

A New Covenant

Today In Your Reading...

The focus of Jeremiah's prophecies were on the future fall of Babylon and the return of God's people to their homeland. "The Israelites are like sheep that have been scattered by lions. First the king of Assyria ate them up. Then King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon cracked their bones. Therefore, the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says, 'I will punish the king of Babylon and his land, just as I punished the king of Assyria; and, I will bring Israel home again to her own land'" (50:17, 18).

The Lord is sovereign over the nations. He raises up kings and deposes them. Just as He used Babylon to destroy Assyria, so He raised up the Medes and the Persians to destroy Babylon. "Sharpen the arrows! Lift up the shields! For the Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes to march against Babylon and destroy her. This is His vengeance against those who desecrated His Temple" (51:11).

In the midst of his prophecies about the end of the Babylonians and the return of the Jews, Jeremiah was given a glimpse of great news — a **New Covenant**. "The day will come," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors, when I brought them out of Egypt. They broke that covenant... This is the new covenant I will make with the people. I will put My laws in their minds and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people... I will forgive their wickedness and never again remember their sins" (31:31-34).

The New Covenant would replace the Old Mosaic Covenant. The Law required that people perform sacrifices and rituals in order to please God and remain in His grace. Jesus came to fulfill the Law of Moses (*Matthew 5:17*) and create a covenant

between God and His people. While the Old Covenant (Testament) was written in stone, the New Covenant (Testament) will be written on our hearts, made possible only by faith in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. At dinner, on the night He was arrested, Jesus said to His disciples, "This cup that is poured out for you is the New Covenant in My blood" (*Luke 22:20*).

Now that we are under a New Covenant, we are no longer under the penalty of the Old Covenant; rather we have been given the opportunity to receive **salvation in Christ, a permanent, unbroken relationship with God through Him**. "That is why He is the One who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under the first covenant" (*Hebrews 9:15*).

Daily Reflection

What are some of the other benefits of being under the New Covenant of Christ?

One of the benefits that I appreciate most about the New Covenant is that **it is unconditional**. Those who lived in the Old Testament had heavy requirements placed on them to maintain a good relationship with the Lord. In other words, it was all based on their work. Under the New Covenant, we are forever in God's grace, not because of anything we've done but because of what Christ has done. **The New Covenant is a work of God, not of ourselves**. Praise the Lord that we live under the New Covenant!

My Way First, Then Yours

Today In Your Reading...

The Lord gave Jeremiah many more messages regarding the fall of Babylon, even before Babylon had risen to prominence. It was God's way of reassuring Jeremiah and the faithful remnant that He was in control, even though Judah was being destroyed and the people taken into captivity. He had a plan and the Babylonians would be judged and punished for their sins as well.

Meanwhile, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem (597 BC), recaptured the city, and took what he wanted, including the young king Jehoiachin, his mother and officials, along with ten thousand hand-picked people from the city. Nebuchadnezzar then set Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, on the throne, and changed his name to Zedekiah. Zedekiah was a Babylonian puppet and the last King of Judah.

It would make sense to us, seeing all that had transpired — the fall of Israel and captivity of ten tribes to Assyria, the ruin of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the loss of tens of thousands of people to Babylon, etc. — for Zedekiah to turn to the Lord and lead a revival in the land, like Hezekiah or Josiah had done; but, that did not happen. In fact, Zedekiah did evil in the sight of the Lord, desecrating the Temple with his idols, just as those before him. Of course, his actions provoked the Lord to anger, which led to the eventual fall of Judah.

How ignorant and calloused were these people? Jeremiah wrote, "Compared to God, His people are foolish! They make idols, but the idols will disgrace their makers, for they are frauds. They have no life or power in them. Idols are worthless; they are lies! **But the God of Israel is no idol!** He is the Creator of everything that exists, including His people, His own special possession. The Lord Almighty is His name" (51:17-19).

"But neither King Zedekiah nor his officials, nor the people who were left in the land, listened to what the Lord said through Jeremiah" (37:2, 3). However, when it became obvious to the King that all was lost, then he sought out Jeremiah and asked him to pray to the Lord for them. This gesture was, of course, shallow and insincere. It reminded me of Pharaoh asking Moses to bless him when he had refused to let God's people go after nine plagues (*Exodus 12:32*).

Daily Reflection

What is it about people that they push God away and demand to do their own thing?

If you were the Lord, how would you have responded to King Zedekiah's prayers? Would you have extended grace? Why or why not?

Have you ever ignored God like this, only to come begging to Him when your ways didn't work? What does that communicate to God?

Is the Lord your first resort or last resort?

Eat This Scroll

Today In Your Reading...

The prophet Jeremiah was abused by the officials of King Zedekiah. Tired of hearing his depressing messages of death and destruction, they flogged him and, then, imprisoned him in the palace dungeon. Later they moved him to a cell in the Temple courtyard, but there he was able to shout at people, so they dropped him into a cistern, a big hole, to keep him quiet.

