations to what He's promised. Given the superiority of these promises, we'd really be foolish NOT to set our expectations accordingly. It's not that we shouldn't expect anything besides these things; but these things are foundational.

In this superior [new] covenant God promises three core things: (Hebrews 8:7-13)

Verses 7 through 9 prepare us to hear the core promises of the new covenant articulated in verses 10 through 12.

7 For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.

The promise of a **new** covenant inherently meant that the **old** covenant was flawed/faulty in the sense that it didn't provide a permanent, comprehensive remedy for sin. Beginning in verse 8 the author quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31 to explain how the new covenant in Christ's blood is **qualitatively** superior to the old covenant.

8 For finding fault with them, He says,
"Behold, days are coming, says the Lord,
When I will effect a new covenant
With the house of Israel and with the house of Judah;

God wouldn't have promised to effect a **new** covenant if the **old** covenant had been sufficient. The fact that this covenant is "with the house and Israel and with the house of Judah" doesn't mean that you have to be Jewish to experience its benefits. Jesus and Paul and Peter all made clear that the Gentiles are included in the promises made

to Israel; all who believe in Jesus are children of Abraham and included in the new covenant.

9 Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers
On the day when I took them by the hand
To lead them out of the land of Egypt;
For they did not continue in My covenant,
And I did not care for them, says the Lord.

God was in no way negligent under the old covenant: like a dad leading his children, God “took them by the hand” and led them out of slavery in Egypt. But (as we saw in Hebrews 3 and 4), the people simply would not walk with God. Because of their rebellion, they failed to experience His care. By contrast, look at the promises God makes in the new covenant. God promises three basic things in the new covenant. None of these three things is foreign to the old covenant, but they are brought to fullest expression in the new covenant.

First, **God writes His word on our hearts**. Instead of God’s word being something external, engraved on tablets of stone, His word is written on our hearts.

10 “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
After those days, says the Lord:
I will put My laws into their minds,
And I will write them on their hearts.
And I will be their God,
And they shall be My people.

Internalizing the law (the word of God) was always possible under the old covenant. The people were commanded to memorize (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) and meditate upon (Psalm 1) God’s word. This internalization happened at certain times with certain people. But generally speaking, the people ignored or rejected God’s teachings. Jeremiah 17:1 even says that “their hearts were engraved with sin, not the law” (O’Brien, p. 298). By and large, the word of God remained an external standard that the people never internalized.

By contrast, God promised that in the new covenant, “I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts.” This internalization of God’s word is possible in the new covenant because of what God promised in Ezekiel 11 and 36. There He promised to give His people “a new heart” and to put His very Spirit within them. The result is a people who are bent toward obedience (Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:26-27); as Paul wrote, we “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (Romans 7:22). Because of this miraculous work in the hearts of all who believe, God writes His word on our hearts. The net result is that we are internally motivated and empowered to do God’s will.

This is one of the most basic expectations we should have of God: that **He will write His word on our hearts**. For example, think about an area of your life that needs to be

transformed. It could be some aspect of your thought and emotional life: fear, anxiety, anger, sensuality, negative/critical thoughts. Or perhaps you're in a relationship that doesn't really honor God; maybe you know you should be committed to the other person's maturity, but you're too annoyed and agitated to be helpful. Maybe you're battling some addiction that leaves you drained and numb.

I love what Paul Tripp writes about the power of God's word to transform us (this is in *Dangerous Calling*):

When the Word of God, faithfully taught by the people of God and empowered by the Spirit of God, falls down, people become different. Lustful people become pure, fearful people become courageous, thieves become givers, demanding people become servants, angry people become peacemakers, complainers become thankful, and idolaters come to joyfully worship the one true God. The ultimate purpose of the Word of God is not theological information but heart and life transformation. (p. 51)

Sometimes I wonder if we (myself included) expect God to do small, insignificant, trivial things in our lives when in fact He's actually promised to write His word on our hearts! We should approach God's word with anticipation and faith (instead of a yawn). As we read and meditate on Scripture, as we listen to the word being taught, and as we have spiritual conversations with friends, we should expect that God's truth will captivate our hearts - to the point where we experience a deep, internal transformation.

