

## Chapter 43 Jeremiah 30-31

### The New Covenant

*“This is the covenant I will make with the house 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. No longer will anyone teach his neighbor, or anyone his brother, saying, ‘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 31:33-34

The trajectory of Jeremiah’s prophecy leads right to the New Testament Church, the coming Kingdom of God, and the promise of everlasting life under the rule of God. The meaning and fulfillment of the New Covenant has everything to do with *who* is included in “the house of Israel.” The Lord’s promise, “I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore” (33:22), finds its fulfillment among both Jews and Gentiles. The remnant was not exclusively Jewish but inclusive of “all the Gentiles who bear my name” (Acts 15:17; see Amos 9:11-12; Rom 11:5). What Jeremiah anticipated was fulfilled in the gospel of Christ which the apostle Paul described as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom 1:16).

Jeremiah’s stress on an essential internal transformation or a “circumcision of the heart” (Jer 4:4) was confirmed by Paul when he wrote, “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God” (Rom 2:28-29). “If you belong to Christ,” Paul wrote, “then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). Those who are in Christ have put off their old self, which was defined in earthly categories of sin and separation, and put on a new self, “which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:10-11).

### The Days Are Coming

If Jeremiah is a parable of Jesus, then Israel is a parable of the church. The inclusiveness of the gospel rests on God’s particular use of Israel. In God’s unfolding plan of redemption the divine promise made to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3) identified Israel as God’s chosen instrument through which to bless the world. Yahweh did not choose Israel because she was either impressive or righteous (Deut 7:7; 9:4). On the contrary, among the nations she was a small, weak, inconsequential nation, but that only served to highlight the love of God that showered his affection on an easily overlooked, if not despised nation. Yahweh set his affection on Israel in order to illustrate his merciful redemption, implement his righteous commands, and impart his vision for salvation. It was a matter of exclusivity for the sake of inclusivity in order that the world might know the love of the living

God.

*In the history of redemption, Israel served several critical purposes.*

First, she demonstrated that the object of God's mercy and love was not based on merit or achievement, but on God's grace. There was no room for boasting and no place for pride. Jeremiah expressed human need succinctly when he said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9).

Second, Israel illustrated the failure of external religion to transform people. Even though she had received the best external religious system available, she had wilfully chosen to go her own rebellious way, so that at times she was condemned as being even worse than her pagan neighbors. "All of us have become like one who is unclean," wrote Isaiah, "and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isa 64:6).

Third, Israel was God's chosen people through whom the Anointed One was to come. This expectation of the Messiah emerged slowly over the course of Salvation History and it wasn't until Jesus came that the various pictures of the Messiah as Conquering King and Suffering Servant converged into one person. Israel never set out to be the object of God's mercy, the paradigm of religious failure and the line of descent for the Messiah. There has always been an unexpected hiddenness in God's providential plan that inherently resists human pride and manipulation and points to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is fitting that the climax of Jeremiah's prophecy should cause us to think of Jesus Christ from the time of his coming (31:15; Matthew 2:18) to the time of his rule (33:15-17; Hebrews 12:2). Every dimension of salvation that Jeremiah foresaw under the new covenant depended on the risen Lord Jesus Christ for its fulfillment. Jeremiah's poetic description of judgment and salvation provides a vivid description of our experience of repentance and redemption and corresponds to what it means to be "born again" in Christ.

### **Judgment Experienced**

Throughout this section, known as the "book of consolation," Jeremiah looks forward to a coming day when the people of God will be restored to the promised land, to good health and to the fortunes of Jacob. Phrases such as "the days are coming," and "in that day" serve as a refrain throughout this passage announcing the future certainty of the benefits of judgment and the blessing of salvation (30:3,8; 31:1,26,31). Jeremiah's Spirit-led vision of a re-united Israel and Judah is a picture of that day, *now present*, when "the dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles is brought down because of Christ who preaches peace to both those who are near and those who are far away (Eph 2:14-17).

However, according to Jeremiah, the process leading up to that day involved an unnaturally long and painful ordeal. He used powerful metaphors to illustrate people's fear and terror. Once self-reliant, strong men would be like women in labor, bent over in pain, with their pale faces contorted in agony, enduring one of the worst days of their lives (30:6). They would be like slaves subjugated by foreign oppressors, or exiles driven from their homeland, or terminally ill patients without hope (30:8,10,12). They would be like the poor without an advocate or a people without allies, or outcasts without a defender. And the sad fact would be that their awful pain,

terrible social bondage, and physical demise could not be blamed on anyone other than themselves.

