

Changes Promised

Devotional Reading: Psalm 103:17–22

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1–40; John 1:17; Hebrews 8:7–13

Today's Scripture: Jeremiah 31:29–34; John 1:17

I. Change in Attitude

Jeremiah 31:29–30

²⁹ **“In those days people will no longer say,**

**‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’**

³⁰ **Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.**

29. Many changes are to characterize the forthcoming restoration, including the rejection of how a certain proverbial expression is misused. Those already exiled in Babylon are using this proverb to shift the blame and exonerate themselves.

The intent of this proverb’s misuse is impossible to miss. Eating a *sour grape* is unpleasant; it causes the mouth to pucker. This puckering effect is transferred from the older generation, who have eaten unwisely, to the following generation, who are seen as innocent victims of their ancestors’ actions. Thus we have a metaphor for generational blame-shifting.

30. In Jeremiah’s prophetic scenario, the shifting of blame will cease. The old proverb is replaced by a new statement about reality. Each person will be liable and, as a sinner, will *die for his own iniquity*.

In some ways, this is a hopeful promise, for it dispels any idea that the nation is cursed and incapable of thriving in the future. Each generation determines how faithful or sinful it will be based on its own actions. We should be careful to point out that this is actually a “new again” reality because the Law of Moses has consistently prohibited imposing the death penalty on children for parental sin or vice versa per Deuteronomy 24:16.

II. Change in Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31–34

³¹ **“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,**

“when I will make a new covenant

**with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.**

³² **It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,”**

declares the LORD.

³³ **“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD.**

“I will put my law in their minds

**and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God,
 and they will be my people.
³⁴ No longer will they teach their
 neighbor,
 or say to one another, ‘Know the
 LORD,’
 because they will all know me,
 from the least of them to the
 greatest,”
 declares the LORD.
 “For I will forgive their
 wickedness
 and will remember their sins no
 more.”**

31. The verses that follow this new approach to generational culpability forms the basis for one of the most important texts in the Old Testament for anticipating the new covenant. The beneficiaries of the *new covenant* are to be those who broke the old one: *the people of Israel* and *the people of Judah*. Correcting the blame-shifting will not be enough. The Lord is moving beyond attempts to guide people back to him via the old covenant.

But when is this to occur? When will *the days* come? Although Jeremiah speaks of *Israel* and *Judah*, additional context in subsequent verses and later fulfillment establish that this comes with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

32. Here the old *covenant* is portrayed in marriage language. *The Lord* is the *husband*, and the people, collectively, are the wife. This kind of metaphor is frequent in the prophets. Ezekiel symbolically pictures the Lord as finding Israel as an abandoned baby girl, raising her, and then entering a marriage covenant with her (Ezekiel 16:4–8). But this wife becomes a prostitute, a symbol of Israel’s worship of other gods, including sacrificing their own children to idols. The book of Hosea is built around the prophet’s marriage to a

prostitute, whose unfaithfulness is likened to the idolatry of Israel (Hosea 1:2). Jeremiah himself pictures the Lord as married to two unfaithful sisters, Israel and Judah, who both commit spiritual adultery and must be divorced (Jeremiah 3:8).

Jeremiah pictures the very beginning of Israel as a nation like a marriage between the Lord and the people. At that time, the Lord *took them by the hand*. The Lord’s rescue of the Israelites from *Egypt* was like the husband leading his new wife from the home of her father to his own home. Such imagery stirs our hearts, suggesting the care and closeness possible within the closest of human relationships.

However, the vows of this symbolic marriage between the Lord and Israel were soon and often violated. Israel *broke* the Lord’s *covenant*, resulting in the language of adultery for their breaking of the covenant given through Moses. They violated this covenant before they even entered the promised land!

That warning proved sadly true as the Israelites proved themselves incapable of keeping the covenant. The numerous episodes that follow help us understand why the new covenant was not to be *like the covenant* the Lord *made with their ancestors*. A new method was necessary.

