

"A New And Better Covenant"
Hebrews 8:1-13
April 28, 1996

Have you ever heard the term "backslidden" or "backsliding"?

In my boyhood church that phrase was used a lot.

What those in my church, following the example of the Bible, were talking about was,

those people who give good evidence that they have become Christ-followers - real Christians- and then sometime later quickly or slowly seem to drift back to the old way of thinking and living.

If someone is in a "backslidden" condition - living disobediently - are they still a Christian, or not?

I don't think anyone other than God can really know.

There certainly is a lot of biblical evidence that if a person stays in that "backslidden" condition, it eventually proves they did not ever truly belong to Christ.

But that TRUE believers can "backslide" for a time, seems evident from the experience of Peter, the Apostles, some of the Corinthian Christians, Solomon, and others.

The possibility of a temporary, even weeks-long or months-long, lapse into unbelief and sin, - "backsliding" - seems entirely possible for many true believers.

How many in this audience can remember well a time when your relationship to Jesus was alive, stimulating, and satisfying BUT you have long since slid back into a lifeless religious routine?

How many here are feeling such pressure from life's circumstances that you are sorely tempted to just give up, at least for a while, - quit

fighting it - and just slide back into that comfortable - carelessness about God that used to characterize your life before you became a Christian?

Maybe you've grown weary of "living the Christian life" - it's too hard. And so you decided, mostly by default, to slide back into one or the other of two popular religions:

Some of you are tempted to slide back into what I call "the man on the street religion".

That is the religion that carelessly hopes God will overlook my failures, my sins, my imperfections because after all, I'm more good than bad. "God's fair, isn't he?"

With a belief something like that, many can live just blindly hoping their logic is correct and that it will all work out in the end.

Some of you are tempted to slide back into what I call "evangelical wishful thinking religion"

That is the religion that says, "I asked Jesus into my heart some time ago and therefore I'm a Christian and it doesn't really matter what I do from now on because when I die, I'll still go to heaven.

Yes, there are times in our Christian lives when we grow weary, when it seems that it would be easier and much more comfortable to just slide.

Just slide back into something that isn't so hard.

Apparently the people to whom God is writing in the book of Hebrews were facing very difficult times being Christ-followers.

And apparently they were tempted to give in to the pressures to just go back to the old ways.

Hebrews 2:2 "Be careful so you don't drift away"

Hebrews 3:12 "See to it that you don't turn away from the living God."

And several more times in the letter, he warns them not to go back.

The old ways to which they were tempted to go back, were the ways of the

old religious system:

They would just do the best they could, offer the proper sacrifices to the priests in the Temple and just hope for the best while they went on living their lives.

The radically different way of living that was demanded of Christ-followers was too hard.

But the pastor-author through whom God writes this letter, says, "don't go back"!

Don't go back to what is dead, to what can't possibly help you.
Don't go back to the old when a new way has appeared.

In Hebrews 7:22 the pastor said "Jesus has become the guarantee of a better COVENANT."

And in Hebrews 8, our text for today, the pastor writes in verse 6 that Jesus has brought a new covenant, a new way of relating to God, that is superior to the old one.

What is this word "covenant" and what does it mean?

In our Bibles most of us have an Old Testament and a New Testament. That word "testament" is a Latin rendering of a Greek word meaning "covenant".

We can rightly refer to the OT of the Bible as that which discusses God's dealings with His people under the Old Covenant.

And the NT as that which discusses God's dealings with His people under the New Covenant.

So "Testament" and "Covenant" are roughly equivalent and we have two "covenants" - an Old and a New.

The word "Covenant" as used of God's relationship to his people means a binding together, an obligation to each other, BUT specifically a "contract" of sorts where the more powerful says what the conditions are going to be and the less powerful can decide whether or not to accept those conditions and the resulting benefits or penalties.

In the Old Covenant God told them how to relate to him and what privileges and penalties accompanied obedience or disobedience.

In the New Covenant God told them how to relate to him and what privileges and penalties accompanied obedience or disobedience.

The book of Hebrews is written to demonstrate how superior Jesus and the NEW Covenant are to the old way of seeing and doing things.

Remember, I am likening the "old" covenant to the systems of belief that we are tempted to slide back into when we grow weary of following Christ.

Today, most of us are not tempted to slide back into the Old Covenant-Testament sacrificial system with priests, lambs, and temples but we are tempted to slide back into other systems that we hope will make us right with God in the end.