Jeremiah captured the essence of this experience in his first line, “Cries of fear are heard—terror, not peace” (30:5). He gave the reporters of his time a sound-bite that summed up the feeling of suffering and doom that pervaded Judah’s culture. It is also a fitting tag line to describe the modern era and American culture. People today wrestle with deep feelings of personal insignificance and live with a constant pressure of trying to make something of themselves. The question of meaning is often met on the surface with cynicism and in the soul with despair. The question of God is usually reduced to a matter of personal preference and sentiment. The one remaining issue of enduring concern seems to be the question of happiness. Yet even this quest for personal peace and pleasure is dealt with in the most superficial ways.

Our culture’s “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” philosophy of life seems to have met its match in a series of world events since 9/11 that compel us to re-examine the meaning and vulnerability of life, the purpose of history, the forces of evil, the limits of human power, the pursuit of justice, and most importantly our relationship to God. We might like nothing better than to tell ourselves that it was all a bad dream and we can go back to bed, pull the blanket of self-preoccupation over our heads and go back to sleep. But in momentous times we are challenged to look beyond ourselves and to examine issues greater than our personal peace and pleasure.

For Jeremiah, the message of judgment, captured in his phrase, “terror on every side,” was meant to awaken Judah from her dogmatic slumbers, her religion-as-usual, her popular spiritualities, her obsession with idols, sex, and self, in order that she might turn to the Lord. The false prophets could no longer get away with saying, “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” They couldn’t claim “Peace, peace!” because there was no peace. The parallels between Jeremiah’s day and our own are powerful. The cries of fear are heard—terror not peace is the order of the day. People are empty, confused, and broken. The collapse of the World Trade Center because of an unforeseen and unimaginable terrorist attack symbolizes the vulnerability of our culture to human hate. And in spite of all the government’s effort to assure our safety, we are confronted with the fact that there is no guarantee for safety in the world. In a world that believes in the survival of the fittest, in everyone doing what is right in their own eyes and in the validity of all religions, terrorism has dramatically reminded us that there is a difference between good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice. Because of evil regimes and terrorism, humankind is forced to recognize moral limits and respond to their violation.

The Space Shuttle Columbia’s catastrophic disaster painfully confronts us with the limits of our technology, the frailty of our finitude, and reminds us once again that our destiny and our future does not lie in space. It is one thing to accept the risks and explore the Creator’s cosmic wasteland with its austere beauty and mind boggling dimensions, but it is another to look to space for meaning and purpose. Nature serves to inspire and humble, but it must never be allowed to become a rival god that offers false hope to sinful humankind. No matter how

advanced we become in our scientific technology we cannot avert disasters. In spite of great advances in the medical sciences we cannot prevent an outbreak of a disease such as SARS and the threat that it brings to so many. My brother wrote from Hong Kong this week and concluded his letter by saying, "We are all well. I hope you stay well, too. Stay away from anyone who has been to Hong Kong, Toronto, Singapore, etc." His closing line illustrates the effect of sin. The Bible teaches that sin separates us from God, from one another, from nature, and from ourselves. We are reminded that no place is safe and that our salvation is not found in health.

With his warning of "terror on every side" Jeremiah captured the multi-dimensional tragedy of evil. His graphic metaphors of sin and evil were not meant to depress people, nor were they designed to entertain as today's cinematic pictures of violence and evil. Jeremiah's purpose was redemptive. His hope was that a true grasp of our fallen human condition and a sinful world would cause people to turn to God for forgiveness and salvation. As sinners we need to turn to God in repentance. As victims of sin we need to turn to God for rescue. Either way, and it is always both, we were meant to seek God, who is our only hope for security and salvation. Jeremiah promised that the redemptive purposes of God's judgment would become evident in time: "The storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath," and "the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In days to come you will understand this" (30:23-24).

### **Images of Salvation**

Jeremiah contrasted these images of judgment and descriptive metaphors of evil with an even more powerful and compelling picture of salvation. He prophesied that a new day was coming when the yoke of oppression would be broken (30:8), old wounds would be healed (30:17), the city would be rebuilt and songs of thanksgiving would be heard in her streets (30:18-19). "Their leader will be one of their own;" Jeremiah prophesied, "their ruler will arise from among them" (30:21). Jeremiah's messianic prophecies appear more subtle than the prophet Isaiah's but no less significant and his vision of a reunited Israel finds its fulfillment in the Body of Christ. "At that time," declares the Lord, "I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people." (31:1). Jeremiah's prophecy corresponds with the apostle Peter's description of the Church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." What Jeremiah promised, Peter proclaimed, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9-10). Jeremiah's endearing description of Virgin Israel corresponds to the apostle Paul's picture of the Bride of Christ (Jer 31:4; Eph 5:25-27) and Jacob's song of praise among the nations parallels Christ's great commission to "go and make disciples of all nations..." (Jer 31:7; Mt 28:19).

