

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
September 14, 2014

Lesson Text: Jeremiah 31:31-37
Lesson Title: Restoration

Introduction

If you have ever participated in the Lord's Supper you have probably heard your pastor read Jesus' words in Matthew 26:28, "*For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*" The words Jesus said, "*For this is my blood of the new testament...*" comes from Jeremiah 31:31 and is without question one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. It is here that God declared that a new age of grace would replace the one governed by the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

God has chosen to relate to man, not on the basis of a whim or the mood of a moment, but rather on the basis of a covenant. In the Old Testament, God's covenant was *anticipated* in Abraham and *inaugurated* through Moses and the Law at Mount Sinai. That covenant was to have found its *consummation* in the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, who were to be the missionary people of God.

Instead of fulfilling their great mission, Israel frustrated the purpose of God's covenant. By the days of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, that frustration had reached a peak that would bring judgment and captivity. Few if any of us can imagine how difficult it was in the days when Judah was collapsing as a nation. It is a frightening reality when sin is reaped and the consequences of unbiblical choices are experienced. Although Jeremiah had prophesied captivity was coming, most of the people had hoped it wouldn't be as bad as Jeremiah said, or that outside military intervention from Egypt, or some other kind of miracle by God would spare them judgment and captivity. Their hopes were not realized and the nation experienced captivity in Babylon for 70 years.

Scripture teaches that God's ultimate purposes will not be hindered by man's sin and rebellion. As believers, we sometimes question that truth because we can't see God at work. From our limited human perspective it is hard to see the end from the beginning. We live in a culture of ten second news clips and we expect problems to be solved as quickly as they are in a thirty minute television program. Real life doesn't work that way. People need hope for the long journey of life.

Only God has a timeless and eternal perspective on the events of history. It's one thing to be flying 20,000 feet over mountains and valleys and another thing

to be on the ground walking through those mountains and valleys. Judah had heard Jeremiah's prophesy and now they were living it. And while they may not have been able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, Jeremiah gave them God's promise of restoration. That restoration would come through what Jeremiah described as "a new covenant."

The Promise of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-32)

One of the most beautiful passages of Scripture in all the word of God is found in Jeremiah 31:4-14. It describes the process through which Israel will be restored, a description of their journey back to the Lord. The return will be started by God Himself (Jeremiah 31:8). As they start back home they will come back weeping (Jeremiah 31:9). When they finally get back home they will be like a watered garden (Jeremiah 31:12).

In Jeremiah 31:18-20, Jeremiah gives insight into the heart of one who has truly repented and is back in a right relationship with the Lord. After genuine repentance, God's people were like "*a bullock*" (Jeremiah 31:18) who is ready to go any direction in which God turned her. Through suffering, she has learned to submit to God's plan and purpose (Jeremiah 31:18). It is at this point that the Lord promises the New Covenant.

Verse 31

"Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

God is speaking and establishing the fact that he is going to do something in the future for his people. "The days come" means Israel is going to experience a specific time in history in the future when God "will make a new covenant" with them. Whatever we may think about the future and whatever interpretation we may have of future events, one thing is sure. God will act and do what he wants to do.

At the time when Jeremiah wrote these words nothing could have seemed more farfetched or impossible. The people, the priests, and the false prophets had all turned a deaf ear to God's Word and as a result the people had no expectation that God would ever do anything again in their midst. But Jeremiah announced publicly that God was going to act in a new way through a "new covenant."

Jeremiah could not have known that the "new covenant" promised here by God would be ushered in by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah. He could not have fully understood that the recipients of the "new covenant" would be more than just a nation of people in Israel, but that

they would be the Israel of God, redeemed by Messiah, the Son of God's sacrificial work on the cross.

While there are references to the subject of the "new covenant" found in other passages in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31:31 is the only verse in the Old Testament where the exact words, "new covenant" are found. Jeremiah called this "covenant" a "new covenant." The word "new" is used so often that it has little meaning to us today. The word "new" in the text means more than "new" in regard to point in time. It means more than just the fact that Jesus ushered in the "new covenant" centuries after the old covenant was in place. It means "fresh, that which is novel, a creatively different thing."

If God is promising to give a "new covenant" it is acceptable to ask, "Was there something wrong with the old covenant?" The answer is "no." The fault with the old covenant was with the people, not with God. Israel decided that God's laws were not best for them and that His covenant with them was too restrictive. The people broke the Ten Commandments and violated their covenant. So, a "new covenant" was needed.

What is amazing in this verse is that God's "new covenant" will be with the "house of Israel, and with the house of Judah." Suppose you made an agreement with someone to do something for you, but the person went back on his word; he broke the promise. Would you be likely to make another agreement with that person? Oh, what grace! God's "new covenant" is with the same sin-prone, disobedient people in spite of their failures!

