

Jeremiah 31

Psalm 131

Hebrews 9:11-28

Luke 1:57-80

Introduction: Jeremiah 31 and the New Covenant

We’re working through the basics of the Christian faith,
utilizing the topics of the Shorter Catechism.

The Shorter Catechism opens with a section on the history of redemption –
we started with God’s eternal purpose from before the foundation of the world,
and then worked through his works of creation and providence.

Over the last couple weeks we’ve been talking about humanity’s problem –
how we have come under the power of sin, misery, and death.

God created Adam and Eve in his image – after his likeness,
and entered into a covenant of life with them.

But Adam and Eve broke covenant with God,
refused the inheritance of life,
and instead inherited an estate of sin and misery.

It’s fitting that we think about this during Advent,
because this story of sin and rebellion is the whole reason *why* Jesus Christ had to come.
Adam’s sin required that one of Adam’s race repair his fault.
But the problem is that Adam’s race is hopelessly mired in an estate of sin and misery!
How can Adam’s fallen race pull itself up by the bootstraps?

So now our catechism asks:

Q. 20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God, having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life,
did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring
them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.

This is what Jeremiah promised.

Jeremiah thinks back to the Exodus –
the day when God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai.

God told Pharaoh that Israel is my son, my firstborn.
We’ve seen from Genesis that to be in the image of God is to be a son of God.
In the Exodus, God adopted Israel as his son –
or, to use the language of Jeremiah,

God became their husband.
The people of God became the bride of the LORD.

Israel was called to succeed where Adam had failed – where Eve had failed.
Will Israel be the second Adam – the one who repairs Adam’s sin?

But Israel broke covenant with God – just like Adam and Eve.
And so God established the Son of David on his throne.
Would the Davidic kings succeed where Adam (and Israel) failed?
But even the good kings die.
Death demonstrates the futility of Adam’s race.

And so Jeremiah says that God will make a new covenant –
a covenant that is *not like* the covenant he made with their fathers.
The Mosaic covenant was good – but it was external:
the law was simply written on tablets of stone.
We need a covenant that is internal:
where the law is written on our *hearts* –
and where our iniquities are forgiven, and God remembers our sins no more!

In response to Jeremiah, let us sing Psalm 131 –
a song of contentment and hope,
which we can sing with all the more contentment
because that new covenant has come,
and the law is now written on our hearts!

Sing Psalm 131
Read Luke 1:57-80
Read Hebrews 9:11-28

What is a covenant?

The language of “covenant” comes from the world of contracts –
but in the ancient world the idea of a covenant emphasized the idea of treaty –
and particularly a treaty *imposed* by a sovereign (or a “great king”).

Kings could make treaties (or covenants) as equals,
but God’s covenants in the OT all portray him as the “great king”
who sovereignly establishes his covenant with his people.

The Hebrew word for “covenant” is *berith*.

And one of the most common ways of speaking of how you make a covenant
is the language of “cutting a covenant” –
for example, when Abraham cuts the animals in half in Genesis 15,
and God alone walks between the animals –

thereby demonstrating that God alone will ensure the fulfillment of the covenant.

When the OT was translated into Greek, the translators had to make a decision.

Because there are two words in Greek that can correspond to *berith*.

There is *suntheke* – which means a contract, or a covenant between equals,

and there is *diatheke* – which means a will or testament.

Diatheke, in secular Greek, does not mean “covenant.”

But *suntheke* was not an option for the translators,
because God’s *berith* with Israel is *not* a contract!

Diatheke correctly captures the sovereign nature of God’s covenant.

And, what is more, it helps connect to the theme of *inheritance*
that we touched on last time.

In the same way that Adam’s sin brought us into “an estate of sin and misery” –
an inheritance of corruption and death –

so also Christ’s righteousness brings us into an estate of salvation –
as we share in the inheritance of the firstborn Son of God!

Q. 20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God, having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.

This is the central thrust of Hebrews 8-10.

Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 to show that in Christ we have a new covenant
that is not like the Mosaic covenant.

The Mosaic covenant is earthly,
and provides only a picture of the heavenly temple.

