

The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31)



A. The New Covenant

1. Jeremiah 31 is the *mountain peak of the entire book*. It is the New Testament enfolded into the Old Testament. Jeremiah sees that there is an inherent flaw in the Old Covenant, and it takes a New Covenant to bring about the fullness of God's blessing to Israel. Jeremiah 31:1 is the theme verse that summarises ch30-31, '*I will be their God and they will be My people.*' (30:22; 31:1; 31:33).
2. Our God is a God of families: (a) God is a family within Himself, He is the Triune God; (b) When God made man, He put man in a family. This is what it means to be made in God's image (Eph 3:14). When the family breaks down the society becomes ungodly; (c) God wants to be particularly the God of the families of Israel; (d) God wants to be the Father of 'one family' out of all the nations of the earth. Note all the earthly families will be broken up by death one day. Then why did God put us in a family just to be broken up? What God aims for in the earth is to make one family that belongs to Him out of all humanity.
3. God is in a family relationship with Israel as (a) 'a lover with a virgin'; (b) 'a husband to a wife' – they took vows with each other. But Israel broke the vow and broke the marriage. That's why Jeremiah says there has to be a new vow, a new proposal and a new covenant; (c) 'a father to His children.' 'Ephraim is My firstborn.' (31:9) We understand best how God feels about us when we understand the fatherhood of God. God in Jeremiah is a father who had to cast out his son in order to deal with his rebellion. This broke God's heart. Israel wandered far from her land because her heart departed from the God of the promised land. Jeremiah 31 is the Old Testament version of Luke 15, echoing the story of the Prodigal Son.
4. Summary of Israel's History

Saul, David, Solomon reigned over all the twelve tribes of Israel. Then a civil war broke out after Solomon's death and split the nation into two. The kingdom of Judah in the south comprised of two tribes - Judah and Benjamin. The kingdom of Israel in the north comprised of the remaining ten tribes, often referred to as *Ephraim* as the dominant tribe among the ten. Then ten northern tribes misbehaved so much that God called Assyria to take them away from their land.

The tribe on the north of the border was *Ephraim*, and the tribe on the south of the border is *Benjamin*. Both were born from Rachel's womb, and thus they were closely related. Ephraim is Joseph's son. Ramah was located just at the south of the border, called Ramallah now at the borderline of Jews and Arabs. This is where Rachel's tomb is located (1 Sam 10:2), ~5 miles north of Jerusalem. Ephraim (Israel) had gone into exile by then, but Benjamin (Anathoth) in the south was still around. Jeremiah now realises, tragically Benjamin too (with Judah) was about to go into exile.

However, there was a bright hope for their future because God will cut a New Covenant with them. God caused them to be plucked up and thrown down, and God will watch over them to be replanted and rebuilt (31:28). God loves them with an everlasting love (31:3 c.f. Deut 7:8-9). He says, 'My heart yearns for him...' (31:20)

B. Three Things to Focus on

Rejoicing Remnant (31:1-26) - Hebraic thinking is often back to front. They look at the end first, then tries to show what led up to that ending. God thinks this way. He knows the end from the beginning, and declares it to us. So Israel's return to their homeland and rejoicing is mentioned first. Then their earlier departure into captivity and sorrow is mentioned next. This is all about Ephraim and Benjamin, Rachel's sons. What happened to the other tribes? God knows where they are, He didn't lose them. And God will bring them back. Remember the 144,000 young Jewish followers of Jesus in Rev 7?

- I. The Return: v2-22 – The northern tribes will return; v23-25 – Judah will also return. One day all of them will be coming back amid singing, dancing, food and much rejoicing '*because I have loved them with an everlasting love.*' (31:3) God will never let His children go. God says, '*Those who seek me in the wilderness (for rest) will find Me because I love them with an everlasting love.*' (31:3)

If we cannot stop loving and praying for our wayward children, how much more, God? Israel will be the 'chief of the nations' (31:7), not the biggest but the chief. Israel and Judah will be rejoicing together in Jerusalem as the family of the prodigal son threw a serious party at his return (Luke 15). 'Mountains of Samaria' (West Bank) has yet to return to Israel's possession.

