

CHRIST THE COVENANTER
6. CHRIST IN THE NEW COVENANT
JEREMIAH 31

INTRODUCTION

Just as God revealed His *Covenant of Grace* in the *Covenant with Moses* following the redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Ex.19-24), so, in Jeremiah 31, God promised a new revelation of His *Covenant of Grace* some time following the redemption of Israel from Babylonian exile (v34).

We will first of all look at the historical and biblical context of these words. Then we shall study the contrast between the old and new covenants. Finally we shall examine the contents of the new covenant promises.

I. THE CONTEXT

1. Reconciliation: a new people (31:1-30)

Jeremiah described the people of God and the new things the Lord would do for them. He would unite both Judah and Israel as one people (v1-27). There would be a restored Israel (v2-20) united with a restored Judah (v21-27).

2. Renewal: a new covenant (31:31-34)

The Hebrew word for “new” here does not mean something completely unprecedented or something entirely new. It means a “renewal” and suggests the taking of an existing covenant and putting it into a new form. Jewish history was punctuated with a number of “covenant renewals” that brought temporary blessing but didn’t change the hearts of the people. However, the covenant “renewal” (not a “replacement”) promised by Jeremiah would go further, deeper, and longer. The *New Covenant* announced here would not only direct Israel’s conduct but would also change their character.

3. Restoration: a new land and kingdom (32:1–33:26)

Under the terms of the *Covenant with Moses* one of the curses for disobedience was deportation from the land (Lev.26; Deut.28). With the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, this final “curse” was completed. The expulsion of Israel from the land of promise emphasised their massive failure under the “old” covenants. In the exile, the covenant curses associated with the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants were enacted and fulfilled. This clearly showed the necessity of a more effective covenant administration than those previously revealed. A *New Covenant* was required which would powerfully transform the relationship between God and sinners.

The promises of a new people (31:1-30) and a new land and kingdom (32:1-33:26) are built upon and flow from this *New Covenant* (31:31-34). It is the *New Covenant* principles and promises found in these verses which we would now like to study.

Following Jeremiah’s example, we will compare these with the old covenant principles and promises. The old covenant Jeremiah spoke of here was not the *Covenant of Works* made with pre-fall Adam but the Mosaic phase or administration of the unfolding *Covenant of Grace*, of which this *New Covenant* would be the climactic administration.

II. THE CONTRAST

Jeremiah, in predicting the *New Covenant* clearly contrasted it with an old covenant in the past. He made it clear that the “old” covenant he was comparing with the “new” was the *Covenant with Moses* (31:32). Before considering the details of the *New Covenant* we must ask in what sense is this old covenant “old” and in what sense is the *New Covenant* “new”.

First of all, let us remind ourselves that there are essentially two Divine covenants, the *Covenant of Works* (made between God and Adam) and the *Covenant of Grace* (made between God the Father and God the Son). The covenants with post-fall Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were administrations or revelations of the one *Covenant of Grace*. The promises of the *Covenant of Grace* were represented in the form of these covenants. So, when Jeremiah prophesied a *New Covenant* he was not prophesying a new covenant with new parties, terms and promises. Rather he was prophesying a new administration of the one *Covenant of Grace*. The contrast is not with the “old” *Covenant of Works* but with the “older” administrations or revelations of the one *Covenant of Grace*, and especially the Mosaic administration of it. What, then, is “new” about the administration of the *Covenant of Grace* prophesied by Jeremiah? There is new universality, new grace, new clarity, new immediacy, new efficacy, new spirituality and new finality.

1. New Universality

The *New Covenant* administration differs from that of the “old” in that it has a universal emphasis. It extends to all nations. The *Covenant of Grace* was originally administered through the “universal” covenants with post-fall Adam, and also with Noah. However, from Abraham onwards, its administration was focused on the family of Abraham. This narrowing was necessary to better preserve the blessings of the covenant for future generations. This narrowing, however, was not intended to be permanent, but to disappear after it had served its purpose (i.e., after the coming of the Christ of the Covenant). In the *New Covenant*, the emphasis shifts from the national to the international. The *Covenant of Grace* moves out from being revealed within the national barriers of Israel to being revealed to the international community (Matt.28:19-20).

