



The New Covenant Jeremiah 31:27-34

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:27**... "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. ²⁸ And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say: "'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' ³⁰ But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

This morning we come at last section of our study of covenant theology and to the final administration or dispensation of the one covenant of grace...the new covenant. Now the first use of the term new covenant is occurs in Jeremiah 31:31. I make the point because it is important, I think, to remember the context or historical setting in which Jeremiah is given this very important word from

God. You see the nation of Israel...the theocratic nation of Israel...is about to go into captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. The Temple of God is about to be destroyed and the people of Judah are about to be carried off to Babylon.

And there is a reason for their plight in Jeremiah. They are being punished...they are being carried off because they have broken covenant with their great covenant God and King YHWH. You see they had been established under Moses as the covenant people of God. They had been established by YHWH as His own peculiar people...as the singular theocratic nation in the world. Of course, that administration of the covenant was tied inextricably to the covenant with Abraham...but it was a bit different than the covenant with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham had been virtually unilateral while the one established with Israel under Moses had had additional stipulations added to it. In fact, I made the point when we were there that in some ways the covenant with Israel under Moses was a sort of republication of the covenant of works with Adam. You see they were given the Book of the Covenant and they were warned that they would only be able to stay in the land provided they kept the covenant with YHWH.

But alas they did not keep the covenant and they were expelled from the land God had given them.

I think one of the most extraordinary scenes in all of the Old Testament takes place in Exodus 24. There Moses goes up into Mount Sinai to receive the Book of the Covenant. The children of Israel meet with Moses before he goes up, however, and they make an oath that they will do whatsoever God commands them to do.

^{ESV} **Exodus 24:1**...Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him." ³ Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "**All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.**"

Now the importance of the scene is significant. The people of Israel wanted the blessing and protection of God but they did not want to meet God face to face. They wanted a mediated meeting with Moses as the mediator. You can see the way they think several places in Exodus but the most obvious I think is Exodus 20:18.

^{ESV} **Exodus 20:18**...Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

Anyway, it seems to me you have the same sort of thing happening here is Exodus 24..."You go Moses and receive the law and we will do whatsoever it commands." And you can tell in the rest of the section that that is exactly what Moses understood them to be saying.

^{ESV} **Exodus 24:4**...And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Now the question of the significance of the blood is not easy to answer. Some commentators like Cole don't want to be dogmatic about the use of blood being similar to the blood covenant in Genesis 15.¹ But I don't have that problem. I think it is exactly the same sort of idea. That is, I think it is the ritual of the blood covenant.² I think that since blood symbolizes life...spattered blood appropriately dramatizes the consequences of breaking covenant—that is violent death.³

Now after this gruesome ceremony and it must have been gruesome, Moses and the others went up into the mountain and communed with God. I've mentioned this before but the passage is so striking that it is worth seeing again.

^{ESV} **Exodus 24:9**...Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

Now I want you to think about what the passage is saying. It is saying that the nation makes a covenant with God and the people are splattered with the blood of the covenant and that after they make an oath to keep the covenant representatives of the nation go up to the mountain of God and commune there in his presence and eat with Him.

I am emphasizing the point because there is a sort of equivalent idea in a remarkable passage in the New Testament...Luke 22. There you have the mention of blood...and a communal meal and the first New Testament mention of the new covenant.

^{ESV} **Luke 22:19**...And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Of course here you have a different mediator – a mediator who is man to God and God to man. Here you have everyman being instructed by God...and not by Moses...not by another.

But in Jeremiah...when the new covenant is first mentioned the nation was a nation on the verge of collapse...it was in danger of ceasing to exist. The Babylonians were at the gates of Jerusalem and it was but a matter of time before the nation would fall. And there on the eve of destruction God gave a word to Jeremiah that He was not through with the people of Israel. There He gave a word to Jeremiah that the northern kingdom that had been carried off by the Assyrians some 136 years before and the southern kingdom of which Jeremiah was a part and which was about to fall would both someday be reunited in the land and that when it was YHWH would there reestablish His covenant with His own peculiar people.

So this word in Jeremiah 31 is a word of comfort...a word of hope...a word of promise given to a people who are about to be carried away in judgment. And that idea is buttressed by the fact Jeremiah is commanded to buy a field...to buy a field when the nation is about to be carried away...so that when they return his descendants will have a purchased possession in the land.

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of history is that the destruction of the first temple in 586 at the hands of the Babylonians and the destruction of the second

temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 AD both just happened to fall on exactly the same day of the same month...August 30th.⁴

In Jeremiah's day the Temple of God is destroyed and the people are judged and carried away because they broke the covenant given to them through the mediator Moses while in 70 AD the Temple of God is destroyed and the people they are judged and driven from the land because they rejected the mediator of the new covenant himself...Jesus Christ. And yet both events invoke the new covenant. Jeremiah promises it and the ministry of Christ confirms it.

Last week, I spent some time trying to demonstrate that the various covenants of the Bible were connected...were progressive. I tried to show that the various administrations of the one covenant of grace were linked like stair steps one after another building to a climax of all that God promised to accomplish for His people in Jesus Christ. Now that is not to say that all of the component parts of the one great covenant of grace were exactly the same. There were elements of continuity and there were elements of discontinuity. There are some things that are the same and some things that are different. I think our reformed Baptist friends would say there are more things different than there are the same whereas we would probably say that there are more things the same than there are different. But if we were both honest we would both have to admit that some things are very much the same and some things are quite different.

