

Under Duress

The Life and Times of Jeremiah

A New Covenant—October 25

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12. In one of the most profound and moving passages in the entire Bible, Jeremiah predicts “a new covenant” that assures forgiveness and promises motivation and strength for willing obedience to God.

Picking up from last week,
 here’s another story about sand in New Mexico.
 Not only did the prevailing wind
 continually blow dust and sand into our house to Connie’s dismay and distress;
 it ruined our car, a classy 1967 Chevy Chevelle,
 in a gold|brown color with a black vinyl top.
 The car was 20 years old, but still looking good,
 until we had to park it outside in the high desert.
 Day after day, for 3½ years, it was bombarded by sand.
 To say the least, after that, it looked the worse for wear.
 The mechanic on our mission team, said:
 “That car looks too shabby to take to Oklahoma City
 (where we were going for our next ministry assignment);
 if you’ll help me with the sanding,
 I’ll remove the vinyl and paint the top the same color as the rest of the car.”
 So we did that.
 In the evenings, we sanded and then he painted
 and the top of the car was gorgeous; it looked just like new.
 My mechanic friend stood back to look at it, and said;
 “Now the roof is so nice that the rest of the car looks shabby.
 If you help with the sanding, I’ll repaint the rest of the car.
 So again, we sanded and he repainted.
 Another coworker replaced the tattered carpet with carpet remnants,
 and by this time the *whole car* looked gorgeous,
 the kind of vehicle you would take to a car show—
 wonderfully restored from *old* to *new*, a classic!

That is the kind of renovation we can have in Jesus—from **old to new**.

As the final message in this series about the life and times of Jeremiah,
 we are going to look at the greatest of all Jeremiah’s prophecies.

In the aftermath of the worst tragedy the nation of Israel had ever known, in the midst of his own loneliness and grief, Jeremiah preached a prophetic message so profound, so true to the heart of God, that it is quoted—in full—in the book of *Hebrews*, the longest of all Old Testament quotes in the New Testament.

In this prophecy, Jeremiah predicted what Jesus would say 600 years later—a prophecy that has been called “the gospel before the gospel.”

You will find it in Jeremiah 31 and in Hebrews 8. As I read the passage, you can follow along in either place, Jeremiah 31:31-34 or Hebrews 8:8-12.

“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. 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. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

To appreciate the break-through impact of this prophecy, it helps to know the context.

In spite of the swift defeat and exile that we talked about last week, the nation of Judah persisted in reckless defiance of their Babylonian conquerors until this ferment erupted in open rebellion.

The Babylonians promptly invaded Judah. They reduced the countryside to shambles. One by one, they conquered and destroyed the outlying cities. Then the mighty Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem.

Many people died of starvation and disease during the siege. Thousands more were killed in battle. Finally, the Babylonians broke through the walls of Jerusalem, conquered the city and destroyed the temple. Officials and leading citizens were executed. Nearly all of the people still living were rounded up and marched to Babylon.

The false priests and prophets were confounded.
All along they had told the people this could not happen;
and, when it did, they could not explain the catastrophe.

So over and above the carnage and destruction of the country,
the people experienced an internal, spiritual crisis, even more devastating.
Because they had trusted in false promises, attributed to the Lord,
their faith in the Lord was swept away.
Many doubted that the Lord really was God.
Others cursed the Lord, saying he was not just.
Still others turned to Babylonian gods.
Those who persisted in faith in the Lord slipped into black despair.
The Lord, they feared, had rejected them forever.

Among all the prophets in Judah, Jeremiah was the only one
who was able to adequately explain the disaster in terms of their faith.

The old covenant, given to Moses on Mount Sinai,
had been **broken**—verse 32—not by the Lord’s action,
but by the flagrant and persistent disobedience of the Israelites.

The original covenant between the Lord and the Israelites
—equivalent to a binding legal contract today—
is referenced in Exodus 19:5-6

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you
shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is
mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

When he made this covenant, the Lord revealed his character and nature,
so that the Israelites would know how he would respond to covenant-breaking.

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and
abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for
thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no
means clear the guilty. . .

Knowing from the beginning
that the Lord would hold them accountable to keep the covenant
the Israelites agreed to the covenant
and then failed, from the start, to keep their side of the agreement,
which was *obedience* to the law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Because God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
he withheld judgment for over *800 years*
until, at last, his forbearance ran out and he punished the guilty nation.

The Lord is true to his Word, Jeremiah said,
but you have not been true to yours; you have *broken* the covenant.
That is why you have incurred this terrible judgment.

At the turn of the 20th century,
the *London Times* posed a question to its readers:
“What’s wrong with the world?”
Among all the answers that came in,
one has endured because of its piercing brilliance.
The English writer, poet, and philosopher, G. K. Chesterton—
responded to the question, “What’s wrong with the world?”
in four words: “Dear Sirs, I am.”

You and I are what’s wrong with the world.
Your sin and mine has contributed to all that’s wrong.
You and I, like the Israelites over eight long centuries,
are not able to attain even the minimum standards of God
stated in ten clear rules, as we find them in the Ten Commandments.

And so the Lord God, through the prophet Jeremiah,
announced **a new covenant**.

Most of Jeremiah’s prophecies open with these words, “Thus, says the Lord . . .”
The prophet wanted listeners to know that the words to follow
were not his words, but words given by Lord God himself.

In this prophecy, that same phrase is repeated four times.
In verse 31, “Behold, the days are coming declares the Lord. . . .”
Verse 32, “. . . declares the Lord.”
Verse 33, “. . . declares the Lord.”
Verse 34, “. . . declares the Lord.”