Meanwhile, we were introduced to a new prophet named Ezekiel. While Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem and Daniel was in Babylon, Ezekiel was taken from Judah by Nebuchadnezzar in the second group of exiles. On the way to Babylon, the Lord commissioned Ezekiel to be His voice to the captives.

Though the Lord predicted that His people would not listen to Ezekiel, He wanted them to know that He was among them through His prophet. To be able to handle the rejection of the captives, the Lord filled Ezekiel with the Spirit. "I have made you as hard and stubborn as they are. I have made you as hard as rock! So don't be afraid of them or fear their angry looks, even though they are such rebels" (3:8, 9). Ezekiel's name literally means "strengthened by God." The Lord referred to him as the "Son of Man." Ezekiel then became a foreshadowing of Jesus, who was *the* Son of Man filled with the Spirit.

I love the Lord's first instructions to Ezekiel. "Son of man," He said, "open your mouth and eat what I am giving you. **Eat this scroll!**" Ezekiel opened his mouth and God fed him a scroll. When he ate it, it tasted as sweet as honey. "**Let all My words sink deep into your own heart first.** Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then, go to the people in exile and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says!' Do this whether they listen to you or not" (2:8; 3:1-3, 10, 11).

Daily Reflection

I am a teacher. Before I can stand before my students and help them learn anything, **I must first learn the material myself.** Behind one lesson is multiple hours of reading, studying, and writing. I cannot share what I do not know. *I cannot lead someone where I have not been myself.* I can't explain what I don't understand.

You may not be a teacher but you talk with people often about spiritual things. Apply this truth to your conversations with others.

"Eat this scroll" was God's command to Ezekiel. Interpret what He was saying in modern terms.

How are you doing with "eating this scroll"?

"Eating this scroll," consuming God's Word, is a life-long process. For His Word to sink deep into your heart, you must meditate on it, which takes time. *Time is something that we sorely misuse.* How will you share it with others if you don't know it? How will you know it, if you don't consume it? How will you consume it, if you don't take time to eat it? **Eat this scroll!**

Deception and Discernment

Today In Your Reading...

We watched our two prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, in action. Ezekiel was taken into captivity and prophesied to those in exile, while Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem and prophesied to those who were left behind. Both of them had the important task of communicating God's warnings and judgment.

Most often the Lord's prophets used their words to communicate His messages. However, there were several times when they were asked to communicate through object lessons or demonstrations. For example, Ezekiel demonstrated how the Babylonians would attack Jerusalem by drawing a map of the city on a large brick. He was also asked to lie down on his side for 430 days, a reminder of the sins of the people.

Jeremiah wore an ox yoke in front of the King and his officials, to predict their capture and future exile by the Babylonians. Later he sent a message to the city of Babylon by way of Seraiah, one of Zedekiah's staff officers. After reading the message, he tied the scroll to a rock and dropped it in the Euphrates River. "In the same way," he said, "Babylon and her people will sink, never again to rise, because of the disasters I will bring upon her" (51:64).

We also saw false prophets, like Hananiah, contradict Jeremiah and his messages of doom. Guys like him made a living "prophesying" good news, telling the king what he wanted to hear. Of course, they were not true prophecies but lies to make everyone feel better.

When Jeremiah stormed into the palace wearing an ox yoke, Hananiah tore it off and broke it, proclaiming that God would remove the yokes from the necks of His people within two years and bring them back to Judah. Because of his lies, Hananiah died within two months.

Daily Reflection

It is a common misconception that false prophets only existed in the Bible. False prophets are alive and well, still making a living telling people what they want to hear. They are, of course, commissioned by our enemy to confuse people and distract them from the true words of God.

When someone says, "I have a word from God..." what should you do? How do you discern what comes out of his or her mouth?

Millions of undiscerning people are led astray each year by preachers, teachers, authors, and musicians who claim to speak for the Lord. All they need to do, to protect themselves from false doctrine, is to **evaluate what they hear in light of God's Word**. Are you practicing discernment with what you read or hear?

Worse than being deceived by false prophets is to deceive others yourself. Any time you share God's Word with others or claim to be speaking truth on His behalf, you must be cautious that what you have to say is right. What steps can you take to ensure that what you are telling others is indeed true and not false?

Just as the enemy uses others to lead you astray, so also he wants to use you to lead others astray. *Be a Jeremiah and not a Hananiah.*

The Marked Ones

Today In Your Reading...

The Lord spoke through His prophet Ezekiel and announced the final judgment of His people. He vented His anger against the nation of the covenant. "I placed her at the center of the nations," He said, "but she has rebelled against My regulations and has been more wicked than the surrounding nations... Since you have refused to obey My laws and have behaved worse than your neighbors, I Myself have become your enemy" (5:5-8). The Lord had Ezekiel cut off his hair and beard to demonstrate His fury.

While the leaders of Judah were in his home, Ezekiel had a vision. God took him, in the spirit, to the Temple, to show him all the abominations that were being committed both in public and in private (8:1-18). Because of these sins, the Lord was about to remove His presence. This removal occurred in phases. Today, we witnessed the first phase, "Then the glory of the God of Israel rose up from between the cherubim (in the Holy of Holies), where it had rested, and moved to the entrance of the Temple" (9:3).

