

The New Covenant
Jeremiah 31, 32; Ezekiel 11, 36

Turn to Jeremiah 44 please. God wants a group people who are devoted to him. We could hardly overstate how much God wants to have a people he can treasure. He has gone to great lengths to make this happen. The new covenant Scriptures in Jeremiah and Ezekiel show this to us, and we'll look at them today.

But first I will tell you the story of the nation of Judah, especially Jerusalem, the city where the king ruled and where we find God's temple. This story covers about 20 years, from about 605 BC to 585 BC. This is a story of Judah's hardness, their refusal to turn to God and live in his ways. No matter what God did, the Jews would not turn to him.

First Invasion.

The Babylonians invaded Judah three times. (2 Kings 24-25) The first time was in 605. To make peace, Judah gave the Babylonians many treasures from the temple, and from the king's palace, all that stuff that Hezekiah had showed the Babylonians 100 years earlier (Isaiah 39). Judah paid Babylon a huge amount to keep their city and their temple.

And the Babylonians also took a few hundred of their best university students. They did not have universities then, but the Babylonians took their best and brightest young people. Daniel and his three friends were a part of this. The Babylonians would train them and use them.

And every year after that, the Jews had to send Babylon a lot of money. Babylon taxed the Jews heavily. It was like protection money. If the Jews stopped paying, the Babylonians would come back with their armies and kill and destroy.

That first invasion of the Babylonians happened about the same time as Jeremiah's temple sermon, in Jer 7, where Jeremiah told the Jews that they had turned God's temple into a robbers' hideout. The people would steal, murder, commit adultery, swindle each other, worship Baal and other gods, and after all that, come to the temple to be safe?

If the Jews did not change their ways and their actions, God would bring in the Babylonians to destroy the city, and destroy God's own temple. But they did not change their ways or actions.

Second Invasion.

After a few years, the Jews rebelled against Babylon, stopped paying taxes to Babylon. They would take their chances. It took the Babylonians a couple of years to get organized, but their armies came back in about 598, about seven years after the first invasion.

This time they were much more severe. They wanted to teach the Jews a lesson. They killed people, and took many exiles back to Babylon. Thousands. Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles, to settle down and live in Babylon, you're not coming back soon, to this group (Jer 29).

All this time, Jeremiah and other prophets were urging the Jews to turn from their idols, and to start living in God's ways. And the Jews as a whole were not interested. Jeremiah was much persecuted and mistreated by the king and other Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah told them again and again, if you change your ways and your actions, God will take care of you, but if you keep living as you are doing, the Babylonians will destroy this city and the temple. There were faithful Jews all along, of course, but they were a minority.

Third Invasion

A few years after the second invasion (598), the Jews rebelled again against Babylon, which means they stopped paying Babylon those heavy national taxes. The Babylonian armies came back a third time, and sieged Jerusalem, which means their armies camped all around, and they waited for the people to starve and come out.

And in 587, 11 years after the second invasion, 18 years after the first invasion, the Babylonians entered the city. They killed many people, they burned all the big buildings, they tore down the city walls, they took at the temple gold and silver to Babylon, and they completely destroyed the temple. And they took many exiles to Babylon.

Flight to Egypt

But the Babylonians still left people behind to live on the land, and appointed a sensible Jew named Gedeliah to be governor. Jeremiah himself stayed behind with this group. But some hotheaded Jews assassinated Gedeliah. The other Jews chased the assassins away.

But now these Jews left behind were terrified of what the Babylonians would do, when the Babylonians found out that Gedeliah, the governor the they had left in charge, had been killed.

These terrified Jews came to Jeremiah, and asked him to ask God what they should do. Should they stay and face the Babylonians, or should they flee to Egypt, which was the opposite direction from Babylon. "Jeremiah, ask God what we should do. We will do it."

Jeremiah asked God, and God answered. "Stay here and meet the Babylonians when they come. I, God, will make sure they are kind to you. Do not flee to Egypt. Submit to Babylon, they will treat you well. If you flee to Egypt, I, God, I myself will send the Babylonians down there to attack you. Do not flee to Egypt. You will be safe here. Do not fear the Babylonians."

That's what Jeremiah told them. And they told him, "no, that's not true Jeremiah, you're just saying that. We are going to Egypt, and we will take you with us." And they did. As near as we know, Jeremiah ended his life in Egypt. And in Egypt they continued their sins. And Jeremiah said to them what God told him to say, and preached to them there just as always.

Jews in Egypt Answer Jeremiah

(Jer 44:15-18) Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present—a large assembly—and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, "We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem."

"At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine."

This conversation happens about 585, that is, about 20 years after Jeremiah's temple sermon, about 20 years after Babylon first invaded.

This speech has two surprises. The first is how open and determined they are not to turn the Yahweh, the God of Israel. "We, our ancestors, our kings and officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem." We have never listened to you, Jeremiah, and we will not start now.

The second surprise is how they reinterpret history. God has designed their history in the last 20 years to teach them a lesson, by means of prophets and the Babylonians. "Reject God at your peril." But they rearranged things, and what they learned was that they should never have rejected the queen of heaven.