By repeating the introductory formula, the Lord is emphasizing, through Jeremiah,
this is *revelation*; this is *authoritative* communication;
this has the full stamp of *divine authority*!

Similarly, in this prophecy, the Lord speaks in the first person, *six* times.
In verse 31, “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make

a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . .”
 In verse 33, “I will make . . . I will put . . . I will write . . . I will be. . .”
 In verse 34, “I will forgive. . .”

Knowing we cannot attain even his minimum standards of holy obedience, God *took the initiative* to devise a new and better way to bridge the distance between himself and us capsulized in the culminating phrase, “I will forgive. . .”

If the requirement of the old covenant was **obedience**, the centerpiece of the new covenant is **forgiveness**,

Listen, again, to the Lord’s description of the new covenant:

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. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Some things *have not changed* between the Old and New Covenants.

In both covenants,
 God’s character is the same: he *is*, and *always will be*, holy and just.
 God’s objective is the same: to be in relationship with us,
 God’s standards for holy living, his law, are the same.
 Jesus said,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Other things have *profoundly changed* between the two covenants:

The old covenant was written on tablets of stone, with *external* constraints; the new covenant is written on our heart with an *internal* capacity to obey.

The old needed priests and prophets as intermediaries between God and us. the new relationship with God is direct, personal, and close.

The essential requirement of the old covenant was **obedience**,
 in the new covenant forgiveness comes *first*,
 and obedience is the *result*, the *outcome*, the *grateful response* to **forgiveness**.

Though he gave the prophecy,
 Jeremiah did not understand how this could be.
 The apostle Peter wrote:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

The new covenant, as we know now, is fulfilled through the work of Jesus.

Jeremiah did not know the full meaning of his words,
 yet his prophecy pointed to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
 through whom we can become . .

a new person, with a miraculous change in desire and intention
 so that we want to live in direct, loving relationship with God
 and by the power of the Holy Spirit,
can grow toward full obedience—
 all because our sins have been **forgiven**.

With full understanding of Jesus as Savior and Lord,
 the apostle Paul described the new relationship this way in 2 Corinthians 3:4-6

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

And in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

In the first message of this sermon series, I described Jeremiah, the person. He was reflective, sensitive, compassionate, capable of intense feelings. He was called to be a prophet as a young adult, who in his own opinion was too tender, too emotional, too inexperienced to be a prophet.

Through his entire life, the prophet Jeremiah lived and preached *under duress*—in a distressed nation, amid widespread idolatry and immorality, and endured violent opposition to his message.

For much of his ministry, the prophet preached gloom and doom—in a mighty, grueling effort to turn people back to God.

Once catastrophic judgment came,
his prophecies shifted to consolation and comfort.

People jeered at prophecies of gloom and doom;
When disaster struck, they could not receive his words of consolation and hope.
From start to finish, people rejected Jeremiah's prophecies.
His entire ministry, his entire life, seemed to be one of *unbroken failure*.

Yet years after his death, some of the exiles, like Daniel,
began to read the words of Jeremiah,
preserved in the book he had dictated to record his prophecies.
In the book of Jeremiah, these receptive readers
found the only adequate explanation of the national tragedy
and the way to move beyond it—by faith in the Lord God Almighty.

Though Jeremiah never lived to see this,
it's fair to say that he, almost single-handedly, saved the faith of Israel.

Even the survival of the Jews as a people,
can be attributed to the prophet's message of *judgment*, which explained the past,
and his prophecies of *hope* that gave them courage to face the future.

The only way to move beyond our own failures,
is by the *forgiveness* of the new covenant, found in Jesus, and in Jesus alone.

By Jesus' forgiveness,
made possible by his atoning death on the cross;
we are given a new heart,
a new direct, intimate relationship with Jesus,
and a new ability to grow into full obedience to the unchanging law of God.

That is the bedrock on which the Church is built,
and on which Millersville BIC can keep building *health* and *strength* and *mission*.

Every month, I take a day to pray
at a farmhouse retreat, just north of Elizabethtown.

At mid-day I take a break to walk along the Conewago Trail, a mile away.
As I walk, I listen to what the Spirit may say to me:

In September, *before* the announcement of our new pastor,
the Spirit said: You're almost finished at Millersville; hang in there.
Actually, I added the "hang in there" part.
All the Spirit said was: "You're nearly done."

This month, as I walked along the trail
I was aware of a place where the trail was cut through a ridge of rocks,
and I thought of the song lyrics:
God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

At another place along the trail,
I noticed side-by-side fields of nearly ripe soybeans
and Jesus' words in Matthew 9:37-38 came to mind:

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the
harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

As I thought about that,
I realized that the Lord has raised up workers here at Millersville.
With few, if any, exceptions all of you
are pitching in, in one way or another, to do your part;
and now the Lord has added a good, new pastor into the mix.

Putting these two scenes together, I sensed the Spirit say:

"At Millersville, I have made a way where there *was* no way.
I have raised up a strong company of workers.
And the fields all around are ripe for harvest."

As each of you lives in relationship with Jesus, by his **forgiveness**,
the plans he has for you as individuals, as households, and as a church—are good.
Though the prophet Jeremiah, as a word for you, here and now,
your Father in Heaven is saying:

I know the plans I have for you. . . plans for [your] welfare and not for evil,
to give you a future and a hope. . . you will call upon me and come and pray
to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me
with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will
restore your fortunes . . .

Warren L. Hoffman, October 25, 2020