2. New Grace

The *New Covenant* era has greater emphasis on the gracious character of the *Covenant of Grace*. Though grace was always present and available in all the old administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*, from Sinai onwards the law was also prominent. This helps us to understand why Jeremiah contrasted the *New Covenant* with the *Covenant with Moses* (31:32). Jeremiah was highlighting emphasis, not essential difference. He was comparing the external form, not the essential substance. Though the essence of the *Covenant with Moses* was grace, the external form of this covenant was law, especially the ceremonial law. In contrast, the *New Covenant* will not be presented in this legal form, but in personal form. The ceremonies will be gone and the Christ of the ceremonies will be present. It is the difference between reading a biography of a person and actually meeting the person. In the *New Covenant* the words on the page came alive. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth.” When the Apostle John says “The Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (Jn.1:17), it is emphasis and external form that John is contrasting not essential substance.

This also helps us to understand why Paul contrasted the *New Covenant* with the *Covenant with Moses* (Heb.8). The problem Paul was addressing was that the Jews of his day had discarded the gracious essence of the *Covenant with Moses*, and perverted its emphasis on law to turn it into a

covenant of works. Paul was not contrasting the essence of the *Covenant with Moses* and the *New Covenant*, both of which were administrations of the one *Covenant of Grace*. He was contrasting the Jews' misunderstanding of the *Covenant with Moses* as a covenant of works, with the *New Covenant* administration of the *Covenant of Grace*. The Jews had perversely cast away the gospel significance out of the Mosaic institutions, and retained only the condemning features of those institutions. They vainly hoped to make a righteousness out of compliance with a law, which was at least partly given to remind men and women that they could make no righteousness for themselves. When Paul spoke of the *Covenant with Moses* he described it as the Jews viewed it (a covenant of works), not as it actually was (an administration of the *Covenant of Grace*). Effectively, they saw the person and said: "We prefer the biography." One of the great benefits of the *New Covenant* administration will be the unquestionable emphasis on grace.

3. New Clarity

As we have seen in our previous studies, Christ was present and revealed to believers in the old administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*. However, the truth then was partly hid, partly revealed, in the types and symbols. When we see a shadow coming round a corner we have a rough idea of what is casting the shadow. However, sometimes the reality can be quite different. The shadow reveals but the shadow also obscures. In the *New Covenant*, Christ has come round the corner and we see him far more clearly. The revelation of God's grace reaches its climax, when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us "full of grace and truth". Shadows give way to sunshine, prophecy gives way to fulfilment, type gives way to antitype, symbols give way to reality.

4. New Immediacy

The *Covenant with Moses* was administered through the mediatorship of Moses. Other Biblical covenants also had covenant mediators. However, in the *New Covenant* all human intermediaries are swept aside and the *Covenant of Grace* is administered directly and immediately by Christ, a son in His own house (Heb.3:5-6). This renders all other mediators unemployed and unemployable.

5. New Efficacy

There is a new effectiveness. Though some, and perhaps many, were saved under the older administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*, one thing is for sure; far more are saved in the *New Covenant* phase of the *Covenant of Grace*. From Pentecost on, we see innumerable multitudes from every nation putting their trust in the Christ of the *Covenant of Grace*.

6. New Spirituality

Previous administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*, especially the Mosaic administration were so encumbered with external elements and ceremonies as to be comparatively "carnal". The older administrations had an outwardness, physicality and visibility that is not present in the new administration. The *New Covenant* revelation is more inward and spiritual. What was then made known objectively, is now, to a greater extent, written on the heart (Heb.8:8-11). The *New Covenant* believer lives in a spiritual world and enjoys spiritual communion with Christ.

7. New Finality

The administration of the *Covenant of Grace* through the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David was preparatory and temporary. The *New Covenant* is final and permanent. There will not be another administration in time, in this present world. This

is the last administration. It will give way only to that eternal administration of the covenant in the new heavens and the new earth. As O P Robertson explains:

By the new covenant God shall fulfil all the promises of the covenants established earlier with his people. The obedience to God's law which did not materialise under the Mosaic covenant shall find consummate fulfilment under the provisions of the new covenant. Israel's possession of the land as promised to Abraham shall become a solid and unshakeable reality...David shall be king over Israel...The blessings associated with the new covenant therefore cannot be regarded as the development of a perspective previously unknown to God's people. Instead this covenant shall bring to fruition the redemptive intentions of God displayed throughout the ages.¹

The "old" covenant was like the moonlight.. Moonlight is a gift of grace, but it is reflected light (from a higher source, the sun) and limited light. The *New Covenant* is like the sunlight. It is a greater gift of grace, giving brighter light, direct from the highest source. The "old" covenant is grace in promise, shadow and prophecy. The *New Covenant* is grace in fulfilment, substance, and realization.

