

We’ve come a long way on our 7-week journey through Jeremiah (and Lamentations), from his visit to the potter’s house to the distant future of the New Covenant. In Jeremiah 29 God tells Israel how-to live-in Exile during the 70 years they would be in Babylon. Today we are transported to the time *after* the Exile and then to the time of Christ and beyond that time to our own day. Time was like a full water balloon about to burst before the Exile, swollen with doom and foreboding. The Northern Kingdom fell 150 years ago and Judah was now only months away from devastation. Nebuchadnezzar and his army are at the city gates and the world is about to come to a violent end. But then, out of the blue, comes a prophetic word about a whole new beginning—a new covenant. Just when it seems all was lost God makes *a new promise*.

In effect, God says, “These days are awful, but these days aren’t the only days you will ever know.” Four times God points ahead to better days: He says, “*the days are coming*” twice, and “*in those days*,” and then, “*after that time*.” With doom at the gate, it was very hard for Judah to believe that there could be any hope for days to come, at any time. So, God overemphasizes that the words spoken to them by Jeremiah were in fact God’s own word. Five times we are assured that the preceding message came from the very mouth of God...with this phrase: “*declares the LORD*.” The word of the Lord in these verses has two parts, the first having to do with Israel’s *return* from exile (vv. 27-30); the second focusing on the *new covenant* with Israel after they return (vv. 31-34).

God promises that after the uprooting and destruction, he will plant and rebuild his chosen people in the Promised Land. “*Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord*” (v. 28). And we shouldn’t miss that both aspects of Israel’s fate are under the complete control of God. Both the destruction and the rebuilding are events that he “*watched over*.” We’ve already heard the quintessential promise of Judah’s return in Jeremiah 29, but this time God says it more forcefully.

Indeed, the remainder of this chapter contains prophecy that is the basis of modern-day Zionism. God says, Israel will never “*cease being a nation before me*” (v. 36). God will never reject the “*descendants of Israel*” (v. 37). And most strikingly, “*The city will never again be uprooted or demolished*” (v. 40).

God underlines this promise about Israel’s perpetual place in the Promised Land with mysterious words about sour grapes and sins in verses 29-30. Apparently, there was a

proverb going around ancient Israel that said, *“The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”* In other words, the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. There was some truth in that, because it sounds a lot like Exodus 20:5 where the fathers’ sins result in problems for the children, *“punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”* At the time of the Exile, Israel had accumulated generations of sin and God was finally done with it. Their guilt led to their Exile.

In the days after the Exile and after the new covenant goes into effect, this proverb won’t be spoken anymore in Israel. Instead, as verse 30 says, *“everyone will die for their own sin.”* Does that mean that the whole concept of corporate responsibility is officially abolished? No, I think it means that after God’s punishment of Israel’s corporate guilt, God will begin again, dealing with individual sins and never again punish Israel corporately as he did with the Exile. After centuries of prophetic condemnation of Israel’s corporate guilt, that cycle was broken, leading to a day of individual responsibility and forgiveness.

That’s because God *“will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah”* (v. 31). This is the *first and only* place in the Old Testament that speaks explicitly of a “new” covenant. Even so, God’s covenant with his people was restated and renewed many times in the Old Testament. Think of the covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, with Josiah. Think of the great covenant renewals after Israel’s sin with the golden calf in Exodus 34 and as Israel entered the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 29. But this is a whole new covenant. Well, not entirely new.

There was that business of the Promised Land that goes all the way back to Abraham and is renewed here in verses 27 and 28. Speaking of Abraham, the very center of the Abrahamic covenant was the promise that *“I will be their God, and they will be my people,”* words repeated right here in verse 33 with a new twist. That relationship will continue. Even the horror of the Exile did not break that relationship, though it seemed that God had forsaken them.

But there are several new features and promises in the new covenant. *“It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt...”* (v. 32). That’s clearly a reference to the Mosaic covenant, anchored in the Exodus and expressed in Torah. Those words from verse 32 do not mean that the new covenant isn’t connected to God’s redemptive action and has nothing to do with Torah. Rather, as the next verse says, the newness has to do with the possibility of breaking the

covenant. Although Yahweh was a loving and faithful husband to his covenant partner, that partner broke the covenant over and over by disobeying Torah. In the new covenant, Israel (whether the Jewish people or the New Israel, the church) will not be able to break the covenant as their forefathers did. Israel could break the covenant because it was based on Torah obedience. The new covenant will be based on forgiveness which cancels disobedience and makes covenant breaking virtually impossible!

