

A Chronicle of Redemption

Chapter 31: The New Covenant in the Old Testament

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CHAPTER 31: THE NEW COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT Jeremiah 31:31-40

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah 31, a fairly depressing book at times, yes? As we have been reading through the book of Jeremiah, we realize why this prophet was known as the "weeping prophet." To be tasked with telling a resistant, rebellious people that they needed to submit to their enemies, Babylon, because Babylon was going to destroy them...bring about the destruction of Jerusalem...and this was the will of God. That's exactly what happened: 586 BC, Jerusalem destroyed. People of God ripped apart to go into exile. Jeremiah himself exiled to Egypt, really, at the behest of his own people.

All of that does not make for very light reading. Yet, in the middle of this very long book, we've got four chapters...this picture from Jeremiah 30, 31, 32 and 33...that give us a picture of hope and comfort and promise for the future. All of it revolving around Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the new covenant. Now, here's the deal this morning. You might be tempted to think, "What in the world does a sermon titled 'The New Covenant in the Old Testament' have to do with my life?" This is where I want us to realize that we in this room stand in a long line of people who have gone before us with whom God has related.

We don't come on the scene in 2010 and say, "All right, how can we relate to God?" The reality is...just let the mammoth reality of this soak in: the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David and Jeremiah is your God, and the God who spoke to this people 2,600/2,700 years ago is the God who speaks to us as His people today. So, what I want us to see is what unites us together with this long line...generation after generation after generation...of God's people revolving around God's covenants with His people. I want us to see that at the center of the covenant with Abraham and Moses and David and God's covenant...God's relationship with us...at the center of all of these generations, thousands of years of God's people...at the center of it all is Christ. He is the supreme picture of God's love and mercy and redemption toward all of us, and I want us to give Christ the glory He is due as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. So, that's where we're going.

The Old Covenant...

Now, in order to understand that, we need to think about the old covenant that we have seen as we've been walking through chronological reading of Scripture this year together and seeing redemptive history. We have seen God relating to His people through covenants of grace. We saw...and this is just a recap...God's covenant with Adam: the covenant of creation where God relates to Adam and Eve by His promises, by His word to them. Now, Genesis 3, sin enters the world; covenant broken leads to God's covenant with Noah, that a covenant of preservation. After the flood, God promises never to destroy His people by flood like that again, that He will preserve His people to the end, which leads us to Genesis 12, 15, 17.

We looked at that when I was in India, and we saw God's covenant with Abraham, the covenant of promise, when God said, "I am going to bless you, Abraham, and form a people through you. Give you descendants and give you land and, through my blessing on you, I'm going to show my blessing to all peoples in all nations." That played out in what became known as Israel's history. As God's people were slaves in Egypt for 400-plus years, God delivered them out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai where He entered into covenant with Moses: the covenant of law. What He did was He gave His people His law, His commands, and God related to His people through these laws, through these commands. That persisted until we came to 2 Samuel 7, and we saw God's covenant with His people through David, the covenant of the kingdom, which informs our understanding now of the book of Jeremiah, because the setting here is in the midst of a failing kingdom.

The Problem in the Old Covenant...

The reason it's failing points us to the problem in the old covenant and all of these covenants. Particularly here in Jeremiah, the problem with these covenants was sin. The people of God were constantly breaking covenant with God, summed up in Jeremiah. Number one, the people of God were idolatrous. From the very beginning, Jeremiah 2, they were worshipping worthless idols. Turning to Baal and other foreign gods. They were idolatrous, and as a result, they were immoral; people of God were immoral. Idolatry always leads to immorality.

Mark this down. Immorality never happens in a vacuum. Immorality always comes from a heart that neglects the worship of God. Any sin in our lives, at the core, is rooted in a heart that is neglecting the worship of God. That's what we see: we see rampant immorality. In the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 7, in Jeremiah's famous temple sermon, Jeremiah talks about how the people of God were sacrificing their children as burnt offerings for these foreign gods. They were sacrificing family members. How do you get to that point? You know, you look sometimes at sin in our lives or in our culture, and we think, "How does that happen?" The reality is it happens when the heart begins to turn away from God. Unmitigated immorality grounded in unmitigated idolatry, and the ultimate problem was the people of God were incapable of anything different.

