

“THE REALITY OF GOD’S NEW COVENANT”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, April 7, 2019

Jeremiah 31:31-34 at NFBC

//31 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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 people 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 they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘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.”//

—Jeremiah 31:31-34 NIV

These words of amazing hope come in the most despairing of days. They are the word of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. The year is 597 BC. The place is Judah, the southern half of the divided kingdom of Israel. The northern half fell under God’s judgment a hundred years earlier in 722 BC. Now the southern half is falling. They saw their last good king, Josiah, back in Jeremiah’s earliest days. That king had brought back the law and the “words of the covenant,” along with the practice of Passover. He had the high places of idol worship torn down and seemed to change the downward spiral into a revival. However, those days were short-lived and now were over. None of those reforms carried on after Josiah’s early death at age 39.

The kings after Josiah resumed the rebellion against God. Jeremiah saw king after king plunge Judah deeper and deeper into sin. He also saw Judah’s best and brightest youths, such as Daniel, taken away by Babylon. He knew it was only a matter of time before Jerusalem itself would be destroyed (589 BC) and all of Judah with it as punishment for violating the Law and covenant of Moses. God would use the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, as his instrument to overthrow Judah and send her into Exile.

By the time Jeremiah delivered the text we have today he was in his late 40s and had seen a lot of evil done by God’s own people. He would see more in the following decades. His ministry would be characterized, not by the preaching of the “Good News” as we are so used to doing, but by preaching the bad news. Something along the line of: ~~God is not pleased with his people of Judah and he has a terrible plan for their lives. The Promised Land and it’s people will be conquered. Destruction and a 70 year Exile will be its future.~~ This message did not make Jeremiah popular. Few heeded his message. He was mocked and persecuted. In these times and with such a calling, God kept him from taking on a wife and family and had to give him special strength to carry on faithfully. Yet, it was in these very times that we find this text of such amazing words of hope.

This word of hope for Jeremiah is a word of reality for us today. It has been a reality with the coming of Jesus, his sinless life, his perfect sacrifice on the cross for our sins and his resurrection. This is what he spoke of on that night Jesus was betrayed, when he shared the Passover meal with his disciples and pointed the bread and wine toward himself and told them: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this in remembrance of me."

Think about that. That which gave Jeremiah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Ezekiel and others living in those dark days... gave them hope just by hearing about it—is the reality of our relationship to God in Christ today.

I hope we appreciate this. I hope we remember it more than once a month. And most of all, I hope and trust we know it in our hearts without it having to be taught to us. For this is not a matter of education. Education can be added onto it, yes. But it must first come by faith. We must believe the Good News of this New Covenant and in this way we will 'know whom we have believed...' (cf 2 Timothy 1:12).

To this end I would like to point out three things which characterize this New Covenant of which Jeremiah speaks—to his generation's hope and our reality.

1. This New Covenant will not be broken by division. Instead it will unite.

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This is addressed first of all to a nation of people who had literally been split in two: Israel and Judah. And then they were destroyed and scattered. But last week we saw how they were miraculously called out of that Exile of 70 years. They gathered back to the Promised Land; they rebuilt the wall, the temple and all of Jerusalem. And they did not do it as a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. They did it as God's people united by his word to return in expectation of their coming Messiah. And they did.

Now, they did not do it perfectly. They did not themselves establish this new covenant. That would come by way of the Perfect One, the Christ, the Son of God. But this miracle of Israel's rebirth and unity was already being expressed in anticipation of Jesus and the new covenant he would establish.

Then, too, there's the Church. Are we all perfectly united? Have there been no divisions these two thousand years? Of course not. But then again, the Church is not the ones establishing the unity of which Jeremiah speaks. It is a unity in Jesus Christ. It is not in our buildings, institutions, denominations, styles of worship or favored, secondary doctrines. Our unity is in one faith, one baptism and one Lord, the head of the Church. It even goes beyond the uniting

of Israel and Judah. It unites Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. It can even bring a unity between Republicans and Democrats... impossible as that may sound.