Is there anything at all that God could have done to make those people his people, and to be their God? No. He tried everything, and nothing worked. The Jews didn't want him, plain and simple, and they believed that all the evidence was on their side.

New Covenant

God told Jeremiah about a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Ezekiel speaks about the same thing, we will spend the second half today looking at God's answer to the hardness of Israel and Judah.

We celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday. The New Testament records the Last Supper in four places. The only word to explain the Lord's Supper, that is from Jesus' own mouth in all four of these accounts, is the word "covenant." Either "this is my blood of the covenant" or "this is the new covenant in my blood."

Jesus himself is the doorway into the new covenant. His death is the sacrifice that establishes the covenant. All of us that have repented and believed, and who celebrate the Lord's Supper, are a part of this covenant. Let's look at this four Scriptures that I've handed out.

The same sentence appears in italics in each paragraph, and that is the covenant. *I will be their God, and they will be my people.* Ezekiel does not use the word "covenant," but he uses that sentence, which tells us that he's thinking about covenant even if he doesn't write that word. (See also Ex 19, Leviticus 26:12; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:12-13; Hebrews 8:10; Rev 21.)

New Covenant – God's Laws in our Minds and Hearts

*"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the people 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 they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, '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."* Jer 31:31-34

According to this, what was wrong with the old covenant? It didn't work. The covenant was to bind God and his people to each other, and it didn't work. God and his people not stay together. Why did in not work? Because the old covenant did not change people's hearts and minds.

I was taught that the old covenant failed because it had all those laws and decrees, and thankfully the new covenant is not like that. Jeremiah does not see it like that at all. What God really wants from people has changed very little. We are told by Jesus and Paul that if we obey the Lord's teaching, we are keeping the law and the prophets.

The problem was people's minds and hearts. Knowing God is bound up with knowing his instructions, how he wants us to live, to treat one another. When God's instructions are in our minds and on our hearts, then we know God. And in the new covenant, God will make that happen, he will change minds and hearts of people.

New Covenant - Singleness of Heart and Action

***They will be my people, and I will be their God.** I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me.* Jeremiah 32:38-40

“I will give them singleness of heart and action, so they will always fear me.” “I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me.” That we have this urge in us to follow God, we are determined to revere him and live in his ways and never turn away, this is a great gift, my brothers and sisters.

This is an unbelievably valuable commodity. Treasure it, and nurture it. It is as great a miracle as God ever does. The Jews turned away. I was taught that the Jews quite following God because they were burdened by all those laws, and no matter how hard they tried they could not get it right. Not at all. If they wanted God, he always forgave their sins.

They did not want God. They turned away. They wanted different gods and a different life.

New Covenant – New Heart and Spirit

*I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. **They will be my people, and I will be their God.*** Ezek 11:19-20

Jeremiah speaks of our heart and our mind, and of knowing God; Ezekiel speaks of our heart and our spirit. But they are talking about the same thing.

Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. God is so pleased when his people live their ordinary daily lives in his ways. We are kind to those beside us, including when they don't deserve it, because God has been remarkably kind to us, when we did not deserve it. We do this even when it's costly, because God did this for us even when it was costly to him.

Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

New Covenant – My Spirit so you will be Careful to Keep my Laws

*I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; **you will be my people, and I will be your God.*** Ezek 36:25-28

And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel has more to say about the Holy Spirit than most of the OT prophets. God puts his Holy Spirit in us to move us to follow his decrees, and to move us to be careful to keep his laws.

The ways we show that we are God's people have already been made clear. God has made his instructions clear. For Ezekiel, the Holy Spirit was not to give new instructions, the Holy Spirit was to give people new life and energy to follow the old instructions. In NT terms, we are talking here about the fruit of the Spirit, as listed in Galatians 5.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel do not think there is anything wrong with what God has been asking of his people. What's wrong is that the people don't care, don't want God, want to worship other gods, want to live in other ways.

God will bring Israel and Judah back by doing this for them. God will yet do this for all Israel. To date it has not happened, not much, but it will. Romans 11 makes that clear. But the new covenant is already in place, and God is now doing this for Gentile followers of the Jewish Christ. That would be us.

This desire in us to be a man of God or a woman of God, to be a faithful follower of Christ, to be a servant of God, that appetite in us, that longing, is a most wonderful thing. These Scriptures tell us that God put that in us. He did it because he wants to have a faithful people, and he knew he would not get a faithful people without changing our minds and hearts and spirits in this way.

Treasure it, and guard it. Never take it for granted. It is a great and mighty work of God.

PRAYER:

God, thank you that you put your laws in our minds and write them on our hearts. Thank you that in this way you cause us to know you. You give us singleness of heart and action, so that it will go well with us. You inspire us to fear you, so that we will love you, and never turn away from you. You give us an undivided heart, and put a new spirit in us. You put your Spirit in us to move us to follow your ways.

But God, the tempter has not gone, and temptation has not gone. Don't lead us into testing or temptation. We don't do well. Rescue us from evil and the evil one. We need your help. Forgive our sins, as we forgave those who sinned against us.

Still, God you have changed us, because we do want to fear you, and love you, and never turn away from you. And for this, and for your Holy Spirit, we give you praise and thanks. Amen.