



## A NEW COVENANT

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 Jeremiah 31:31-34  
 23rd Message  
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When I came to Peninsula Bible Church in 1973, I immediately sensed there was something quite different about it from the stale, lifeless church in which I was raised in the Midwest. The reason soon became obvious: it was the impact of the new covenant, one of the bedrock teachings of Peninsula Bible Church. Ray Stedman and others from PBC traveled the world teaching these biblical principles. Part of the curriculum for interns at the church was the study of the new covenant. One intern even wrote a musical based upon it. Its truths have shaped the life of every pastor and elder of our church, and form the basis for our ministry at this church today. We are greatly indebted to our spiritual fathers who dug out these new covenant truths from the Scriptures and pounded them into our hearts.

Now we are not skipping from our studies in the book of Jeremiah to the New Testament this morning. It would be wrong to equate the new covenant with the New Testament, because the new covenant has always been part of redemption history. The Old Testament is filled with promises and predictions of the new covenant. Even back in O.T. times there were some who looked forward to it and lived in its reality. And one of the greatest texts concerning the new covenant comes right in the middle of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Chapters 30-33 of Jeremiah were written to bring the promise of comfort and hope to a people in exile. These texts foretell a future time when Israel would return from captivity and experience restoration and renewal. This restoration is envisioned in a rebuilt Jerusalem, heart-felt worship, productive crops and flocks, a repopulated and fruitful land, and a sense of joy and peace. Repeatedly in this text God promises that despite a much-deserved judgment, his people would experience a great reversal, and they would be saved, restored and healed.

The question is, how would this reversal take place? How would God's people be cleansed from idolatry? How would they change to seeking the Lord instead of worshiping idols? How would they begin to love him with all their hearts? Up until this point in history, despite all of God's best efforts, his saving miracles, his signs and wonders, Israel had turned away from him. How would all this be changed? The answer lies in the new covenant. It would accomplish what the old covenant could not.

Our text consists of a mere four verses from Jeremiah 31:

**"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jer 31:31-34, NASB)**

The new covenant is announced in verse 31 with the formulaic phrase, "Behold, days are coming." This phrase is found five times in chapters 30-33. It introduces verses 27 and 38, as well as verse 31 of chapter 31.

**"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."**

A covenant is simply an arrangement for living. Marriage is a covenant relationship. In the marriage relationship, a man and a woman take vows to commit their lives to one another no matter what the future holds. Any business agreement or partnership that has terms, conditions and expectations for what each party will do is a covenant relationship. The Bible tells the story of the covenants that God made with man, the agreements with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The concept of cutting a covenant is portrayed in Genesis 15, when Abraham cut animals in two and God walked between them as a smoking oven and a flaming torch.

Even though we find the notion of the new covenant woven throughout the O.T., the only time the actual words are used is here in Jeremiah 31. The next time this phrase is used it comes from the mouth of Jesus, when he said to his disciples in the upper room: "And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood'" (Luke 22:20). Jesus was saying that the promised day in Jeremiah would be realized in his shed blood poured out on the cross. Judah was given words of hope while in exile in Babylon as the nation looked forward to a future day of salva-

tion. But for us who believe, not only do we look forward to glory, we also look back to the cross, realizing that the day of salvation and restoration has already begun. In recent studies we have spoken about our hope in a future day of glory, but today we will speak about the present reality.

Our text makes it clear that God's people needed a new covenant because the old covenant didn't bring about the result he desired.

**"not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. (Jer 31:32)**

The covenant referred to here is the old covenant, the Law, the Ten Commandments, the agreement that God made with Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Law said that people would be blessed, they would live, if they obeyed it. But if they disobeyed, they would be cursed and suffer death. Israel ratified the Law and accepted this covenant from God. Despite God's faithfulness, however, Israel failed. Yet God was a faithful husband, even though Israel violated her marriage vow and committed spiritually adultery. They had promised to love the Lord their God with all their heart, but they failed to keep their word.

Now there is nothing wrong with the Law. The apostle Paul says it is "holy, righteous and good" (Rom 7:12). What is wrong is using the Law for a different purpose from what God intended. What is wrong is people's expectation they can achieve salvation and restoration through the Law. Scripture says that the purpose of the Law is to make sin visible in our lives, to make us realize that we fall short of the glory of God. It exposes our flesh, our fallen humanity. That is as far as it goes.