Although Jeremiah is better known as the weeping prophet, he described the joy of salvation in vivid social and pastoral images. He prophesied that mourning would cease and there would be dancing in the streets: "You will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful." "...Maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow" (31:4, 13). Lush vineyards on the hills of Samaria were beyond any exiled Jerusalemite's imagination, but it was Jeremiah's way of saying that a new day was coming. "For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem them from

the hand of those stronger than they. They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more” (31:11-12).

These social and pastoral images of salvation find their fulfillment in the New Testament description of Christ’s coming. When John the Baptist introduced Jesus he was “full of joy” because he heard the bridegroom’s voice (Jn 3:29). It was John’s way of saying, “Let the celebration begin!” Jesus commenced his public ministry by announcing “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:19). He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, and preached good news to the poor. He changed water to wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. He removed people’s heavy burdens in exchange for an easy yoke. He fed the multitude and raised the dead. Jesus’ actions signaled the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. The celebration had begun and even though many refused to enter into this joy, the fact was undeniable, a new day had dawn (Mt 11:16). The apostle Paul resonated with Jeremiah’s pastoral imagery of salvation when he spoke of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and the “fruit of the light” which consists “in all goodness, righteousness and truth” (Eph 5:9). Paul transposed Jeremiah’s pastoral description of the land, into a character description of the person in Christ. What is crucial is that we make the connection between Jeremiah’s prophecy and Christ’s coming. Jeremiah’s picture of a reunited Israel gathered from distant nations, celebrating joyfully and experiencing abundance, is a picture of the Gospel evangelizing the nations and transforming lives.

Jeremiah gave his message of hope and consolation well aware that God’s plan of redemption involved both suffering and confession. It was clear to him that God’s salvation would one day overcome this history of suffering and wipe away the tears. What was unclear to Jeremiah, as well as to all the prophets, was to what extent God would identify with human suffering and demonstrate his compassion for his prodigal people. Jeremiah interrupted his positive message of celebration unexpectedly with the sound of weeping. “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more” (31:15). Jeremiah captured the pathos of Israel’s suffering by recalling Rachel’s grief at Ramah, where she died giving birth to a son (Gen 35:16-20). Jeremiah associated this event and this site, which was some five miles north of Jerusalem near Bethlehem, with the place where the captives were gathered before being “carried into exile to Babylon” (40:1). The weeping could be heard in Ramah through the centuries from Rachel in labor to the exiles being deported. It seemed like one long tragic history of grief. But Jeremiah was not the only one to use Ramah and Rachel’s weeping as a type. Matthew connected Jeremiah’s prophesy to Herod’s massacre of innocent boys in Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus (Mt 2:17-18). He understood that the birth of Jesus was crucial to overcoming this history of suffering and sorrow.

We sense that Jeremiah was delighted to say, “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears...” (31:16). A new day was coming when the people of God would be empowered to return to the Lord with their whole heart. As opposed to the meaningless confessions that Jeremiah had previously recorded (14:7-9) and the suggested confessions that the people should have prayed (3:22-25; 14:19-22) this confession was authentic and came from the heart. Each

one meant it when they said, “You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God. After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth” (31:18-19). Yahweh was eager and ready to respond to such a confession: ““Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,’ declares the Lord” (31:20). Jeremiah’s description of God’s compassion makes us think of the waiting Father in the parable of the lost son. God is so ready to embrace his son, who is lost in the far country, that he wants road signs and guideposts put up to clearly mark the way home (31:21). Jeremiah likens Israel first to a lost son and then to an unfaithful daughter, but the point is the same, Yahweh’s message is filled with compassion, “Return, O Virgin Israel....How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?” (31:22-23). It is difficult to know how far to take the enigmatic promise, “The Lord will create a new thing on earth—a woman will surround a man,” but according to Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison the possibilities point in the direction of the Incarnation. “The innovation of a woman protecting a man describes the loving care with which a physically weaker partner surrounds and sustains the stronger one. In the new covenant the Lord descends to the level of his people, limiting Himself to the point where they can lay hold upon Him. This situation is described in Christ’s incarnation by the phrase ‘the Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14), where God became what we are in order to make us what He Himself is” (136-137). In contrast to Jeremiah’s nightmarish visions of judgment, this vision of salvation refreshed the weary and satisfied the faint and filled the prophet with a pleasant feeling (31:25-26). It was one vision that he must have wished he didn’t have to wake up from.