But the new covenant is heavenly,
and provides access to the heavenlies through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The old covenant is still seen as an administration of the covenant of grace--

after all, Hebrews makes it clear that Moses was pointing to Christ--

but Moses was deficient, because the Mosaic covenant could not finally deal with sin.

All the sacrifices were designed to purify the flesh (9:13),

but they could not purify the conscience (9:14).

The Mosaic covenant, then, should be seen as the pattern--the architect’s blueprint--
for the new covenant.

Christ, however, is the new covenant himself.

1. The Estate of Salvation: Covenant and Inheritance (Hebrews 9:11-28)

a. The Blood of an Eternal Redemption (v11-14)

In the first part of Hebrews 9 (verses 1-10),

we are told that the earthly tabernacle had two parts:
the first (the Holy Place) symbolizes the present age and the first covenant,
[the Mosaic covenant]
the second (the Most Holy Place) symbolizes the age to come/the new covenant.

Think about that for just a second:

Hebrews is saying that the structure of the tabernacle reflects the history of redemption.
As the priest passes through the first part of the tabernacle,
he is walking through history, approach the glorious Age to Come.
And when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies – once a year –
he is entering the Age to Come.

And Hebrews says that so long as the first part of the tabernacle is standing,
so long as the priests offer the repetitive day after day sacrifices,
the way into the heavenlies is shut.
Because only the high priest could enter – and then only once a year.

Now in verses 11-15, Hebrews explains how the better covenant
is expressed through a better sacrifice.
The first covenant was weak and impotent
because it had restricted access to God (7-8)
and it lacked a decisive way of dealing with sin (9-10)

But if you want to fully understand the glory of the new and better covenant,
then you need to understand something of how the first covenant worked.

And especially, the relationship between covenant and sacrifice.

Great.

Why do we have to spend so much time talking about these OT practices?
Bloody covenants, bloody sacrifices–
What has it bloody got to do with me!

Remember that Hebrews is talking to you.

The author of Hebrews thinks that this is what will help you hold fast to Christ.

There are all sorts of things going on in your lives right now
that are pulling–tugging–at your mind and heart –
pulling you *away* from a wholehearted love for God.

And what Hebrews wants you to see.... is nothing less that Jesus himself!
We see *him* who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus,
but now is crowned with glory and honor,
because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

And not some tame Jesus—
centuries of well-intentioned Christians have tried to tame Jesus
to make him more palatable to modern ears.

No, the Jesus whom Hebrews wants you to see—
the Jesus who sits at the right hand of God—
is a strange Jesus.

But it is only that strange, alien Jesus,
who comes to us symbolized by these ancient Jewish rituals,
who can be that merciful and sympathetic high priest *to us*.

He can only identify with us in our sufferings,
if he first becomes the sacrifice for our sins.

Because all those strange, bloody rituals that God gave to Israel
were designed to teach them (and us) about sin, redemption,
and our eternal inheritance.

Jesus is the high priest of the good things *that have come*.

The Age to Come that was signified by the Holy of Holies in the OT,
has come in the resurrection of Jesus.

He has entered, not the earthly holy of holies, but the heavenly holy of holies,
at the right hand of the Father.

(The Age to Come *has come* at the right hand of the Father)

And he has offered there the perfect sacrifice which purifies our conscience
from dead works to serve the living God.

b. The Mediator of an Eternal Inheritance (v15-17)

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant.

What is the point of this new covenant?

So that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

Verse 15 says that the reason why you *know* that the new covenant has come,
is because a death *has occurred* that redeems us from the transgressions
committed under the first covenant.

Now I have to quibble slightly with the translation in verses 16-17.

Most translations (like the ESV) use the word “will” or “testament” in verses 16-17.

The problem is that the word translated “will” in those two verses
is the same word translated “covenant” in the rest of Hebrews
(including verses 15, 18 and 20).

A more literal translation would be:

“For where there is a covenant, the death of the covenant-maker must be brought forward; for a covenant is valid upon dead bodies, since it is not in force as long as the one who made the covenant is living.”

Plainly in verse 15 we are talking about a “covenant.”
Wills do not have “mediators.”

