

Study 5 — God's New Covenant

The story of our world, broadly speaking, is the attempt of nations and peoples to build a stable community and an assured future, and then, the discovery of our own flawed humanity making this a precarious endeavor. In our study of covenant, we have seen God make unshakable promises concerning his relationship to his people on the one hand and his people regularly failing to meet their covenant provisions on the other. The new covenant we look at now deals with this very matter.

The first mention of a 'new covenant' is in Jeremiah. Although the term appears only once in the Old Testament, it is reflected in other promises made to various prophets. The next usage is by Jesus when he gives us the cup at his Lord's Supper with the words, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). From this, we know it is the covenant under which we most directly live. Paul and the writer of Hebrews also tell us the difference between the old (Mosaic) and new covenant and we will look at these later. But first, we should understand how deeply necessary this new covenant is and what is new about it.

"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 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, though I was their husband, declares the LORD' (Jer. 31:31-32).

We note, first, the old covenant with Moses is broken beyond repair because of the sins of the people, particularly evident in the unrestrained days of Manasseh (2 Kin. 21:10-15). Thorough reforms instituted by King Josiah (a contemporary of Jeremiah) have not changed the heart of the nation and God is about to send his people into captivity. Jeremiah tells us their sins are 'written with a pen of iron' (Jer. 17:1). Judah (Southern tribes) has seen the Northern tribes 'divorced' (Jer. 3:8) but has taken no heed. The actual relationship of God to his people seems ambivalent (cf. Isa. 50:1-2).

God must make a new covenant if he wants to remain in relationship with this people. The covenant implications of the captivity are enormous: the line of kings promised to David given to secure their security and welfare is ended; the temple that assured them of God's presence and forgiveness under the Mosaic covenant is razed to the ground; the people themselves are removed from the land promised to Abraham. Evidence that they still live under God's covenant is gone.

Second, there must be something different about the new covenant that is not in the old one. God had said, '...if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine' (Exod. 19:5). Strictly speaking, if they have not kept the covenant, they are not his treasured possession and cannot receive the blessings of the covenant. There must be something new that is 'not like the covenant made with their fathers'. The answer lies in there being no 'if' in this covenant. God is announcing what he will do and it will involve his having a faithful covenant partner.

The prophecy continues:

For 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 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 sin no more" (Jer. 31:33-34).

We note, first, that the covenant is made with Israel, but then, the blessing of God's covenant with Israel was always with a view to the blessing of the nations.

Second, the law will now be an internal desire of God's people, not an external condition of blessing. In other words, God will have circumcised the heart of his people, that is, taken out the heart of stone and given them a heart of flesh that loves God. In fact, this is anticipated in the old covenant, namely that the circumcision of the heart God required of his people (Deut. 10:16) would in fact, be accomplished by God (Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26). It is clear that there is no fulfillment of this prophecy until we are circumcised in the circumcision of Christ (Col 2:11).

Third, the covenant is now fulfilled from both sides. God's people know God—they don't avoid him (cf. Jer. 2:27; 18:17; 32:33) but face him. The theme song of covenant, 'I will be their God and they shall be my people' is now fulfilled (Jer. 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 34:30; 37:23, 27; Zech. 8:8; 13:9; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; 11:16), a fulfillment first anticipated in God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:7-8) and with Israel (Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 14:2; 26:18). It is the goal of all history (Rev. 21:2-3, 7).

Fourth, the reason this covenant succeeds is because God forgives their sin and remembers their iniquity no more. That is, the sins of Israel, past, present and future, will never be remembered against them. This is given as the reason for their knowing God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21; Gal. 4:4-9). The dynamic of this is spelled out in Hebrews where this whole passage is quoted (8:8-12) and explained. The writer says that Christ, by his own blood will 'purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God' (Heb. 9:14). Knowing that God has nothing against us is powerful in writing God's law on our hearts—that is, to serving him in worship and love.

We now see the significance of Jesus raising this specific promise and covenant when he celebrated the covenant feast of Passover with his disciples on the eve of his death.

'And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer".....likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood"' (Luke 22:15, 20).

'And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"' (Matt. 26:27-28).

