

What is new about the new covenant?

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, and as you know, Bob has restarted his series in Jeremiah, and we come to Jeremiah chapter 31 this morning.

If you have one of our church Bibles, that's page 658, and it's a long chapter, but we're going to read the whole chapter because really we need to do that.

It's such an important chapter, not only in the book of Jeremiah, but in the whole of the Bible. And the title which our ESV Bible gives is The Lord Will Turn Mourning to Joy, and it is all about the laying out of the great promise of God's ultimate intervention for his people in the new covenant which we know and love and which has become ours in Jesus Christ.

At that time, says the Lord, and he means in the latter days, you'll see the previous verse, that phrase that comes again and again.

At that time in these latter days, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord. The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

[1 : 21] When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again, I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel. Again, you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Again, you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria. The planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim, Arise, let us go up to Zion to the Lord our God.

For thus says the Lord, Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations. Proclaim, give praise, and say, O Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.

Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth. Among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman, and she who is in labour together, a great company, they shall return here.

[2 : 29] With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back. I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble.

For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. Hear the word of the Lord's own nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away.

Say, he who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him, as a shepherd keeps his flock. For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

They shall come and sing aloud on the heights of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain and the wine and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd.

Their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.

[3 : 32] I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord.

Thus says the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

Thus says the Lord, keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears. For there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country. I have heard Ephraim grieving. You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined like an untrained calf.

Bring me back, that I may be restored, for you are the Lord, my God. For after I turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I slapped my thigh, I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.

[4 : 45] Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him.

I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord. Set up road markers for yourself, and make yourself guideposts. Consider well the highway, the road by which you went.

Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities. How long will you waver, O faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth.

A woman encircles a man. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah, and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes.

The Lord bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill. And Judah, and all its cities, shall dwell there together.

[5 : 45] And the farmers, and those who wander with their flocks. For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish. At this I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them, to pluck up and break down, to overthrow and destroy and bring harm.

So I will watch over them, to build and to plant, declares the Lord. In those days, they shall no longer say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.

But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. 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 I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

[7 : 04] But 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 teach 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 sins no more.

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar.

The Lord of hosts is his name. Only if this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.

Thus says the Lord, only if the heavens above can be measured and the mountains of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

[8 : 13] Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananel to the corner gate, and the measuring line shall go out further, straight to the hills of Garib, and shall then turn to Goa.

The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron to the corner of the horse gate towards the east shall be sacred to the Lord.

It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore forever. Amen.

May God bless to us this is great gospel word. And now if we could have our Bibles open please at page 658 at Jeremiah 31.

We'll have a moment of prayer before we look together at the chapter. And God our Father, as we turn to these glorious words, those words which inspire us, those words which challenge us, we ask that the gracious Holy Spirit who first gave them will now take these words and take my words and all their weakness faithfully to unfold them and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[9 : 45] Amen. One of the great wonders of Egypt and indeed of the whole ancient world was the great library in Alexandria.

It was said that it contained all the knowledge in the world. Now that rather extravagant statement actually led to its undoing because I think it was in 642, Caliph Omar ordered the library to be burned down.

The reason he gave for this act of vandalism was that either the books in the library contained what was already in the Quran, in which case they were superfluous, or they contradicted what was in the Quran, in which case they were blasphemous.

And so the library of its priceless treasures was burned down. Now I don't know if any Christians actually want to burn the Old Testament, but the attitude of the Caliph is rather reflected in some views that many Christians have.

We don't need the Old Testament since we have the New Testament. I don't hear the phrase so much now, I'm very glad. When I was young, people used to talk about New Testament Christians. [11:03] Now if you read the New Testament, you'll find that the New Testament Christians were those who believed in the Scriptures, in other words, believed in what we call the Old Testament.

So the question I want us to try and answer this morning is what is new about the New Covenant? You see, everything in the New Testament, everything the New Testament says about the Old Testament is true, of course, absolutely true.

But not everything that's in the Old Testament is in the New Testament. Because New Testament people read the Scriptures, read the Old Testament, as we do now, and it fills us in with so many things that are taken for granted in the New Testament.