So even though the Law is holy, righteous and good, no one can be saved by trying to keep it, because no one can keep it. That is why Paul refers to the Law as the "ministry of death," the "ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor 3:7, 9). It simply points our failure, inadequacy and guilt. It sets standards that are good, but it does not empower us to keep them. That is why the old covenant was lacking for Israel and why it is deficient for us when we try to gain salvation and life through law. The Law comes into play to point out sin. If you think you can keep it, just try to keep the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," for one day. Try not wanting what someone else possesses. We can't keep God's Law. We can't even keep the law that we impose on ourselves.

God had to do something different. That is what Hebrews 8:7 says, "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second." God could not change the standard, and he didn't want to change his goals, so he had to change us. Thus, the necessity for the new covenant.

In contrast to the old covenant, in these verses God describes the nature of the new covenant. Our text gives four characteristics.

### 1. A new heart and obedience.

**"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it." (Jer 31:33a)**

The first characteristic is a new heart, and thus a new obedience. The problem with the old covenant is that it is external to us, therefore it cannot change us internally. When you see a police car driving behind you, you immediately slow down, but inside you still want to drive faster than the law permits. You want to be faithful to your spouse, but internally you combat the power of lust. That is why God in the new covenant gives us an entirely new heart. He doesn't start with externals; he deals with internals. He doesn't repair, he replaces. He doesn't just tune the carburetor, he gives us a new engine. The new covenant is not about improvement, it is about transformation. As Richard Foster says, "The goal of the Christian [life] is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us!"<sup>1</sup> In the new covenant, God takes the external law, which is his character, and writes it on our hearts, using the pen of the Holy Spirit.

Then, once our hearts are transformed, our external actions begin to change. Our natural obedience is simply a working out of who we are internally. We experience life the way God intended. God himself lives through us. In the old covenant, everything comes from us; in the new covenant, everything comes from God. This is what Paul says, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:5-6).

When I was in the process of becoming a Christian, I thought I would have to do certain things and give up certain things. I was looking at externals. But when I finally accepted Jesus, I didn't try to change externally. Something changed inside me. That was when I understood that authentic Christianity was not about me changing for God, it was about God changing me for himself.

### 2. A new family and community.

The second characteristic of the new covenant is the oft-repeated promise of God:

**"and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Jer 31:33b)**

The new covenant creates a new community, a restored humanity, a new way of relating. God is committed to having a people for himself. So committed is he to having a family that man's failure does not thwart his purposes. Under the old covenant, Israel was God's

family. Jesus came to his own people, but “those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). So the offer to become part of his family went out to the lame, the lepers and the outcasts. In the new covenant, the family of God encompasses all nations and all cultures - anyone who will believe in Christ. The resurrection gave birth to the church. Here is how Paul describes this in Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:28-29).

Just consider your presence here this morning. The fact that you are here in church and that you believe in Jesus is a fulfillment of God’s creation of a family. You are evidence that God keeps his word. Community is very dear to his heart.

Here is the third characteristic of the new covenant that is found in Jeremiah:

### **3. A new intimacy and access to God.**

**“And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD.** (Jer 31:34a)

Under the old covenant, the life of God was mediated through the offices of priests and prophets. But when Christ died, the veil was removed. Now we can have access to the Holy of Holies, the throne of God. The word “know” is a term for intimacy. The day has come when every person in God’s family has intimate access to God, no matter what one’s social standing. The least and the greatest are on the same footing with God. There is no elitist status or spiritual hierarchy. The Holy Spirit living within us allows us to have an intimacy with God that is not available under the old covenant. When we open up the word of God the Holy Spirit teaches us. We can pray to God and talk to him as if he were sitting here with us.

Before I became a Christian I didn’t understand the Bible. I read it, but it didn’t speak to me. But after I came to Christ, this book that was closed to me suddenly became alive. The Holy Spirit living inside me began to illuminate my mind. I could commune with God. I sensed his presence. The thirst for intimacy deep in my soul began to be quenched. I learned that I could know the Lord, not just know about him. That is what is available to each and every one of us in the new covenant.

The fourth characteristic of the new covenant is a new sense of acceptance:

### **4. A new acceptance and freedom.**

**“for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”** (Jer 31:34b)

Under the old covenant the sacrificial system provided the means for confession and forgiveness. And yet the old covenant, the Law, fosters the notion of perfor-

mance to earn acceptance before God. Laboring under it we try diligently to do the right things in order to get a good grade on our “sin report card.” We think we can lose or gain God’s acceptance and favor through our behavior. We try to be morally perfect so that we can be rid of shame, guilt and pain. But it always fails. The Law appeals to the flesh, the wrong resource. The result is that we feel more condemnation and more guilt. We turn away in shame. We stop going to church and turn to addictions to anesthetize our shame and guilt.