That doesn't mean that Torah doesn't matter in the new covenant. Indeed, rather than obeying a written law *on stone tablets*, God's people will have the law written *on their hearts*. Despite all the Pauline warnings about misuse of Torah, the new covenant does not reject God's law. Instead that law is injected into God's people. Or as Ezekiel puts it, God will put a new heart and a right spirit in his people so they will desire to do God's will and be able to do it. We know that this promise was fulfilled with the gift of the Holy Spirit who produces the fruit of a Christ-like life.

That same Holy Spirit is also the explanation of the promise of verse 34 that "*they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest.*" Some have taken these words as an argument against witnessing and teaching and preaching. But what it really means is that the Holy Spirit is our ultimate teacher. Jesus said, "*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth*" (John 16:13). We come to a deep relational knowledge of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Israel never arrived at that kind of knowledge in spite of all her prophets and priests. Only through the Holy Spirit can we come to know God as intimately as a married couple know each other. This new knowledge of God is based on God's forgiveness.

Israel knew God as creator and deliverer, as lawgiver and judge, as provider and punisher, but in the new covenant God's people will know God first of all as a forgiver and forgetter. That is not to say that forgiveness is unknown in the old covenant. But in the new covenant forgiveness will mean the sins of God's people will not be punished through Exile. Now they will be forgiven and forgotten. This is true because of the sacrifice of Christ, as Hebrews 8 and 10 explains, where this passage is quoted at length. No more sacrifice for sins, or punishment of sins, is needed. It is Christ who has "*offered for all time one sacrifice for sins*" (10:12).

Some of the promises of Jeremiah 31 were fulfilled when Israel returned from Exile. Others had to wait for the days when Jesus died on the cross and then sent the Holy Spirit. Complete fulfillment remains until the final coming of God in Christ. The sad fact

is that even with the Holy Spirit within, we still don't obey Torah completely. And even with Christ showing us the Father, we still don't know God fully. And even with our understanding of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we still don't receive forgiveness personally and internally all the time. There is still a time ("the days are coming") when the New Covenant will be fulfilled completely in all God's children.

This idea of a New Covenant is a bit like the old *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy tells Charlie Brown that she will hold the football for him so he can kick it. Remember those comics? Every time, just as he runs up to kick it, Lucy pulls the ball away and Charlie Brown lands flat on his back. There is a sense in which Charlie Brown, as trusting as some of us might assume he is, just doesn't learn from his mistakes and constantly misreads his relationship with Lucy and her behavior patterns. That's why he routinely winds up flat on his back never knowing what it feels like to kick a football while someone holds it for him.

Do you know Einstein's definition of insanity? It's doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. We need to pay attention to what we or others do, or don't do, and what the results are. Our Scripture today shows us that God is attentive to his relationship with us and the results of our behavior, and is constantly trying to teach us and turn us in the right direction.

Jeremiah prophesies to the children of Abraham, who are now captive in Babylon because they did not follow Torah and trust God in everything. God is not insane. We know that. So, God is trying something new. God has evaluated the results of previous covenants and is ready to make his next move; God is going to put the law within people's minds and write it on their hearts—the law of love. No longer will we have to say to someone, "Know the Lord." We will learn from the Spirit to love God and each other. God forgives the mistakes that brought us to where we are, and he remembers our sins no more! God creates a clean heart within us and puts the Holy Spirit within us.

Like a seed planted in the ground that bears fruit, Jesus' death and resurrection bore the fruit of the New Covenant. All who look to him and trust in him receive the gift of his Holy Spirit, who comes to live within us, cleansing our hearts and leading us in the law of love. And this is a result we can measure and fine-tune: How well did we love today? Are we trusting God completely? Are we willing to be vulnerable and open to God with our lives? Are we willing to evaluate and change how we love in the name of Jesus? And last, but not least, have we committed fully to following Jesus under the New Covenant that he puts in our mind and writes on our heart? Well, have we? Amen.