Out of the Shadows
Hebrews 8:1-13

So just to remind you where we've got to in this letter: the writer is writing to a group of Christians who have most likely become Christians out of a Jewish background. But in the face of growing persecution, some of them were considering turning their backs on Christianity and returning to Judaism.

Now, as we've said more than once, that is not something you are likely to struggle with. If you find yourself doubting the faith, or considering leaving the church – it's unlikely to be because you're being wooed back to Judaism.

And yet, there is something very tempting about religion. Religion can be really attractive to us and we can find ourselves drifting back into religion and away from the gospel, the good news of God's grace to us in Jesus.

You see, as someone has said, religion is the default mode of the human heart. There is something innate within us that thinks we can and must earn God's favour by good works, or living a morally upright life, or through religious rituals or zeal. And that's religion – it doesn't matter what name it goes under, it could be Hinduism or Islam or whatever – religion tells us that in some way, by the way we do or don't live, by the rituals we undertake, we can build our ladder to God, that we can save ourselves, and earn God's favour and the right to stand before him.

So, you don't need to be a convert from Judaism living in mid-first century Rome and facing persecution to feel a drawing back towards religion. You and I face this temptation every day. When you catch yourself thinking that you've got to do this or that, read more or pray more, to earn God's favour – that's religion. Or when you think that you've got to do certain things or go through certain rituals, or worship in certain ways to enter God's presence and win his attention – that's religion. Or when you find yourself looking down your nose at others in a superior kind of way because of what they do or don't do – that's religion. Or if trouble comes your way and you think, God I don't deserve this, I've been living a moral upright life, I deserve better – that's religion.

And the problem is that if you're drifting towards religion it means you are also drifting away from God's free grace and love to us in Jesus, which we can never do anything to earn or merit.

And so this deep, in-built tendency to move away from grace and towards religion, trying to build our ladders to God, is a temptation we all face. And it's into exactly that situation that the writer addresses chapter 8.

I've got three points: Shadows and Reality; Religion Doesn't Work; The Relationship that Does.

Shadows and Reality
The writer has already told his hearers that Jesus is greater than the angels, and Moses and Joshua – these great heroes of the Jewish faith. And in the last couple of chapters, he's been telling them that Jesus is greater than Aaron, the Jewish High Priest. And he's got to the priesthood of Jesus for a reason. Just for a minute,

imagine you were a Jewish or Roman neighbor to one of these Christians. They would have seemed very odd. Because you could point to your temple, and your priests and say – well, this is where we worship, this is how we earn the divine favour, this is who mediates between us and God, this is how we build our ladder to God. But what about you Christians? Where's your temple, where's your high priest?'

And writer answers that in Chapter 8:1, 'Now the point of what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest.'

Everything the writer has been saying has been building up to this point, this is where the money is: Christ is our high priest. When it comes to religious rituals, or needing someone to mediate between you and the divine, to bridge the gap or build the ladder between you and God, you don't need anyone else, the writer says, you already have a high priest and he has done all that you need.

Verse 1 again, 'we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.' Now the fact the Christ is seated at God's right hand tells us at least two things. Firstly, there is no one greater.

We've just finished reading Mark Twain's, The Prince and the Pauper, to the girls. And if you don't know it, it tells the story of how Edward, the young Prince of Wales, son of King Henry VIII, switched places with a pauper boy called Tom Canty, who just happened to look just like him. And when Henry VIII dies, Tom, the pauper, ends up on the verge of being crowned king, while the real prince ends up a vagabond pauper. But the Prince gets rescued by a down-on-his-luck knight, Miles Hendon, who hasn't got a clue that it's the real prince of Wales, that he's rescued. And when Edward talks of being the rightful king, Hendon who has become very fond of the young lad, just thinks he's out of his mind. But because of Hendon's kindness to him, Prince Edward allows him to sit in his presence, which of course Hendon thinks is a great joke – him, a knight, being allowed to sit with a pauper boy.

Well, of course, by a long journey Edward is eventually restored to his throne, and crowned the rightful king. And Hendon is escorted into the king's presence, without realizing that it's his pauper boy that he is going to meet in the throne room. So when the king lifts his head and Hendon sees that he really is the king, he can't believe it. And he knows only one way he can prove it to himself. So in front of the whole court, all of whom are standing of course, Hendon takes a chair and sits down. And the court is horrified: how dare you sit down in the presence of the King of England. And it takes the King to let everyone know that because of his service, Hendon and his descendants will forever be allowed to sit in the presence of the king – something no one else was allowed.

