

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 (2)
THE NEW COVENANT: HOW DO WE LIVE?

Several years ago, we had a family in our home for a meal. As we ate, one of the young children tugged on my wife's shirt and said, "Mrs. Stein! Mrs. Stein! Your refrigerator is upside down!"

To her, it was, because we are one of those rare families with a "freezer-on-the bottom" refrigerator. I grew up with one in my home, so when we needed a new refrigerator a few years ago, we decided to try it.

If you are not used to it, it is a bit disorienting. Even as you hear me describe that, you might be wondering, "What would it be like to have a refrigerator like that? It would be hard to get used to that."

What would it be like? What is it like, to live in the New Covenant? Because, as sinners, we are so used to living apart from God, we wonder what it is like, to live in the New Covenant with God.

We are in the second week of pondering the New Covenant, as Jeremiah has presented it to us. Last week, we learned how we enter this covenant:

* It's all God. We enter purely because of his grace, his mercy, and his Savior. Jesus has died as our substitute, so that God "forgives and forgets" our sins.

* It's for all. It's for all kinds - from the least to the greatest. It's for all time - it will not be broken, because it is made secure not by our goodness or faithfulness, but by God's goodness and faithfulness.

Through faith in Jesus, we have entered the New Covenant. But what is it like to live in this New Covenant - in this new relationship with God?

Let's capture New Covenant living with two phrases. New Covenant living is God with us, and God within us.

GOD WITH US. If we live in the New Covenant, we are confident that God is with us, as we live in our kitchens and every other place.

Notice how this develops through these words. It starts out, when **GOD COMES TO US**. Before God can be with us, God must come to us, and we read here how that happens.

We read in verse 33, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

How did God bring the old covenant to the people? He wrote the words on tablets of stone. Those words defined the relationship. But now, in this New Covenant, his law is written on the hearts of his people.

This is important, because it helps us understand the rather perplexing words of verse 34: "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord'..."

Does that mean there are no teachers in New Covenant life? No. We see teachers all through the New Testament, as people live in the New Covenant.

But this is a way of expressing an important truth: in the New Covenant, we come to a knowledge of God directly through his Holy Spirit.

You might say, "Didn't people receive the Holy Spirit before this?"

Yes, but before this, God and people related through human mediation. Think of Moses, speaking to God for the people, and speaking to the people for God. Think of how the written law was given through him.

But now, God comes to us directly. People may be involved, but people need not be involved, because God will work directly on the human heart.

The theologians call this "effectual calling." It is where we understand the gospel, and our hearts become soft to the gospel, and we believe in the Savior of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ. This happens because the Holy Spirit enters our hearts, and turns our hearts away from sin, and to Jesus.

It is like when you are arguing with a representative of a company, and you are not getting anywhere with your complaint, and you say, "I want to talk to a supervisor." You go straight to where you need to go. In the New Covenant, God comes straight to us.

God comes to us. So **GOD IS WITH US**.

Listen to that phrase again: "...they will all know me." In the New Covenant, we know he is with us, because we know him.

This is not just mental knowledge. This is not just intellectually knowing who God is, or mentally recalling some truths about him.

This is personal knowledge. This is the real experience of God's personal presence in our hearts and lives.

This is not just knowing God is "out there", somewhere. This is knowing that God is "here," with you, in your heart and your life.

Think of it this way. What if I came up to you and said, "This is a great candy bar. It is sweet, and it is rich, and it is smooth"?

You might believe me because you know me, and you trust me. But you would really believe me, because you have experienced the pleasure of eating a candy bar.

Do you know God in this way? Do you know, by personal experience, that he is with you?

I wonder. In our culture, all of us know about God, and most of us have some level of belief in God, but

fewer of us know God in a personal way. He may be in your head, but is he in your heart, through faith in Jesus Christ?

Do you know God? One of the great Christian classics of our lifetime is a book called “Knowing God”, by J.I. Packer. Early in that book, he provides four thoughts to guide us in this.

1. Do you have great energy for God?

Packer is thinking of people who react to what is opposed to God. If you know a person, and that person is being attacked, you will offer your energy and even your life to defend that person.

We live in a world where people oppose God. They speak untruth about him with their lips, and they rebel against him in their lives.

What is your response to that? Does that bother you? Or can you just carry on with your business, like nothing is wrong?

If you know God, you care enough about him, to oppose people who oppose him.

2. Do you have great thoughts of God?

Here, Packer is describing people who see how great God is, and have a passion to praise him for it. If you see how great a person is, you will want to tell that person how great he is.

The issue here is worship. Have you been in the presence of God, so that you have tasted how great he is, and does that stir your heart to worship?

Or is worship, as we discussed a few weeks ago, just something you do to check off a list? Is it something you do, to look respectable?

If you know God, you think highly of him, and you want to give him high praise.

3. Do you have great boldness for God?

Packer writes here of people who truly want to follow Jesus. They count the cost of following him. They will take risks to follow him. They will give up anything and everything, to follow him.

If you know and love someone, you will stick with that person, no matter what the cost, because that person is worth whatever price you pay.

Do you boldly live for the Lord? Or do you only live comfortably, and safely, and securely, and predictably?

If you know God, you will live radically for him.

4. Do you have great contentment in God?

Here, Packer ponders people who have great peace. They can be content, because they know they have an everlasting relationship with the Lord.

In this world, we face frustration, opposition, anger, fear, and even terror. But this we know: we know the Lord, because Jesus has secured eternal relationship with him. In this, there is contentment and peace.

Great energy. Great thoughts. Great boldness. Great contentment.

God is not an abstraction. God is not an idea. God is not some big guy “out there” somewhere. You are in a genuine relationship with him. He is with you.

Is he with you?

