



FELLOWSHIP FLYER Vol. I No. 3 Feb 2, 2025

“THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT”

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Every first Sunday of the month, we as a church family partake in the Lord's Table. This is a time when we remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and how He gave His body and blood for our sins. But this is not merely a time to reflect upon the suffering *itself* per se (though it is that); it is also a time to reflect upon what that suffering *purchased for us*. And what did Christ's blood purchase for us? There are a host of answers one could give, but this is one answer Jesus Himself implicitly gives the night He instituted this ordinance: “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood” (Luke 22:20). In other words, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross purchased and established the new covenant.

What is the “new covenant”? And what exactly makes it “new”? Simply stated, the new covenant is the fulfillment of all the previous covenants in the OT. What the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants promised and typified¹ find their fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. Thus, all the promises God made in these covenants find their “Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20). But again, what exactly is “new” in the new covenant? Jeremiah 31 is the only place in the OT where the specific designation of “new covenant” is mentioned, and it provides us with an answer regarding the newness of the new covenant. It says,

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, 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. (Jer. 31:31-32)

Within these two verses, Jeremiah makes mention of the covenant that God made with Israel when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. This is obviously a reference to the Mosaic/Israelite covenant that God made with the people of Israel in Exodus 19-24. Verse 32 says this was a covenant that they “broke” due to their unfaithfulness to God, though He was their husband. In saying that the “new covenant” will “not [be] like the covenant that I made with their fathers,” and that this was a covenant that they “broke,” one essential and overarching thing that God is communicating about the new covenant is that it will be an *unbreakable covenant*. Those under that old covenant system were nothing but covenant-breakers; not one of them were completely faithful covenant members, hence the need to look for a better covenant (cf. Heb. 8:7), one that is not subject to breach.

Jeremiah further elaborates on this very point when God says through him in Jeremiah 32:39-40, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant [i.e. new covenant], that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may

¹ Typology is the study of how persons, events, and institutions in the OT look forward and anticipate a greater fulfillment. In this sense, things like the temple, the priesthood, and people like Adam and Moses typify and foreshadow the person and work of Christ.

not turn from me.” In this “everlasting covenant,” God guarantees that both sides of the covenant will be faithful: He will be faithful and “not turn away from doing good to [us],” and He will “put the fear of [Him] in [our] hearts, that [we] may not turn away from [Him].” Thus, God guarantees the unbreakableness of this new and everlasting covenant—unlike the previous covenant He made with Israel. That old covenant was characterized by its conditionality (‘If, then’)², but the new covenant is characterized by its unilateral nature—hence the reason why God says “I will” six different times in Jeremiah 31:31-34. As a result, not only will God be faithful, but the people under this new covenant will be a faithful and loyal people as well; they will be covenant keepers rather than covenant breakers.³

Renewed Heart

After mentioning His covenant with Israel in verse 32, the covenant in which they broke, he goes on in verses 33-34 and gives three aspects of the new covenant that makes it truly “new.” The first is the reality of a renewed heart. Verse 33 states, “For 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.*” In order to comprehend this promise, context is important. Throughout Jeremiah’s prophesy he has indicted the people of Israel for their wicked and uncircumcised hearts:

“But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the *stubbornness of their evil hearts*, and went backward and not forward.” (Jer. 7:24; cf. 3:17; 9:13; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17)

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab... for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are *uncircumcised in heart.*” (Jer. 9:25-26; cf. 4:4)

The people of Israel did not have hearts that obeyed God’s commands; they had hard, stony, stubborn, and uncircumcised hearts. What was needed, therefore, was a heart change. The people needed hearts that longed to obey and were able to keep God’s commands, and that’s precisely what God is communicating when He says He will write His law (instruction) “on their hearts.” Instead of merely commanding the people to do what they cannot do because of their sinful hearts, God gives them new hearts that desire and are able to obey His commands. Or to put it differently: The obedience that God externally *commanded* in the old covenant through the law is the obedience that He internally *creates* in the new covenant. Here’s how the prophet Ezekiel puts it in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

And I will give you a *new heart*, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And *I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

This is an essential difference between the old and new covenants. That old covenant came with a label, “Batteries not included.” It commanded, but gave no ability to keep the commands. God commanded the people to circumcise their own hearts so that they would love and obey Him (Deut. 10:16), though they

² “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Exodus 19:5).

³ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 549.

were entirely unable to do so; but what God commanded of the people in that covenant, He sovereignly creates in the new: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). God accomplishes this very thing by giving His Spirit to all the members of the covenant, and not just a select few such as prophets, priests, and kings (see Num. 11:29; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-21). Thus, God transforms His people from the inside out by the work of His Spirit.

Regenerate People

This leads to the second aspect of the new covenant that is “new,” namely, that all those under this new covenant will be believers. Verse 34 states, “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.” This is not to say that there were no true believers under that old covenant. There is no doubt there was a remnant within national Israel at that time who were true believers; but, it is also true that many of them were not truly regenerated. That’s why Paul says in Romans 9:6, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.” That old covenant community was a “mixed” community, meaning some were believers and some were not. Though there were many physical offspring of Abraham, only some were his spiritual offspring. As James White once put it, “for every David there were a dozen Ahabs; for every Josiah a legion of Manassehs. Unfaithfulness, the flaunting of God’s law, the rejection of the role of truly being God’s people, the rejection of His knowledge, and the experience of His wrath, were the *normative* experiences seen in the Old Covenant.”⁴

The new covenant, on the other hand, will not be a mixed community of believers and unbelievers. It will be a purely regenerate community in which *all* know the Lord. The prophet Isaiah also spoke concerning this when he says in Isaiah 54:13, “All your children shall be taught by the Lord.” The Lord Jesus understood this text to mean that all those “taught by God” are those whom God sovereignly draws to Himself in conversion (John 6:44-45). The result is that no one in the new covenant needs to be taught to know the Lord, for they all know Him. As the apostle John said, “But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you” (1 John 2:27). This does not mean that people under the new covenant do not need to be taught anymore. As Thomas Schreiner says, “Certainly people will need teaching even after becoming believers. Jeremiah’s point, however, is that they don’t need to be instructed or commanded to know the Lord as if they are unconverted, for by definition all those in the new covenant know the Lord.”⁵

(As a side note, this is one reason why we do not baptize children. Our Reformed Presbyterian brothers and sisters believe that children born into Christian families are considered “covenant children,” and therefore should receive the sign of the covenant—baptism. But what this text tells us is that it is only those who exercise saving faith—those who truly “know the Lord”—who will be part of this new covenant.)

⁴ Quoted in Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 144–145.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 93.

Full and Final Forgiveness of Sins

Lastly, what makes the new covenant “new” is that it provides full and final forgiveness of sins. Latter part of verse 34 states, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Under the old covenant, sacrifices were offered continually for the forgiveness of sins, and on the Day of Atonement, they were offered to cleanse the priests and the people’s sins in the year that just passed (Lev. 16). These daily and yearly sacrifices could never bring about full and final forgiveness of sins. But as the book of Hebrews tells us, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross accomplishes the very thing the old covenant was never able to do. The author of Hebrews tells us,

And every high 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... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Heb. 10:11-12, 14)

Right after saying this, the author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:34 and concludes, “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb. 10:18).

Consequently, Christ establishes a truly new and better covenant, a covenant that brings about true heart transformation, creates the obedience that it commands, and fully and finally forgives all sin through the sacrifice of the final and perfect Lamb of God. Thank God for the new covenant in Christ’s blood!