

“No More”

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God has provided a way that sin will no longer barricade access to God.

Hebrews 8:1-13

June 19, 2022

Seeing more clearly

The sermon title today is drawn from my favorite passage in the Old Testament. It's from the Old Testament, but it's quoted in Hebrews 8. "I will remember their sins no more." This is the Gospel. There is no more glorious truth.

I want you to see that truth today in a fresh way. Seeing is especially important to me this week. You may have heard that Pastor Bob is having outpatient surgery on my eyebrows and eyelids because the sags are limiting my peripheral vision.

In Hebrews 8, Barney wants you to see the Gospel better. Barney is the name I've given to the writer of Hebrews. It's short for Barnabas, one of the best theories (in my view) for who wrote Hebrews – which I think is more sermon than letter. Barney was also my grandfather's name. Grandpa Thompson was a missionary and pastor in India when I was growing up across the border in West Pakistan. We didn't get to see my grandparents often, but we did get to see them at Christmas.

Grandpa Barney was our Santa Claus. That's perfect! Santa symbolizes grace. He always comes through, doesn't he? There may be warnings and threats, but Santa ends up overlooking a lot of misbehavior when Christmas morning comes around. If Santa really held to high standards, boys and girls would have coal in their stocking.

See the point (8:1-2)

In Hebrews 8, Barney first wants you to see the point. Not just the point of this chapter, the point of everything he is saying. This is a pivotal verse in Hebrews. If you get lost in Hebrews, if you get confused or distracted, return to Hebrews 8:1.

Every once in a while, when making announcements or preaching a sermon, I wave my hands, talk a little louder, and say something like, “If I’ve lost you, come back.” This is the point of Hebrews 8:1-2. Writing to Christians with a Hebrew background living in a Greek city, Barney has told us Jesus is better than prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, priests, even better than Melchizedek, if you can believe it.

It would have been easy to get lost by this point, for a number of reasons. Barney intersperses his “better” arguments with some of his favorite quotations from the Old Testament. Some of Barney’s congregation had begun to think that returning to their Jewish roots offered more spiritual security, more confident access to God. He reminds them that their own Bible tells them the Messiah will be God’s son. Their own Bible urges, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Their own Bible speaks of a “priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Pastor Amy reminded us last week from Hebrews 6 of God’s oath and God’s promises, two things in which it is impossible for God to lie, that gives us hope as an anchor for the soul. Then we skipped over chapter 7, where Melchizedek takes center stage. Like Melchizedek, Jesus comes from nowhere and disappears. He’s not like ordinary priests, who die and sin. Jesus is like Melchizedek, only better. He’s now in heaven as a permanent priest who is interceding for us.

This excites some of you, who know and study this theme. Others are saying, “What’s the point of all this?” That’s what chapter 8 is about.

The word translated “main point” can mean exactly that or it can mean “summary.” It can also mean “crowning affirmation,” like the summit. This is the best, highest, noblest, most profound thing Barney has to say in all of Hebrews.

What is this peak? If you’ve dozed off during all the “Jesus is better than this” or “better than he,” or if we lost you on Melchizedek, pay attention! Here’s the summit. Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. This is the second time Barney has used this exact phrase. It was in his introduction (1:3). That he “sat down” is important because his work is finished. No priest in the tabernacle ever sat down.

Jesus is in “the sanctuary, the true tabernacle.” These are words that would have been familiar to anyone in the ancient world, Greek or Jew. Places were set up and set aside to get access to God, but set up with human hands. Imagine having access to God with God right there. In heaven. That’s where Jesus is, and that’s where “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him “(7:25).

See the preview (8:3-7,13)

Because of his audience, Barney spends a good bit of time summarizing details of the system that required a sanctuary “set up by a mere human being.” It was a system of gifts and sacrifices, of priests and laws, of access to God through a human mediator.

