

What is the new covenant? * Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8
September 15, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we're going to pick up a thread that I left dangling in my message last week. If you recall, I pointed out that we as Christians belong to a covenant – we belong to the new covenant – and then I said that that was probably something that we should spend a little more time thinking about.

And when I sat down to prepare for this week, I realized that there was an open slot in the preaching schedule and so I thought, 'what better time than now?'

So that's what we're going to look at today – the question – 'what is the new covenant?'

That language of 'new covenant' is something that we hear quite often in Christian circles – and it's significant enough that some churches even name themselves after it – but I'm not sure that we have a good handle on what it means to be a covenant people. So we're going to ask this morning – what's a new covenant? What's so new about it? And what does it mean to be new covenant people?

To get us into this question, I'm going to look with you at the passage of Scripture that I pointed out last week – Jeremiah 31:31-34. This is a very famous and very important statement in the history of redemption and so I invite you to turn with me there, to Jeremiah 31, starting in verse 31.

Before we start though, I want you to think back to a time when you had to discipline your children. I know that all of you were perfect parents and your children were entirely obedient every time ;) so just imagine if you have to – but see if you can identify with this.

One of your kids is doing something wrong. They've been at it for awhile and you keep telling them to stop it but they won't. They're really pushing your buttons. You've specifically said – do not do this – and yet with a smirk on their face, they go ahead and do the thing that you just told them not to do – and immediately you're filled with righteous anger. How could they do that?! This disobedience must be dealt with. And so in a stern and disciplinary tone – you say 'get to your room now. And no screen time!' And off they go.

After a while, you're ready to forgive them and so off you go to their room. And you sit down beside them on the bed and say 'listen, you made a bad decision and it was the wrong thing to do. It hurt our relationship. But I love you and I forgive you and I will make things right.'

Have you ever had that happen? That's Jeremiah 31 to the people of Israel.

They had spent years ignoring God; they had deliberately crossed the boundaries that He had set for them and some of them even abandoned Him to chase after other gods. God was very patient with them, giving them lots of opportunities to repent and He warned them time and again to stop doing what they were doing. He was indeed slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But eventually, justice demanded that something be done. So in 722 BC, God sent the Assyrian empire in to take the north of Israel (which we call Israel) into captivity. And they more or less disappeared. And then in 587 BC, God sent the Babylonians to take out the southern kingdom (what we call Judah), and carry the lion's share of them back into exile in Babylon. And that's where they lived, in a foreign land, ripped out of the land that God had given them, all because they had been unfaithful to the God

who loved them. And I'll bet at this point, they were probably wondering if that loving God loved them anymore.

And then one day, a letter showed up, postmarked in Jerusalem. They open it up and found this letter from the prophet Jeremiah, who had been left behind in Jerusalem. That letter is chapters 29-31 of the book of Jeremiah. And Jeremiah 31 is its climax.

Just imagine how these words must have sounded to this pocket of exiles, huddled up in some corner of this foreign land. Jeremiah 31:31-34:

31 "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:31-34 NIV).

That's incredible. God had not forgotten them. Despite their disobedience, God still loved them. And He was promising a time when He would make things right and restore them to relationship with Him in a way that would never fail. And that was through the establishment of a new covenant.

Now they had had an old covenant – that was the covenant that God gave them through Moses at Mount Sinai. God had graciously delivered this nation of slaves out of Egypt and into freedom. And since they'd never been in relationship with God before, He gave them this covenant to explain – this is what to do what God is your God and what God will do when God is your God.

The covenant in and of itself was fine. But there was a problem. The people couldn't keep it.

They were fallen people, just like us. They didn't want to listen to God and so they did what was right in their own eyes. They chased after things that made them happy and abandoned the God who loved them the way a good husband loves his wife. And so, rather than the blessings of the covenant, they received its curses.

And that was a problem that the exiles sitting in Babylon knew all too well. They wanted the covenant blessings too but they couldn't bring themselves to keep it. They too chased after other gods; they too ignored God and did right in their own eyes; as verse 32 says – they broke the covenant... and so, just as God had said back in Deuteronomy 28, they received the covenant curses instead. They were taken captive out of the land and into exile. They were uprooted from the land God had given them.

62 You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God.

63 Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.

