

SESSION FIFTEEN

JEREMIAH

The Prediction of the New Covenant (Jer 31)

I. INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 26:28, at the scene of the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus Christ held up the cup of wine before his disciples and announced, ". . . this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins."¹ What came to their minds in those moments as they reclined together around the table? The gospel accounts do not reveal that Jesus had taught explicitly about any new covenant. The covenants with which they were familiar were the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic Covenants. Were they aware that their Lord was picking up on the New Covenant announced by Jeremiah the prophet? Furthermore, what did His blood have to do with Jeremiah's New Covenant, since no mention had been made of anyone's blood in connection with this covenant?

Obviously, we are not told in this verse in Matthew's gospel what they thought or what they understood. What is clear is that this "New Covenant" Christ spoke of was connected with His soon-to-be crucifixion, and that it would provide for the forgiveness of sins. Later New Testament revelation in Hebrews 8–10 certainly clarifies for us that this New Covenant Christ spoke of was specifically that which was spoken of and predicted in Jeremiah 31:31-34. From our post-resurrection perspective, it is easy to see the connection between the death of our Lord Jesus and His announcement of the New Covenant being inaugurated by the shedding of His blood.

Though we as believers today know that the New Covenant applies to us, how do we reconcile this truth with the fact that Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah? No mention was made in Jeremiah about Gentiles. This covenant was with Abraham's race . . . the same as had received the Mosaic Covenant. Is this a justification, then, for spiritualizing Israel to mean the "church"? If not, how do we reconcile Jeremiah's prophecy with the history of Israel?

II. ANTECEDENTS TO JEREMIAH

A. Moses

Since the New Covenant is a contrast with the one inaugurated through Moses, a few comments are appropriate about the covenant given at Sinai. In Exodus 24:7-8 we are told that this previous covenant (the Mosaic Covenant) was inaugurated by the blood of animals. After Moses had received the details of the covenant, he read it to the people and they committed themselves to obeying it. Consequently, the blood of the animals was sprinkled on the Law and on the people to seal the agreement (the people obligated themselves to

¹The covenant referred to is undoubtedly the "New Covenant" as is clear from the parallel passage in Lk 22:20, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."

live up to the demands stipulated by the Law). This covenant only revealed the moral demands of a righteous God. There was nothing inherent in the Law to enable the people to keep the demands of the Law.

At the end of his life and ministry, Moses could say that the people did not have a "heart" for keeping this Law (Deut 29:4).

What was clear was that the people would indeed turn away from the LORD and experience the curses predicted for disobedience. However, ultimately the people would be restored to the LORD in blessing. The details of this ultimate restoration were clarified in Deuteronomy 30:1-10 and would include the following elements:

1. restoration from captivity
2. experiencing God's compassion
3. regathered from Gentile lands
4. possessing the promised land
5. YHWH's prospering and multiplying them
6. the circumcision of their hearts
7. obedience to the LORD
8. YHWH rejoicing over them "for good"

The verses in Deuteronomy 30 which followed were important because they clarified that this would be attained by faith: "The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (30:14).

The elements listed above are important, because the very same ones are reiterated by Jeremiah in the context of Jeremiah 30–33. The promise of a "circumcised heart" must not be overlooked. This was the anticipation that ultimately YHWH's people would have a *changed heart* for the doing of His will. The great commandment is that His people should love Him with all their heart (Deut 6:4). This will have its full realization when the New Covenant is consummated with Israel (as it is for those of us who have already entered into the New Covenant). Though not clearly stated as such, the New Covenant is anticipated in Deuteronomy 30 by Moses . . . the very one through whom the "Old Covenant" was inaugurated.

B. Isaiah

It should not surprise us that some glimpse of the New Covenant should be found in the writings of Isaiah, since so much of Messiah's kingdom was revealed to him. Isaiah did speak of the nation experiencing devastation "until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high" (Isa 32:15; cf. Isa 44:3; Joel 2:28-32). Even more significant are the verses in Isaiah 59:20-21 in which YHWH speaks of "My covenant with them." This was qualified by the added details of YHWH's Spirit upon them and the obedience to His words through successive generations. Significantly, the Apostle Paul appeals to this passage in Romans 11:26-27 in speaking about Israel's future salvation when mercy is extended to them. Thus, Isaiah (writing about a hundred years before Jeremiah) anticipated a covenant involving God's Spirit and resulting in obedience (cf. Isa 55:3-5 which hints at Gentile participation with Israel).

