

We’ve done some skipping around, exploring the prophecy of Jeremiah this fall, even though we could have taken each sermon in the order it appears in the book of Jeremiah. If we had done that, this passage would be the last sermon in the Jeremiah series. However, I chose to end the series on a high note by remembering the extraordinary call that Jeremiah the prophet received from the Lord. Contained here in chapter 31 are some of the most well-known words of this entire book. The reason is easy to see: The New Covenant the Lord Promises through Jeremiah clearly finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ that God’s law is written on our hearts and we will all “*know the Lord.*” This is the phenomenal promise of the New Covenant.

Jeremiah 31 in a way looks like a preview of the Acts 2 wind of the Spirit that makes each believer a living Temple of God himself. At the tail end of this passage are words that are pleasing but perhaps a bit confusing in terms of when this was to come about. Jeremiah predicts that the day would come when everybody would *know* God (which I suppose renders sharing our faith with someone a moot point). The reason this day of universal God-knowledge would come about is because God is going to forgive everyone’s sins.

So, on the one hand, we have words to the effect that people are going to die on account of their sins. On the other hand, we have a prediction that God is going to forgive all sins. In between is the promise of a new way by which God will get the knowledge of himself and his law across to people and it ends up being a promise with huge ramifications: everyone would simply *know* who God is. Sounds almost automatic, yet we all know it doesn’t really happen that way even in the era of the New Covenant.

What we should note is that God is talking here about the reality of his own chosen people and so is not applying this knowledge of God universally. Even if we bear that caveat in mind, we will still wonder whether such a day ever came for Israel even in post-exilic times. Like many prophecies, this one may have multiple horizons of fulfillment so that we could rightly affirm that the

ultimate horizon has come only in Jesus Christ the Lord and in the coming of God's indwelling Holy Spirit. All of us who are believers baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit receive the Holy Spirit even if the presence of the Holy Spirit does not mean we lead flawless lives. Yet it means the venue for God's work has shifted from mainly corporate to what is very personal.

In Jeremiah 29, we saw last week that 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 before and Judah was now only months away from devastation. The army of Nebuchadnezzar is at the gates and the world is about to come to a violent end. But 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, "*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 headline news today. God says, Israel will never “*cease being a nation before me*” in verse 36. God will never reject the “*descendants of Israel*” (v. 37). And most strikingly, “The city will never again be uprooted or demolished” the Lord promises in the last verse of chapter 31. 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 and as Israel entered the Promised Land in Deuteronomy. 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!

Mention the word "covenant" to the average person today and you won't get much of a reaction. It's not a word that gets a lot of play in everyday conversation. If you Google it, you'll find about 30 million search results, but you would have to go through hundreds of Google search pages before you ran out of search results that were the names of churches, hospitals, schools, retirement communities, and the like. Somehow "Covenant" is a good name for establishments even though it's not a word we typically use in day-to-day life.

We're far more familiar with words that are synonyms for "covenant" like "contract" or "deal" or "agreement." Most people figure a covenant is like a contract, so if they have any associations with this word at all, it covers all that is legal and official. It's all cut and dried and bloodless. How very different "covenant" is in the Bible and especially in a passage like Jeremiah 31! From the Call of Abram forward, covenant in the Bible is the lifeline of God's relationship with humanity. When it comes to God's relationship to Israel, covenant was always more than a transaction. Covenant was life itself! Covenant was hope and promise and grace all rolled into one. It opens up a future for all creation that would not be possible were it not for the existence of the covenant. And if we Christians are now right to believe that "*no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ,*" (2 Corinthians 1:20) then we can know for sure that this is a word *loaded with meaning*. And so, on the far side of this passage in verse 34 we are told that God is going to find a way to forgive all those sins once and for all. In between, in verses 31-33, we learn what it is that is going to snap the cycle of sin and death and so lead to a new day of knowledge and life.

God is going to take on the problem himself. He's going to do a new thing. He's going to find a way to move right into the human heart with new grace and new life-giving power that turns things around once and for all. This is the divine plan. Or as we usually call it today, this is *the Gospel*. It is better news than any other news the world has ever heard! Hallelujah!

Like a seed planted in the ground that bears fruit, Jesus' life, death and resurrection bore the fruit of the New Covenant. All who look to him and trust in him receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes to live within us, cleansing us and leading us in the law of love. This is something we can actually gauge: 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 finally, have we committed fully to following Jesus under the New Covenant that he puts in our minds and writes on our hearts? Well, have we? Amen