But what about verses 16-17?

Most commentators think that Hebrews is using a play on words
(because the Greek word *diatheke* can mean either “will” or “covenant”),
but the example here doesn’t fit the ancient idea of a will.

The translation I gave you points to one aspect that is oft-overlooked:

“the death of the covenant-maker must be *brought forward*.”

The ESV says “the death of the one who made it must be established”

The NAS “there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it.”

The word here has nothing to do with “establishing” or “necessitating”
but “bringing.”

The death of the covenant-maker must be *brought*.

In the context of Hebrews 9, there’s a lot of discussion of priests.

What do priests do?

They “bring” sacrifices (the word translated “established” in the ESV
is the word used throughout the OT to speak of the priests
“bringing” sacrifices to God).

What is the problem with the old covenant?

First, the people keep breaking it—so that the son of God (at that rate)
would never enter his inheritance;

and second, the sacrificial system of the first covenant is not finally dealing with sin.

In other words, a death needed to be *brought* that could deal finally with sin.

And where a covenant is involved the death of the covenant-maker must be brought.

In the OT this was done through animal sacrifice.

The death of the animal was your death.

When you brought that goat, or that bull, to the altar,
that animal died in your place.

The priest *brought* your death to God.

You could paraphrase verse 17 by saying,

“a covenant is only valid through the dead bodies of the sacrifices,
since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.”

The word translated “dead” or “death” in verse 17 is plural,

even though the “one who made the covenant” is singular.

This means that verse 17 cannot be talking about the literal death of the covenant-maker.

It is talking about substitutionary death through a sacrifice.

There must be a sacrificial death in order to establish a covenant.

In Genesis 15 God established his covenant with Abraham.

He had Abraham cut the animals in half,

and then God himself passed between the pieces of the animals,
saying, in effect, “may I be cut in two, if I do not keep my covenant.”

But we are not kept guessing as to the meaning of this.

Verses 18-22 explain exactly what he is talking about.

Hebrews immediately starts talking about how the first covenant was established!

c. The Offering of a Once for All Sacrifice (v18-28)

“Therefore, not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood.”

The reference here is from Exodus 24, the ratification of the covenant with Israel.

After Moses had proclaimed the law of God—the book of the covenant,
he sprinkled the book and all the people with the blood of the covenant.

The book of the covenant – the word of God – reveals the purposes of God,
while the blood of the covenant – the sacrifice –
reveals the power of God for salvation.

Think of what Paul says in Romans 1:16

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation”

And what is the gospel?

It is the revelation of the righteousness of God
in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is nothing less than God’s final solution for sin and death.

The book of the covenant and the blood of the covenant need each other:
without the book of the covenant, the blood of the covenant is meaningless
the word of God interprets and explains the sacrifice;
without the blood of covenant, the book of the covenant is powerless
the sacrifice is after all, the *good* news.

Without the sacrifice, the Word of God condemns us.

Without the Word, the sacrifice has no meaning.

And Hebrews shows us this by reminding us of how Moses sprinkled both the book
and the people, saying, “this is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.”

The same book that terrified them in Exodus 20,
now becomes good news, through the blood of the covenant in Ex 24.

This is why the shedding of blood was so pervasive in the OT.

There was a sacrifice for everything!

Everything had to be cleansed by blood.

So if the pattern or copy—the OT sanctuary—had to be cleansed with the “worse” sacrifices,
then we see the necessity of a better sacrifice to cleanse the heavenly things.

Now that may seem odd.

The heavenly things had to be purified? Cleansed?
What does that mean?

The earthly sanctuary—the tabernacle—had to be cleansed annually,
because the earthly tabernacle was God’s dwelling place among an unclean people.
And the uncleanness of the people contaminated the earthly sanctuary.

And now Jesus is about to bring all of these unclean people into the heavenly holy of holies?!
(and remember that the holy of holies stands for “the Age to Come”)
How can God dwell with all these unclean people?

Well, this is why the Son of God became a man.

This is why the very radiance of God’s glory became one of us.

Because only the power of an indestructible life could cleanse once-for-all.