III. JEREMIAH 30–33

A. *The General Context*

These chapters from the book of Jeremiah are usually regarded as a unit. They are cast in the context of the very near doom to fall upon Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Chapter 29 (which precedes) is composed of a letter written to those who had been previously exiled by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. Chapter 32, in the midst of this unit, notes a date of 587 BC (just prior to the final devastation in 587). The chapter which follows this unit (i.e., ch 34) also provides an historical date of 588-587 BC when Nebuchadnezzar's army was putting Jerusalem under siege. Hence, the context is the dark and gloomy days of Judah when she was about to be devastated by Babylon. Was this to be the end of Judah? In such a crisis moment, it was appropriate that Jeremiah would pause and hold out hope—Israel will not perish as a nation. Fittingly, chapters 30–33 can be called the "book of Consolation."

Two key phrases provide convincing evidence that these four chapters should be regarded as a unit. Of frequent repetition running through chapters 30–33 are the phrases "Behold, days are coming" and "I will restore their fortunes" (regarding the latter, see 29:14; 30:18; 31:23; 32:44; and 33:7,11,26).

Chapter 30, which opens the unit, begins by speaking of the return from captivity and the restoration of blessings. Although the context might suggest that the fulfillment of this would be in the near future with the return from the Babylonian captivity, further reflection seems to indicate that this looks beyond the political upheavals of the Babylonian power in light of the eschatological direction of the passage:

- 1) The phrase "days are coming" looks toward eschatological times, not simply the near future (cf. 3:16; 16:14; 23:5; 31:27,31). The use in 23:5 does specify the messianic age.
- 2) The phrase "days are coming" occurs again in 33:14, and the fulfillment is in the days when Messiah of the line of David is raised up to execute justice and righteousness on the earth.
- 3) Jacob was not "saved" (i.e., delivered) from that day of distress brought on by Babylon (30:7).
- 4) The announcement of distress, "Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it" (30:7) must be compared with the words of Christ in Matthew 24:21 (cf. Dan 12:1). He predicted that the greatest time of trouble was yet future (and He obviously spoke long after the Babylonian era).
- 5) Jeremiah 30:8 pictures the removal of Gentile domination, which did not happen when Babylon capitulated.
- 6) Jeremiah 30:9 pictures both physical and spiritual salvation, which is hard to reconcile with the return from Babylon in 538 BC.

The Babylonian invasion and the return from Babylon are not the fulfillment of these chapters, though they are an appropriate base for these predictions. The final fulfillment must await the eschatological messianic age.

B. *Jeremiah 30*

The important contribution that ch 30 makes is the fact that Israel must undergo a severe time of tribulation . . . "the time of Jacob's distress" (30:7). The Babylonian invasion was simply a foretaste of a more ultimate time of trouble (see above for the eschatological context). Yet, Jacob will be "saved" from it. Jeremiah 30:9 adds the detail, "But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them." Interestingly, the Jewish Targum for this verse reads, "Messiah, Son of David their king." Three times in this chapter the phrase "restore the fortunes" is mentioned (verses 3, 18, and 24). This is a reference to the

restoration of blessings anticipated by Deuteronomy 30, and fulfilled in the reign of Messiah. As this happens, God promises "And you shall be My people, and I will be your God" (Jer 30:22). This should be compared with Exodus 19:5-6; it looks at restoration to a position of fellowship and worship in the bond of the covenant and with God's covenant blessings upon them. Though in one sense Israel is always God's people, they are not always fulfilling their calling of what God intended them to be as His witness to the unbelieving world.

C. *Jeremiah 31*

The same terminology continues in this chapter as well. The chapter opens with the promise "At that time . . . they shall be My people." The time referred to is that just mentioned in Jeremiah 30:24, namely "the latter days."