In other words, this is one book. And I'm going to argue it's one book about one covenant which shows itself in different ways. Hebrews 11, remember, says, by faith, by faith, by faith.

There is the view that some people still hold that in the Old Testament, salvation was by works. And in the New Testament, by faith. That's not the case. Hebrews 11, by faith.

[12:19] Abraham, by faith. Moses, by faith. All those great and lesser figures of the Old Testament. Only think about it for a moment. If Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, can save us who live 2,000 years after it, then that same death and resurrection can save those who live thousands of years before it.

And that's the thing we've got to remember. We're told also in Hebrews 11 at the end of the chapter that the people of the Old Testament did not receive what was promised because they were waiting until with us they would be made complete.

You see, one people of God in both testaments, not two people, not a Jewish people and a Gentile people, but one people of God rejoicing in the blessings of the covenant.

Now, this is a great poetic celebration of the new covenant, this chapter. And it's the only place, in fact, in the Old Testament where the phrase new covenant is used.

However, the phrase everlasting covenant, and we're looking at that next week, occurs in Jeremiah 32, in Isaiah 55, and in Ezekiel. Ezekiel, and this must govern the meaning of new.

[13:40] What is the new covenant? Now, I think 1 John 2 verse 7 helps us here. John says, this is not a new commandment, but an old commandment.

Yet, it is a new commandment because the darkness is passed away and the true light is already shining. In other words, with the coming of Jesus, with his death, with his resurrection, with his ascension to heaven, the new covenant shines in its full light.

But all the way through Old Testament times, people saw that light, even though they saw it in the distance. And Hebrews 11 again, they did not receive what was promised, but they saw it in the distance.

And what they saw in the distance is the same as what we see clearly in Christ. Revealed fully in Jesus, gathering up the past and anticipating the future.

And in verse 1, at that time, and in verses 27, 31, and 38, this is talking about the last days. Now, remember the last days.

[14:51] We are living in the last days. Not because we know the time of the second coming. We don't. But because the last days began when Jesus came and will end in the last day with his return in glory.

Christ has already come. He sealed the new covenant with his blood. But one thing that's important to remember is this. Even in the New Testament, the new covenant is still to be fulfilled in the future. What is the covenant language of the New Testament? Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

In other words, it's not just us on earth who in a real sense are waiting for the full blessing of the new covenant. Even the saints in glory are still waiting.

They have not yet received their resurrection bodies. The marriage of the Lamb has not yet happened. So the new covenant already begun has still to be fulfilled.

[15:58] I think that's so important. We mustn't imagine that we are in a higher spiritual state than the believers of the Old Testament. Read the Psalms. Read, for example, David's Psalm, I so long and thirsts after you, O Lord.

Well, I don't know about you, but I don't feel that very often. And I'm wanting to claim a superiority to the believers in the Old Testament.

So all the covenant blessings of the Old Testament, all the covenant blessings of the new, are gathered up in this great poem, and it is a great poem, verse 26, at this I awoke and looked and my sleep was present to me.

This presumably suggests that Jeremiah received this in a vision, as the prophets often did. Vision and dream, after all, is one of the ways in which God reveals himself in Scripture.

Joseph, Daniel, others, even in the New Testament, Joseph and the wise men, even Paul himself, in the vision of the man of Macedonia. So what we're going to try and do is not go through this verse by verse, because it's a powerful and rich chapter.

[17:09] In any way, it's a poem. I want to try and pick out three great themes which tell us what the new covenant is and tell us how we are still waiting for it.

So first of all, the new covenant is a new creation and a new exodus. The great themes of the Bible, what God did at the beginning of the world and what he did when he let out his people of Egypt, these are gathered together in the new covenant.

at the end of the chapter, verses 35 and 36, there's a deliberate echo of Genesis 1, the sun for light by day, the fixed order of the moon and the stars by night, and so on, recalling what God did at the beginning and then at the very beginning of the chapter, verse 2, thus says the Lord, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

In other words, the promised land recalls Eden, recalls the rescue from Egypt and anticipates the new creation. One of the great pleasures I allow myself over Christmas is to reread the Narnia stories.

