

Creating a New Covenant

Scripture Text: Jeremiah 29:10-14; Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 30:18-22 **Background Scripture:** Jeremiah 29-31

Jeremiah 29:10-14; 31:31-34

¹⁰ *This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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 there 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.”*

LESSON AIMS

- Tell what God promised for the future of the Jewish exiles, including a return to their homeland and the making of a new covenant.
- Explain how the gospel of Jesus Christ fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant.
- Describe the future that awaits those who enter into a covenant relationship with God.

INTRODUCTION

Romans 9:4 refers to covenants given to Israelites. Going back to the time of the patriarchs, we note covenants given to Adam (Gen. 3:14-19), Noah (9:9), and Abraham (15:18). The covenant of law was given by God through Moses at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:5—6). Another covenant was given to David (II Sam. 23:5).

This lesson speaks about a new covenant to be made by God and to be written in the hearts of His people (Jer. 31:31-34). Hebrews 8:6-13 shows this to be the covenant of grace mediated through Christ. This gives Jeremiah's prophecy enormous relevance to us today.

BACKGROUND

God's real prophets spoke the truth that God gave them, whether anyone wanted to hear it or not. The prophet Isaiah had foretold captivity in Babylon (Isaiah 39:5-7). But no one wanted to hear that message.

Jeremiah, prophesying many decades after Isaiah, said Jerusalem would be destroyed. The hearers wanted to kill him for bringing that message (Jeremiah 26:8-11). But the southern kingdom of Judah did indeed become captive in Babylon, and Jerusalem was indeed destroyed. These disasters could have been averted if God's people had listened to God's truth in time.

Jeremiah emphasized to the Israel exiles that it would only be “after seventy years” that God would deliver them from captivity.

1. How long would the Jews be held captive, and where? (Jer. 29:10)

God promised to not leave the Jews in Babylonian captivity indefinitely. He said that He would “*come to*” them. This expression means to visit for a purpose, either to bless or to judge. God promised that this visitation would be to “*fulfill my good promise...*” In this case, God's “*good promise*” was that He would bring about their return to this place, that is, to Jerusalem. God said that His thoughts towards the exiled Jews were “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” Even though they would be chastised for their disobedience, He had not cast them off forever (I Sam. 12:22; Jer. 31:37; Rom. 11:1) What a great expectation for them and for us!

Just because we are Christians does not mean that we can disobey God with impunity any more than the ancient Jews could. Because He loves us, God may chastise us to bring us back into His will (Heb. 12:5—11). So it was with the exiles in the time of Jeremiah the prophet. If nothing else, the Babylonian Exile cured the Jews of their propensity to commit idolatry.

2. What did God promise the exiled Jews? (Jer. 29:10, 11)

At the time of today's lesson, the Jewish exiles were not predisposed to call upon God for deliverance. Indeed, they had been deluded by false prophets into believing that their time in Babylon would be brief. Seventy years of captivity would change their perspective, though.

Just as the prodigal son did not feel the need to seek forgiveness until he found himself in dire straits (Luke 15:11—23), so it would be with these exiles. There would come a time when the captives would call upon God and pray (Deut. 4:29—31). The Lord would be found by those who came to Him in sincerity and truth (Isa. 55:6; Acts 3:19; Heb. 3:13).

The promise of restoration to the Promised Land was sure, but the people had to turn to God in earnest repentance; likewise, the New Testament promises that the Lord is “*not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*” (II Pet. 3:9).

3. What would happen when the Jews sought God sincerely? What does this say to us today? (Jer. 29:12, 13)

Not only would the Jews call upon God, but they would find Him! As Christ promised, those who ask, seek and knock will receive answers (Matt. 7:7-8). Sometimes, though, it is as James 4:2 says: “*You do not have because you do not ask God.*”

Because the exiles would pray for deliverance in days to come, God promised to, “*bring you back from captivity.*” (Jer. 29:14). He would return them to the land of their fathers.

The fact that God promised to gather the people “*back to the place from which I carried you into exile*” causes many to conclude that this promise encompasses far more than just the Babylonian Captivity. While the immediate context certainly suggests the return from the Babylonian Captivity is in mind, the language points to a larger fulfillment. The future regathering of the nation of Israel in the end time may thus be envisioned in this passage. To be sure, God is not finished dealing with Israel (Rom. 11:25).