Well, if it was considered impossible to sit in the presence of the King, how about in the presence of God? And to sit at a King's right hand was to rule alongside him. So when the writer says that is where Christ is sat, he's telling us, look there is no one higher: there is no greater place of honour. And every other high priest has to stand and serve – but this High Priest is seated at the right hand. And no

other priest had also ruled as king, and no king as priest, except of course that man of mystery Melchizedek from a few weeks back, but Christ, the writer is saying, is both priest and king.

So, Christ being seated tells us about His status. But it tells us something else as well. You see, the Jewish priests serving in the temple could never sit down, could they? No sooner had they sent one person away having made sacrifice for his sin, there would be another and another. In fact, the priests had to organize themselves in rotas to make sure there was always one of them on duty because there was never an end to the sacrifices for sin that needed offering. People just kept on coming. So they could never sit down. But the writer opens this letter by telling us in 1:3 that 'After making purification for sins, [Christ] sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.' So Christ can sit down at God's right hand, not just because of who he is, but because of what he has done.

You see, there is never any rest in religion. If you think you've got to save yourself and make yourself acceptable to God by all your 'doing', living morally, or being better than others, or doing good works, or through religious observance, you can never rest, you can never sit down, because there is always more to do. There's never that feeling of 'it's done.' But Christ can sit down and, in a sense, as we trust what he has done, our souls can sit down, we can find deep inner rest in him, because at the cross he made that full and final sacrifice for sin and cried out, 'it is finished!' He has perfectly done, what needs to be done.

But the writer says something else profound here. He says that all these externals of religion are really just shadows of a greater reality. Now, one of the reasons that religion can be so attractive is that, by and large, we're impressed by externals. Fine religious buildings, lofty music, well-crafted words, tradition and ceremony, these can all be impressive because they give an appearance of deep spirituality. And yet they're just externals, and tell us little of the heart of the people engaged with them. They're just the surface.

But the writer's goes deeper. He says that the Jewish High Priests, serving in the tabernacle and temple, v5, 'serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.' They're just a pale imitation of the real thing. Now, the point about shadows, your shadow or my shadow, is that they're just that – shadows. It's not the real thing. Now a shadow does tell you that there is a real thing, and it tells you something about the real thing. But if Su, my wife, told you she fell in love with my shadow and wanted to spend the rest of her life with my shadow and that she talks to my shadow every day, you would think she was mad. Now, you might think she was made to fall in love with the real thing. But still, a shadow is a shadow. And the writer is saying, look, don't drift back to religion – it's just a shadow of the reality, which is Christ.

Now, there's an expression in English: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. If something is working fine – don't meddle with it. And the writer says in v6-7, '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. For if that

first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.'

And the writer's point here is: look, if everything was fine and dandy, if religion and temple worship and ceremony and ritual and sacrifices and rules could make people right with God in any ultimate sense, then there would have been no need for God to do something new. But the fact he has done something new tells you that all was not right.

Religion doesn't work

Now to understand this bit about the Old and the New Covenants, you've got to understand a bit about covenants full-stop. A covenant was a binding agreement that was built upon a relationship between two parties. So it wasn't like a modern day contract. A modern day legal contract is almost specifically designed to keep the relational aspect out. If you don't want friendship or relationships interfering in something then you draw up a legal contract, and it's cold and its legal – and it's to stop any fuzzy relational stuff getting in the way.

But when an ancient covenant was drawn up, it was built entirely on the basis of relationship, with blessings and curses one either side. And in a covenant each party was saying: I will be faithful to you, I will be all I should be to you, even if you are not all you should be to me. If you are faithful and true to this relationship, if you invest in it and honour it, here is all the blessing you'll experience. But if you don't, well, here are all the consequences you'll face.

And the writer is saying, look, if God's original covenant with his people – this covenant that these Jewish Christians in Rome were tempted to go back to - was all that there would ever be, why does God promise through the prophet Jeremiah, v9: '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.'

If there was nothing wrong with the old, why talk about a new? And the answer is that the old covenant was fatally flawed, and it was flawed for two reasons.

Firstly, it was flawed because of the problem of the human heart. The writer says that the reason God announced through Jeremiah that he would initiate a new covenant was, v8, 'For he finds fault with them.' The breakdown in the first covenant happened because God's people wouldn't keep it, the fault lay on their side: v9, 'for they did not continue in my covenant.' In this binding agreement, built on relationship, one party, the people, refused to keep it, and in their hearts just kept on turning away. So, problem number one was the human heart.