I was rereading that wonderful, well, wonderful passage at the end of the last battle where the unicorn, the unicorn actually talks a lot of sense, more sense than the humans in the story very often, as the real Narnia, not the earthly one, but the real one unveils itself.

[18:42] The unicorn says the reason we loved the old Narnia was that it sometimes looked like this, the anticipations of the new creation that even shine in this creation.

New creation, new exodus. And there are two particular emphases. First of all, this is God's initiative. Verse 3, the Lord appeared to him from far away.

In other words, they didn't go looking for him, the Lord himself took the initiative. That's what covenant is about. It's a unilateral initiative taken by the Lord.

And his love is not fickle and feeble like ours. But our response to that initiative is at the heart of what covenant means to us.

After all, it is totally God's grace, but we have to respond. After all, if we don't respond, it's rather like two people getting married and after all, marriage is the biblical image of the covenant and saying to each other, it was nice to meet you, we may see each other again and walk away.

[19:50] That's not a true covenant. And similarly, if we don't respond to God's gracious initiative, we cannot enjoy the blessings of the covenant. But it is his initiative that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And this beautiful language here that God uses about his people, when he talks about, he talks about, verse 10 here, the word of the Lord, he who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him as a shepherd, keeps his flock, for the Lord has ransomed Jacob.

and later on in the chapter in the new covenant passage itself, when he talks about writing the covenant on their hearts, we'll come to that in a moment, he takes them by the hand.

There's a beautiful little passage in the prophet Hosea. Remember this, if anyone tells you the God of the Old Testament is a bloodthirsty, bigoted God, this is what God says about his people.

I taught Ephraim to walk. Wonderful image there of the parent with the toddler. That is what God is like. Remember, God chose you before you did anything good or bad.

[21 : 15] God chose you before you were born. God chose you before the creation of the world. My name, from the palms of his hands, eternity will not erase, as we said.

It is God's gracious initiative. We're not going to impress God by his special goodness. That's why the gospel of good works is not a gospel at all. Nor are we going to turn him away by our own fickleness, our own feebleness, and our own sinfulness.

He knew before we were born the kind of people we were going to be. So it's God's initiative. And the second thing about the new covenant is there will be the end of sorrow.

Remember, this is a fallen world, a world marked by the curse, a world marked by brokenness. And this particularly comes out in verse 15.

Thus says the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted because they are no more.

[22 : 22] These verses, as you probably know, are quoted in Matthew chapter 2 when Herod, in his vindictiveness and fury, kills the children in Bethlehem in order to try to kill the Messiah.

And indeed, the Messiah goes into exile in Egypt to keep him safe. So, it will be the end of sorrow, the end of lamentation and bitter weeping.

You see, the exile is going to be a period of sorrow for Rachel. Rachel, Jacob's wife, of course, the mother of the nation, if you like, the mother of the people. But this will be over.

People will return as the prophet Isaiah says. The redeemed of the Lord will return and come with singing to Zion. And, of course, there are tears.

There are tears of repentance. Verse 16, keep your voice from weeping and your eyes for tears.

And, verse 18, I have heard Ephraim grieving.

[23 : 21] You have disciplined me and I was disciplined like an untrained calf. So, this last week in chapter 30, the kind of weeping that leads to repentance, the kind of weeping that leads to forgiveness, that weeping will be over.

The prophet Isaiah has a beautiful image which is picked up in the book of Revelation. God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. Now, you'll notice, once again, the tenderness and the personal note of that.

Not just tears will be over. Not just there will be no more weeping. But, that God himself personally will wipe away the tears. That is what covenant is about.

It's not a contract. Not a relationship between, not the kind of thing that two solicitors work out on your behalf. It is a marriage relationship.

And, this wonderful poem is bringing this all together. It's a difficult poem. There are many puzzling verses. Verse 22 in particular.

[24 : 27] How long will you waver, O faithless daughter, for the Lord has created a new thing on the earth, a woman in circles of man. If you look at the commentaries, you'll find eight or nine pages on that.

