

## The Exaltation of Christ in the Grace of the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

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*Introduction:* Clarity in communication is a gift. It's also a necessity if you want to communicate anything well. Recently I read an article from 2017 which was titled, "Bad Writing Costs Businesses Billions." The subheading reads, "It's not just a chore to wade through the badly written memos, emails, and other lousy business communication—this inefficiency costs us insane amounts of money." He goes on to argue that the lack of clarity in communication costs American businesses around \$400 billion every year!

This section of Hebrews is not the easiest to wade through. I think one of the reasons it's difficult is because it's often talking about things (priests, covenants, sacrifices) of which we have little (or NO!) personal experience. And this is why the first verse of our passage for this morning is such a gift. The first verse of chapter 8 (which, remember, was just the next sentence when this was first written) says this: "now the point in what we are saying is this..." How helpful!

*Illustration:* You've probably been in conversations before or reading a book or listening to lectures before (or even sermons!) where you've wanted to ask this question: "What's the point?!"

Well, here's the point of everything that we've heard in the three sermons on Hebrews 7, and it's given to us right here in 8:1: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest." Or this could be translated: "we have *this kind* of high priest" OR "*this* is the kind of high priest *that we have*." In other words, ***the purpose of these chapters of Hebrews is to highlight the value and distinctiveness of our high priest, of Jesus.*** That was the point of chapter 7, that's the point of chapter 8, and that's much of the point of chapters 9-10. Each of these chapters highlights the value and distinctiveness of Jesus in different ways. (Remember several weeks ago Ted Allston shared that the arguments here are not linear but circle around and around.) And the topic they are circling around is the distinctiveness of Jesus. Chapter 8 is going to look at the distinctiveness of Jesus specifically in terms of Jesus mediating over a better covenant.

*Pre-application:* It's possible you came in this morning feeling distant from God. Could be because of personal sin. Or because you haven't considered him much (or your relationship with him over the past week). Or, just because you feel distant from him for whatever reason. Our chapter this morning is going to highlight God's pursuit of a personal relationship with his people through covenant. V.6 (right in the middle of the chapter) kind of helps give us the structure of the passage.

V.6 : "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." In this chapter, we will see that the new covenant is better because it comes with a better ministry (vv.1-6) and better promises (vv.6-13). All of this will highlight God's grace through Jesus.

**Covenants:** But before we start into the text, I want to continue this extended introduction by talking briefly about the idea of covenants, since this biblical word can often seem distant and confusing to

us. But I think understanding the old covenant is important to grasping the glory of Christ in the grace of the New Covenant. Let me first start off with a simple illustration.

*Illustration:* I recently became a part of a local disc golf club. We just became official a couple weeks ago...and the reason I say we became official is because we now have a document that is titled, "Disc Golf Club Rules and Regulations." The first item lists the names of the members of the club. Then there is a stated goal of the club. Then, there are general and specific regulations for how and when we compete and how to compare scores in various situations. Finally, at the end of the document, even this statement is included: "As stated above, the goal of [this group] is to encourage fun, competitive play, but competition can push individuals toward choices that are not in the best interest of the entire group. If a repeated issue arises, it will be brought to the group as a whole and a group majority will determine whether or not sanctions are necessary." We have a binding agreement that established a relationship between us. (*Marriage:* man/woman commit or covenant to be faithful to each other "until death." *Member Covenant:* we agree to live in a certain way towards each other and to hold each other accountable.)

Written agreements like this may be the closest that we get today to the biblical idea of a covenant. But covenants were common in biblical times, and they were foundational to God's relationship to his people. And this is our focus this morning. Divine covenants (or covenants that God made with man) had at least three main features:

1. *Covenants established a special relationship with undeserving people.* Covenants were the means by which God pursued a special relationship with his people. So when you think of covenants, think relationship. They showed people how to relate to God. And therefore, covenants highlight God's grace because they show us that in spite of our sin, God is pursuing a relationship with man. He's making a way to be made right with him.
2. *Covenants involved a blood sacrifice.* God's covenants with men involved blood being shed to show the seriousness of the promises being made and the commitment involved. Covenants were not entered into flippantly. In fact, often in Scripture the words translated "make a covenant" literally mean to "cut a covenant," referring to the cutting apart of an animal. The death of the cut animal symbolized the curse that one called on himself if he did not keep his portion of the covenant.
3. *Covenants were both initiated and dictated by God.* They weren't like the disc golf agreement that I told you about earlier, where we come together and talk through together what we want to happen. God is completely sovereign over the covenants that he makes (he dictates the terms). He decides how sinful man can approach him. If the divine covenants say anything, they say this: God is God, and man is not.
  - Now, our passage talks specifically about the Old Covenant, which could also be referred to as the Mosaic Covenant. This is a covenant made between God and the nation of Israel (and it expands on the promises God previously made in his covenant with Abraham).
    - *Established a special relationship with an undeserving people:* Exod 19:4-6 – "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice

- and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples...” v.8 – “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Did Israel deserve this? No. Only a few chapters earlier, after crossing the Red Sea, Exod 16 describes the nation already grumbling against Moses. God displayed his justice in the Exodus by giving the Egyptians what they deserved, and he displayed his grace in the Exodus by giving the Israelites what they did not deserve.
- *Involved blood*: We read of this graphic picture in Exod 24:7-8 – “Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” (Quoted in Heb 9:18-20!) This graphic picture demonstrates the seriousness of the covenant between God and his people.
  - *Was initiated and dictated by God*: Following Exod 24, in the next chapters God establishes with his people in detail the terms of the covenant, in particular how they can approach him, the sacrificial system, the roles of the priests, the various items to be placed within the tabernacle. God dictates the terms of the covenant. And in his covenant with Israel, God is sovereignly working out his plan to highlight the glory of his grace to an undeserving people. This was the reason he “bore them on eagles’ wings and brought them to himself,” to highlight his grace to them.

*Transition*: And so (with that brief overview of covenants) we come to Hebrews 8, and v.6 reads, “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old (ministry) as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.” This verse connects the two halves of this chapter. The first half focuses on the Jesus’ more excellent ministry in the new covenant, and the second half focuses on the better promises of the new covenant.

Hebrews 8:1-6 – “1 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.”

## **1. The Better Ministry of the New Covenant (1-6)**

*Explanation*: So right from the start of Hebrews 8 we are reminded of the point of it all: the point of what we are saying is this: we have this kind of high priest! It’s as if the writer is saying to the readers, “We’re all familiar with the old covenant priests and the high priest and their

role among God's people." But think of the kind of high priest that we have! Again, to appreciate this, we have to remember the priests of the old covenant. So let's talk about the old covenant ministry of priests for a minute: we are told in vv.3-5 that (1) the priests offer many gifts and sacrifices according to the law (2) in an earthly tent/tabernacle (3) that the tabernacle was set up by man (4) that these are a shadow. They had to follow incredibly strict rules and regulations approach God and mediate on behalf of God's sinful people. The old covenant shouts: sinful people cannot just walk into the presence of a holy God. (Think of experiencing these sacrifices on a regular basis: the smells, the sight of it, the sounds of the animals as they are dying, etc.) ***These practices were a graphic, daily reminder to God's people of the costliness of their sin and their need for a mediator between them and God.***

He compares Jesus to this: "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, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus, it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer." So let's compare Jesus' ministry with the old covenant ministry:
  - The old covenant priests offered many gifts/sacrifices → Jesus offered one, perfect sacrifice
  - The old covenant priests ministered in a tabernacle on earth → Jesus ministers in the true tabernacle in heaven
  - The old covenant tabernacle was built by man → the heavenly tabernacle was built by God
  - All of this old covenant ministry was a shadow, a copy of the reality to come.
- Now, the point being made here isn't that the old covenant priests weren't doing their job. (Some didn't do their job well, but that's not the point here.) Rather, the point being made in this comparison of the ministries of the old and new covenants is that the old covenant priests were intended to serve as a shadow what was to come. The old covenant along with its regulations pictured or foreshadowed true and final reconciliation to God that was to come.
- **The argument of the writer of Hebrews here is that the priests and sacrifices of the old covenant were always intended to be a shadow and to point forward to Jesus. Old covenant believers were reconciled to God by faith in a coming Messiah who would fulfill all that God promised and pictured in the old covenant. We are reconciled to God by faith in Jesus, the Messiah, who has come and fulfilled all of God promises through the new covenant.**

*Application:* Let me return to the beginning of v.2 – Jesus is "a minister in the holy places." Jesus is right now ministering for his people (for you!) in the presence of God. 7:24 highlighted this when it said, "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." Jesus is continually ministering for you in God's presence. There's no greater ministry than this!

Brothers and sisters, this means that all throughout this past week, at every moment, Jesus was interceding for you. He never stopped ministering even when you forgot him. In your moments of prayer, he was praying too, taking your broken, imperfect words perfectly before God's throne. In your moments of sin, he was interceding for you. In your seasons of doubt, he doesn't stop continually bringing your name before the Father and claiming you as his own. He doesn't ever stop identifying himself with you.

If you are in Christ, no one can do anything to take your union with Christ away from you because Jesus is continually ministering for you in God's presence. Rom 8:34 – "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."

"This is the kind of high priest we have: one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places."

