

“The New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31:27-34

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Ever wonder why the New Testament is called “the New Testament”? Or what that means? The answer is in our passage this morning from the book of Jeremiah. Or, at least, it *begins* here. The passage contains two major promises from God. Both begin like this: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when” The first promise begins in verse 27; the second – and more significant – in verse 31.

The first promise has to do with the restoration of the people of Israel and Judah following the terrible calamity brought upon them by the Babylonian Empire about 600 years before Christ. The Babylonians had invaded and conquered; the walls of Jerusalem had been breached; the city ransacked; the beautiful temple – the center of Israel’s worship – utterly destroyed. Many people had been killed. Many more had been carried off, away from their homeland, brought *hundreds* of miles away to Babylon, where they tried to pick up the pieces of their life, their faith, their religion. All that destruction had come to pass, the Bible says, because of the great sins of the people of Israel and Judah.

Jeremiah had been saddled with the responsibility of *telling* the people that. For several decades he had been predicting doom and gloom. But now, on the other side of those climactic events, he becomes a prophet of comfort and hope. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals.” There had been terrible loss of life. But now God promises to *restore* life. The people will “be fruitful and multiply,” just as they did in more peaceful days in the past. “And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord.” There will be *new* fields, *new* vineyards, *new* seasons of planting and harvest.

The survivors – the ones that cared about God – may have felt that the devastation was unfair. “It wasn’t *us* that screwed up,” they might have been saying. “It was our parents, the generations before us. We did our best to remain faithful – but it was *their* sins that led to all this devastation.” It’s a legitimate complaint. There was a proverb: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” – which is just a way of saying that the children are paying the price for the sins of their parents. God, through Jeremiah, says, *it’s not going to be like that now*, in this restoration that God is bringing. Rather, “all shall die for their *own* sins.” Not the sins of their parents or grandparents. “The teeth of *everyone* who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.” Meaning, *you* are responsible for your own fidelity to God. God is going to hold *each individual person* accountable for their *own* sins.

So this was a message of comfort and hope to the beleaguered exiles. In Babylon, over the next couple generations, the people's lives and faith would be restored. Indeed, by the time the exile ends some 70 years later, Judaism emerges healthy and strong. There was a *tremendous* amount of devotion that emerged out of the terrible calamity. The Jewish faith was rekindled, re-forged, *made strong again*. Judaism exists today in large part because of the *resiliency* of the Jewish exiles. It was *there* that they took up books and learning, *there* that they learned how to be faithful in the midst of terrible suffering, *there* where they developed devotional and religious practices that did not require a grand temple.

All of that is the *first* promise God gives to the people. Now comes the second. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." The *new covenant*, the new *binding agreement*; what will be called "the New Testament," later on. Although, note that here in Jeremiah, God is promising to make a new covenant with the *same* people. God has not abandoned the people of Israel and Judah. God is not done with them. God is going to establish a new relationship with the *same* people he had *previously* established a relationship with. This is not yet a covenant that includes the Gentiles, not yet a covenant that includes people who aren't Jews, not yet a covenant that you and I get to partake in. That will come ... but not yet.

What will this new covenant be like? "It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord." God is referring to the "old" covenant that he had established about seven hundred years earlier, through Moses, when God rescued the Israelites from slavery and gave them the Ten Commandments and a whole series of other laws. That was the *original* covenant. The Israelites had badly broken that covenant. That was what had led to all that destruction.

What will be different about the *new* covenant? "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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.*" The critical difference between the "old" covenant and the "new" is that the old covenant was *written down*. *Chiseled in stone*. It was a *written law*, a set of 613 specific rules and regulations that the people were required to follow. *The written law didn't work*. The people didn't follow it. The new covenant, on the other hand, is going to be written *on people's hearts*. It will be an *internal faith*, not an *external law*. God is going to *inspire* people to be faithful. Rather than a set of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not," there will be more heartfelt sincerity, more faithful devotion. More *Spirit*. It will be more *organic*, more *relational*, more *personal*.

The results of this will be profound: "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord." *People's hearts are going to burn with passion and devotion for God*. It will not be a *mechanical religion*, but rather a *living faith*. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

So this "new covenant" is a gift that God promises to *the Jews*, living in exile in Babylon. And God is true to his word. We find, during and after the exile, people like Daniel. If you remember the story, you will recall that he had a rich life of faith, bowing down to God in prayer multiple times each day, a faith that was able to withstand all sorts of fiery trials, and an integrity to match. A model Jew.

But the “new covenant” does not remain solely with the Jews. There came a moment, about six hundred years later, when the “new covenant” got expanded. Jesus has gathered with his disciples for the Passover meal. It is the last night of his existence here on this earth. He shares bread with them. “This is my body, broken for you.” He takes the unleavened Passover bread and turns it into a metaphor for his own life and death. Then he lifts up a cup of wine and says: “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood.” (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25) He is referring, of course, to his blood that will be spilled on the morrow, his blood that will grant forgiveness and reconciliation with God. But the phrase he uses is quite deliberate: “this cup is the *new covenant*.” That is a deliberate, intentional reference back to this passage here in the book of Jeremiah. God had promised a new covenant for the people of Israel and Judah, and God had made good on that promise. At the Last Supper, Jesus takes that *same new covenant*, and *extends it*, to all the world. It is now, as of that moment, *no longer* just for the Jewish people. It is now a covenant that *all* of us can participate in and benefit from. A new covenant, written on people’s hearts, *wherever* they come from, *whatever* their lineage has been. It is the *same new covenant* that God had already given to the people of Israel and Judah. But now it is for *everybody*. It is for *anybody* who places their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

A generation later, the writer of the book of Hebrews picks up the same theme. He quotes the entire passage about the new covenant from Jeremiah 31. (Hebrews 8) He draws a distinction between the old covenant that was written on stone and the new covenant that is written on people’s hearts. “In speaking of a ‘new covenant,’” he says, “God has made the first one obsolete.” The new covenant exists *because* of the old; it is the *same* God who offered both; the new is not just the *replacement* of the old, but also its *fulfillment*. Without the old covenant, there would *never have been a new one*.

Jump forward to the fourth century AD. The Bible is now being read in Latin, not Hebrew or Greek. When readers come to that passage in the book of Hebrews, they do not find the words “new covenant.” They find the Latin words *novum testamentum*. “New Testament.” *Testamentum* was the Latin word for “covenant.” It still referred to a “binding agreement” between God and God’s people.

Jump forward in history one last time, another thousand years or so, to the formation of the King James version of the Bible, in the early 1600s. When King James’ translators came to these passages that we have been talking about, they made an interesting choice. *Sometimes* they used the word “covenant.” Other times they used the word “testament.” The result is that Jesus’ words at the Last Supper are now: “This cup is the new *testament* in my blood.” And Hebrews now calls Jesus “the mediator of a new *testament*.” This wording takes root; Bibles are printed with the words “Old Testament” before the books that begin at Genesis, and the words “New Testament” before the books that begin at Matthew. There is now, firmly established, “the Old Testament” and “the New.”

Now that was all a nice little history lesson. But what does this *mean*, for you and me? How does this impact our lives, *now*? It really boils down to one key lesson: *the new covenant is written on our hearts*. We have a book. A very, very important book. But Christianity is not a list of “do”s and “don’t.” It is not “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” It is not wooden. It is not meant to be legalistic. It is *the Holy Spirit, living, ALIVE, in your heart*. Do not quench the Holy Spirit. Let it *LIVE* in you.

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