And on this there is remarkable unity to be found. The world today is not filled with hundreds of thousands of different Christ's, from which a person has to make a guess as to which is true. From the first century onward the Church has been in remarkable agreement when it comes to the truth of Christ and the falsehood of the many anti-christs. The Good News and the New Covenant are proclaimed today in a voice united not only between different denominations of our day, but between believers from different centuries right back to the first one – from which we get the Gospels, the letters and the Revelation – all of which we call the New Testament, or the New Covenant.

2. This New Covenant will not sit on stone. Instead it will live in our hearts.

//33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people 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.//

The Old Covenant spoken of here is that given by Moses after God freed Israel from Egypt. I believe the New Covenant is at its heart the same Covenant established by God with Abraham, well before the one with Moses. This New Covenant established by Christ fulfills everything anticipated and hoped for in the Abrahamic covenant, as well as many things spelled out more clearly in the covenant with Moses. But much of the covenant with Moses was to be temporary. Paul likened it to a tutor teaching a son while he is growing up. But when he becomes an adult he doesn't need the tutor anymore. His standing as a son is all the covenant he needs.

This is closely related to the third point. So I will jump to that to make further points.

3. This New Covenant will not teach about God. Instead it will be the knowing of God, from the least to the greatest.

//34 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, '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."//

Imagine if your relationship with your family depended on your going to school and maintaining a top grade point average. Or if you had a contract with 600 stipulations for behavior and seasonal habits, all of which had to be checked year after year to see if you were keeping up your end of the relationship. That describes Israel's contract with God as a nation. That is the Old Mosaic Covenant. But that is not the description of Abraham's covenant with God. That one was based on God's word of promise. Promises kept in Jesus Christ.

The covenant with Moses, on the other hand, could be broken, not so much by God as by the disobedience of Israel. And indeed it was broken. 70 years of Exile for violating the Law of Moses. (2000 years for rejecting the Messiah!) Yet, even there you find a remnant through which God proves himself gracious and faithful – in this hope and reality of the New Covenant.

So at the heart of this New Covenant is the difference between a breakable, stone contract of laws, regulations, etc., which all need to be taught and drilled day after day... VS ... a family-type relationship that comes by things like birth, and faith and hope and love. They come once and last a lifetime. They don't have to be renewed, reviewed and worried about failures and cancelations.

In this New Covenant you will know where you stand because you will know your Father. In this case: God. You will know God. Now that may sound presumptuous. People might be tolerant of other people when they say they "believe" there's a God, so long as they get the idea that those people are just guessing there's a God out there somewhere. But if you talk about actually knowing God, that's when people get really nervous, uptight and suspicious.

But this New Covenant is about everyone in it *knowing* God, from the least to the greatest. Yes, it involves faith and believing. But it is not about guessing. And it is not about being at a distance from God as some kind of a stranger. In this New Covenant he is to be "Our Father...". And we can say this because the Son of that Father has come and introduced us to him. And he says if you know the Son then you also know the Father. And we can know the Son because we have his Story in great detail given to us in the New Tes... New Covenant scriptures. And because that Covenant is a reality, established once and for all at the Cross by his shed blood, proven three days later with his resurrection. And, as if that weren't enough, 50 days later the very Spirit of God comes to everyone who enters into this Covenant, so that we might know the very mind and spirit of God in Jesus Christ.

This word of hope for Jeremiah is a word of *reality* for us today. This is what Jesus spoke of at that Passover meal when he pointed the bread and wine toward himself and told them: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this in remembrance of me."

I hope we appreciate this. I hope we remember it more than once a month. And most of all, I hope and trust we know it in our hearts without it having to be taught to us. For you don't get this from a text book. You get this by putting your faith in Jesus Christ, by getting to know him. And through him, through this "new covenant in his blood," we know God.