"And now for me he stands  
Before the Father's throne  
He shows his wounded hands  
And names me as his own." (My Hope Is in the Lord)

*Transition:* v.6 – "Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better." But this ministry, v.6 says, is *founded* on a better covenant. And the covenant is better, v.6 says, *because* it comes with better promises, promises which were actually promised during the days of the Old Covenant. The writer of Hebrews is going to quote from Jeremiah 31.

Hebrews 8:6-13 – "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.”

## 2. The Better Promises of the New Covenant (6-13)

*Explanation:* Let me first ask, why a *new* covenant? This portion of the text gives us two reasons:

1. *Fault with it.* The first one comes in v.7 – “For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.” So, in what sense can “fault” be attributed to the old covenant? Well, the old covenant was not wrong or bad. Rather, it was *ineffective* to make sinful man righteous before God. It taught about and visually displayed to God’s people his holiness, their sinfulness, the need for sacrifice, and the need for a mediator between sinful man and a holy God. But the old covenant in itself was not effective in producing the righteousness that it required. It foreshadowed the need for something more.

2. *Fault with them.* The second one comes in v.8 – “For he finds fault with *them* when he says...” (then goes on to quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34). And v.9 quotes Jeremiah saying, “For they did not continue in my covenant.” God’s people turned away from his covenant with them. They did not continue in his covenant. And this is actually the context in which Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant comes. In the midst of God’s people *not continuing* in his covenant and in the moment where they were on the brink of being cast out of the promised land into a foreign land, God promises a new covenant.

So, God promises a new covenant because his people did not continue in his covenant and because the old covenant only *pictured* the need for righteousness and for forgiveness of sins (shadow/sketch) without actually accomplishing it.

*Transition:* The foundation of the new covenant is a relationship between God and his people (end of v.10): “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The new covenant, as we remarked about covenants earlier, establishes a relationship between God and undeserving people. (Remember, it’s in the midst of God’s people not keeping his covenant that he promises the new covenant.) ***Just as the old covenant highlighted God’s grace by bearing his people on eagles’ wings out of Egypt to bring them to himself, the new covenant highlights God’s grace by giving sinful man a way to enter into a personal relationship with the living God.*** And it comes with even better promises.

*Explanation:* There are three main promises in this prophecy from Jeremiah to God’s people about the new covenant.

**1. (v.12) I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.** So, in the new covenant, God will finally and fully remove the sins of his people from them. In the new covenant, God will finally display how he can be both just and justifier, by making Jesus a substitute. Romans 3:25-26 – “God put forward [Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he

had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

The new covenant, as we remarked about covenants earlier, involved blood sacrifice. Matthew 26:28 says, “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” ***God’s promise of mercy towards iniquities and not counting sins against his people finds its fulfillment in the substitutionary death of Jesus. Sins were actually paid for. Perfect Justice and Perfect Mercy collided at the cross. All to the glory of God’s grace in Christ.*** This is the first promise of the new covenant.

**2. (v.10) I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.** No longer will God’s laws be written on stone for God’s people to read (or to be read to them). He will write his laws inside of his people, on their hearts. ***This promise moves beyond the previous in that God will not merely cancel the PENALTY of sin that they deserve, but he will also deliver them from the POWER of sin in their actual lives and experience.*** In this promise, God will ensure that his people are faithful to him to the end because he will change his people from the inside out so that they *treasure* his law and so that their *joy* is to follow it. (*Application*: Does this describe you? Would you describe the very words of God are your delight? Or do your actions say that you care little for God’s Words and care much for other people’s words. Col 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”) ***This promise of the new covenant is that God will change the hearts of his people to delight to do what he requires.***

Joseph Swain, 18<sup>th</sup> century British pastor and hymnwriter said it this way:

Blessed are the eyes that see him,  
Blessed the ears that hear his voice;  
Blessed are the souls that trust him,  
And in him alone rejoice;  
His commandments, His commandments  
Then become their happy choice.

This is the second promise of the new covenant. ***By his grace, in the new covenant God empowers what he requires, he enables what he demands.*** “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.”

**3. (v.11) They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.** In the new covenant, God’s people will come to know him. This is the goal of God graciously establishing a relationship through covenant with his people: that they should *know* him. Not just to know about him. But to intimately know him. Paul talks about this in Phil 3:

Phil 3:8 – “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

John 17:25-26 – “O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

One of the glories of God’s grace in the new covenant is an intimate and personal knowledge of God in Christ that comes through His Word and through the Spirit who lives inside all of his people.

This intimate and personal knowledge of God in Christ is what we get to invite others to experience with us: 2 Cor 2:14 – “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” In the new covenant, God enters into a relationship with all who come to him in Christ.

