

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This is the word of the Lord.

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING:** John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

*“Written on our Hearts”*

“It’s a new thing.” “It’s a new thing.” We hear that a lot these days. Whether it’s a new style (Bell Bottoms, Shoulder Pads), or a new turn of a phrase, (That’s so sweet, so bad), or a new product (“Windows Vista”, “New Coke”). “It’s a new thing”. We hear that a lot. And when we do, we wonder whether this is a fleeting thing that won’t be around in 6 months, or whether it will be a permanent change.

Today in our reading, the prophet, Jeremiah, speaks for God to the people of Judah in about 587 BCE. They are in exile in Babylon, their beautiful city, Jerusalem, is in ruins, their Temple is gone, their kings killed. They’re in this situation because they broke the covenant God made with them. They ignored the commandments and lived arrogantly and self-righteously. This weakened them and they were conquered, enslaved and ruthlessly deported. They are now without hope. And they are wondering what God, if God is still present, is going to do? Jeremiah speaks, *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”* *“I will make a new covenant.”* God has not abandoned them. God is, in fact, doing a “new thing” and it has the feel of a permanence.

The newness of this thing does not lie in a change in the character of God. God continues to be the steadfast, loving, merciful God that God has always been. God has remained faithful when the people have not. And God has not forgotten the promises made so long ago with Noah, with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses. In fact, we hear God repeat the same words as were used before, *“I will be your God and you shall be my people.”* God has not changed.

But what HAS changed is that God is finding a new way that God’s people can live into being the treasured possession that they are. *“I will put my law WITHIN them, and I will write it on their HEARTS...No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”* This is what is new...not the content, but the means of the covenant.

You see, through the 10 commandments, the old covenant shaped the relationship between God and God’s people, but it was external. The commandments were, IN FACT, written on

stone tablets and hidden away in the Ark of the Covenant. The Book of the Law, containing the stipulations of the covenant, likewise was stored and forgotten until it was rediscovered in the reign of King Josiah. This external law could be broken and the scrolls lost, but the new covenant that God is making is internal. As one preacher says, *“With this new covenant, there is no more waiting around for humankind to wise up and obey, no more of their temper tantrums when they do not, and no more elaborate systems of punishment and reward.”*<sup>1</sup> The law is to be written on the people’s hearts. “Everyone will KNOW the Lord from the king to the stable boy, from the oldest elder to the youngest child.”<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, God is promising to fill the human’s hearts with a longing to receive God as God. Do you remember that *Sunday School* song which goes, *“Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart Lord Jesus?* Well, that’s pretty much it. We all have been given an internal longing, an ever growing desire to Know the Lord. It is written on our hearts.

*I think C.S. Lewis’ story about the persistent longing inside of him is very inspiring. I will read a summary of it by David Downing. CS Lewis, contemporary theologian and great intellectual, had an idyllic childhood during which he was taken to church numerous times, however when he lost his mother at the age of 9, he also lost his father, because his distraught father sent him and his brother to boarding school. It was a horrible, brutal experience which resulted in CS Lewis devolving into despair and claiming himself an atheist. Lewis said, “Nearly all I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real, I thought grim and meaningless”. In his imagination, he loved to read about truth, goodness, and beauty, but in his reason he held to a dark view of life. He was drawn toward the occult. However, “the tension between reason and imagination,” Downing says, “between the hemispheres of his brain, continued to increase.” Once, while reading George MacDonald's book *Phantastes*, he was surprised that something came off the pages and “baptized his imagination.” He couldn't put it into words at that time, but later came to describe it as holiness. He was simultaneously*

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *“Blood Covenant”* In: *Gospel Medicine*. (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1995), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker. *“Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34”*. [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1089](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1089). (accessed 3-16-18).