Meanwhile the Gentile believers can declare, (1) 'O LORD, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!' (v7); (2) 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.' (v10)

II. The Departure: Jeremiah dreams of Rachel's children, Ephraim and Benjamin, being led away in chains to Babylon not knowing if they will ever return home. As they pass Rachel's tomb in Ramah Jeremiah hears Rachel weeping because the last of her children are gone. Her heart is breaking. Rachel gave her life-giving birth to Benjamin. But God comforts her, 'Don't weep, Rachel, because your travail (labour) was not in vain because I will bring them back.' In the far country they will come to their senses. Ephraim will say, 'For after I have turned away, I was instructed...' (31:18-19) Literally, 'After I was made to know myself, I was ashamed and bore the disgrace of myself.' Like the prodigal son who 'came to himself' in a far country, and arose and returned home. So Jeremiah shouts in his dream, 'Set up the signposts as you go, so that you can find your way back' – the signposts showing the way back 'HOME' (v21).

So far Jeremiah was thinking about Ephraim which was already in exile. Now he thinks of Judah (31:23-26). God says, 'Judah will come back, farmers will come back, shepherds will come back.' Indeed, they had come back to their land and witnessed Jesus' birth. 'For I will satisfy the languishing soul' (31:25), weary of backsliding. Then Jeremiah woke up from the dream. But it was the dream from the Lord which would come true, every bit of it!

III. What does v22 mean? 'The Lord has created a new thing a woman 'protects' a man (v22).

(a) Prophetic picture of Mary's conception of Jesus? (Jerome)

(b) At Rachel's tomb Jeremiah was set free (C.f. Jer 40:1)? Jeremiah and his fellow tribesmen (Rachel's descendants) too were taken away. But they were passing through Ramah near Rachel's, for some inexplicable reason the soldier in charge took the chains off Jeremiah and set him free.

C. Contrasting the Two Covenants

Now God will put together the new marriage covenant and a new proposal. This new covenant will be sealed by God's vow - 'I will' repeated 3 times (v33). The old marriage vow made at Sinai was broken by Israel. Now there will be changes. The new covenant will be built on God saying, 'I will.'

What is the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?

1. Individual Responsibility – God will no longer deal with Israel as a nation or as a family. God will deal with each one individually. *In those days they shall say no more, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, but every one shall die for his own iniquity; every man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.'* (v29-30) This is a revolutionary thought. Under the Old Covenant the people and the nation were bound together. They were either blessed or cursed together. The New Covenant for each person. Previously 'circumcision' was given at birth, but now 'baptism' is undertaken at a personal decision. We cannot blame our family, society, or other people to excuse ourselves. We are each answerable to God for our lives.
2. Inward Religion, NOT External Religion We are no longer dependant on the temple, sacrifice, tablets of stone, but the law of God written in our hearts. Inward religion is based on THREE R's:
 - I. Revelation (v33) – God's laws will be written in our hearts (not outside).
 - II. Relationship (v34) – everybody 'from the least to the greatest' will know God individually.
 - III. Remission of sins (v34) – 'Get your sins forgiven', and 'have a personal relationship with God', 'then God will write His own laws into your hearts.' How did Jeremiah learn about this new covenant? He probably learned this profound truth while standing alone with God. He wrote ch31 while shut in a prison cell by himself. Jeremiah had to truly 'know' God and stand before Him face to face.

3. God will not only forgive but forget. We have no power to forget our sins. That is why it is hard to forgive ourselves. But God forgets when He forgives. *God has an almighty memory for the sins which are not forgiven, but God has Almighty 'forgetory' for the sins that are forgiven.*

D. The Permanent Place

1. How long will this new marriage covenant last? As long as this universe exists. So long as there are stars in heaven, there will always be Israel. Who can measure the universe? No man is able to measure the universe. When you can measure the heavens, then Israel will cease as a nation. How about Jerusalem? It will be rebuilt, and it will include the current temple mount and the valley of Hinnom, which is now a renovated national park. Jeremiah foretells that the city will spread toward the westerly direction. The modern Jerusalem has developed toward the west, not toward the east.
2. Where do we fit in? We entered the New Covenant even before the Jews have fully entered in. The majority of Israel did not enter into the New Covenant. Paul explains they were (temporarily) cut off. The early Pharisaic Judaism insisted on external religion rather than the internal reality required by the New Covenant. So instead, we the gentiles have been grafted in. But Israel will be grafted in again. This is happening right now. The New Covenant's condition of entry does not require 'becoming a Jew'. We can come into this covenant without becoming a proselyte.

The New Covenant began with the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it was completed on Pentecost Sunday. The Pentecost Sunday was the 'memorial-day' of the giving of the law on Mt Sinai. God entered into the new covenant (new marriage ceremony) on the memorial day of the Old Covenant with the baptism of Spirit and fire. Now every nation can have this relationship with God freely and rejoice.