(Deu 28:62-63 NIV).

But now here, through the prophet Jeremiah, God was promising a new covenant that would depend not on the people's obedience, but on God's graciousness. God was taking all the responsibility for the covenant onto Himself.

And here's how it would work. God makes three promises and they go like this. Verse 33 –

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

See the problem with the old covenant was that the Law of God was outside of His people. They had it written on stone and scrolls, but it was always outside of them. They knew the Law but they lacked the inner motivation and resources to keep it. Just like us, they were fallen people, more interested in themselves than in God, and so as they followed their own interests, they often ended up breaking the Law.

But now here, God was promising to put the law into the very hearts and minds of His people. He was promising to renew them from the inside out, so that they would not only keep the Law but delight to do so. They would know instinctively how to please God and so they would keep the covenant because they genuinely loved the God who had given it to them.

God also promised – again, verse 33 - I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD (Jer 31:33-34 NIV).

Now that first part had always been a part of God's relationship with His people. "I will be their God and they will be my people" goes all the way back to Leviticus (*12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. Leviticus 26:12*). But verse 34 adds something new.

34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

The promise of knowing God is moving from the national level to the personal. This is not just 'I will be Israel's God' but 'I will be YOUR God.' For sure, the Israelite people could have some sort of prayer life and connection to God individually, but their faith lives were really governed by the priesthood and the sacrificial system. They could pray to God but never really get close to Him; only the priests had access to His holy dwelling space in the tabernacle and even then only one could enter His most holy presence once a year. And of course, class distinctions played a role in approaching God and if you were a woman, forget about it; there was a line that kept you even further back than the lay men.

But now, God was promising a reality where ALL of His people would know Him and have access to Him. From the least to the greatest. Men, woman, Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free; all would know God personally and intimately. And not only that. HE would know them. They could go to Him personally and know that God had heard them.

And the third promise explained how that would be possible – They can know me personally BECAUSE "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:34 NIV).

Sin had always been the big obstacle keeping people from God and here God was going to do away with it.

Certainly under the Old Covenant, people's sins were forgiven but they were blotted out rather than wiped away. A stain remained that had to be removed every year at the Day of Atonement. But now God was promising to wipe the slate clean; total forgiveness that threw the memory of sin into the dustbin of history. Gone. As far as the east is from the west. So God would forgive.

This must have been incredible news to the exiles in Babylon. Even though they had been unfaithful, God was still faithful to them. And He promised a new covenant that depended not on their obedience but His graciousness – a new covenant that would make things right. A new covenant founded on internal renewal, personal relationship and total forgiveness. Now God did eventually bring a remnant back from exile in Babylon, but the new covenant in full was still a future thing. “The time is coming” declared the LORD.

When Jesus died on the Cross, the time had come.

With His blood, Jesus sealed the New Covenant and put these promises into effect for anyone who would receive them, Jew and Gentile alike.

We know that because Jesus told us. He told us at the Last Supper that He was dying to seal and to activate the new covenant. He said – “This cup is the new covenant in my blood”. And Matthew tells us that Jesus also said – poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins – He's clearly talking about the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah.

20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luk 22:20 NIV). 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Mat 26:28 NIV).

Our relationships with God would no longer depend on our obedience to the covenant, because He had already paid the price for disobedience. Jesus had kept the Law perfectly and then died in our place because of our sin; He received the covenant curses so we could receive the blessings that He deserved.

The New Covenant is for us. The Book of Hebrews actually quotes the whole of Jeremiah 31:31-34 – the longest OT quote in the NT – and says this is for the church, just as much as it is for any Jew who will receive it.

So let's take this and see how it applies to us. I think that we can sum it up like this – under the new covenant, God renews our hearts, knows our names and forgives our sins. Under the new covenant, God renews our hearts, knows our names and forgives our sins.

So first, God renews our hearts.

When we come to faith, God does heart surgery. Takes out the old heart of stone, replaces it with a heart of flesh. God puts His Law in us so that we will want to keep it and gives us His Holy Spirit to help us to. That's what God said in Ezekiel 36:26 - 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Eze 36:26-27 NIV). And that happens under the New Covenant.

I think too that that's what Paul's talking about in Philippians 2 – he calls us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling and then says - 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phi 2:12-13 NIV). Under the New Covenant God renews our hearts, giving us the desire and the ability to actually live for Him.