Over a hundred times in this book, Jeremiah calls the people to repent. Over and over and over again, he says, "Repent, repent, repent, repent," and they continue in disobedience. However, lest we harp on them...isn't there a tendency to read through this, the Old Testament, you're like, "Come on, man! Just turn from your sin!" However, the reality is, this picture of the people of God here, is intended to be a reflection of the hearts of the people of God in this room, because we are all at the core idolatrous, immoral. The core of the gospel is that we are incapable of doing anything different. You say, "What? The gospel...core of the gospel? Gospel means "good news. The core of the good news is that we are bad and incapable of anything but bad? How is that good?"

It is good because our God looks across a people who are idolatrous, immoral and incapable of anything different, and He says, "I am faithful to you anyway." That is the essence of what He is saying in the midst of His judgment in Jeremiah 31:31. Read it with me: "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD...*" So, this is Jeremiah speaking on behalf of God; God's word through Jeremiah. God says, "*When I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 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."

In verse 33 and verse 34. Essence of the new covenant. Underline these verses; two of the most important verses in all of the Old Testament.

[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. 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.

The New Covenant...

New covenant. Covenant/testament are interchangeable terms. So, this is the New Testament in the Old Testament. The new covenant in the midst of the old covenant. What Jeremiah is prophesying is a new covenant: the coming of Christ and the covenant of consummation.

Now, that word is key. There's a great book by O. Palmer Robertson wrote called *Christ of the Covenants* that I've leaned on at different points throughout this year just helping my understanding of covenants. Some of the language here is reflected from there. This word in particular is very important: "consummation." What I want us to realize that in all of these different covenants...when the covenant of Abraham came on scene or when the covenant of Moses came on the scene, it wasn't that, "Okay, well now the Mosaic covenant is here, the Abrahamic covenant is just thrown out the window. Like, not important anymore. Just leave that behind. Move on with the Mosaic covenant." No! All of these covenants are building upon one another. There is a progression that is going on here.

What we see in Christ, the new covenant, is the consummation of all that we've seen before, which means that our relationship to God through Christ in the new covenant in this room is totally based on how God has related to His people through these old covenants. All of these old covenants help us understand the wonder of the new covenant.

The Promise of the New Covenant...

So, what I want us to see in this consummation is how it all comes together in a few different ways; the promise of the new covenant. What I want us to do is I want us to put ourselves in the shoes of the people of God in Jeremiah 31. In the midst of despair, Jerusalem is about to be destroyed and the people of God taken into exile, and Jeremiah speaks these words. So, let's try to listen to it from the perspective of our forefathers who have gone before us, and then that will help us to realize what a privilege we have in the new covenant in this room.

We will receive a new covenant.

So, Jeremiah says, first, we will receive a new covenant; a new covenant that consummates all these other covenants. It will contain the same components...you see in your notes there, we're going to talk about the law of God, and the knowledge of God, and the grace of God. It's not that, "Well, there was law in this covenant, and there's no more law in this covenant." Or, "There was grace in this covenant, but there's no more grace in this covenant." These components are there in all of the covenants, in both old covenant and new covenant.

What I want us to see is the progression that happens, for example, with the law of God. The law of God was central, foundational, in both the old covenant and the new covenant. Here's the difference: In the old covenant, the law was written on stone tablets. You remember Moses coming down from the mountain after meeting with God, and he is holding in his hands tablets of stone that have the law of God engraved on them, written down.

Even here in the book of Jeremiah, when Josiah was king, and he rediscovered the written law of God in the temple, he said, "We need to return to the law of God." So, the picture was the law written on stone tablets. Outside of them; external from them, and Jeremiah says in verse 33, what God is promising now is the law written on human hearts. "*I will put my law within them...I will write it on their hearts.*" This is what we need. This is what the people of God need. There's a variety of places that we're not going to have time to turn to this morning, so you might just write them down. One of them is Jeremiah 17:1, where Jeremiah said, "*The sin of Judah is written...*" listen to this imagery. "*The sin of Judah is written...with the point of a diamond...and engraved on the tablet of their heart.*"

