

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 (1)
THE NEW COVENANT: HOW DO WE ENTER?

Before our junior year at Geneva College, two friends invited me and my roommate Scott to join them in a larger room, in a house on campus.

These two friends were tired of the squeaky metal bed frames you get at college, so they built wooden bed frames for all four of us.

One night, they decided to have some fun with me. They sawed off a few inches from one of my bed legs. I didn't notice.

The next night, they sawed off a few more inches from the leg. Now the bed was really off balance. I still didn't notice.

By the third night, they sawed off still more of the leg, then they stacked the loose pieces back below the leg. They watched as I fell into bed. At last, the entire leg collapsed, and the bed (and me) crashed in a heap.

Their laughter was mostly the laughter of relief, as they said to me and each other, "Finally! We got you to notice!"

I offer that image to you, as we enter back into the Old Testament book of Jeremiah today. Everything is collapsing, but do the people notice?

Happily, God notices. In Jeremiah 31, he declares words that change all of human history. He announces a new covenant.

A covenant is a relationship that God establishes with people. God has established his covenant with Israel through Abraham, Moses, and David.

But since the covenant is collapsing, something new is needed.

We live in the age of the new covenant, described here through Jeremiah. It rules our lives and our eternity.

How do we enter it? We will ponder that this week.

How do we live in it? We will consider that next week.

If everything is collapsing in our relationship with God, we have to know how to enter into a new relationship with him. These words reveal two core truths about entering into this new covenant. It's all God. And it's for all.

IT'S ALL GOD. His grace. His mercy. His Savior. If we are going to enter this relationship, it's all because of what God will do.

It's all God: HIS GRACE.

What is grace? It is God's goodness, to bad people. We do not deserve this goodness, because of our sin. But our gracious God is good to us.

We wonder, why does there need to be a new covenant? What's so bad about the old covenant?

There is nothing wrong with the old covenant itself. The problem is not with God. As we read in verse 32, he has been "a husband" to Israel. That means he has been faithful to Israel.

Human husbands are not always faithful. But God has never failed his people.

Yet they have failed him. The problem is with the people. God declares that they have broken his covenant. They have promised to love and follow him, but they have not. As we learned last week, they have forsaken God, and they have embraced other, false "gods."

It reminds me of the story of the older couple in the car. He is driving, and they pull up to a light. In the next car, they see a younger couple, and the woman is snuggling close to the man.

The older woman asks, "Why aren't we like that anymore?"

The older man says, "I haven't moved."

God has not moved. The people have moved away from him, as they have followed their own ways, instead of his ways. The relationship will grow close again, only if God is good to these bad people, in his grace.

It's all God: HIS MERCY.

What is mercy?

If grace is when you DO get what you do NOT deserve (God's goodness), mercy is when you do NOT get what you DO deserve (God's judgment).

Sinners deserve God's judgment. Mercy is when they do not receive it.

God declares his mercy to his people when he says, "For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."

You have heard the phrase, "Forgive and forget." This verse is God's promise to forgive and forget.

He says, "I will forgive their wickedness." When you forgive someone, you promise not to hold against them, what could be held against them.

You have broken my trust. But I will not hold it against you.

You have hurt me with your words. But I will not hold it against you.

You have not helped me in my need. But I will not hold it against you.

So when God says, “I will forgive their wickedness”, he is saying that he will not hold their wickedness against them. He could do that. But he says he will not do that. In his mercy, he will forgive.

And he will forget. He says, “I will remember their sins no more.”

What does that mean? Does God somehow drain the memory from his mind, like you drain a hose before you put it away at the end of summer?

No. He has not mentally forgotten. He has morally forgotten. He will no longer build a case against us. He will no longer accuse us. He will not continue to bring it all up, again and again and again. He forgets.

It’s like something we do in our home. I will occasionally clean out our old financial records, and we will sit in front of a fire, and toss the records into the flames. They’re gone. They won’t be coming back.

That is how God deals with our sins, in his mercy.

But how can this be? How can God give us the goodness we do not deserve, and withhold the justice we do deserve?

It is because of HIS SAVIOR.

This is where the New Testament helps us with these verses. All through the New Testament, we find phrases from these words. But especially in the book of Hebrews, the writer declares Jesus Christ to be the One who secures the blessings of the New Covenant for his people. But how?

In Hebrews 8, the writer demonstrates how Jesus is the best high priest. Jeremiah’s readers knew about the high priest. He represented the people before God, and he represented God before the people.

But Jesus is the best high priest. Why?

In Hebrews 10, the writer shows that Jesus has done what no other high priest could do. Those high priests would offer animals as sacrifices to God. The blood would be offered in the hope of securing the forgiveness of sins.

But the blood had to be offered over and over again, and it could not finally remove the sins of the people.

So Jesus has come to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice, once for all. He has represented God before people, and people before God, and he has now secured a new relationship, because he has offered himself, as a sacrifice for our sins.

He has stood in our place, receiving God’s justice for our sin, so that God forgives our sins and forgets our sins.

On the ride to school in the morning, we sometimes talk about substitute teachers. I recall my days as a student, and I try to say, “It’s not easy being a substitute. They are entering a situation that others have made. They are standing in the place of someone else. And they are getting all sorts of stuff dumped on them.”

Jesus Christ is The Substitute. He takes the judgment of God, for the sins of people. In him, was no sin. On him was dumped, all of our sin.

God has sent Jesus to give us the grace we do not deserve, by taking the judgment we do deserve. The New Covenant is all about the Savior Jesus. We enter into this relationship, through faith in him.

It’s all God! It’s his grace. It’s his mercy. It’s his Savior.

We can do nothing to secure this new relationship. He has done all that is needed, to secure this new relationship.