*So, while God’s grace was evident in the prior covenants with his people, **the glory of God’s grace is displayed most beautifully in the new covenant because in the new covenant and through Christ God promises to both fully save and increasingly sanctify those who do not deserve it.*** This is why he ends by saying in v.13, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is read to vanish away.”

*Conclusion:* As we said about covenants before, God sets the terms of his covenants. The good news is that there is only one requirement of us in terms of the new covenant: faith in Christ. Why? ***Because Jesus has lived the righteousness that the old covenant required, Jesus offered the true and final sacrifice that the old covenant pictured, and Jesus perfectly mediates what the new covenant promises.***

We take part in the new covenant through faith in Christ alone. This is why we sing, “Hallelujah! All I have is Christ!”

*Application:*

- If you are here, and not a believer, why would you look anywhere else for meaning in life? The sovereign creator God has pursued us and told us how to be reconciled to him. It’s through Jesus. So, put your faith in Him alone. No one else can decide how to be made right with God. God alone sets the terms of his covenants with man. If you have any questions, we would love the chance to talk with you about these things.
- Now, to my brothers and sisters here, let me return to v.1 – “the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest...” The point of Hebrews 8 is to highlight the glory of God’s grace in the new covenant. And at the center of that new covenant is its mediator, Jesus. So, let me encourage you to look to Jesus.
  - When you sin (and you will this week), let me encourage you to be quick to confess your sin, turn from it, and consider what kind of high priest you have!
  - When you are in despair over the weight or the consequences of your sin (maybe how it has affected the people around you), remember the promises of the new covenant: “I



will remember their sins no more.” Speak this truth to yourself. The new covenant gospel says that our sin should lead us to humble repentance, but not hopeless despair.

- Psalm 1, written in the days of the old covenant, describes a really happy person: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” In the new covenant, through Christ, God promises to create all kinds of Psalm 1-people. He will write his law on their hearts and ensure that it becomes their delight. This is a miracle of the new covenant: that God would make his self-revelation our absolute joy and delight! I’ve talked with many professing Christians who say that this is not the case with them (“I just don’t get anything out of it; so this can’t be true”). And ironically the most common response to their feelings has been that they stop trying. If this is you, let me encourage you that there are *tons* of Christians in our church who have experienced the miracle of God’s Word becoming their delight. Talk to them (this is the beauty of the church). Ask them how they read, what questions they ask, how they meditate. We are currently offering a SS class called “Meeting with God” that explores this idea. This miracle is happening all the time, but it doesn’t come apart from pursuing it in faith.
- For those of you who are suffering, remember that Jesus is ministering for you, too. He’s interceding for you. Do not miss the distinct ways God wants to draw you closer to himself through these deep waters. Many brothers and sisters have testified to the mysterious providence that, in the midst of the most difficult times, God’s presence and promises have become significantly sweeter and more precious. Keep looking to Jesus. Psalm 94:19 – “When my worries are many within me, your comforts cause my soul to delight.” It’s the promises and the mediator of a new covenant that sustain your joy as you face cancer or loss or mistreatment or even death. It doesn’t mean you don’t cry or grieve. It means there’s a deeper joy that grounds you in the midst of the pain. (In the words of Heb 6:19, “you have a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”)

However God is at work in you, I hope that God will capture your heart through the beautiful story of his grace foreshadowed in the old covenant and fulfilled in the new covenant through Jesus. Let me give you a moment to respond.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. 8:1 starts with “now the point in what we are saying is this...” State “the point” in your own words. What is the point of these chapters of Hebrews? What is the point of chapter 8 specifically?
2. What is a covenant? What were some features of God’s covenants with man? Why did God enter into covenants with man?

- With whom did God make the old/Mosaic covenant?
3. How is Jesus' priestly ministry different from the old covenant priestly ministry?
  4. Think about Jesus as a minister on your behalf (v.2). How does it make you feel that Jesus is continually ministering for you, at every moment? How can this truth help you in the various circumstances that will come your way this week?
  5. Why is the new covenant better than the old covenant? What are some of the specific promises of the new covenant that make it better (vv.10-12)?
  6. What is the one requirement of us in the new covenant?
    - Why is "faith" the only requirement?
  7. Think about this promise: "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts." Have you experienced, at any point in your life, God's Word becoming your delight? Share this with others. Maybe take time to have different people share how you personally pursue this.
    - Can you think of other passages of Scripture that also speak to God's Words being the delight of his people?
    - How do we know this is something to *pursue* and not something that just happens "automatically" without our pursuit of it?
  8. In groups of 2-3:
    - What are 1-2 things you want to take away from this passage?
    - Pray together.