Second, ***Each of us in the covenant community knows God experientially.*** God promises that every person who enters into the new covenant through faith in Jesus will know Him personally. Notice what God promises:

11 "And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen,
And everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
For all will know Me,
From the least to the greatest of them.

God's refrain throughout the book of Jeremiah was, "My people don't know Me!" (Jer. 4:22, 9:3; see also Heb. 3:10). Hosea lamented that "there is no knowledge of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1, 6). The remedy is given in the new covenant. Those who trust in Jesus alone for salvation enter into a relationship with God in which we know Him experientially. As you've probably heard, when the Bible speaks of "knowing" someone, it's not normally talking about information; it's speaking about experiencing someone. That's certainly the connotation here.

The promise in verse 11 is expressed in a way that emphasizes that knowing God would be the common experience of ***every single person*** who has entered into the new covenant. "For all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them." This means that there is no hierarchy within the new covenant in which some are closer to God than others. Your gifts and your role in the body of Christ may be different than mine, but we all know God experientially.

This reality suggests a very tangible expectation: As we live our lives, we should expect to experience God personally in very tangible ways. Depending on your spiritual background, you may subconsciously think that there are only a select few in the body of Christ who really experience God (e.g., pastors, missionaries, elders, and few other really zealous people). . . and everybody else watches in stunned amazement. Consequently, you may not really expect to hear God's voice through the Scriptures, to teach you things in everyday life, or to use you in significant ways in the lives of others.

But based on this promise God makes in the new covenant, we should each assume and expect that God Himself will speak to us and lead us and empower us as we fix our eyes on Jesus, our great high priest. It is vital for the health and the mission of the church that every one of us experiences God in these ways.

Third, ***God forgives our sin in an unqualified, decisive way.***

12 "For I will be merciful to their iniquities,
And I will remember their sins no more."

Hebrews 10:3 points out that under the old covenant "there is a reminder of sins year by year" because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." By contrast, Jesus sacrifice paid for our sins permanently. That's why God could promise "I will remember their sins no more." In other words God has forgiven our sins in an unqualified, decisive way. As our great high priest, Jesus offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. Jesus' sacrifice didn't merely atone for our sins for a year; His sacrifice paid for our sins permanently. When God says to you, "I forgive you," it means that He is never going to make you pay for your sin. The penalty for your sin fell upon His one and only Son Jesus on the cross.

This reality that God has forgiven our sins in an unqualified, decisive way suggests any number of expectations for our relationship with Him. Perhaps the most foundational expectation we should have is that God will relate to us as people who are fully alive to Him. In Romans 6 Paul explained that because our sin has been forgiven, we are just as alive to God as Jesus Himself. This isn't make believe; this is spiritual reality. Therefore, we should expect that our relationship with God will be vibrant and alive. I'm not talking about pure emotion here (although our emotions are probably a lot more important than we realize). I'm talking about a relationship with God in which the barrier of sin has been removed. We are now free to receive from God, and we are now free to give back to God (our devotion, our love, our lives, etc.).

Our experience of God's forgiveness is the foundation of all sorts of things. It's the foundation of our self-image; we think of ourselves as forgiven, fully-accepted sons and daughters of God (which, by the way, never fills us with pride but humbles us to the core). It's the foundation of our forgiveness of others; since God doesn't make us pay for our sin, we don't make others pay for theirs. It's the foundation of our peace in this world; if God has addressed the **biggest** issue in our lives (our sin), then we can rest assured He'll address everything smaller in our lives.

The Lord's Table. This morning as we celebrate the Lord's Table, I'd encourage you to examine your expectations and experience of God. Specifically:

- Do you expect God to transform you through His word?
- Are you growing in an experiential knowledge of God?
- Do you live before God as someone who is holy and blameless in Christ Jesus?

I don't mean to imply that these are the **only** three things we can and should expect of God. But these things are foundational. If we're not expecting these things, we'll probably be off in our other expectations. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let's ponder what God promises us through the new covenant in Jesus' blood. If you're a believer in Jesus, we invite you to celebrate the Lord's Table with us today. We'd ask that you hold the bread, and then the cup until everyone has received; then we'll eat and drink together.