The new covenant was by no means new to God. Everything in the Mosaic covenant pointed forward to this new covenant. The essence of being God’s covenant people was never a matter of external religion, ethnic identity, ritual conformity and legalistic duty. The new covenant was not new in the sense that over time God came up with a better plan. Jeremiah was not introducing a new improved program that promised to work better. God’s promises through Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, all pointed forward to a personal relationship with God based on God’s love and mercy. What was new was that God was making the means and the power of his redemptive purposes more fully known. That which was hidden was being revealed, but even then Jeremiah’s prophesy did not make full disclosure of what would only be revealed when Christ came (Eph 1:9-10).

“The time is coming,” announced Jeremiah, when the experience of judgment, so vitally important in making people aware of their sin and need for God, will be superseded by the good news of salvation. ““Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,’ declares the Lord” (31:28). The defeatism of the past will no longer dominate human minds and the religious excuses, instigated by works righteousness, will be seen for what they are, hollow and empty. The new covenant will underscore personal accountability, a truth that has never lacked emphasis in the word of God, but one that has often been obscured by religion-as-usual. The new covenant will make it impossible for people to blame others for their faithlessness. “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on

edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge” (31:29-30). The Gospel makes it illegitimate for people to use their ethnicity or the religion of their parents or their cultural backgrounds as an excuse for rejecting God’s provision of salvation. God’s way of redemption would no longer be hidden in Israel or expressed in a sacrificial system but witnessed throughout the world by the Spirit of Christ. The old covenant was like an arranged marriage with one loving partner and another who acted imposed upon and wanted out of the relationship. In that arrangement, as we have seen, God was the jilted lover and Israel the adulteress. “‘They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord” (31:32). By contrast the new covenant is deeply personal and based on mutual love. God still takes the initiative, but this time the relationship is strengthened from the inside-out and is based on forgiveness. Knowing God is no longer based on external conformity and religious performance. Under the new covenant, God goes beyond laying down expectations and instead, by his grace, transforms our whole internal disposition. This indwelling principle based on God’s presence and forgiveness leads to a personal relationship with the living God.

“‘This is the covenant I will make with the house 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. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘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.’” (31:33-34).

Jeremiah did not attempt to explain how God planned to do this, but there was no doubt in his mind that “he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar” would accomplish his will (31:35-37). There was more to the meaning and mystery of the new covenant than Jeremiah prophesied, but it was clear that its fulfillment was tied to the coming of the Anointed One, “a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line” (33:15; see 23:5; 30:9). Jeremiah promised that the coming ruler would arise from their own ranks and his intimacy with Yahweh would be unparalleled (30:21). Beyond this, nothing more specific was known about the new covenant until Jesus came. But in Jesus the means of implementing the new covenant became powerfully clear. The prophecy of Jeremiah and the passion of Christ were inseparably linked. In the upper room, Jesus told his disciples, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). In that moment the means of forgiveness and the power of the indwelling principle were revealed. As the author of Hebrews asserted, “...Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (Heb 9:15). The new covenant was revealed in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, when he said, “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:7-8). Jesus pictured the power of the new covenant when he used the imagery of the vine and branches. “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me...If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it

will be given you” (Jn 15:4, 7). The apostle Paul equated the indwelling principle of the new covenant with being in Christ, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor 5:17). Instead of being conformed to the world, Christ’s followers are to “be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind” (Rom 12:2). Paul laid out the theology of the new covenant when he spoke of “the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). This is why he said that Christ “has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).

Jeremiah’s message helps us understand our captivity—our bondage to sin and death. His images of salvation offer us a vision of the gift of salvation—our liberation from sin and death. And the promise of the new covenant points directly to the means of that redemption—the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul recalled the words that Jesus used when he established the Lord’s Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Then he added, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:25-26). The complete fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy remains outstanding, but the means of that fulfillment has been clearly revealed. The dividing line in history is not between *eras*, ancient and modern, but between *epics*, redemptive and heroic. The choice is between God’s Salvation History and our own personal quest for significance. We either embrace this new covenant as a gift from God that leads to everlasting life or we insist on our own way that leads inevitably to everlasting death.