33. Jeremiah reveals a new approach. The old covenant is written on stone, and the people of its era were to internalize its laws. The new covenant, by contrast, is written on *minds* and *hearts* by God himself. It is through the Holy Spirit, who indwells each and every Christian, that God does so (Romans 8:5–11). Obedience will not depend merely on human ability. Rather, God’s people will exhibit Spirit-empowered, loving obedience to his ways, which will flow from the inside out.

During Jeremiah’s ministry, Israel’s collective “heart” is described as uncircumcised (see Jeremiah 9:26). This

imagery depicts self-exclusion from the covenant God made with his people. Reference to this covenant goes back even further than that of the Mosaic covenant, to the covenant with Abraham. The only way for a covenant with the Lord to succeed was to begin with new hearts, hearts that are spiritually circumcised.

Older English versions of this verse use the phrase “inward parts” in place of “minds.” The expression of God’s law being written on “inward parts” may be a reference to the ancient Near Eastern practice known as *extispicy*. In this practice, diviners would seek revelation from a deity, asking that the truth be written on the entrails of an animal to be sacrificed. While admittedly an odd image to us today, consider how it would be taken by an audience familiar with such a practice. God’s revelation—his truth, his law, his ways—would be written on his people’s own inward parts.

Note the relationship made possible through this new covenant. The Lord says, *I will be their God, and they will be my people*. When initially establishing his covenant with Israel, the Lord told them they would be his special people, his “treasured possession,” if they “obey me fully and keep my covenant” (Exodus 19:5–6).

34. This verse predicts a perfect state of affairs: no one is needed to teach about the Lord because everyone already has the knowledge. This seems puzzling since we understand that a teaching function does indeed exist under the new covenant.

The paradox and tragedy of Jeremiah’s time was that many Judeans did not know the Lord or follow his ways even though they were hereditary members of God’s people. The express teaching of God’s Word by a select group of priests will no longer be necessary because *they will all know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest*. While this statement of inclusion

initially appears to refer to social class, it also points forward to the eventual inclusion of Gentiles in the new covenant.

III. Change in Mediator

John 1:17

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

17a. To understand the contrast introduced here in John 1:17a, we should consider what immediately precedes it. There, the author declares, “of [the Son’s] fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given” (John 1:16). The translation “in place of grace already given” could be understood to signify something like “grace on top of grace already received.” Or it may carry the idea of the replacement of one kind of grace with another kind. Both ideas carry the significance of “unmerited favor” and set the stage for understanding verse 17.

Moses experienced God’s gracious favor. And the law that came through him was by the initiative of the gracious God. Yet the primary characteristic of the Law of Moses is its “commands,” “decrees,” and “ordinances.” There was nothing inherently wrong with these—quite the opposite! But the passage of time proved humans to be incapable of keeping these 100 percent of the time. So the initial grace of the old covenant received through Moses as mediator needed to be replaced by the grace of a new and superior covenant.

17b. This superior covenant is mediated by a far superior mediator: *Jesus Christ*. Compared to the Law of Moses, his “yoke is easy” and his “burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). To attribute the coming of *truth* to Jesus is not to deny that Moses received truth! The truth Jesus brings is the truth regarding the new covenant.

Involvement Learning

Changes Promised

Into the Lesson

Describe a time when you used a manufacturer's warranty to fix or replace a broken item.

What setbacks that would have resulted without the warranty and how having the warranty helped?

We will study how God offered a new covenant that would redeem his people. As we study, consider why the new covenant is superior to the old covenant.

Key Verse

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

—Jeremiah 31:33b

Into the Word

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. Then locate and identify the following in the text: (a) the key verse that summarizes it all and (b) the eternal promise.

When and how will this promise be fulfilled?

How would the promised new covenant differ from the old one?

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant?

Into Life

Today's study taught us that God's people have been promised the presence of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Lord promises that the Spirit will guide and instruct us. Work with a partner to write down ways you can notice the Holy Spirit's work in each category listed.

1. *Bringing Awareness of Sin*

2. *Giving Desires to Love God Faithfully*

Thought to Remember

Jesus mediates a new covenant based on grace.