Jeremiah 31:15-22 depicts Israel's lamentable present (with emphasis on the ten northern tribes). Rachel is lamenting the exile of her children in 722-721 BC (and possibly also the exile to come in 587 BC). Ramah was a town five miles north of Jerusalem, where exiles were gathered before deportation to Babylon (cf. 40:1).

Rachel weeping is a poetical figure looking forward to her seeing her posterity carried off into exile. . . . She who had so longed for children (cf. Gen 30:1) is cruelly bereaved of them, but God purposes to restore them.²

Hence, she can stop mourning because of the comforting promise of their return.

Judah's bright future is depicted in Jeremiah 31:23-26, and national blessing under Messiah is given in 31:27-30. Messianic times are evident by the formula "the days are coming" (cf. 30:3). Whereas invasions and deportations had taken man and beast from the land, the LORD will reverse these catastrophes and "resow" the land, i.e., restore the land in prosperity (as vs 28 confirms).

The next two verses (vv 29-30) revolve around a proverb involving the fathers and their children. This looks at the bitterness of the exiles who considered themselves as suffering for the sins of previous generations rather than for their own (cf. Ezek 18:2-4). Hence, they insinuate that God has been unjust in dealing with them. However, in the messianic day no one will voice this complaint, for they will realize that they have suffered for personal guilt.

D. *God's New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34)*

Once again we have the phrase "Days are coming" . . . an eschatological formula that places the prophecy in messianic times in the *day of the LORD*, the consummation period of the nation's history. The mention of a *new* covenant signals a radical change in God's economy (i.e., His ways of dealing with and relating to the nation). This reveals that the Mosaic Covenant was obviously not God's ultimate intention, since another covenant is deemed necessary.

The recipients of this "New Covenant" are specified to be the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This must not be spiritualized to mean the *church* since no former covenant had been made with her in coming out of Egypt (31:32). The very same ones who had received the former covenant when they came out of Egypt are the ones who are to receive this New Covenant.

²Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1986), 570.

What is not clarified (but which is nonetheless true) is that this New Covenant was not restricted to Israel. The death that implements the New Covenant for Israel does so for all sinners for all time. Feinberg notes,

Because Israel rejected the covenant in the first advent, Gentiles availed themselves of its provisions (cf. Rom 9:30-33); and Israel will yet ratify it at the climax of her history (cf. Zech 12:10–13:1). Thus it is correct to say that all believers in Christ are by virtue of this covenant grafted into the stock of Abraham (cf. Rom 11:16-24).³

Though not all the blessings promised Israel may now be appropriated by believers today, there is some degree of fulfillment with the church. The New Covenant is bound up with the crucifixion of Christ for all mankind. "When Israel refused to enter into the covenant (cf. Isa 53; Matt 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-23), God having but one way of salvation for all ages of history, the offer of redemption (the procuring means of the covenant) went out to all people."⁴

1. Jeremiah 31:32.

This "New Covenant" is not like the Mosaic Covenant because that covenant was one of legal obligation ("If you do . . . I will do"). Hence, it was incumbent on both parties to maintain its provisions. It was faulty because it depended on Israel's obedience, which they obviously did not maintain.

2. Jeremiah 31:33.

In this verse, the aspect of a national covenant is emphasized again. The phrase "after those days" refers to a time after the return from exile. Yet the fulfillment will not be following the return from the Babylonian captivity, but following a future eschatological return. It is after this future eschatological return from exile that the nation of Israel will experience the writing of the law upon their hearts, i.e., an internalization of the law. Feinberg comments,

Instead of changing his covenant relationship to his people because they broke the covenant, in his grace God finds a way whereby they will not break the new covenant. How can this be done? God will write the law within them; on their heart he will inscribe it. The old covenant had been engraved in stone. The new covenant will include a revolutionary change in will, heart, and conscience. It will be an internal rather than an external covenant. . . . The core of the new covenant is God's gift of a new heart (cf. Ezek 36:25-27). Herein lies the sufficient motivation for obeying God's law. Basic to obedience is inner knowledge of God's will coupled with an enablement to perform it, all founded on the assurance that sins are forgiven.⁵

The doctrine of regeneration should come as no surprise, for this is exactly what the New Covenant implied.