The real point of verses 3-7 is that all of that was a “copy” and “shadow” of what now exists in heaven. God himself had used a visual with Moses: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

I read a daily devotional guide called *Encounter with God*. This past Friday I finished a long series of readings from the last half of the book of Exodus. I know it’s in the Bible, but it is painstakingly laborious reading. Some Christians love studying the tabernacle and find so many parallels with the Gospel. I love that they love it, but for me it’s difficult reading. The pattern God showed Moses on the mountain included raw materials – fabrics, wood, metal – precise dimensions, furniture, moldings, the altar, the courtyard, priestly garments, rings, carrying instructions, on and on. Moses was to do all this exactly according to the pattern. God was the architect, but Moses was the project manager, foreman, and inspector.

The closest visual parallel I can think of between the wilderness sanctuary and the heavenly one is a 70s phenomenon called electric football. You set up your players and turn on the vibrator to see where they move next. Can you learn something about football from electric football? Sure. You can learn about yardage and first downs, offense and defense, coaching and playing, a little bit of strategy. Is there any comparison with real football? Not much. It’s a “copy and shadow.” At best, it’s a preview.

Once you’ve played or even watched a real football game, that toy thing is “obsolete and outdated.” It was only there as a preview.

The question I was asked multiple times this week is, “Why did God give them a system which was so badly flawed? Why wasn’t Plan B Plan A? My answer is twofold.

First, whenever the question is, “Why did God....” you can stop right there. That’s above my paygrade.

Second, it does seem to me that humans needed centuries of failure with a system “set up by a mere human being” before they could see what God saw from the beginning. God needs to show them that they can’t get access to him when he makes it simple, when he writes it down, when he backs it up with miracles, when he lets them have their way, when he provides for them, when he withholds provision, when he punishes them, when he rewards them, when he sends them poets and prophets, when he presses ahead, when he waits. No matter what God does, humans mess it up. They commit sins. They persevere in wickedness. They ignore God. They follow false gods. Whatever God does, they prove incapable of faithfulness to him.

See the promises (8:8-12)

There’s one more visual Barney wants us to open our eyes wider, let more light in, and see. The purpose of this third visual is that we know Barney didn’t make this up.

He needs his congregation not only to know that they must not return their Super Bowl tickets for electric football. They need to know the Super Bowl was promised by God.

Why is the new covenant better than the preview? Before we answer that, I want to share with you a new insight into the word “covenant.” How did I miss this all these years? Or if I knew it, how did I forget it?

William Barclay’s commentary pointed out to me that the normal word for “covenant” in Greek, the one used for a treaty between nations or a business deal or a marriage, is *syntheke* – which means “to set in place with.” That is, it’s a contract, agreed to by two parties. It’s like a contract, where both parties have to agree.

There is a different Greek word for covenant used in the New Testament. Are you listening? Did you hear that? The new what? It’s a different word – *diatheke* instead of *syntheke*. The prefix makes all the difference. It means “to set in place *through*.” It’s a one-way deal. The named beneficiaries in a will don’t sign it. They don’t have to agree to it. If the testator wanted to inform them or even negotiate it, that’s fine. But the testator didn’t have to. There’s only one party in control of a “last will and testament.” The testator dictates the terms.

Your Bible doesn’t have an Old Contract and a New Contract, an old *syntheke* and a new *syntheke*. It’s a *diatheke*. In both Old and New, it is a testament initiated by God and he sets the terms. In the first testament, his terms were, “I’m claiming you as my people, and you will follow these laws I give you.” The laws will be written in stone, thoroughly explained, prioritized, and you will obey them. They don’t get to negotiate the terms, modify the laws. These are the rules, you keep them.

Now there’s to be a new covenant, but it’s still a *diatheke*. Once again, God initiates, God sets the terms, God makes it happen. And, Barney asks, did you catch what Jeremiah said about this *diatheke*? Do you understand why it’s new? Do you get why the promises are better?

First, it’s better because it’s from the inside out. It’s not that God’s laws or God’s ways don’t matter, it’s that you’re not going to need someone hassling you or chiseling them in stone. He’s going to work inside of you.