Sin engraved on their hearts, and not just theirs, but ours. The reality is, this is the human condition for all of us. Every single one of us in this room has sin engraved on our hearts, ingrained into the fabric of who we are; sin written on our hearts. It's why Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*The heart is deceitful above all things...*" The heart is desperately sick, so we need a new heart. What we have seen all throughout these...this old covenant and the people's disobedience over and over and over again...we see that our worst enemy...hear this. This is so important among all nations, and this is so important among a religious people in Birmingham, Alabama. Our greatest enemy is fleshly religion. Our greatest enemy, worst enemy, is fleshly religion. The idea that we can check off a box. Sign a card. Walk an aisle. Pray a prayer. Go to church. Do this thing. Live this way, and in so doing, God will be pleased.

That is the essence of every religion in the world, and if that is all New Testament Christianity is, then we are no different. No matter what kind of Christian lingo we try to attach to it, Christian prayers we try to attach to it, it is no different than Hindu prayers, Muslim prayers, fleshly efforts to get to God. The worst enemy in this room that we have is the idea that we can get to God by what we do. Fleshly religion.

Our greatest need, ladies and gentlemen, is spiritual regeneration. We need a heart change from the inside, and that's the promise in the new covenant. Not, "Law on the outside, now try to obey it." No! Law written on our hearts, filling our hearts, transforming our lives from the inside out. We need new hearts.

Now, this doesn't mean the law becomes irrelevant. This is the beauty of the new covenant. Watch this: where the obedience to the law is not a condition for entering the new covenant. If obedience to the law was a condition for entering the new covenant, then none of us could. That's the whole point. We can't do it, but that doesn't mean obedience is just thrown out the window. "Oh, okay, well I'll just pray a prayer and live however I want."

That is most certainly not New Testament Christianity. Obedience is at the core of New Testament Christianity, but not as a condition for entering the New Covenant. Obedience to the law is a promise we experience in the new covenant.

God puts His law in our hearts, and He says, "I'm going to enable you to obey." We're going to see this some more in Ezekiel in a couple of weeks, when His Spirit is talked about as the one who enables us to obey from the inside out. Jonathan Edwards, I love what he said. His personal notes on this verse. Listen to this; follow along. Jonathan Edwards said, "I think the difference here pointed out between these two covenants, lies plainly here: that in the old covenant, God promised to be their God upon condition of obedience. Obedience was stipulated as a condition, but not promised, but in the new covenant, this hearty obedience is promised." I love that phrase: hearty obedience. Hearty obedience. Obedience driven from the heart.

Christianity is not a matter of coming to this point where you say, "Well, I guess I need to ask you just to forgive my sins, so I can save my skin for eternity and stepping out of the life I really want into the life that I really don't want that much, but since I need to do this in order to be saved for eternity, that's what I'll do." Then, we struggle through trying to live out this Christian life even though our heart really belongs over here with the things that are where we left. No! When we come to Christ, it is a brand new heart. Our desires, our affections, are changed from the inside out, and we want new things. We want God more than we want the things of this world. It's not, "Oh, I guess, reluctantly, I have to let go of this." No! We have found a treasure in Christ that is more valuable than anything we had to let go of, and we want Him, and we desire Him.

It's like when I come home to Heather and if I were to walk in after a day of work and give her a big kiss on the lips, and she were to say, "Well, what's that for?", and I were to say, "Well, it says in this book that it is wise when you come home to give your wife a kiss on the lips." What is she going to do? She's going to take the book and stuff it down my throat, is what she's going to do. No, that is not...that's not loving obedience. That's not hearty obedience. Hearty obedience is, "Oh, because I love you, and I desire you." This is New Testament Christianity. Hearty obedience promised. God says it is guaranteed. For all those who have a new heart, you will obey. Why? Because His law has so transformed your heart and the Spirit is in you, which we'll get to in Ezekiel.

Okay, so there's the law of God. Then, the knowledge of God. It gets even better. Verse 34, *"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."* So, the knowledge of God...here's the deal: In the old covenant you have teachers; you have teachers who are mediators. Moses: teacher of the law; teacher of God's people. Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, and 31: Levites, priests, prophets who bring God's Word to God's people. So, in the old covenant, what you have is that we relate to God through flawed men. The people of God relating to God through flawed men; through teachers who would bring God's Word to them, who would intercede for them. What it meant was that was limited admission to the presence of God.

