

“Grace and Law Meet in the Words of Jeremiah”

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

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"The time is coming," declares the LORD," when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers 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.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house 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. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, '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."

Jeremiah was not a happy man. He saw the depth of human wretchedness, and he could not shut up about it. I bet he had a big voice like a bear. . . His words got under peoples' skin. That is what prophets do. It's part of their job description. Everybody knew Jeremiah was a prophet, and true then as well as today, people mostly ignored him.

By all measures of success, the prophet Jeremiah was a failure. His first prophecy said there was to be an invasion by a mysterious "foe from the north," which never happened. He got ordained, but was booted out for preaching unbearable sermons. Kind of puts the fear of God into us preachers. There are some preachers today who are afraid to say the difficult word, for fear of figurative tomatoes being thrown their direction. Squishy tomatoes did not faze Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet. Jeremiah preached away in his big bear voice high on the temple steps, in full view of everyone.

In a strange but memorable move, Jeremiah fastened an ox yoke to his shoulders. For three years he bumped into irritated pedestrians on

narrow streets with his extra wide wooden shoulders, saying they were "yoked" to the evil King Nebuchadnezzar because of their immorality. Picture that crazy street preacher, wearing a gigantic wooden placard, with the words "You are immoral! Repent!" plastered all over it. You're beginning to see why he was so popular.

Well, the higher ups couldn't stand it anymore, so they threw him in prison. They drug him to the edge of town and dumped him into a cistern (basically a big wide well). The stone lid closed with a loud bang. Hunger, thirst and mud were set loose to divide the spoils of Jeremiah's ignominious life.

He was rescued from death-by-cistern under cover of darkness. Sick of a long life of failure and abuse, Jeremiah resolved to quit making prophetic outcries, but even failed at that. He couldn't keep quiet.¹ He couldn't stop.

Jeremiah's words in today's reading are some of the most often quoted in the Old Testament. This is the only time in the Hebrew Bible we hear anyone talk about the *new covenant*. In this passage, Jeremiah implicitly sets up a contrast between the old and the new covenant. There are 'old covenants' all over the Hebrew Bible. We've talked about a few in recent weeks here during our Lenten series on Grace and Law.

There was the covenant that followed the flood, when God promised Noah he would never destroy the earth again this way. There was the covenant given to Abraham, the one where God promised Abraham land and descendants more numerous than the stars.

And who can forget the stone tablet covenant? These covenants are sprinkled all over the Old Testament, because the Old Testament is first and foremost about relationship. About the relationship between God and God's people.

Then we come to the heart of this passage. God is going to make a new covenant with all God's people. Even though the people messed up and broke the earlier agreements, God persists. What will be different? Well, this time, God will place God's law directly into their hearts. The NIV says, "**I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.**" My translation from the Hebrew is this: "I will give (as in a gift) my law to their inmost part (korbam). I will write it on their heart."

What is new about the new covenant? It is where grace and law meet. The old covenants had grace and law, to be sure, but the new

¹ This part of Jeremiah's history was inspired by an essay written by George William, appearing in beliefnet.com.

covenant goes even further. The new covenant is a different thing, never before seen. The new covenant is without precedent. One preacher put it this way: “What is without precedent is the *law written on the heart*, the covenant at the core of one’s being. God. . . promises to change the people from the inside out. . . This covenant will overcome the conflict between knowing and wanting one thing and doing another.”² To get rid of the conflict between knowing and doing. This is profound.

In the short story entitled “The Happy Hypocrite”, Max Beerbohm writes of change that happens from the inside out. His tale is about a scoundrel named Lord George Hell, a debauched and profligate sinner, who falls wildly in love with an innocent young girl. For him, it is love at first sight.

Lord George boldly proposes marriage to her, but she says that she will only marry a man with the face of a saint. He spends the night wandering the streets, heartbroken. In the morning, he stumbles upon a mask maker’s shop. To win her love, Lord George covers his wicked, bloated features with the false mask of a saint. Long story short, she marries him.

Starting with signing the marriage register as "George Heaven," Lord George makes a total moral conversion by returning ill-gotten wealth to the rightful owners, donating excess money to charities. He then buys a little cottage to live a quiet, modest existence with his bride.

They live happily there until a woman from Hell’s wicked past turns up and exposes him. She rips off his mask. He is astonished to find that beneath the saint’s mask is the face of the saint he has become.

To no longer be a person of hell but a person of heaven? To no longer struggle with doing what I know is right? Oh, don’t you long for that? I know I do. I know St. Paul did. “Why do I keep doing the things I don’t want to do, and why do I continue to avoid doing the things I so long to do?”³ I want to be changed so that I have the capacity to be so faithful to God, the capacity to love so completely, that my very face becomes the face of love. We all want our hearts changed like that,

² Fred Craddock

³ Paraphrase of Romans 17:19-21 “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.”

because that is the way our hearts were created. We were created to know, love, and serve God. Our hearts will be continually restless until such a time as that. Until such a time as all masks are removed and we all wear the face of a saint.

The new covenant. Written on our hearts. The new covenant. Where God's grace and God's law come together in a new way, like a mysterious equation. Where God's grace and God's law are combined to create something unprecedented, never before seen.

Grace + Law= Changed Hearts

Grace + Law= Changed Lives

Grace + Law= Love

"I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." (Matthew 5:17). Jesus. In the middle of that long sermon, standing as he was at the base of that hill, looking up into the crowds craning their necks to catch his words carried on the lakeside breeze, next to the blue lake they called Galilee. As he talked to his followers about the kingdom and blessedness. As he set the bar so very high that not a one of us could ever reach it ("Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.")

In Christ, of course, we see the new covenant made real---incarnated---made physically present among us. In Christ, Grace and Law meet and both are fulfilled.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks for God: "When things are finally the way I want them to be, my people shall all know me, effortlessly, intuitively."

God is still working on us. God is changing hearts all the time. It's far from universal. There's still plenty of us out there who don't quite get it and who are still really worried about laws and who tend to forget they are tempered by God's grace. But Jeremiah's words cut to the heart of the matter and remind us---we are to be made new.

None of us can yet fully claim we are sons and daughters of the new covenant, because you see, the new covenant is still a promise. It is a picture of the way things ought to be, the way things will be, when God rules in our hearts. When all barriers are dissolved, when there will be no mediators, no masks. We will know God directly and fully. Our masks will be gone, and we will see God face to face and God will see us face to face. I for one am glad Jeremiah just couldn't shut up.

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