4. How might the promise to gather the Jews from all nations have a larger fulfillment? (Jer. 29:14)

The promise of God was clear: “I will make a new covenant.” For us who live on this side of the Cross, it is not difficult to see the establishment of the new covenant in the death of Christ for our sins. In fact, this entire passage from Jeremiah is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12 to show that the new covenant is far superior to the old covenant given through Moses.

The fact that the new covenant was to be made with the “*the people of Israel and with the people of Judah*” (Jer. 31:31) envisions a restored nation as a whole. While all Christian Believers participate in the new covenant now, the covenant will find its ultimate fulfillment for the nation of Israel in the end times, when “all Israel shall be saved” (Rom. 11:26).

5. How would the new covenant be different from the old? (Jer. 31:31, 32)

Even though God was like a husband to them, Israel did not keep God's covenant. From her beginning and throughout her history, Israel broke God's commandments. God references this in v. 32 by saying, “...*they broke my covenant.*” Indeed, the very reason the nation was suffering now and would experience captivity was their breaching the covenant stipulations.

6. How successful were the Jews in keeping the first covenant? (Jer. 31:32)

The old covenant was written on tablets of stone (Deut. 10:1-2) and later in a book (Deut. 31:24). Even though the people were told to keep God's law in their hearts (6:6), they failed to do so.

Keeping the old covenant was a matter of obedience to various written commandments. One of the important features of the new covenant, however, is that it is written in the hearts of God's people. The difference is highlighted in Christ's conflicts with the Pharisees, who were seen as guardians of the law. They outwardly obeyed the commandments of God, but they failed to have the proper motivation for doing so (ref. Matt. 6:1-6; 23:1-5; John 5:42).

Having God's Word written on the heart reveals true conversion. “The old covenant tried to control conduct, but the new covenant changes character so that people can love the Lord and one another and want to obey God's will” (Wiersbe, Be Decisive, Victor).

7. Where was the old covenant written? Where was the new covenant to be written? (Jer. 31:33)

Under the old dispensation of the covenant, the Israelite was included in the covenant because he/she was born of Hebrew parents. Already in the covenant, the child had to be taught what it meant to “know the Lord” as he grew up. Under the new covenant, though, those who are a part of the covenant already know the Lord. For a person to be in the new covenant, he or she must make a personal decision to accept and follow Christ as Lord and Savior (Acts 2:36-41; 16:30-34). Jesus likened this to a new birth (John 3:1-7). We are in the new covenant not because we were born but because we were born again! All who are participants in the new covenant will know the Lord, “from the least of them unto the greatest of them” (Jer. 31:34)

This does not mean that the ministry of teaching is to be done away with. It is simply Jeremiah's way of speaking of the Holy Spirit in the making of a new man, who not only has illumination as to what God's will is, but also has the power to respond in obedience to that will.

8. Who would know the Lord under the new covenant? (Jer. 31:34)

One of the most important features of this new covenant is that it provides forgiveness of sins. While the Old Testament system of sacrifices only foreshadowed the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. As Hebrews 10:4 says, “*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*”

Just before quoting this passage from Jeremiah, the writer of Hebrews declared, “*For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.*” (8:7). If the old

covenant had been able to provide what was most needed by humanity (forgiveness), there would be no need for this new covenant. If we could be saved by the law, Christ would not have had to die. Paul wrote, *“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”* (Gal. 2:21).”

9. What would the new covenant provide that the old covenant could not? (Jer. 31:34)

CONCLUSION

On the night before His death, Christ spoke of this new covenant at the Last Supper. Distributing the cup He said, *“This is my blood of the[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* (Matt. 26:28).” Each time we share in the Lord's Supper we are reminded that we are God's people under a new covenant. In Christ, our sins are forgiven and forgotten forever (Jer. 50:20).

PRAYER

Holy Maker of all humanity, how wonderfully You have cared for Your people through the centuries! We are grateful even for the painful punishment that sometimes has turned Your straying people back to the duty and privilege of behaving as creatures made in Your image.

Knowing that all have sinned, we confess our guilt. We are grateful for the new covenant by which sins are forgiven and forgotten. In the name of Jesus we pray for wisdom and courage to avoid sin and walk daily in the good ways indicated in Your Word, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Learn from the old covenant, embrace the new covenant.