III. THE CONTENTS

The *New Covenant* contains many blessings for God's people. They are predicted in Jeremiah using the words and forms the people of Israel were familiar with. In essence God is saying: "I will be your king, your prophet, your priest, and your husband."

I. I will be your king

God said: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (31:33).

a. What is written: "my law"

This refers to God's moral law. This was written perfectly in the hearts of our first parents, Adam and Eve. One of the effects of the fall was that this internal inscription was almost obliterated in the human heart. This was one reason why it was summarised and externally inscripturated in the Ten Commandments given at Sinai. It is this same law which will be written in the hearts of God's people in their experience of the *New Covenant*. What is promised is not a removal of existing law, nor a replacing of it, but a new writer writing it in a new place.

b. Where it is written: "their hearts"

Where will this law be written? The Mosaic covenant document was written by God on two stone tablets and given to Moses to communicate to the people (Exod 31:18; Deut.4:13; 5:22; 10:1-4). However, Old Testament believers were aware that one of the great blessings of conversion was that the law would be written in or on one's heart (Ps. 40:8; 119:11; Deut 11:18). In other words, the covenant would be a warm internal delight to the people, not a cold external prescription. This had always been the ideal (Dt.10:16 ; 30:6), but now it would be realized, because in some way the Lord would create the desire and ability to obey in His people: "I will write." Keil & Deilitzsch commented on this passage:

When God writes the torah (law) on the people's heart, mediators are bypassed and the limitations of written documents are superseded. Jeremiah's audience knows that stone tablets can be broken (Exod.32:19; Deut 9:17) and that scrolls

¹ O P Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 275.

can be lost or ignored (2 Kg. 22:8), and burned (Jer.36:23) or drowned (Jer.51:63). Written documents are also limited to one location, and their availability is restricted....The metaphor of writing on the heart shows how the external limitations and vulnerability of the old system of written documents and human mediators will be eliminated.²

c. Who writes it: God

This brings us to the author of this law, the one who writes it on the heart. He was, of course, the original author of it. But, as mentioned above, He generally used mediators to communicate it to His people. Now, however, He was promising a new kind of writing. O P Robertson put this succinctly:

While the new covenant will be at radical variance with the old covenant with respect to its effectiveness in accomplishing its goal, the substance of the two covenants in terms of their redemptive intention is identical.³

The fulfilment of this promise **commenced** at the incarnation with the coming of Christ, the incarnate Torah (Law), and at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Spirit (Ezek.36:24-32). Both events injected a new power to obey into the Christian's experience. The promise **continues** to be fulfilled in the believer's sanctification by the Spirit who applies the work of Christ to his soul and so his obedience to the law increases (2Cor.3:3). The promise will be **consummated** at the second coming of Christ when the law of God will be written on the heart of every covenant child in such a way that they simply cannot disobey it. Until that time believers will find this promise fulfilled only in part.

2. I will be your prophet

"And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD" (v34).

The universality of the New Covenant blessings is emphasised in this promise. "They shall **all** know me." Knowledge of God will extend to all ages and classes, "from the least to the greatest of them." There will be no religiously privileged elite or nation. As Matthew Henry noted:

All shall be welcome to the knowledge of God and shall have the means of that knowledge; his ways shall be known upon earth, whereas, for many ages, in Judah only was God known. Many more shall know God than did in the Old Testament times, which among the Gentiles were times of ignorance, the true God being to them an unknown God. The things of God shall in gospel times be made more plain and intelligible, and level to the capacities of the meanest, than they were while Moses had a veil upon his face.⁴

Also, the clarity of the *New Covenant* blessings is emphasised. With the passing of the often complex ceremonies, types and symbols, the *Covenant of Grace* will become clearer and easier to understand. Returning to Matthew Henry we read:

Many shall have such clearness of understanding in the things of God that they may seem rather to have been taught by some immediate irradiation than by

² Keil & Deilitzsch, *Commentary on Jeremiah*.

³ O P Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 282.