To talk them out of backsliding, this author-pastor tries to demonstrate to them how infinitely superior walking with Jesus is to going back to their old system.

And he says, in Verse 6 it is superior because the NEW covenant is founded on better promises.

He will spell those out beginning at v 10.

But before he does that he sets the new covenant in contrast to the old one beginning at v7.

Look at v7. READ

Your old system for relating to God was flawed - if it hadn't been there would have been no need for a New one - a new covenant - but there was a problem with the Old Covenant. - People didn't respond to God in faith and obedience.

Under the Old Covenant, everyone who was born of Jewish parents was considered part of the Covenant - the boys were circumcized on the 8th day after birth to indicate their covenant relationship to God.

What you had were people who were called "Israelites" or part of the people of "Israel" just because they were born into the family.

But at the end of verse 9 God says that the people did not remain faithful to the covenant.

God made a covenant with the People.

He said that if they would trust him and obey him he would be their God and they would be his people.

But the covenant and commandments were disregarded as Jeremiah said it in 7:24-26 "But they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts."

Prophet after prophet came calling the people back to covenant loyalty saying "Listen to the terms of the Covenant and follow them...all along I have warned you, obey me - but you did not listen or pay attention." (Jer 11:6f)

King Josiah (as recorded in II Kings 23) called the people back to God.

The people SAID they would follow God but it was lip-service - "They did not return to me with all their heart but only in pretense" (Jer 3:10).

And so the pastor to the Hebrews says in V7 - there's something wrong!

You see, the Old Covenant couldn't deliver!

The Old Covenant couldn't actually bring people to God

The Old system said you "OUGHT to do better" but it gave people no power to do so.

The "man on the street" religion says be careful to be good more than you are bad - but it can't help you do it.

The "evangelical wishful thinking religion" says "I hope you're right about this "eternal security" stuff because I'm in trouble if it's wrong - and something in my heart says - this isn't the way it's supposed to be - Calling myself a Christian while disregarding God doesn't do well in creating peace of heart and mind.

The Old Covenant didn't cut it because there were thousands who were part of the Covenant who had no ability to obey the law.

They were part of the Covenant not by heart, but just by birth.

And so God, in vs 8 using the prediction of Jeremiah, says a time will come when the house of Israel - the so-called "people of God" will truly be the people of God.

God will make a new covenant.

And this time, people would become part of the Covenant not by birth but by re-birth!

And God is writing to remind these discouraged or careless Christians of certain facts which ought to change their minds about backsliding.

Your birth-right may entail obligations and even hardship but don't, like Esau, sell it for a bowl of porridge.

Don't slide back into the old system just because following Christ is hard.

Consider what you have in Christ and the New Covenant that you could never have under the old system:

In V 6 God had called it a "better" covenant" -
How is it better?

Verses 10-12 show us three ways:

First of all in verse 10:

I. Your New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ is better because God has brought you into His family by writing his laws, his desires on your mind and heart.

Under the old system the laws of God were external to the person.

A person could look it up in the Bible, read it, and even think to himself - "I ought to do that" BUT there was nothing corresponding to that in his heart - he had no internal compulsion or propensity to obey.

If you go back to your old system, whatever it is, remember that you

will be expected to live by the law (you can't escape that) but you'll have forfeited or at least dulled that inward principle enabling you to obey God.

When God talks about writing his laws on our minds and hearts he is talking about a "heart transplant".

This is more than memorizing the Bible - Deut 6:6-9 already called for that and most of the people of Israel were no better off for it.

Memorizing is no guarantee of performance.

What people need is a new heart - a heart on which is written the law of God.

Ezk 11:19ff "I will take the stony heart out... and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God."

When the people in Moses' day heard the demands of the covenant they said, "All that Jehovah has spoken we will do, and be obedient". (Ex 24:7) "But they did not have the internal moral power to match their good intentions" (FF Bruce p 173)

They needed a new heart!

The defect was not in the demands of God but in the inadequacy of the human beings who were supposed to obey.

The NEW covenant was NEW in that it imparted a new heart ABLE to obey, to respond to God, to be God's person.

Dr. Christian Barnard, the first surgeon ever to do a heart transplant asked one of his patients, "Would you like to see your old heart?"

John Blanchard writes, "the men stood in a room of the Groote Schuur Hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dr. Barnard went up to a cupboard, took down a glass container and handed it to Dr. Blaiberg. Inside the container was Baliberg's old heart. For a moment he stood there stunned into silence - the first man in history to hold his own heart in his hands..."