Yes, we have believed. But this belief is itself a gift, given by the One who has done all things, to reconstruct this collapsed relationship.

* This is why our hearts are full of praise.

Why do we worship? We worship, because it’s all God! If we deserved some of the credit, then we should deserve some of the worship. Maybe we could get together and congratulate ourselves, on how good we are.

Sadly, that is what people like to do these days. We want it to be about us. We want to feel good about ourselves.

But worship is about “feeling good,” not about ourselves, but about the God who has reconstructed our relationship with himself. I worship a God who has done everything, without my help, and despite my sin. Everything in worship is ultimately about him, because he alone is worthy of this.

* This is why our lives are full of humility.

How do we think about ourselves, and others? Too often, we think so well of ourselves, and so little of others.

Once on a mission trip, my wife made the girls in her cabin pay a dime every time they complained. If I had to pay a dime every time I think of myself as better than someone else, I would be broke.

To the extent that I think I have contributed something to reconstructing this relationship, I will be proud. To the extent that my heart is saturated in the truth that I have contributed nothing to this, I will be humble.

As Christians, we should be known for our humility, as we declare with our lips, and demonstrate with our lives, that we are no better than anyone else. We are in covenant with God, because it’s all God.

How do we enter? It’s all God.

And, IT'S FOR ALL. All kinds. For all time.
It's for ALL KINDS.

In verse 34, the Lord through Jeremiah is describing New Covenant life. We will explore this more next week, but now let's pull out one phrase.

"...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Why do we need to read those words, again and again? Maybe because we still sprout seeds of pride. Maybe because we tend to rank people.

We rank people intellectually. We like the smart ones. We despise the not-so-smart ones. (Of course, we can all find someone less smart than us!)

We rank people morally. We like the ones who are "cleaned up." We disdain the ones whose lives are messy. (Of course, we can all find someone more messed up than us!)

We rank people societally. We like the ones who are in our class. We distance ourselves from the ones who are below us. (Of course, we can all find someone who is "below" us!)

We think the New Covenant is for people who are just like us. We may never say it that way, but we don't see why God would want to know those people who don't quite rank intellectually, morally, or societally.

It's for all kinds. It's not just for smart, cleaned-up, middle-class people. God's New Covenant is for the people the world considers great, and it is for the people the world considers small.

Maybe you are one of those "small" people. Maybe your problem is not pride, but despair.

Maybe you think you are not smart enough to be in a relationship with God. Maybe you think you are not cleaned up enough to be loved by God.

Maybe you think God only wants to be with the winners.

The New Covenant is for the greatest, and it is for the least.

You do not need a Ph.D. You need to know your need.

You do not need to have your life perfectly straightened out. You need to know you need the perfect Jesus Christ to straighten your life out.

You do not need to be a winner in the game of life. You need to know that Jesus Christ has won the victory you need, as your Substitute.

It's for all kinds. Come, sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore. Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, joined with power.

And it's for ALL TIME.

I was recently reminded of the story of Dick and Rick Hoyt. Maybe you have seen videos of them competing in marathons and triathlons. They are known, not just because they are father and son, but because they compete by having Dick push and pull his son through the races.

At Rick's birth, oxygen was cut off to Rick's brain, so he is physically helpless. But despite his helplessness, his father loves him and longs to be with him.

On the runs, Dick runs and pushes Rick in his wheelchair. In the bike races, Dick pedals and Rick is in a seat on the front of the bike. In swims, Dick pulls Rick in a small boat.

Their success does not come from the strength of the child, for he has none. Their success comes from the love of the father.

As Jeremiah writes, the covenant is collapsing. The sons of Israel have failed. How will God succeed in relating to the people he has made?

Not because of them, but because of him. He says, "I will be their God, and they will be my people." He promises, "I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." If it depends on their strength, or their goodness, or their faithfulness, there is no hope. But if it depends on God's faithfulness, and God's goodness, and God's strength, there is all hope.

It's for all time. The New Covenant is forever. It is this way, because it does not rest upon the faithfulness of people, but on the faithfulness of God. Because the Father loves the ones he has made to be his own, and because he will never fail in his love, it's for all time.

I offer you these words, because I want you to experience the peace of his promise. We live in a world of change and insecurity. As we were reminded last week, everything is changing profoundly, as in the days of Jeremiah.

It is disorienting. It is frightening. We wonder whether there is anything or anyone, in whom we can securely hope.

The answer is yes. Through Jesus Christ, the One who brings, establishes and preserves the New Covenant, we have sure and certain confidence in our relationship with God. Through the blood of his Son, given so that he might forgive our sins and forget our sins, we are secure in our Father.

Sometimes he pushes. Sometimes he pulls. But never does he let go. He has secured this new relationship. His is a love that will not let us go.

What disorients you today? What frightens you today? What leads you to wonder about your hope

today?

Maybe it is the regret you feel, over the mistakes you have made.

Maybe it is the worry you feel, over the prospects for your family.

Maybe it is the fear you feel, over the changes in your workplace.

Maybe it is the sorrow you feel, over the loss of a loved one.

Here is peace: Jesus Christ has brought you into this New Covenant with God the Father, for all time. You are secure, for he has secured it.

After my roommates were finished laughing at me and shaking their heads about me, they repaired my bed. I could fall into my bed, secure.

Of course, with them, I never knew what was next! But with the New Covenant of God in Jesus Christ, I know what is next.

I know that I can humbly worship him, because it's all from him.

I know that no matter who I am, or what I have done, or what others think of me, this covenant is for me.

I know that he has forgiven my wickedness, and remembers my sins no more, so he will be my God forever.

Have you noticed the collapse?

Have you entered this covenant? Will you enter this covenant?