*continuing his intellectual advancement and was drawn to philosophers who happened also to be Christians. They began to have great influence on him, people like Chesterton, Milton, Coghill, Dyson and Tolkien. And he was drawn away from those like Voltair, Nietzsche, and other whom he'd previously identified with theoretically. They seemed shallow and tinny. He is quoted as saying "Christianity seemed very sensible 'apart from its Christianity'". One by one the arguments that were obstacles to faith disappeared. While riding on a bus once, Lewis had the sense that he was "holding something at bay or shutting something out". He felt he could either open the door or let it stay shut, but to open the door "meant the incalculable." He finally submitted himself to Christ, and "resolved the dialectic of desire" he'd been struggling with since childhood. Downing says that Lewis was the "most thoroughly converted man he'd ever met." His journey from atheist to "reluctant convert", to influential writer, perhaps the most highly regarded Christian writer of our time, was something beyond even his imagination.<sup>3</sup>*

Right!...and inner desire to know God. Now, what comes when we know God is an intense desire to also live in God's way. We want to, are compelled to be the Light, Life and Love that God is to us, to the world, and to have our sinful loyalties put to death. Again, God promises to do this. God says, *"I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sin no more."* God's ever-present grace offers us forgiveness, a natural call back into relationship.<sup>4</sup> Professor Doug Bratt says that this is possibly God's greatest miracle... *"not the parting of the Red Sea or the rescue of Jonah from the whale, but instead, the softening of stony human hearts and the implantation of the desire to do the right thing."*<sup>5</sup> (long pause)

Now, God's new covenant is partially fulfilled after Judah returns from Babylon. The people do, in fact, begin to acknowledge the Lord alone. They give up worshipping images of God, and they gather in the town square to hear and learn from the reading of the Law. They do this as they rebuild their Temple! But it is, however, another time when the prophecy finds complete fulfillment. *"The days are coming says the Lord"*.

<sup>3</sup> From Art Lindsley, *"The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis' Journey to Faith"*. <http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/node/48> . (accessed 3/17/18).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *"Blood Covenant"*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Doug Bratt. *"Jeremiah 31:31-34"* [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-5b-2/?type=old\\_testament.lectionary](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-5b-2/?type=old_testament.lectionary). (accessed 3/16/18).

It is when Jesus, God in flesh and blood, comes to be with us, that we are able to REALLY see and know God, at least as much as our human minds can KNOW God. We look to Jesus and can see God's character. We look to Jesus and know how to live the God's way, for Jesus loved God and neighbor perfectly, and we look to Jesus to feel his Holy Spirit indwelling us. And finally, we look to Jesus and his cross and are drenched in his forgiving love. In fact, on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus says to his disciples, "*This is the cup of the new covenant, THE NEW COVENANT in my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*" (repeat) In Jesus, the new covenant, promised first to the Jews in exile, is fulfilled.

(Now, just an aside. When Jesus says, "the new covenant **in my blood**", he is saying that he is entering into what is still practiced in other cultures, what had huge meaning to those of the ancient world, that is, a blood trust/covenant. When friends seal a promise to each other with sharing of blood, each pledges to be kin to the other, binding themselves together for life in an indissoluble union. From that day forward, they do not live for themselves. They take each other's life and nature into themselves).<sup>6</sup>

When Jesus then lifts the cup and identifies it as "the new covenant in his blood", he is telling his disciples, those who would soon betray, deny or abandon him, and he is telling us that he is sharing his life with us. He telling us that he is putting to death the sin which aims to obstruct this relationship. In essence, he says, "*I know who you are. You will not be innocent of the blood represented in this cup, but I will not let that come between us. This is my gift to you. Let my life become yours, through the blood of this covenant, this new, this last covenant.*"<sup>7</sup>

Yes, the new covenant is the last one. It is the ultimate covenant, not just a temporary new thing. It is God's promise from before time and forever, now spelled out in flesh and blood, by his death, resurrection and his presence with us each day. God has bound his very self to us IN life and God has bound his very self with us FOR life, and can do no more. God has written the divine law of love permanently on our hearts! "*I shall be your God and you shall be my people.*" Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *Gospel Medicine*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *Gospel Medicine*, 63.