This inward knowing of God's will and a new heart result in the renewed relationship with His people: "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." This indicates that they are restored to God's favor and thus in a position to serve Him once again as a covenant people.

³Ibid., 575.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 576.

But how do we account for this new heart and the internalization of the law? Parallel to the idea of "put My law within" is the declaration in Ezekiel 36:26-27 that God will put His Spirit within. Ware explains,

God's sure and certain remedy to this problem of covenant infidelity is to effect a fundamental transformation of human agents under the new covenant, and he does this as his Spirit indwells those covenant participants (Ezek. 36:27), making his law a very part of their inner life (Jer. 31:33).⁶

3. Jeremiah 31:34.

The New Covenant also brings the promise that "All will know the LORD." The fulfillment of this aspect will be in the coming kingdom, for only believers (whether Jew or Gentile) will be permitted to go into Messiah's kingdom. The climax of the passage is found in the latter part of vs 34 with the promise of forgiveness of sins. Although the Old Covenant made provision for temporal forgiveness of some sins (through the sacrificial system), this New Covenant will make a permanent provision for sins. This is the basis of the New Covenant. The provision of complete forgiveness of sins makes possible the gracious bestowment of all New Covenant blessings. What is not specified in this passage is how God could provide such forgiveness. Whereas sins under the Old Covenant required the death of a substitute and the shedding of blood, the New Covenant does the same thing on another level. Although Jeremiah does not state so directly, this New Covenant will be possible because of the shedding of the blood of Messiah Himself. Isaiah 53 makes this abundantly clear . . . God's suffering servant will die for the sins of His people. This better sacrifice results in a better forgiveness . . . an eternal one, such that no other sacrifice is thus needed. Hodges summarizes the heart of the matter when he says,

The Old Covenant failed because of the sinfulness of the nation, for which it had no remedy. The New Covenant, however, has such a remedy.⁷

The New Covenant's remedy is complete forgiveness and a changed heart. The context of the New Covenant in Jeremiah implies that the New Covenant will have a time of fulfillment with Israel as a nation (31:31), and it will be at the time that Messiah (the Son who fulfils the Davidic promise of 2 Sam 7:14) comes to execute justice and righteousness on the earth (Jer 33:14ff). The time of ultimate fulfillment is also specified to be in the days when "Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety" (33:16).

IV. FURTHER NEW TESTAMENT CORRELATION

Mention has already been made of the announcement by Jesus Himself that it is His blood that secures the New Covenant (Matt 26:28; cf. Lk 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25). Paul writes to the Corinthians in 2 Cor 3 about the implications of the New Covenant for these Gentile believers, contrasting this with the Old Mosaic Covenant: "You are a letter of Christ . . . written . . . with the Spirit of the living God . . . on tablets of human hearts" (3:3). Paul also spoke about being servants of a "New Covenant" (2 Cor 3:6). In this passage, then, the Apostle Paul clearly establishes the link between the New Covenant and the Spirit. The indwelling Spirit had not been the provision for the disciples during Jesus' earthly ministry (Jn 7:37-39; 14:17; 16:7; and Acts 2:33). Ware concludes, "The superior glory of the new covenant is seen in its transforming power to enable its covenant participants to live increasingly righteous lives through the Spirit."⁸

⁶Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992), 77.

⁷Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary (NT)*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 800.

⁸Ware, 88.

The most substantial New Testament treatment, however, is provided by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 8–10 (cf. 12:24). To summarize chapter 8:

- Context - Christ's priesthood is superior to the Aaronic priesthood.
- Why? - He has a more excellent ministry!
- Reason? - He is the mediator of a better covenant having better promises.
- Proof? - Appeal to the announcement of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 (which implies the other covenant was not sufficient; it was inadequate).

In chapter 9 he delineates the nature of the sacrifice that stood behind each covenant and the benefits that these sacrifices could provide. Under the Old Covenant, the blood of calves and goats served to cleanse the flesh, outward ceremonial purification (Heb 9:13). The sacrifice of the New Covenant, the blood of Messiah Jesus, is able to cleanse one's conscience from dead works to serve the living God!

