

“A New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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“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.” (Jeremiah 31:31) Ever wonder why the New Testament is called “the New Testament”? It has its origins in *this* verse, from the prophet Jeremiah, in the *Old* Testament.

The word “covenant” refers to an *agreement* between two parties. It’s like an *alliance* or a *pact*. There were several distinct covenants in the Old Testament. The first was the covenant that God made with Noah: after the flood, God said to Noah, “I am establishing my *covenant* with you and your descendants after you ... never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Genesis 9:9-11) This was an *agreement* God was making with the human race. It’s known as an *unconditional* covenant – Noah and his descendants did not have to *do anything*. It required *nothing* from them. It was just ... a gift. A *promise*, on God’s part; a binding promise, that God would never do anything like that again.

The second covenant was the covenant God made with Abraham. That agreement consisted of two promises on God’s part: first, that God would grant to Abraham’s descendants the entire land stretching from Egypt to the Euphrates River (Genesis 15:18-21); and second, that Abraham’s offspring would be “exceedingly numerous;” Abraham would become “the ancestor of many nations” (Genesis 17:2, 4). But God wanted something in return: “every male among you shall be circumcised” (Genesis 17:10) – an identifying marker; a way of distinguishing God’s people from the rest of humanity. God’s covenant with Noah did not require anything on the people’s part. God’s covenant with Abraham did.

The third covenant was the covenant God made with Moses. God gave Moses a *law*. 613 specific commandments; 10 of them special. This law covered many aspects of the people’s daily living; it addressed their sacred duties towards God, and the ways they should treat one another. At the most basic level, the Jewish law was about two things: *love of God* and *love of neighbor*. God expected the people to faithfully observe the law. In return, God would grant them safety and well-being. “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” (Exodus 19:5-6) The people agreed: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” (Exodus 24:7) To seal the covenant, Moses offered sacrifices to the Lord; oxen were slaughtered, their bodies burned. The blood from the oxen was collected. Blood was considered *holy*; it was the essential ingredient for *life*. Moses took half the blood and dashed it against the altar; he dashed the other half on the people. Blood was the sacred bond that connected the people with the promises of God.

The rest of the Old Testament is basically the story of the Israelites’ miserable failure to keep their part of the bargain. God kept sending them messengers to lead them back into faithful obedience. Israel rejected those prophets time and time again; Israel rejected God’s covenant time and time again.

One of those prophets God sent was named Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived during a tumultuous time in Israel's life, just before and just after the collapse of the kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BC. God called Jeremiah first to proclaim to the people of Judah their coming destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, and second to proclaim to the people that after that was over, God would bring a restoration and a new beginning in days to come. Jeremiah is a prophet of doom, and also a prophet of hope. His prophecies were not popular. He was beaten, put in stocks, and nearly killed, more than once. Ultimately, as the country collapsed, he was taken to Egypt, which is where he probably died.

But before he died, he uttered a long series of remarkable prophecies that were written down and preserved for future generations. One of those prophecies spoke of a "new covenant" that God would make with the people of Israel. "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.... 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. 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; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34) It is a promise: a promise that there will be a *fourth* covenant that God will make with the people, qualitatively different from the previous covenant that God made through Moses. There will still be a *law* from God – but it will not be a law chiseled on stone, not a law enshrined in 613 written commandments. No, in this *new* covenant, the law will be written on human hearts. And the people of God will *know* God, in a way they have never known God before.

Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet to say things like this. The prophet Ezekiel said this: "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) But it was Jeremiah who described this promised new relationship between God and God's people as a new *covenant*.

Fast forward in time some six hundred years. There came an evening when a small cluster of Jews – 13 men – gathered to celebrate the Passover. They were in Jerusalem, in a secluded upstairs room. One of those Jews – their leader, teacher, mentor, and friend – took a loaf of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and shared it among them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you." Then he lifted up a cup to share among them, and he said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19-20) *The new covenant*, he said. Jesus deliberately used words that harkened back to that prophecy from Jeremiah. That six-hundred-year-old prophecy was coming to fulfillment – *right then*. And, like the previous covenant, this new covenant would be sealed in blood; in this case, the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ, poured out, the next day, as he was whipped and hung on a cross to die. It is the *blood* that unites us with God; the blood of Jesus that forms the *bond* of this new covenant; blood which is represented by the wine or juice we use every time we celebrate communion.