Remember the whole picture of the Mosaic covenant? When God reveals Himself as a consuming fire on the mountain and says to the people of God, "Stay back; don't come anywhere near the mountain lest you be consumed." So, the people of God said, "You know Moses, we're okay with you going for us. We're just going to sit back." That's what they did, and Moses went. It's the whole Old Testament sacrificial system. Year after year after year on the Day of Atonement, one priest goes into the presence of the Holy One. Everybody else, all the people of God, stand in silent awe as a man goes in to meet with God. He's got

bells strapped into his garment, so that you can tell if he's still moving. If he gets struck down, he's got a rope that you can pull him out with.

A man meeting with God, limited admission to the presence of God, and a distant encounter of the glory of God. It's Moses who goes into the tent of meeting while all the people stand and wait. When he comes out of the tent of meeting, after meeting with God, his face is glowing from encountering the glory of God. This was distant, limited, and Moses, every Levite, priest, prophet, all of them are sinful men. Limited, distant, flawed knowledge of God, and Jeremiah says in the new covenant, God says, "All, not just the elite, the one, the few. All my people will know me."

How is that possible? Well, in the new covenant, we are reconciled to God through a flawless man. Jesus is no mere teacher; He is the perfect teacher; He is the covenant keeper; He is the perfect prophet, priest and king. We relate to God, not based on our ability to keep the covenant; we relate to God based on Christ's accomplishment in keeping the covenant. He has kept the covenant for us, so that when we trust in Him, He robes us in His righteousness.

What that means is we now have unlimited access to the presence of God. Every single person in this room. Nobody today is going into a tent to meet with God. Brothers and sisters, you meet with God. Through Christ, unlimited access. The author of Hebrews says, "Approach His throne with confidence." Sinful men approaching the throne of a holy God with confidence. How is this possible? Only through Christ the flawless man; the flawless mediator, and through Him, we have a direct experience of the glory of God.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 3. "We have this hope, and we are bold. We are not like Moses," Paul said, "who would put a veil over his face. We all with unveiled faces behold the glory of the Lord." Every man, woman and child in this room who trusts in Christ as your righteousness, before God...boldly, without hindrance...you live in His presence, and you behold His glory day after day after day. Do we realize that for generations, the people of God longed for what you and I have the privilege of experiencing every day? Let us not neglect the prayer closet. Let us not neglect time with God beholding His glory; enjoying His presence. Oh, what grace!

Now, it's not that there wasn't grace in these...all other covenants. Sometimes we picture old covenant, no grace; new covenant, all grace. No! There was grace in all of these covenants. Redemption and mercy, I hope we've seen throughout this year, have been at the foundation of all of these covenants, but look at the difference here. In the old covenant, they had persistent sacrifices through which God patiently passes over sin. Year after year after year, the blood of bulls and goats sprinkled over the altar on the Day of Atonement. Romans 3:25 says that God, in His forbearance, was passing over these sins. However, year after year after year after year, the sacrifices had to be repeated persistently. Why? Because sin still remained. The blood of bulls and goats...God in His grace and mercy passing over sins.

However, in the new covenant, there will be a perfect sacrifice through which God permanently removes our sin. Write this down: Hebrews 10:11-18. You say, "Where is the perfect sacrifice talked about in Jeremiah 31:33-34?" Well, you go to Hebrews 10:11-18, and what you'll see is the author of Hebrews quoting from Jeremiah 31. This is what he says about it. He says in Hebrews 10:11, "*[And] every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*" Then, he quotes

from Jeremiah 31:33-34. "[And] the Holy Spirit bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make them...I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,' then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin."

Yes! We do not gather together in this room to bring offerings for our sin; to atone for our sin. That offering has already been given. It was a perfect offering. It was the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and it has covered over our sins. By His blood, God forgives all of our sin. "I will forgive their iniquity.", verse 34 in Jeremiah 31 says. He forgives our sin, and God forgets all of our sin. "I will remember them no more." To think that your God chooses not to remember any one of your sins...new covenant grace.

We will comprise a new community.