That's usually a sign the commentator doesn't have a clue what it means and tries to disguise that by many words. I want to suggest this refers actually to the virgin birth itself.

To the woman who is going to bring, through whom is going to come into the world, the one who is to be the initiator and the embodiment of the new covenant.

The one who will make all things new. And notice the verse 27, the days are coming when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

As we saw last week, it's the whole people of God, not just the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, not just the Old Testament people of God, but the whole people of God. The seed of man and the seed of beast.

[25 : 26] It will be repopulated. It will be glorious. And it shall come to pass. I have watched over to pluck and to break down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to bring harm.

Now, if you go back to chapter 1, these were the very words given to Jeremiah as he began his ministry. I've appointed you to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to bring harm.

The kind of things that were already happening when the exile comes. I said last week that these chapters, here 30 and following, are delivered within months, within weeks, of the fall of the city and the terrors of exile that were going to follow.

But here, there is also in that, there is also to build and to plant. The negatives are going to give way to the positives. And notice, build and plant, a great combination of metaphors.

Build means this is going to be solid, and that's picked up at the end of the chapter in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Plant means it's going to keep on growing. And verse 29 and 30 emphasizes personal responsibility.

[26 : 38] In other words, this is God's gracious initiative. He is giving his word, but we need to obey it. Everyone shall die for his own sin.

I think in the context in Jeremiah, this refers to Josiah's great reformation. Jeremiah began his ministry in the days of the great reforming king, one of the worthiest of David's sons to sit on his throne.

That reformation was wonderful. Josiah was a truly great and godly man. The trouble is, it was only the king and a few others who were personally committed.

The people took no responsibility and immediately he was gone. They reverted to their old ways. And I think that's what this verse means in the context. That's the first thing. It will be a new creation and a new exodus.

The new covenant will also be marked by a new inner obedience. And if you look at verse 32, 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, although I was their husband, declares the Lord.

[27 : 51] But this is the covenant 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.

I will put my law within them and write it on my hearts. You see, the problem was never with the law, the Torah of Moses itself, the failure of people to obey it.

I think there's a number of points that need to be made here. The first point, I think, is one which many people ignore. If God is going to write the Torah, and in Jeremiah that especially means the words of Moses, if God is going to write this on people's hearts, that means that the words of Moses remain valid for all God's people all through their history.

And not only that, the words of Moses remain valid to all eternity. I don't believe we'll discover anything in the new creation that will contradict anything in Scripture.

Rather, what we will discover increasingly is that in Scripture, in the deep well of Scripture, these great vistas, there's a mixed metaphor, in the deep well of Scripture, these great vistas, we'll begin to understand.

[29 : 12] And throughout eternity, these words, which we partially and imperfectly understand now, will become more and more glorious. But you see, it's already there at the beginning, Deuteronomy 30, verse 6, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, that you may live.

In other words, the gracious initiative which God gave in these words to Moses still remain valid. Right on the heart, in other words, the word is to become flesh.

flesh. Now the word uniquely becomes flesh in Jesus, who not only brings the covenant, but is himself the covenant. I often say to Cornhill at preaching classes and so on, the word must become flesh in you as well.

In other words, your talk, your sermon, must be you, not somebody else. That's not just true for preachers. The Scriptures which we read, the Scriptures which we believe in, must become flesh in us.

It doesn't mean we all become clones. It doesn't mean we all see things in exactly the same way. It does mean as we listen to, as we read, as we study, as we obey the Word of God, we become more fully the people that God created us to be.

[30 : 35] Only partially in this world, but in the new creation that will be true fully because it is a life transforming experience. Verse 32, No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother.

Well, does that mean that those of us in the preaching and teaching team ought to resign and say, well, the Scripture says we don't need teachers. Now, clearly that is not what this verse means. The New Testament talks about the importance, role of pastors and teachers.

What it does mean is that by the Holy Spirit of God, by having the complete canon of Scripture, we have access now to the Word of God in a way that, remember, Jeremiah didn't.