No place is that more obvious than under the Mosaic covenant. Part of that was related to the nature of the Mosaic covenant and part of that was related to the nation's misunderstanding of the covenant. One of the inherent problems of the Mosaic covenant was the sinfulness of the people. They were commanded to

obey God's law and were promised that if they did so, they would be blessed with all manner of spiritual and material blessing. But the sinfulness of the people was an inherent problem under the Mosaic covenant. While the law of God was given as a rule for their behavior, it was also given by God as an instrument to drive them despair of confidence in themselves and was intended ultimately to cause them to throw themselves on God's mercy.

We know that such is true from the words of many biblical writers but especially from Paul.

^{NIV} **Galatians 3:11**...Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "**The righteous will live by faith.**" ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "**The man who does these things will live by them.**" ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "**Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.**" ¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Now, the fact that the law did not bring about the full blessing of God's chosen people does not mean that the law was flawed or even worse that the law was evil. The problem was not in the law but in the hearts of those to whom it was given.

^{NIV} **Romans 7:7**...What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "**Do not covet.**" ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. ¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Now, I want to make two points here. First, that the law needed to be internalized was understood to be true from the very beginning.

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 30:5**...And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. ⁶ And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

That the law needed to be internalized, was made obvious by our Lord in His stern rebuke of the Pharisees.

^{ESV} **Matthew 23:27**..."Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Now, the notion that God would circumcise their hearts meant that one-day God would internalize their obedience. It meant that one-day God in His kindness would reach down and change their hearts. It meant that one day God would do all that was necessary to redeem His people.

The children of Israel knew and understood that external obedience to the law was inadequate. They also knew that even external obedience was impossible. They knew that they lacked the inherent ability to obey God's law. They knew that from the ceremonial sacrifices that filled their eyes and they knew it from the

smell of burning flesh. Still, they had the promise of God that one day He would change their hearts.

^{ESV} **Ezekiel 11:19**...And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. ²¹ But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord GOD."

It is a promise that is repeated over and over.

^{ESV} **Ezekiel 36:24**...I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

But no place is the promise of God to evoke a change, to evoke a transformation more clear in the Old Testament than in the book of Jeremiah. There, God promises to institute a new covenant. It is a covenant that will not be dependent on their obedience but will in its fullness actually change their hearts and induce obedience.

And they needed a change because their hearts were wicked and they were locked in the endless cycle of disobedience, deliverance and disobedience all over again.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 13:22**...And if you say in your heart, 'Why have these things come upon me?' it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up and you suffer violence. ²³ Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.

But in Jeremiah, God promises the internalization of all that He sought to accomplish in them.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:31**..."Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Secondly, I want to make the point that the new covenant was not different in the sense that it was completely separate from the covenants that had been made before. God's law was still at the forefront. It was not a different law that would be written on their hearts; it was the same law. It was new only in the sense that it was a new form or dispensation of that which God had already promised.

God was about to fulfill all that He had originally promised Adam, Noah, Abraham and even Moses. This new covenant was not a complete reversal of all God had promised to the fathers. Rather, it was the fulfillment of all God had promised.

Now, where was that promise fulfilled? We know, of course, that it was fulfilled in the persona and work of Jesus and we have a couple of hints early on. The first has to do with a prophecy regarding Rachel and her children given earlier in Jeremiah 31.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:15**...Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

Amazingly, that same prophecy is referred to again in Matthew's gospel when Herod killed the innocents at Bethlehem.

^{ESV} **Matthew 2:16**...Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

I imagine that the first thing Jewish readers of Matthew's gospel did when they read this account of Herod and the babies killed at Jerusalem was to make the connection immediately to the idea of the new covenant when they read Matthew 2.

But the idea is further enhanced by the promise of the coming of the Lord.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:21**..."Set up road markers for yourself; make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities. ²² How long will you waver, O faithless daughter? For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encircles a man." ²³

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes: "'The LORD bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill!' ²⁴ And Judah and all its cities shall dwell there together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks. ²⁵ For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish."

Jeremiah reminds the people to set guideposts to return to the Lord but the real promise is that the Lord is returning to them. They would have known Isaiah's promise.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:1**...Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

That is why John the Baptist's preaching was so important. He was connecting the two events.

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:1**...In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

But the passage that removes all doubt is Luke 22.

^{ESV} **Luke 22:20**...And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Christ makes clear that He is the fulfillment of the promised new covenant. The scene that is recalled is similar to Exodus 24 but different. The blood is sprinkled on the people as a warning of judgment whereas in Luke 22 Christ makes it explicitly clear that it is His blood that is being shed in judgment for the sins of His people. He is drinking the cup alone.

And when you look carefully at Jeremiah you can see the promise of his coming.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 33:14...** "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

You see it is Jesus who is our righteousness. His obedience to the law that Israel could not keep is imputed to us. Our sin is imputed to Him and the judgment is poured out on Him at the cross. He bore our sin there.

And the fact that Christ is the mediator of the new covenant is one of the principle points of the book of Hebrews.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 8:8...**For he finds fault with them when he says: "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, ⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the

least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." ¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

In fact, I think it is right to say that Hebrews 8-10 really makes up one long continuous commentary on Jeremiah 31. Not only does the writer to the Hebrews explain that Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant, he actually breaks down the various parts of Jeremiah 31 and explains them in relationship to the new covenant and we will talk more about that next week.

Let's pray.

¹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 185-6.

² John W. Hilber, "Theology of Worship in Exodus 24" In *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 no 2 Je 1996, p 177-189.

³ M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1970), 196-199.

⁴ <http://christianitytoday.com/ch/2008/issue97/3.8.html>