Life in the New Covenant: God with us, and GOD WITHIN US.

This means God goes to the heart, so we grow from the heart.

GOD GOES TO THE HEART. Let’s go back to verse 33: “I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.”

In the New Covenant, God comes directly to us, and God goes directly to our hearts. He does not just impose a law upon us from the outside.

Governments do that. All they can do is write laws that they impose upon us, so that we will conform to them, whether we like them or not.

But God goes to the heart. He transforms our hearts, so that we want to follow him, his commands, and his truth.

The theologians have phrase for this, too: “definitive sanctification.”

“Definitive” means definite. It really happens, once and for all.

“Sanctification” refers to holiness. What really happens, once and for all, is that God does a marvelous work of turning our hearts away from evil, and turning them toward a new desire for good.

We do not instantly become perfect. But like a compass that points in a new direction, our hearts are now definitely pointed in a new direction.

Remember, the covenant is about relationship. What will develop this relationship? A bunch of external rules? Does that spur love in us? Will those government rules stir love in us, for our government?

No. Since this is about our relationship with God, God is about changing the inside, not just the outside. He goes to the heart.

If you are in relationship with God through Jesus Christ today, you will have new heart desires. In the words of Jesus, you will be seeking...

* His kingdom. First and most, your heart longs for Jesus to rule other hearts, and all the nations. You pray, “Thy kingdom come.”

This is more important than the kingdom of the United States. This is more important than the kingdom of the Indianapolis Colts. This is more important than the kingdom of...you.

* His righteousness. First and most, your heart longs for Jesus to rule your life. You pray, “Make me holy.”

This is more important than your happiness. This is more important than your comfort. This is more important than your reputation.

Is God within you? Has he gone to your heart, through Jesus?

If so, WE WILL GROW FROM THE HEART.

Last week, we talked a bit about the collapse of the relationship between God and his people. Because their hearts were not changed, their lives were not changed, and they disobeyed God.

If our hearts have truly been changed by the God of the New Covenant, our lives will be changed by that same God.

Yet that looks different than we think. When I say that, I know at least some of you are ready for me to pull out the hammer, and pound you with lots of rules.

But in the New Covenant, the outside flows from the inside. We live in a new way, not because God or the pastor hammers us, but because God truly has changed our hearts, and we want to grow in holiness for him.

I don’t need to cram that candy bar in your mouth. You are learning more and more how sweet candy bars are, so you want to eat it.

In the same way, you are learning more and more how sweet it is to have God within you. With him in your heart, you want to live a holy life.

So what does this look like in daily life? Let me offer you three truths.

1. I am motivated by love, not law.

My obedience to God is a response to his love, and it flows from the love in my heart for God.

I do not obey because of guilt before God. Jesus has taken my guilt!

I do not obey because of guilt from people. God is my judge.

I obey, because I love God.

I take that extra minute and serve you, not because I must do it to earn God’s favor or your approval, but because I love God, and I want to share that love by serving you.

I wrestle with that sin in my heart, not because I must do it to get God to love me, or to get you to be impressed with me, but because I love God, and I want my life to reflect his holiness.

I tell that friend about Jesus, not to score points with God, and maybe despite the points I will lose with that friend. I love God, and I want that friend to know about God’s love for him. So I speak.

I am motivated by love, not law.

2. I want to know why, not just what.

Why do I do, what I do? Why did I do that? Why didn’t I do that? What was happening in my heart, when I did that?

Those are the questions I ask of myself, and others, because I want to grow from the heart.

I am not just interested in shaping the outside, so others can see. I know God is interested in the inside, so I will do the hard job of asking why.

Why was I so harsh with her, when she asked me a simple question? What is going on in my heart? What must change?

Why am I so afraid of what the doctor is going to say to me? What is going on in my heart? What must change?

Why did I lie to him? Why couldn’t I just tell the truth? What is going on in my heart? What must change?

Why am I struggling to forgive them? Do I not know how Jesus has forgiven me? What is going on in my heart? What must change?

I want to know why, and not just what.

3. I strive to give all of me, not some of me.

Have you ever heard of someone purposely paying extra taxes? It’s rare. The government imposes its tax on me from the outside, and I pay my taxes. But not a penny more.

If I live by an external law, I will do only what fulfills the external law. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Okay, I didn’t.

But if God is within me, and if my heart has been changed, I want to give all of my heart, and all of my life, to the Lord.

I do not just want my hands to avoid murder. I want my heart to avoid murder, and I want my heart to genuinely love.

I do not just want my hands to avoid touching as I shouldn't. I want my heart to not lust, and I want my heart to love purely.

I do not just want my hands to avoid stealing. I want my heart to be content, and I want my heart to move me to work honestly and well.

I do not just want to "do the minimum". I want Jesus Christ to change all of me, and to spur me to live ever more clearly for him.

It is rather upside down, isn't it? We live by law. We just think of what we do. We give only what we have to give.

But because God is with us, and God is within us, everything in our lives is turned upside down, as we live in the sweetness of the New Covenant.

When Ruth Bell Graham, Billy Graham's wife, died this summer, we heard much about her life and words.

It is said that this was her suggestion for her gravestone: "End of construction. Thank you for your patience."

In the New Covenant, God is constructing a new relationship with us, as he constructs us into new people who live with him, and for him.

He is with us in this. He knows us, and we know him.

He is within us in this. He is changing us, from the heart.

If that seems upside down to you, I want to challenge you. Do you know the God of the New Covenant, through Jesus?

If that seems rightside up to you, but difficult for you, I want to comfort you. He is constructing you, and your eternal relationship with himself. Be patient. He is with you. He is within you.

May he open our hearts, and search us. May we stand before him, purified by his forgiving grace, and made new by his changing grace.