We will receive a new covenant. We will comprise a new community. We don't have a lot of time to spend here, but you go back up to Jeremiah 31:31, and what you see is God saying, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." The picture we see in the book of Jeremiah...we see it in Jeremiah 3 in the beginning of this book; Jeremiah 50 at the end of this book; and then right here in the middle is...you have the Northern kingdom of Israel; Southern kingdom of Judah. Divided kingdom. God bringing His people back together, and not just Israel and Judah, but you go to Jeremiah 4:2, Jeremiah 12:16, and you see God's promise to Abraham coming to fruition as God says, "I will bring together all nations to see my glory."

We will anticipate a new city.

A new community united, not by cultural or historical background, language, ethnicity, socioeconomic ties, but a new community bridging all of those, united together in the grace of God. A people who know God and have new hearts. As a new community, we will anticipate a new city. What happens is you go to the end of this chapter, and you get to verses 38 and 39. Well, get...before we read this, just get the scene with me for a second. You've got the people of God. They were in the Promised Land where the people of God have dwelt ever since the Lord brought them out of slavery and brought them into the Promised Land, and you look at all those covenants that are in your notes there, and every single one of those covenants is always attached to the land. God promising to give His people a place. God bringing His people to His place, to a land. "The land that I will give you." That was the picture of God's faithfulness to His people, that He put them in this land. Well, now the land was about to be ripped away. They were about to be taken out of the land. The ultimate picture of covenant breaking. The people of God taken from the land that He had promised them.

So, God says to them, verse 38, "*Behold, the days are coming...when the city [talking about Jerusalem] shall be rebuilt for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill of Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah.*" So, here's the deal. For them, what Jeremiah is saying...in light of the words of Jeremiah, look forward to the restoration of Jerusalem. "God is going to bring us back." When we get...later, in about a month or so...into the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, we'll see this happening, and we'll see Nehemiah, then, rebuilding the city of Jerusalem exactly like it's specified here.

So, God's saying, "I'm going to bring you back to this land." In fact, in the next chapter, He tells Jeremiah to buy a piece of land there, which is not a very wise investment from the world's eyes. Buy a piece of land that's about to be demolished by a foreign army, and Jeremiah says, "What are you thinking?" God says, "This is a picture of the reality that I will bring my people back to this place." So, that was comfort.

However, then you get to verse 40. It says, *"The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the LORD."* There's so much there, and we'll even see more of this when we get to Ezekiel, but listen to this last phrase: *"It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore forever."* This city will endure forever.

All of a sudden, we realize that in the heart of this new covenant is a picture, not just of an earthly city, but of an eternal city. You say, "Well, how does that relate to the new covenant?" Let me remind you. The picture in Revelation 21:1-2 when John says,

[Then] I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

That's the exact covenant language that we see.

Here and all throughout Scripture, there is a day coming, new covenant community of faith, when we will be brought into the presence of God, new Jerusalem, where God will dwell with us. We will dwell with Him. The very next verse says, *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more."* For them, in light of the words of Jeremiah, look forward to the restoration of Jerusalem. It's coming. For us, in light of the work of Jesus, long for the re-creation of a new Jerusalem...of a city...of a place where we as His people will dwell with our God.

Come with me to Luke 22, and this is where we're going to close out. Luke 22:14. Luke 22:14. Long for the re-creation of a new Jerusalem. Verse 14. Now, here's the deal: 600 or 700 years before this passage we're about to read, Jeremiah gave this prophecy that we just read. So, 600 or 700 years later this is what happens.

[And] when the hour came, he ["He" being Jesus] reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 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." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the [What?] new covenant..."

Circle it; underline it; star it. *"This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."* Six, seven hundred years after God had said through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will make a new covenant with you.", we come to the night before Jesus was going to the cross, and He gathers together His disciples, and He inaugurates the new covenant. He says, "I am about to go to the cross where my body will be given for you, and my blood will be shed for you. Because of this sacrifice on the cross, you will receive a new covenant by which your heart will be transformed from the inside out, and your sins will be totally removed, and you will have access to God. You will know Him. You will be a new people, and you will live and long for a new city. This world is not our home." For Jesus says...we see it in

Matthew and Mark's account, as well as Paul in 1 Corinthians 11...here is coming a day when this cup of the new covenant, we will share with Him when He comes back for us.

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