

The New Covenant

There are times so overwhelmed by loss and injustice that we call out to God, “Where are you?” So it



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was with Israel and Judah as the armies of Babylon arrived to defeat God’s chosen people, decimate the land and turn the best and brightest of Israel into servants of the pagan enemy king. In what seemed the total destruction of God’s people and eradication of God’s promises, the prophet Jeremiah remains in the Promised Land as a testimony and voice of God’s faithfulness. Jeremiah reminds the people: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah” (v. 34).

This covenant announced by Jeremiah is the fifth covenant declaring the unique grace of God. Each covenant reveals the perfection and expansiveness of God’s love and power of restoration. God is always the initiator, the One who overcomes the impossible, the One who eradicates darkness with his light. John 1:4 connects to this covenant: “In Him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men” (NASV). God says this covenant will not be like the covenant announced at Israel’s freedom from Egypt (v. 32). The five Old Testament covenants are like stages of a human life, from toddler to young adulthood, a process of learning how to live spiritually as an adult. Moving through experiences of rebellion, poor choices, learning from mistakes, developing a system of values and finally figuring out there is a better way to live – this is the Israel we read about and realize we are like them.

Chapter 31 is a turning point as Jeremiah moves from the dark images of destruction and judgment to God’s promise of a different future. God does not give up, affirmed by the fact he did not destroy Adam and Eve when they sinned in Eden, he did not destroy humanity with the flood and he continually offers a new beginning throughout Israel’s history. Remember God’s promise to King David, including

the reminder that sin always has consequences (2 Samuel 7:10-15). Each covenant has been different, but the God behind them remains the same.

Faith in God always involves a relationship. Humankind tries to redefine “relationship” as keeping holy rules, banking our good deeds and withdrawing dividends, drawing up a correct doctrinal statement, designing a structure of religious exercises/rituals and establishing a religious hierarchy. The clear idea of “relationship” remains constant: God will give them a new heart so they will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest in society, they will all know the Lord (v. 34).

Out of the ashes, the Lord says, there will come a new people. How is this possible? The Lord says: “I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins” (v. 34). Psalm 103:12 is King David’s vision of God’s forgiveness: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sins from us” (NASV). In the past God “took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” and Israel “broke that covenant” (v. 32), so now God is confronting them and presenting a new covenant beyond adolescent protection to adult responsibility. They must grow up. Everything they had held on to as proof they were chosen or special is gone. But God saw them in the light of his grace, their potential if they would return his love! Through the time of the old covenant, God usually appeared as the husband of an unfaithful wife (v. 32). Compare this to the book of Hosea, which pictures God instructing the prophet to reclaim his unfaithful wife from the slave market. With their old world destroyed, God invites them to a new kind of world, shaped by his transforming love and grace.

To those defeated, exiled people this new covenant must have seemed impossible. So God connects to images of the tangible to help Israel believe God can forgive their sins forever because God is “The one who established the sun to light up the day and ordained the moon and stars to light up the night, who stirs up the sea into crashing waves, whose name is the

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Lord of heavenly forces. If the created order should vanish from my sight, declares the Lord, only then would Israel’s descendants ever stop being a nation before me” (vv. 35-36). If that were not enough, God concludes that if humankind could measure and explain all that exists and its origin, then and only in that impossibility, would his promise be nullified (v. 37)! I seriously doubt we will ever understand the beginning of reality!

God is the origin of all and only he can reach outside the eternal to touch our mortal world. The Old Testament is a recounting of all the ways humankind has brutalized this world and itself while crafting religions that foster fear, selfishness, and ignorance. Connected to the earth as we are, it is difficult to see God, who is totally other while desiring to relate to mortals. Until the covenant with Jeremiah the constant reality was our separation from God. But with each successive covenant the idea of God loving us has grown clearer. God is bridging the gap between himself and us, a divide that will be crossed through God’s Son, our Savior.

We continue to need God’s laws for balanced living and a healthy sense of our inadequacies. But do not forget the absolute necessity of God’s grace, for only that can make life as God intended it to be. God’s law teaches us how we should live. Jesus models how we can live. Christ is God giving himself to us so we can be his children beyond the limits of immediate reality.

When you accept God’s gift of life, when you decide to live as his child (with his help), then God’s truth will grow within you and you will “know the Lord!” (v. 34). God invites Jeremiah and his people to seek a relationship with him that will change them and their world forever. In the coming of Jesus Christ that invitation becomes yours!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.