Verse 32

"Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD:"

Before God speaks to Jeremiah and explains the "new covenant," He reminds them about the "old covenant," He "made with their fathers" when He saved "them out of the land of Egypt." The terms of the "old covenant" were simple. Israel was to obey God and they would be blessed. If they disobeyed God, they would suffer (Deuteronomy 28:1-24). In spite of the thundering and lightning and all that God said and did in giving His law at Sinai, the people broke their agreement with God before Moses ever returned from the mountain. Because they refused to obey they inevitably came under the curse of that old "covenant." That's why Paul called it "*the ministration of death*" (2 Corinthians 3:7).

To describe how the Israelites had broken His covenant, God described Himself as "an husband unto them." The Lord had been a faithful "husband" to Israel in relation to His promise and covenant with them. He had, like a "husband,"

been their protector, provider, and keeper. On the other hand, Israel had been like an adulterous wife. She had been unfaithful and broke her promises to God. The “new covenant” God is promising is “not according to” or will not be like the old covenant. It will not be a repeat of the old one.

The Particulars of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Jeremiah now describes the new covenant God “will make with the house of Israel.” A description of the new covenant centers around four “I will’s” listed in verses 33-34.

Verse 33

“But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

First, God said, “I will make” the new covenant with the house of Israel. Since God is the author of the new covenant, it will be one of certainty and one of grace. “But this shall be the covenant” emphasizes the difference between the old covenant and the “new covenant” God will make with Israel. The “new covenant” will be made “After those days.” “Those days” are a reference to the time after Israel has been brought back to the land.

Second, God said, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The “new covenant” will be written “in their inward parts” and “in their hearts.” It will be a covenant of spiritual discernment. The word “law” here should not be limited to the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets. The word “law” is used here to signify the will of God in the broadest sense in every relationship in life.

God intended that the old law should reach the “inward parts” and the “hearts” of the Israelites, but that just never happened for the vast majority of the people (Deuteronomy 32:46; Psalm 37:31). Why? Because the external written law of God as perfect as it is, is always more than I can live up too when I have to apply it to my life, my personal situation and circumstances. God never intended that the written letter of the “law” be the last word in the believer’s life. For instance, the written letter of the law is very clear when it says, “Thou shalt not kill.” But what about a soldier in war or a husband who must make a medical decision as to whether or not to save the life of his expectant wife or the child. You can’t peel off the words “Thou shalt not kill” and find an explanation behind the words for every situation in life. That was the whole problem with the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. They tried to take a written commandment and make a rule for every conceivable situation in life and it resulted in spiritual deadness.

The “new covenant” which is realized in Jesus Christ is based on an “inward” relationship. The “heart” of course refers to center of personal behavior. It is where all man’s decisions and deeds originate. If the “heart” isn’t right then the behavior of man can’t be right (Matthew 6:22-23; 7:15-20). God’s “new covenant” gets to the heart of the matter! A changed heart is what people need, not changes in God’s law.

God said, “I will put” and “write it in their hearts.” In both the old and new covenant, God does the writing. The difference is between the stone tablets and man’s heart. One is *external*, the other *internal*. True restoration is about what is in your “heart,” not what is happening externally.

Third, God said, “And will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Under the new covenant, God establishes a people for Himself by writing His law in their hearts and in their minds in calling them out of spiritual bondage. Under the old covenant, God wrote His law on tables of stone after bringing them physically out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt.

Verse 34

“And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Under the “new covenant,” God’s people will not have to go around teaching each other about God. Does the “new covenant” put Sunday school teachers out of business? I don’t think so. What he means is that under the “new covenant” there is no longer an ultimate dependence on the part of an individual believer for his knowledge of the will of God upon anyone else. As individual believers, we can “Know the LORD” with a first-hand knowledge.

The knowledge spoken of here is the knowledge of God by faith. The knowledge of a relationship. The word “know” here means “to know by observation.” It carries with it the thought of “clear individual understanding.” It has nothing to do with knowing God through a reciting of truth about Him or a learning of what others have said about God. It has nothing to do with intellectual apprehension. It means they will be personally, intimately acquainted with God (John 10:26-27).

Commenting on this verse, Doctor G. Campbell Morgan writes, “At best human interpretation is subject to error. At worst human interpretation can be positively diabolical. Every human interpreter is fallible. No human interpreter is infallible. Any final relationship to the will of God of the believer’s life must not be founded upon any one human interpreter.” That’s why John the Apostle wrote, *“But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye*

need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him" (1 John 2:27). What John means is that the New Testament believer under the new covenant has access to the Spirit of God and the wisdom of God in such a way that we are not dependent upon any human interpreter.