The New Covenant will never fail because God Himself enables us to keep it.

I'm not sure that I would go as far as Walter Brueggemann when he writes "... "Obeying will be as normal and as readily accepted as breathing and eating. . . . All inclination to resist, refuse, or disobey will have evaporated" (quoted in Jeremiah NAC; 31:33-34) but I certainly agree that our desire as new covenant believers will be to do the will of God in all that we do.

So, under the NC, God renews our hearts; under the NC, He also knows our names. That's how I'm paraphrasing 'I will be their God and they will be my people' – every last one from the least to the greatest. If you are a new covenant believer, then you are precious to God. He knows every little thing about you and His plans for you are good. Full stop. God hears you when you pray and knows what you need before you can even ask. You might feel like a nobody in your school or family or place of work, but the truth is, you are beloved by God. You are precious to Him.

God renews our hearts; God knows our names; finally, God forgives our sins.

And this is the biggie. This is the one that all the others are built on. I DO agree with Walter Brueggemann when he writes "All the newness is possible *because* Yahweh has forgiven" (in Jeremiah, EBC; 31:34). We can have relationship with God, we can desire to do His will, because He forgave us first.

So listen, if you are a new covenant believer then your sins are washed away. If you have turned from sin to follow God, and claimed Jesus' sacrifice by faith, then you belong to the New Covenant and your sins are all forgiven. Washed away. Gone like sand in a windstorm. You are made entirely new.

And the language of Jeremiah 31:34 is especially important. "I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." That word 'remember' has an active sense in Hebrew, so it's not just 'I'll forget about your sin' but 'I'll never bring it up again.' That's God's way of saying 'not only do I forgive you, I promise to not hold a grudge.' Cause there's a difference right? You might forgive a person but still feel negatively towards them; not so with God. He doesn't hold grudges; He doesn't keep notes. In Jesus, your sins are forgiven. So if there is something in your past that you just can't let go of, some sin you can't forgive, let it go. Because God already has.

Under the NC, God has renewed us internally, knows us personally and forgiven us totally. He renews our hearts, knows our names and forgives all our sins.

So that's the New Covenant. What does it mean to be a member of the new covenant community? Well, it means to live together according to that covenant. The one danger I think in the way that I talked about God knowing your name, is that you might be tempted to forget about the corporate nature of God's promises. It's true – He does love **you** fully and completely – but it's also true that He is OUR God and WE are His people. Just as much as we belong to Him, we belong to each other.

And our new covenant community should be characterized by the same love and grace and godliness that characterizes the covenant itself. Since God enables us to do His will, our interactions with one another should be kind and gracious and full of love. Our instinct should be to want what's best for the church as a whole, and not just what's best for me. Our instinct should be to put the interests of others before our own. And since God forgives us completely, we should forgive one another the way that God forgave us. Belonging to the new covenant community means working together to love the one who saved us by His blood.

To wrap up, I just want to point you back to [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) for a minute. I want you to scan through that and tell me, can you find the word 'if' there? You can't right? It's not there. It's not like the old covenant, that depended upon our ability to obey. This New Covenant is not an 'if' covenant but a 'because' covenant. Now admittedly, you won't find the word 'because' there either, but it is implied in verse 34. All these promises are possible BECAUSE God was going to forgive our sins. All the promises are possible BECAUSE Jesus died to forgive our sins. The New Covenant is not an 'if' covenant, but a 'because' covenant.

Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, closed a message on this passage saying this -

There is all of it. Do you believe in Christ? Then God will work in you to will and do of His good pleasure! God will conquer your sin! God will sanctify you! God will save you! God will keep you! God will bring you to Himself at last! Rest on that covenant and then, moved by intense gratitude, go forward to serve your Lord with all your heart, and soul and strength! Being saved, live to praise Him! Work not that you may be saved, but because you are saved—the covenant has secured your safety! Spurgeon, sermon 3261 <https://www.spurgeongems.org/vols55-57/chs3261.pdf>

BENEDICTION

20 Now may the God of peace-- who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, and ratified an eternal covenant with his blood--

21 may he equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ, every good thing that is pleasing to him. All glory to him forever and ever! Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21 NLT).