This is, really, the *fourth* covenant between God and the people, although it is often commonly referred to as the second. The author of the book of Hebrews described Jesus as "the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one." (Hebrews 8:6-7) "In speaking of a 'new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete." (Hebrews 8:13) The obligations of circumcision and adhering to the law of Moses are thus *not binding* on any Christian. The 613 commandments of the "old covenant" law have been replaced by a "new covenant" law that is *written on our hearts*.

There was a significant change in terminology that happened around more-or-less around the same time. When the Jewish scriptures were translated into Greek, some two hundred years before Jesus, the Hebrew word for “covenant” was replaced by the Greek word for “testament” – as in, a “last will and testament,” the written instructions pertaining to *inheritance* after someone has died. There were other Greek words that the Jewish translators could have used to convey the idea of an “agreement” or an “alliance” or a “pact,” but for some unknown reason they opted to use a word that had to do with *inheriting gifts* after someone has died. That seems an odd translation choice – and yet it was *prophetic* at the same time, for this “new covenant” that is sealed in the blood of Jesus takes effect *with his death*. We receive the gifts and blessings of this new covenant *solely* because of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. We receive an *inheritance*; we are the beneficiaries in this *testament*.

So the *new covenant* is also called the *new testament*. In time, this term came to refer not just to the new *relationship* we Christians have with God through the blood of Jesus Christ, but also to the *whole corpus of writings* that *describe* this new relationship, the 27 books of the New Testament. Similarly, the term “Old Testament” came to refer not just to the old *covenant* (or covenants) that God had made with the people of Israel, but also the 39 books in the Old Testament (46, if you’re Catholic) that describe that old relationship between God and the people, which has been supplanted by the new.

It is important to understand that the “new covenant” does not stand on its own. This is a *continuation* of God’s ongoing relationship with the people of God. It is a significant *development* of that relationship, a marked *change* from what has gone before, and portions of the New Testament go to great lengths to describe that development, both in terms of *what’s new* and *what remains the same*. There is still a *law* of God; it’s just now a very different *kind* of law. There is still a *sacrifice* that stands at the center of our relationship with God; it’s just now a very different *kind* of sacrifice. There is still a *binding relationship* that exists between God and God’s people; it’s just that now, *who gets included* in that relationship has expanded tremendously. You and I get to be included in that relationship. In a way, it brings us back, full circle, to God’s *first* covenant, with Noah. That was a covenant that God had made with the *entire* human race. The covenants with Abraham and with Moses were made to a relatively small *portion* of the human race. Now, the invitation is open wide once again. *Anybody* can participate in this “new covenant” relationship with God through the saving blood of Jesus Christ.

The other critically important thing to remember is that this remains a *covenant*, a *binding agreement* between two parties. God grants us some very specific things: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit. *But God wants some things in return*. A certain kind of *life*. The faithful observance of God’s holy *law* – a law that is not chiseled in stone, but instead written on our *hearts*.

But if the law is no longer chiseled in stone, *how are we supposed to know what it is?* How do we learn what kind of *lives* God wants us to lead, what *sins* Jesus asks us to turn from? Well, there is still a *book*. There may not be 613 specific commandments, but there are some pretty clear *themes*, some *patterns of behavior* that are lifted up time and time again – or that are called out as sin, time and time again. Jesus himself also has some very specific things to say. *We need to spend time with that book!* But much of it requires interpretation, and there are a multitude of issues it doesn’t address at all. Which is why the Holy Spirit is so critically essential. We have to let the Holy Spirit of God lead us, guide us, *direct* us, *call* us, *empower* us. *How do we do that?* Well, there’s this little thing called *prayer*....

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