We note, first, that Jesus is enacting the covenant promised to Jeremiah—something promised first to Israel. This means that all that has gone before in Israel's covenant relation with God is being 'signed over' to all who participate in this new covenant meal. The promises given to them, the promises renewed in the context of failure and the unbreakable nature of this new covenant now belong to those who participate in this new covenant. Gentiles, formerly excluded from God's covenants of promise, are now included (Eph. 2:11-22).

Second, the bond in blood, in which sanctions apply to covenant breakers, is being established with Jesus as the liable party. This harks back to the smoking fire pot and flaming brand that passed between severed animals in Abraham's vision. It recalls the blood sprinkled against the altar in the covenant made with Israel. It fulfills the Suffering Servant/King by whose stripes we are healed.

Third, Jesus says he has eagerly desired to have this Passover feast with his disciples. This strong feeling would be natural enough given that the Passover was Israel's national remembrance of their origins. But all was not well between God and his people Israel. They had broken the covenant and their relationship with God was more formal than real. God had promised a new covenant relationship with them, based on new promises and Jesus was coming to establish this new covenant. He was coming to enact the mercy promised to their forefathers (Luke 1:72) and was eager to see it done. If Moses was covenant head for Israel and 'put his life on the line' to see the covenant fulfilled (Exod. 32:31-32), Jesus as new covenant Head makes his body and blood the security of the covenant between God and his people. God is more eager to establish a relationship with us that we are with him and this is

the eagerness Jesus has as he comes to the Covenant Feast. He knows there are penalties associated with a broken covenant—a curse rather than the promised blessing. We may have become casual about a relationship with God but God has not.

Fourth, the specific blessing of Christ's blood is forgiveness for us, the remission of sin and the remission of penalties against us. Through this forgiveness, we know God. Through knowing God we will want to do his will. The covenant relationship is now really established. God's promise to be our God and for us to be his people has actually happened.

Fifth, we need to accept his gift of dying instead of us. He said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant. Let all drink of it.' These are powerful words, calling us to participate in a covenant with God that is based on his promise and provision. Jesus is the mediator of this covenant, meaning that our relationship with God is completely dependent on him—what he does and who he is. We can't liken it to 'brokering' a new deal or 'negotiating' a different settlement. Rather, by God's will, Jesus has identified with us—put himself in our place—and borne the consequences. When he rises from the dead, he says 'Peace be with you' (John 20:19-21). He *is* our peace with God (Eph. 2:14). This is the way God is relating to us and the only way we can relate to him—inside this covenant. We may try all manner of ways to have a relationship with God—by meditation, self-humiliation, endless proving and improving of ourselves or bargaining. All this is to no avail. God's covenant can only be established by God's appointed Mediator—his Son (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15).

The newness of this covenant must not be compromised. Human nature wants a negotiated settlement of some kind and so the apostles needed to affirm that God's covenant with us is new.

Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:5-11).

We note, first, that there is no glory for man in this covenant, no pride in being teachers of the law (cf. Matt. 23:6-7; 1 Tim. 1:7). All the glory is God's, both in giving it and conveying it.

Second, the Spirit produces fruit, rather than us producing works (Gal. 5:18-23). It remains that an emphasis that make law a condition of relation to God will always condemn. On the other hand, the work of the new covenant is glorious and the glory will never fade.

The writer of Hebrews also deals at length with those tempted to revert to something less than a covenant fulfilled by Christ and warns us, 'How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation' (Heb. 2:3). He quotes all or some of the passage in Jeremiah 31 two times and his conclusions must be heeded.

'...by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' And, 'Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin' (Heb. 10:14, 18).

Human relationships based on mutual respect are good but only as good as the faithfulness of both parties. God has already reckoned on our unfaithfulness to his Son. He has provided an offering for our wickedness and now calls us into this new covenant or bond with himself. This is what we all need, deeply, and urgently. Nothing could be better than to know that our relationship to God is based on his faithfulness entirely. But then, we find that forgiveness has bonded us to him forever and we want to be faithful to him. This is the covenant in which we live as believers in Jesus Christ. The new covenant calls us to live as faithful covenant partners (2 Corinthians 6:16-18).