In the OT, the unclean contaminated the clean,

but in the resurrection of Jesus, this is reversed.

In Jesus, the power of the holy cleanses the unclean.

Christ has entered—not the copy—but the true holy place—into heaven itself,
now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly—

this was a once-for-all sacrifice – “*at the end of the ages.*”

Why is it important that this is the *end* of the ages?

This means that your sins have been definitively dealt with.

As Hebrews 10:14 says,

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

There is nothing that can be added to Christ’s perfect and finished sacrifice.

He has not only paid for your sins – but he has perfected you for all time!

We’re going to conclude by singing the Song of Zechariah – the “Benedictus” –
which connects well to our text in Hebrews.

Because Zechariah was a priest from the old covenant who understood the point.

2. By a Redeemer: God Remembered His Holy Covenant (Luke 1:68-79)

a. “For Us” – the Election of Israel (v68-75)

Zechariah gives thanks because God has remembered “his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.”

Zechariah lived in the Mosaic covenant.

He served in the temple—offering the sacrifices that Hebrews describes.

But he understood full well that the salvation of Israel did not depend on their works,
but on the covenant faithfulness of God.

And so he gives thanks that God has “visited and redeemed his people.”

He has done what he promised by the prophets,
“that we should be saved from our enemies.”

Who is this “we”?

For Zechariah, it is plainly the chosen people – Israel.

The prophets had said that God would deliver his chosen people from their enemies,
and so Zechariah believed God’s promises!

Gentiles could be saved (if they repented and were circumcised,
and thus were joined to Israel).

The rest of the NT, though, makes it clear that the election of Israel
was designed as a picture of the election of the new humanity in Jesus Christ –
a new humanity that now includes both Jew and Gentile,
as Gentiles are grafted into the one olive tree.

It’s not as though God set aside Israel –
rather, he has added the nations to Israel –
as Simeon will say in the next chapter:

“my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

But what is the purpose of this salvation?

“That we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days.”

The new covenant also has conditions.

Yes, God has delivered us from our enemies,
and so he commands us to serve him.

Remember Jeremiah 31 – that in the new covenant,
the law will be written on our hearts.

If the law is written on our hearts, then we should be *better* at obedience
than our fathers in the wilderness.

But the conditions of the covenant are not “prerequisites”:

God does not say, “If you walk in holiness and righteousness,
then I will save you.”

Rather the conditions of the covenant are subsequent:

God says, “If I save you, then you will walk in holiness and righteousness.”

b. “The Forgiveness of Their Sins” – the Sovereignty of Grace (v76-79)

Zechariah then goes on to speak of what his son, John, will do,

“you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This was the point of preaching in John’s day –
and it is the point of preaching today!

I proclaim to you today ‘the knowledge of salvation to you, in the forgiveness of your sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God’ in Jesus Christ.

Some of you may be thinking about the next couple weeks with some apprehension.
Maybe you have some awkward family issues to deal with over the holidays.
Maybe you face uncertainty with your work – your finances.

The proclamation of the covenant of grace calls you to turn away from your fears.
God has had mercy upon you.
He has remembered his covenant—the oath that he swore to our father Abraham,
and he has delivered us through the Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ,
so that we might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Let that sink in for a moment:
“so that we might serve him without fear.”

What are you afraid of?
Remember Jesus!
Serve him fearlessly.
If God is for us, who could possibly be against us?
When your fears arise, remember the promises of God in Christ Jesus.
Serve him in holiness and righteousness.

The covenant of grace is not just an abstract doctrine.
The covenant of grace is the bond of your relationship with Christ.
It is the reason that you may serve him without fear.

God has said, may I be cut in half if I do not fulfill my covenant with Abraham.
There is a certain beauty in that image of God passing between the halved animals.
God declares that he will die before he allows his covenant to fail.

And in Jesus Christ, God made good on his promise.
God would not allow his covenant to fail.
He would even send his Son to become a man and die,
before he would break his oath.

Remember that—when you are tempted.
Remember that—when you are suffering.
Remember that—when you want to throw a pity party.

By a single offering Christ Jesus has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

[Song of Zechariah]