Furthermore, the author of Hebrews picks up on the eternal provision of this better sacrifice: "But now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (9:26). He emphasizes this point again in 10:18. It should not surprise us that the Old Covenant rituals should be dropped. In the Old Testament, the prediction of a final and complete provision of forgiveness logically implies that sacrifices would one day be unnecessary.

So far, it is not difficult to follow the logic of the author of Hebrews concerning the superiority of the New Covenant. The more difficult issue is the application to Gentiles, seeing that they were never specified in the promises of Jeremiah 31. The New Testament, however, affirms that Christians (both Jew and Gentile) gain the blessings intended by the New Covenant. Hodges comments,

This perception does not lead to an inappropriate confusion between Israel and the church. The New Covenant is God's appointed vehicle for fulfilling the Abrahamic blessings to Israel. But the Abrahamic Covenant also promised universal blessing, so the New Covenant becomes as well God's vehicle of salvation for believers since the Cross. To say this is not to say anything more than Jesus did when He declared that 'salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22). In no way should this impede the perception of the Christian church as a unique interadvent body, closely united to Christ as His bride and significantly distinct from the nation of Israel. But inasmuch as all salvation is through the Cross of Christ, it is also through the blood of the New Covenant.⁹

V. THE FUTURE ASPECT OF THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant has a present aspect for everyone who believes in Christ, because the New Covenant is grounded in His shed blood at Calvary. There is also a future aspect to the New Covenant, however, when the thrust of Jeremiah 31 will be fulfilled with Israel as a nation. With this, Ware agrees,

. . . only the spiritual aspects of new-covenant promise are now inaugurated in this age; the territorial and political aspects, though part of God's new-covenant promise, await future fulfillment. The fulfillment of God's new covenant thus should not now be viewed as an all-or-nothing affair. Rather, it is best seen as

⁹Hodges, 800.

partially realized now (spiritual aspects of forgiveness and the indwelling Spirit for all covenant participants) and later to be realized in its completeness (when all Israel is saved and restored to its land).¹⁰

The confirmation of this is given in Romans 11 by the Apostle Paul. He sees Israel as under a "partial hardening" now, but yet to experience a salvation and restoration to the Lord when God has completed His Gentile harvest (11:25-26). Then he quotes two verses from the Old Testament, uniting them in thought. The Deliverer (i.e., the Messiah) will come to Zion, cleanse the nation (Isa 59:20), and thus the New Covenant will be fulfilled with Israel (Rom 11:27). Certain benefits of the New Covenant are realizable now, because the New Covenant is based upon Christ's work at the cross (the most notable benefit being the forgiveness of sins and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit). Yet the complete fulfillment of the New Covenant envisioned by Jeremiah awaits the return of Jesus Christ to save His chosen people, Israel, at the culmination of the Great Tribulation. This will prepare Israel (along with all others who have put their faith in Messiah Jesus) for participation in Messiah's kingdom.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

Has your heart been "circumcised" by the Spirit of God? The Apostle Paul writes in Rom 2:28-29, *"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."*

Jews of old often considered their circumcision as a sign of being a true Jew. Paul corrects that notion, for unless the Spirit of God *changes* the heart, the person is still really the same. When a person is born-again at the time of putting his faith in Christ, he receives this *spiritual circumcision*. We are inwardly changed, so that we can love God and respond to Him in obedience. This spiritual circumcision is the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise made in Jeremiah 31. Once we have this, we are not enslaved to sin. Of course, Satan would like to keep us in a lifestyle of disobedience, but we are now free to obey (cf. Rom 6). And we can obey, because we have the Holy Spirit residing within. If we fail to draw upon the Spirit's help, we may find ourselves sliding back into old sin habits. If we allow ourselves to be filled with the Spirit, however, we will experience a greater and greater desire to walk in obedience to God and please Him in everything we do. Eventually we learn that *sinning* is no fun (it always harms us), and we have greater joy in our lives by walking with the Lord. Don't let Satan rob you of the *joy of obedience* that the Lord has made possible for you. In Christ, you are a "New Covenant person."

¹⁰Ware, 94-5.