But problem number two was that ultimately religion cannot fix the human heart. The old covenant, with its provisions for sacrifices and rules to contain sin could do nothing about the underlying problem of humanity. That's why in chapter 7:18 the writer describes the old as being set aside 'because of its weakness and uselessness.' Now, how can he describe something God set in place as weak and useless? Well he tells us in 7:19 – 'for the law made nothing perfect.' You see, religion, and rules, and law and sacrifices and washings and

rituals and zeal – whatever form it takes, can do nothing about the underlying issue of the human heart.

In fact, later on, the writer will tell us in chapter 10:3 that in all 'these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.' So rather than the old dealing with the underlying heart issue, as animal carcass was thrown on animal carcass, it just makes us aware of the mess we're really in. That no amount of right living, or law keeping, or sacrifices can ever make us good enough.

So there's got to be a better way.

The Relationship that transforms

And in quoting this prophecy from Jeremiah, the writer wants us, to see just how different the new is from the old, how putting our trust in God's grace and what Christ has done for us is so different from religion, and what we do. This new covenant, he says, brings about a new heart, a new relationship and a new community.

Firstly, it brings about a new heart. As someone once said, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Well, through Jesus, and this new covenant, God deals with that root problem. In the words of Jeremiah which the writer quotes, v10, 'I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.' As we put our trust in Christ, God does something in our hearts. The prophet Ezekiel says it is like taking out a heart of stone and giving us a heart of flesh. And religion, with all its emphasis on the externals can never do that. But God does it, by His Spirit, as we put our trust in him. You find your heart being transformed and you find yourself loving the things that God loves and hating the things that he hates.

Secondly, this new covenant brings about a new relationship. V10-11: 'And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me.' So if religion is all about man, in his own efforts, trying to bridge the gap and build a ladder to God, God says that this new thing he is doing in Christ means that there is simply no need for these external mediators of religion, but that Christ is that mediator, and he makes it possible for us to know God in deep, intimate relationship. That through Christ we can know God, not in theory, not at a distance, not with a temple priest as a kind of middle man, go-between, but in real, personal experience.

And then thirdly, he says that this new covenant is going to bring about a new community: v10 again, 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' V11: 'for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.' Now did you notice, God doesn't say 'they shall be my individuals, or, they shall be my persons, living in glorious isolation from one another. He says, they shall be my people. So this isn't just that we can know God intimately for ourselves, but that we know God intimately and live that out in a community of people, his body the church. And that community is going to be marked by radical equality: they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest.

I don't know if you saw it, but this week some sociological research was published that suggests that in place of the usual upper, middle, and lower classes, in Britain there are now no less than 7 distinct social classes, by which people can now be classified. And that struck me because religion thrives on that kind of stuff, doesn't it? Who's in and who's out, who makes the grade and who doesn't, is he one of us or isn't he, are they good enough or aren't they, and we're better than those ones over there. But the writer says that this new covenant community in Christ was always going to be known for it's radical equality: they will all know me from the least to the greatest.

Now you might think, yes, but how can any of that be? I mean, sure, there's this inner transformation and this new relationship but we still break the covenant, we still sin. Well, the writer finishes chapter 8 by addressing just that. You see, this new covenant is not built on you making the grade, or you being good enough. It's built on the radical grace and forgiveness of God.

V12: For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.' You see, in the old covenant, in the face of the people's unfaithfulness the writer quotes God speaking through Jeremiah and saying, v9, 'They did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them.' In the face of their sin, God turned his face away. But on the cross, Christ took upon himself all the curse and the consequence of the broken covenant, your failings and my failings, and God turned his face away from Him. It's why Jesus called out from the cross, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me.' And out of His love for you, God turned away from His son, that he might turn His face toward you. And he says, I will remember their sins no more.

When Su and I do marriage preparation classes with young couples about to be married, one of the things we tell them is 'don't bring up the ghosts from the past.' Don't keep bringing up the ways the other has hurt or sinned against you. Instead, learn to forgive, and let those ghosts lie – or else they will kill your relationship. Well, here God says He will not remember your sins. Nothing in your past can separate you from His love. Nothing can keep you from knowing God your Father in real intimacy, because Christ has paid the price.

Religion can never offer you that. Only grace can.