(after asking many questions) he turned to take a final look at the contents of the glass container, and said, "So this is my old heart that

caused me so much trouble." (Cited in Kent Hughes p218)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come."

God has given us a heart transplant.

We now have a heart that desires to obey our God.

Yes, we still battle daily with our old habits but at least now we have a new propensity for obedience engraved on our new hearts by the Spirit of God.

Don't slide back to the old systems, the old ways of thinking, the old "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" kinds of religions.

Don't ignore the new heart God has given you.

Don't stifle the promptings of that new heart by disregarding God or by carelessly ignoring him.

It may be hard to be a Christ-follower but God has given you a new heart on which he has written his laws so that you are enabled to follow Christ. - Don't ignore that.

How effective is that new heart provided in the New Covenant?

I hope you will come two weeks from tonight to hear Dorie Van Stone.

Dorie is called the girl nobody loved.

You will be moved and encouraged as you hear her story about God's grace to change a life.

Did you hear the testimonies last Sunday morning - Oh, how I wish you could have heard all of them - what testimonies to God's grace to change lives.

Yes, God is giving new hearts - and writing his will on those hearts so that people want to obey God.

II. Not only is your New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ better because God has brought you into His family by writing his laws on your mind and heart

BUT ALSO because in this New Covenant relationship we have an intimacy with God that others cannot know.

Look at 10b-11 READ

The Old Covenant relationship was with a whole lot of people who frankly didn't know God.

Most were part of the Covenant simply by birth not re-birth.

They knew about God if a neighbor or brother told them - saying "know the Lord" but they didn't know God personally.

They had no relationship with Him.

God through this author-Pastor, in a sense, pleads with his readers and us, "Don't slide back to the old system where your knowledge of God was second-hand."

Don't go back to where you only know God by what others tell you instead of having the experience of being his child.

Don't go back to being distant from God.

What you have under the New Covenant is a Father-child relationship with Almighty God.

Because God's Spirit now lives within you, you have the privilege of coming directly into the presence of God.

Regardless you are of the greatest or the least - if you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your saving-Lord, you belong to God and you can know Him personally.

Would you forfeit that?

Would you go back to a system that just knows ABOUT God when you can live daily in an awareness of his presence and the intimacy of his counsel to you?

Don't slide back.

And according to Verse 12 , not only is your New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ better because God has brought you into His family by writing his laws on your mind and heart,
and also because in this New Covenant relationship we have an intimacy with God that others cannot know

III. BUT ALSO, this New Covenant relationship with God through Christ is

better because we have the full knowledge of sins forgiven and remembered no more - READ V12

As I have explained in previous sermons from Hebrews, sin is the plague of the human race.

Most, except the most audacious and foolish, admit that something is wrong between them and God.

Most human beings know they need help because they are in trouble with God.

Most of the other religious systems of the world are an attempt to deal with God's displeasure against sin.

Even the Old Covenant could not actually deal with sin - it only sacrificed animals daily as a reminder that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

If you slide back to the old way of living and thinking you will have to deal all over again with the problem of sin - your sin.

The "man on the street" religions and the "evangelical wishful thinking religion" don't deal with sin - they just try to cover them, ignore them, or pay for them - none of which works.

Under the New Covenant, God in Christ has paid for your sins and he promises to forgive them and "remember them no more."

Forgiveness is tied to memory.

Kent Hughes tells of the ancient Roman named Seneca of whom it is said, he could listen to 200 students each quote a line of poetry and then when they were all done, repeat back each person's poem.

It is said of St. Augustine that he admired a friend who could recite from memory the entire text of Virgil - backwards.

But they would lose in contest with God for God never forgets anything UNLESS he wills to.

And he has willed to forget our sins-
Because Christ has paid for them.

That is the "New Covenant" forgiveness - total forgiveness - no longer remembered.

Would you slide back to the insecurity and doubt of the old systems?

God by his Spirit gives us the security of knowing we have been forgiven by Him and that we belong to Him.

Don't lose that!

The New Covenant provides what is so much better - Don't lose it.

How about you, have you slid back to the old ways and old systems?
Have you dulled the writing of God's word on your heart?
Have you lost a sense of his personal presence in your life?
Have you taken back again the guilt for your sins?

PRAYER

PRAYER HALL

BENEDICTION