Under the new covenant, however, we have a completely different kind of acceptance, one that is not based on anything we do or don’t do. There is no guilt, no shame, no condemnation. James Bryan Smith puts it this way, “In Jesus we hear God saying to us, ‘What you cannot do for yourself, I myself will do. Your sin stands between us, and you cannot remove it, so I will do it for you. My blood will cleanse your sins, and I will remember them no more.’”<sup>2</sup>

Not only are we forgiven, God does not even remember our sin. He will never mention it to us for all eternity. It is not that God ignores sin. So effective is the cross it wipes God’s memory clean. It is as if we had never sinned at all.

That is so unlike the way we operate. We remember everything that people have done to hurt us and we write them off. We hold onto resentments and grudges. We bring up past failures with our children: the flunked class, the wrecked car, the opportunity not taken. Imagine having no memory of your children’s failures. Imagine always conveying complete and utter acceptance to them. That is the kind of heavenly Father we have.

This then is the nature of the new covenant spoken by God to Jeremiah and realized in Jesus Christ: a new heart leading to obedience; a new family giving us community; a new intimacy filling our souls; and a new acceptance that removes shame.

I will conclude by making some observations and exhortations.

### ***1. The new covenant is initiated, implemented, and sustained by God.***

Notice the number of times the personal pronoun “I” is used in the text: “I will make,” “I will put,” “I will write,” “I will be,” “I will forgive.” This is truly amazing. All the way through to chapter 30 of Jeremiah we read accounts of Judah’s sin and rebellion and God’s promise of judgment. It seemed as though God was giving up on Judah and all mankind. But that is not the God of the Bible. This is what makes chapters 30-33 so amazing. God doesn’t give up.

God initiates the saving. He supplies the resources. He picks us up when we fall. We cannot do one thing in our own strength that is righteous before him. Only that which he does in and through us is pleasing and acceptable before him. Everything comes from God, nothing

from us. The subject of our life is God, not “I.”

This truth relieves us of the pressure to perform. We can live in freedom. God gives us wings and bids us fly. This is why the new covenant works, and this is how we can be God’s people

**2. Even though the resources for the new covenant come from God, there is still work for us to do.**

The temptation is to sit back and wait for God to zap us with his grace to defeat sin or make us feel strong enough to do something beyond our comfort zone. But even though our standing before God is totally by grace, and our best efforts cannot be righteous before him, there are things that we must do. We can be so hard-hearted and stubborn that we don’t give God a chance to change us, so we must continually lay our hearts before him and allow him access to every part of our lives. We can be so afraid of failure that we never give God’s power a chance. So we must step out in faith, believing that he will supply everything we lack. When we sin, we can get discouraged and end up wallowing in self-pity and doubt. But despite how we feel we must go right back to God. Our transformation is utterly and completely a work of grace. Our work never adds one iota to our righteous standing or acceptance before God, and yet we have to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). We don’t have the power to do (to accomplish God’s righteousness), but we have the power to choose.

Sometimes God will do a major work of grace in us. He will take away a sinful habit or heal us in some miraculous way. But more often than not the transformation is little by little and day by day. The discipline of prayer, reading and worshipping lets God get at us and change us. C. S. Lewis said, “The goal towards which God is beginning to guide you is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except you yourself, can prevent Him from taking you to that goal.”<sup>3</sup>

**3. Life in the new covenant has already begun for the believer in Jesus.**

In exile, Judah was given hope for a future day. We too live with a future hope of glory. But we have a present hope as well. The process of transformation has already begun. And while our transformation into the likeness of Christ will not be fully completed in this life, we can and should expect substantial movement forward. As Richard Foster says, “God does not wait until death to initiate this process of complete and total transformation. Oh no. It begins now, and God can and will do far more here and now that we can possibly imagine. If we are not perfect yet, we can be a whole lot better.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem with many churches and many believers today is that they know about the new covenant but they do not live it. This is a struggle for all of us. We still live with the hope that we can patch up our lives and make them the way we want. We aren’t ready to give up on the old covenant. We think we’ll be the one person in history to save and heal ourselves through our performance. We either think that we have what it takes to defeat sin and or we live in despair, thinking that sin’s power can never be broken. We can be terribly deceived to settle for less than what God desires for us. But God said, “Behold, days are coming.” That day is today.

Which covenant are you living under, the old or the new? We can’t live under the control of both the law and the Spirit. We have to choose. It really isn’t much of choice, but it still is a choice we have to make. And it is a choice we have to make every time we fall back into the old covenant. Will we let go of our life to have God’s life? Will we believe that God can supply all that we need to live life as he designed it to be lived?

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1. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 85.

2. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 18.

3. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 158.

4. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 85.