

## **Jeremiah 31:31-34 – God’s Promise of New Covenant**

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

O God, with steadfast love You draw us to Yourself, and in mercy You receive our prayers. Strengthen us to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, and renew us that we may follow Your commands and proclaim Your reign of love, that through life and death we may live in Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### **Historical Context**

- Jeremiah was active during a critical time in Israel’s history – from the reform of Josiah through the downfall of Judah, the time of exile and the destruction of the Temple.
  - This is the great crisis of Israel’s history in the Old Testament – destruction of the Temple and exile – and much of the biblical literature either deals with it or comes out of it.
- There was considerable geopolitical upheaval in the ancient Near East at the time, which were often the focus of his oracles.
  - The Assyrian Empire was in decline which led to a conflict between Egypt and Babylon for control of the Fertile Crescent, of which Judah was a part.
- King Josiah enacted many reforms to bring the Temple and worship back into alignment with God – the people had been drifting towards worship of other gods.
  - This reform was not universally welcomed, which led to internal political problems.
- After Josiah’s death things quickly fell apart – Egypt took control then Babylon did – weak kings were put in place by foreign occupiers – it was a mess. Finally, under King Zedekiah (put in place by Babylon) the people rebelled. Babylon reacted, laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the Temple in 587/586 BC.

### **Background – Jeremiah**

- He was born sometime after 650 BC and died around 570 BC.
- He is the second major prophet after Isaiah, and his book is the second longest after Psalms.
- He was active as a prophet from 626 BC until around 587 BC – 39 years (from 24 to 63 years old).
- He is known as the “weeping prophet” because of his many prophecies of judgment against the Israelites. Jeremiah was also heavily persecuted and survived several attempts to kill him.
- He tangled not only with civil and religious authorities, but several false prophets who were prophesying peace when Jeremiah was telling about the coming destruction.
- He was not a popular guy.

### **Background – the Book of Jeremiah**

- The book was written over a long period of time. It was only preserved in memory for oral communication at first and written down later.
- There are actually two texts of Jeremiah that go back to much earlier Hebrew writings
  - From Egypt and found in the Greek (or Septuagint) text of the Old Testament
  - From Babylon and found in the Masoretic Text
- No one seems to know why there are two texts, but I don’t think we really have to worry about it.

### The Text – Jeremiah 31:31-34

- This is a well-known text that is quoted several times in the New Testament (**Hebrews 8:8-12**, **Romans 11:27**, **Hebrews 10:16-17**) and alluded to in **Matthew 26:28**, **Mark 14:24**, and **John 6:45**.
- Jeremiah 30-33 are often called the “Book of Consolation” or the “Book of Comfort”
  - Right in the middle of sad and angsty Jeremiah come these chapters of hope and comfort.
  - These texts envision the time after the Babylonian Exile is over and the people have returned.

### Covenant

- After the return, a new covenant will be established – specifically “not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors ... a covenant that they broke” 31:32.
  - Remaining in the covenant God made with Moses was conditional. **Deuteronomy 28** describes all the blessings that come with remaining faithful and all the consequences of disobedience.
  - Because God makes the covenant, it cannot be broken. God cannot break it and remain faithful. So even if the people are unfaithful, the covenant remains – they just don’t get any benefit from it.
- A new covenant – or maybe better, a revised covenant – is necessary because the people have fallen so far away from God.
  - **Jeremiah 11:10** They have turned back to the iniquities of their ancestors of old, who refused to heed My words; they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant that I made with their ancestors.
  - **Jeremiah 22:9** And they will answer, ‘Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods and served them.’

### New Covenant

- The new covenant is dependant on the old covenant – it does not displace it. It is a revision or reformulation.
  - “I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” verse 33.
  - The law given at Sinai – the Torah – is not overwritten or discarded.
    - Now, however, it is “written on their hearts” by God.
      - Contrast with **Deut. 11:18** where the people had to put the law in their hearts themselves.
      - Treaties, or covenants, were usually written on clay or stone tablets – both of which could be broken, cast aside, or ignored.
      - A covenant “written on the heart” describes a relationship so deep it is natural to sustain, not difficult.
- Coming home out of exile is like coming out of Egypt – Israel is not the same as before. But God is.
  - **Jeremiah 31:3b** I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you.
  - God has always shown care and concern for Israel.
  - God is already planning for how things will be when they return.

- **Jeremiah 24:6-7** I will set My eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.
- The old covenant relationship remains – “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (**Jeremiah 31:33, 30:22, 31:1**)
  - But Israel will be the people of God in a new way.
    - God will change their hearts by writing His law on them so that keeping the covenant will be as natural as the heart beating.
    - They will no longer need the priests – “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’” verse 34.
    - They will know God – everyone will know Him “from the least to the greatest” v. 34.
- God’s forgiveness and forgetfulness are both unconditional and the foundation of the new covenant.
  - “For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” v. 34.
    - So – God will make a new covenant which He will write on their hearts, enabling them to know God, all of which is possible because God will forgive and forget.

### **What does this mean for us?**

- Christians have long read this passage and connected it to Jesus, to His words at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24) especially in Luke: “And He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” **Luke 22:20**.
- Unfortunately, there is a long history of using this to declare that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity. That the Mosaic covenant in the Old Testament no longer exists and has been replaced by the new covenant in Jesus.
  - God cannot break covenants!
- But if part of what constitutes this revised covenant is having God write Himself on our hearts, knowing God and being forgiven – we can see how Jesus brought that about.
  - Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have God’s spirit within us, constantly working to bring our hearts in line with God’s heart.
  - We know God in a new way through Jesus. He reveals the Father to us in ways we couldn’t know before.
  - God’s gift of unconditional forgiveness comes to us every time we take the sacrament and every time we ask.
  - The ground or foundation of our entire relationship with God and His with us is the forgiveness of sins made possible in Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- This covenant has not been completely fulfilled – our hearts are not naturally and effortlessly aligned with God’s heart, and we still need to encourage others to “know the Lord.” It remains a great promise for the future.