⁴ M Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*.

any means of instruction. In short, the things of God shall by the gospel of Christ be brought to a clearer light than ever (2 Tim.1:10), and the people of God shall by the grace of Christ be brought to a clearer sight of those things than ever, (Eph.1:17, 18).⁵

There will be a deeper and more spiritual knowledge of Christ in Gospel times than under the older administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*. The knowledge will be less theoretical and more experiential.

The fulfilment of this promise **commenced** with the first coming of Christ. He bypassed all the Jewish teachers and spoke directly to the people the words of truth. The promise **continues** to be fulfilled as His people are taught by the Holy Spirit: “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things... But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him” (1Jn.2:20,27). The **consummation** of the promise will climax in glory: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1Cor.13:12).

3. I will be your priest

“For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (v31).

This promise looked forward to a time when God, would act no more to judge his people for their sins. The basis of this forgiveness is clarified in the actual inauguration of the *New Covenant*. In the upper room, Christ announced that the *New Covenant* was to be inaugurated through the shedding of His blood

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matt. 26:27-28).

Forgiveness of sin would be part of the *New Covenant* only because God provided a substitute to pay the penalty required of man. This forgiveness then is able to **commence** because of the first coming of Christ and His sacrificial death. The forgiveness **continues** to be promised and enjoyed through the Gospel of Christ. The final and full assurance of forgiveness will be **consummated** at Christ’s second coming.

4. I will be your husband

“...and [I] will be their God, and they shall be my people” (v33).

This is the essential element of the *New Covenant*. As we have seen, it was also the essential element of the old administrations of the *Covenant of Grace*. Again this emphasises that the *New Covenant* would not abolish the old but fulfil its ideals (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 19:7). God promised to marry His people and His powerful grace will ensure the marriage is successful and unbreakable.

The fulfilment of this promise **commenced** with the first coming of Christ, who is Immanuel (God with us). It **continues** to be fulfilled as His people live in a married relationship with Him (Eph.5:22ff). But the full enjoyment of that marriage union will not be **consummated** until Christ’s second coming.

⁵ *Ibid.*

God's being to us a God is the summary of all happiness; heaven itself is no more (Heb.11:16; Rev. 21:3).⁶

As the fulfiller of all the Messianic promises, Christ achieves in himself the essence of the covenantal principle: 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people.' He therefore may be seen as the Christ who consummates the covenant.⁷

SUMMARY

Let us go back one last time to our cathedral. The Gospel is now shining in upon sin-darkened humanity via six windows. They are shaped like a snake, a rainbow, a knife, a lamb, a scroll and a crown. What is predicted in the *New Covenant* is that God is going punch huge holes all over the walls in order to flood in unprecedented light from the *Covenant of Grace*. We might say these huge holes are shaped like fountains of water (baptism), loaves of broken bread and cups of red wine (the Lord's Supper). These New Testament signs of the *Covenant of Grace* declare the grace of the Gospel to all nations (not just Israel) in an unparalleled manner. It is as if God says: "I cannot make my provision of an unconditional salvation any clearer than this." Though some still prefer the shadows, and some still simply admire the windows, innumerable sin-darkened souls flock to the light coming through the new sign-windows, and trace the *New Covenant* signs of bread, wine and water to what they signify; a crucified Saviour bleeding, bruised and broken for sin and for sinners; and a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. Those that sit in darkness see a great light. The unconditional nature of the *Covenant of Grace* is seen in the clearest light yet. Through the signs of the *New Covenant* we see the Son of God fulfilling all the conditions of the *Covenant of Works* and so fulfilling all the terms of the *Covenant of Grace*. Through these signs we see Christ meeting all the conditions so that His people can enjoy unconditional salvation. Through these signs we see Christ paying the price so that His people can have salvation without money and without price. On the cross, Christ defeated the Devil, secured peace, was cut off and died for sin, magnified the law and made it honourable, defeated evil and delivered His people using the cross as His throne. The shadows have gone, the true light now shines.

CONCLUSION

We await one final development in the unfolding plan of God, the return of Christ for His people. Then He will demolish the "cathedral", its walls and windows. "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (Rev.21:22-23). Then the essence of the *Covenant of Grace* will be fully realised and experienced. "He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev.21:3). Then we will hear the Divine voice say forever: "I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Rev.21:7).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ O P Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980).