Second, it’s going to be about relationship, not rules. I will be their God, they will be my people, and that’s going to be inviolable, immutable, unchangeable.

Then, third, hold on to your seats. Because yes, you’ll still demonstrate that you can’t do this right. People – individually and collectively, in this thing called “church” – they’re going to mess up as often as those people in the old covenant did. They’re not going to stop sinning, not going to cease wickedness. But God is going to create a way where that sin and wickedness need no longer be a barrier, will no longer prevent access to God. You won’t have to go to bed every night wondering if you’re good

enough for the covenant or if the hammer's going to fall any minute. The earth will open up and swallow you or snakes will surround you or enemies will slaughter you because of your sin. God has created a way that sin will no longer barricade the access to God. No more.

Why? How? There's a priest in heaven who has sat down, who's on your side, who's interceding for you, who's got your back. This will not be "grace if," "grace plus," or "grace as long as." This new testament, which God himself will make through the death of his Son, will be "grace period."

All in

I for one am all in when it comes to this gospel of grace. I am all in for my own life and eternal life. Is there more to the New Testament than just this? Of course there is. I believe because God has forgiven me I don't belong to myself. I'm all his. And I want to give my whole life to serving him. But I have also invested my whole calling – all in for my whole life long – that this gospel of grace, that God will remember our sins no more – is how lives are truly changed. Not when we say, "You have to trust Jesus and then we'll accept you if your life is sufficiently holy."

Two parts of pastoral ministry in particular force me to believe in grace – and to hold on to grace: confirmation and funerals. Well, there are more, but let's stay with those two. I've been confirming kids long enough that I know all of them don't remain faithful to the profession they make. But it's not mine to decide or predict whose faith is genuine.

As for funerals, I preach every single one with grace. If someone was a declared unbeliever, that's different. I don't want to pretend they had a faith they didn't profess. But with the wide range of how Christians live and die, I preach grace over every funeral. Because I believe it. And I believe it because of Scriptures like Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8.

There are so many varieties of "grace plus." Most of them apply to someone else, not me. We Christians tend to think someone else isn't really good enough for grace. Some other church or denomination or someone else's sin disqualifies them. Someone else's inattention to God or unrepentant greed or sexual brokenness or sexual differentness or racism or lack of forgiveness or abortion or fundamentalism or liberalism or inability to accept me for who I am or over eagerness to dismiss sin or wrong theology or – and the list goes on – places them outside the reach of God's grace.

One of my Bible study guys this week reminded me of a classic and beautiful little book by Brennan Manning on grace called *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-up and Burnt Out*. There's a quote from that book in your bulletin, and I could have drawn a hundred quotes from it.

“My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.”

“I could more easily contain Niagara Falls in a tea cup than I can comprehend the wild, uncontainable love of God.”

“The ragamuffin gospel says we can't lose, because we have nothing to lose.”

“Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands (see Revelation 7:9), I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me that she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son.

If I have a criticism of the book it's that at times Manning doesn't seem to extend grace to those who have a hard time extending grace. For example, this quote –

“The story goes that a public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden entry to the church. He took his woes to God. 'They won't let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner.'

'What are you complaining about?' said God. 'They won't let Me in either.’

Even in churches where they're too self-righteous to “let God in,” to love the unrighteous, grace invades. The reason I don't spend a lot of time complaining about churches that do it wrong is because I'm so keenly aware there's never been a church or a pastor who's done it right. I won't be the first and neither will you.

I didn't make up the Gospel. God did, and it's his *diatheke*, his testament. He communicated his will through Jeremiah and Barney, through Paul and John, and, of course, ultimately and most fully through Jesus who is seated at the right hand of the Father and has your back and mine.

So say it again. Say what God said, believe it for yourself and for those you love and even those you hate. What does he say? What is the gospel? “I will remember their sins no more.” Amen.