Jeremiah only had part of the Bible. And remember, throughout the book of Genesis, no one had a Bible at all. But in these days, with the coming of the Spirit, the Spirit who comes upon all believers,

believers have immediate access to God through Christ.

We don't need covenant mediators. Ministers today are not priests. They are not people who bring people into the presence of God, as intermediaries.

[31 : 51] And again, this is only fulfilled in the new creation. Remember what John says again, when we see him, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Later in the book of Revelation, his servants will serve him and they will see his face. At the moment, we have these reflections in a mirror that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians.

There will be a new inner obedience. Now, as you know, at the moment, there is a disjunction so much of the time between what we actually believe and what we do because of the weakness of our flesh, because of the fallenness of the world.

But then, you see, in the new creation, there will be no placards up saying, do not murder. Rather difficult to do that with resurrection bodies, wouldn't it, anyway?

Though we know, though we know, not to sing, do not commit adultery because in the new creation, the kind of selfishness and the kind of self-centeredness that leads to these and stealing and all the rest will no longer be there.

[32 : 54] In that way, the law will fully be written on our hearts. So, a new creation, a new exodus, new inner obedience, finally and briefly, a new Jerusalem, especially the last few verses, 35 to 37.

Sorry, a bigger pardon. Let me get the right. Yes. Never been good with numbers. It would help if I were looking at the right chapter, of course.

Verses 38 to 40. Behold, the days are coming when the city shall be rebuilt. Now, last week, I talked about progressive fulfillment. This partially happened when Ezra and in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah and the temple and then the city were rebuilt.

And that explains the physicality of this. But very clearly, that did not fulfill the glowing prophecies of the prophets.

The desert did not blossom like the rose. It did not fulfill the passage from Isaiah which began this morning. People were not flooding to Zion, listening to the Torah.

[34 : 13] The mountain of the Lord was not rising above the hills. But nonetheless, the rebuilding was an important stage in that. And then, on the day of Pentecost, when the city of God, his temple of living stones, began to be built.

And beyond that, notice once again, behold, the days are coming. Now, it's interesting that that passage is almost a parallel to 35 to 37.

The new Jerusalem is not an entity in the new creation. It is the new creation under a different, from a different angle. And I think that's very deliberate.

The new creation, the created order, suggests the vastness, the wonder, so many new things to explore. And the sense of, the sense of amazement, never getting to the end of it.

Whereas, the city itself suggests intimacy, redeemed community, and so on. And this physicality is important. At the end of Ezekiel, Ezekiel describes the rebuilt temple and city, as the Zechariah in chapter 2.

[35 : 28] It's a real physical place. The new creation is a physical place. After all, one of the reasons why many people don't really fancy the new creation is because they have a totally disembodied idea.

They're disembodied spirits dressed in ethereal negligence, froth on clouds, and strum harps. That's a very unattractive prospect, isn't it? Once again, read the last battle.

This is a deeper country. The sky is bluer. The grass is greener. I've come home. There's the unicorn. So, there is this progressive fulfillment until the wonder of the new creation.

And notice the last phrase of the chapter. It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore. It is eternally secure. Remember, we sang some moments ago, more happy but not more secure the glorified spirits in heaven.

As we finish just a couple of points to round this off. The new covenant is the new covenant because by the spirit of God we are progressively able to obey it.

[36 : 44] Partially now but fully in the new creation. And the second thing is we will never be uprooted anymore.

This verse I've just referred to. Part of it is still to be fulfilled. And we'll see this next week when we look at the everlasting covenant.

In a moment or two we are going to sing the hymn about the unity of God's people. On earth we feebly struggle and they in glory shine.

But even on earth we are still part of that new covenant. That new covenant which becomes more and more glorious as the scriptures unfold.

And one day we will be like him because we will see him face to face. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father we have such limited such shallow and such trivial ideas often of the world to come.

[37 : 53] Help us to rejoice in your wonderful purposes of grace beginning before the worlds are made from all eternity which will culminate in the marriage of the Lamb when the new covenant is fully realized and when heaven, earth and ocean will sing your praise and your glory.

We thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.