"For" is a little word mentioned twice in this verse that bears much significance. As a result of the new covenant, God's people will "know me." There is no knowing of the law of God until there is a knowing of the God of the law. There is no knowing the will of God until there is a knowing of the God whose will it is. God does not reveal Himself to you through His law or His will. He reveals His law or will to you through Himself. Exodus 1-19 is a revelation of God Himself. Exodus 20 is a revelation of God's law.

God promises that this "knowledge" of Him under the new covenant will be available first to the "least" among them and then the "greatest." The order is deliberate. Jesus said, *"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes..."* (Luke 10:21). Jesus was thanking the Father that He had withheld the glorious truths from men like Herod and Caiaphas, men of intellectual and political genius. Instead, you are building your kingdom on simple fishermen like Peter and John.

Note: It is sad that there are still so many professing believers today who only relate to God based on His law. In other words, they only know what they can and can't do and they don't know Him! That's so sad when they could be living under the New Covenant that is about knowing Him!

Fourth, God said, "For I will forgive their iniquity" and "I will remember their sin no more." The new covenant is a covenant grounded in forgiveness and restoration. Forgiving and not remembering are essentially the same thing. Simply stated, under the new covenant, God holds none of our "iniquities" against us. What comforting truth.

Jesus personified the truth of this aspect of the new covenant when He said, *"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God"* (Matthew 5:8). No one can know God or know in will until they are right with God in their heart. The very center of our being, our "hearts," must be forgiven and cleansed of sin. The new covenant cannot be achieved in our minds but rather received in our hearts. In the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, man strained and worked to achieve a right standing with God under the law. In the New Testament, under the New Covenant, man receives a right standing with God through His grace.

The Permanence of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

This part of the new covenant concerns the physical blessing of Israel in the land that God has promised to give Abraham and his descendants. The land called Palestine is not just another piece of land in the Middle East. God has chosen to give it to His chosen people. The covenant God is permanent. No one will prevent it from happening.

Verse 35

“Thus saith the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts is his name:”

The permanence of the new covenant is based on the truth that the maker of the covenant is none other than the Creator of the universe. “It would be easier for the sun to stop shining and the moon and stars to go out than for God to break His promises to His people Israel. Just as Jerusalem was rebuilt after the Babylonian Captivity, so it will be restored after the time of Jacob's trouble and he holy to the Lord.” *(From the Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament © 2001-2004 by Warren W. Wiersbe. All rights reserved.)*

“The LORD of hosts is his name” literally means “Lord of armies.” Jeremiah is saying the One who is promising this new covenant is not only the Creator but He is the Lord of armies. He wants his readers to think about the eternal nature of the God who is securing this new covenant. Just as everything God created was perfect and in order, so will the new covenant be the same.

Verse 36-37

“If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. Thus saith the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD.”

The “ordinances” or the order of God’s creation as described in verse 35 ever “departs” or falls to pieces, then “the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever.” For God to forget His covenant with Israel His creation would have to fall apart. The sun must refuse to shine, and the stars must never shine again. We know that will never happen and that means Israel has a guaranteed future. God will not reject His people.

“If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD.” If someone could take a measurement of the heavens above with a tape measure and investigate every aspect of what is beneath the earth, then God could forget His promise with Israel and turn His back upon them

and give their land to someone else. We know that will never happen and that means Israel has a guaranteed future.

“Saith the LORD” says it all. God said it that settles it. Restoration is coming to Israel.

Conclusion

Nearly 3,000 years ago, Jeremiah, a prisoner in the court of King Zedekiah, received from God a promise that He would do a “new” thing in the nation of Israel and Judah. God is working with Israel today in preparation for fulfillment of His promises to them in the future.

Clearly, Jeremiah 31:31-37 is about Israel but it is not just about Israel. It is about a God who is faithful and a God who keeps His promises not only for Israel but for all who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. For believers today, Jeremiah 31:31-37 has direct application to us who believe. God promises not to forsake His people (Hebrews 13:5). If it is true, as some teach, that God is through with Israel, then what hope do we who believe have? God promised He would not cast off Israel even though they had sinned. So, if He has, then His word is not true and you and I as believing Gentiles are in trouble. Thank God we know that is not the case (Matthew 28:20; John 10:28).

There are clear New Testament teachings and promises related to the prophecies of the new covenant. The prophecy and promises written by Jeremiah in our lesson text was written for Israel but because we have been grafted in by grace we can claim these same promises. Worship the Lord as you read Ecclesiastes 3:22-23 and Hebrews 10:11-18.

Amen.