God had been patient long enough. He would remove His presence from the people. Thus, He removed their protection. Final judgment was upon them. However, in an act of mercy, the Lord sent someone to rescue His faithful remnant, "Walk through the streets of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of all those who weep and sigh because of the sins they see around them" (9:4).

Bearing this mark would rescue God's elect from judgment. It reminded me of the blood that His people painted on their doorposts in Egypt, just before the death angel took the first born. It seems to be a consistent pattern, as He did in the days of Noah's flood, that **God rescues the faithful, His elect, from His wrath**, a picture of those marked by the blood of Christ.

Daily Reflection

Are you a "marked one" of God, part of His elect? How do you know? Is there evidence in your life of the transformative work of Christ? Explain.

A characteristic that stood out to the Lord was that the "marked ones" did not participate in the sinful deeds of those around them. Instead, they were sorrowful and distraught over the sins of their neighbors. What about you? Do you take part in the world's ways, delighting in their sins? Or are you sorrowful and distraught over the sins around you?

If the Holy Spirit is in you, *you will cringe at the sight of sin*. If God is at work in your life, you will be in the world but not of it, meaning you will stand apart from its wicked ways. Like a person who is moved to vomit at the smell of death, **a follower of Christ cannot be comfortable in an atmosphere of debauchery**. *Being surrounded by the depravity of man should make your skin crawl*. Like an allergic reaction, it should irritate and agitate you.

Can you relate? If not, perhaps the Spirit does not reside in you. Perhaps you are not a "marked one" of God. Or perhaps you have become callous to sin. *God's people do not delight in sin. They disdain it*. Do you?

A New Spirit

August 18 — *Ezekiel 10:1-13:23*

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Day 230 — 135 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory and presence of the Lord leaving the Temple. He had been there, among His people, since Solomon had built His sanctuary hundreds of years earlier. However, with the rebelliousness of the people and the egregiousness of their sins, God could no longer dwell among them. "The glory of the Lord went up from the city and stopped above the mountain to the east" (11:23).

Though God's presence would return to the city later (*Ezekiel 43*), for now His protection was removed with His presence. Thus, the last days before the final judgment had come. Those who remained in Jerusalem would either be killed or captured. Their end was near. Even the king, Zedekiah, would be taken prisoner (11:12, 13).

However, as the Lord had promised Jeremiah, He told Ezekiel that He would one day bring the people back to their homeland. "I, the Sovereign Lord, will gather you back from the nations where you are scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel once again" (11:17). It was the first time in Ezekiel's ministry that he had been given a message of hope. The captivity would not be the end but a beginning.

In fact, the Lord foretold of a new era that was coming. "When the people return to their homeland, they will remove every trace of their detestable idol worship. I will give them a singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their hearts of stone and give them tender hearts instead, so they will obey my laws and regulations. Then, they will truly be My people, and I will be their God" (11:18-20). Here is a prophecy of the New Testament, during which the Lord would send His Spirit to live within His people forever. The visible difference He would make is incredible.

Daily Reflection

I am so grateful to be living on this side of the cross, after the coming of Christ. It pains me to watch the people of God in the Old Testament disdain and disobey His Word. Their disregard for His will and ways is remarkable to me, especially after all that He had done for them; but, then I realize that they lived in a time when the Spirit was not present within them, as He is in us. In their defense, they had no one to help them overcome their sinful nature and, thus, no way to sustain a desire to follow God's laws.

Praise God, you and I have His Spirit living within us (*1 Corinthians 3:16*). By the blood of Christ, He has overcome our enslavement to sin and, through His power, we are able to obey His leadership, to understand His Word, to withstand the temptations of our flesh, and to do good works for His glory and the good of others.

Can you sense the Holy Spirit living in you? How so? What else has He enabled you to do?

The power of God dwells in you. He has given you everything you need for life and godliness. **All that is necessary for Him to work in your life is your availability.** If you are not witnessing this transformation, perhaps it is because you have not yet surrendered all to Him. What are you holding back for yourself?

Naked in a Field

August 19 — *Ezekiel 14:1-16:63*

Day 231 — 134 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

The Lord vented His anger regarding His people and their atrocious behavior. "Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were there, their righteousness would save no one but themselves" (14:14). He was so fed up by their disrespectful attitudes and detestable acts that He had to remove them from His sight.

In describing His people to Ezekiel, the Lord used two analogies. First, He called them a *useless vine*. "How does a vine compare to a tree? Is a vine's wood as useful as a tree? Can it be used for making things? No, it can only be used for fuel, and even as fuel, it burns up quickly. Vine branches are useless. The people of Jerusalem are like grapevines growing among trees. Since they are useless, I have set them aside to be burned" (15:1-8).

The second analogy the Lord used to describe His people was *an unfaithful wife*. "On the day you were born, **you were dumped in a field and left to die, unwanted**. But I came by and saw you there. I helped you thrive and become like a beautiful jewel. When you were old enough to be married, I made My covenant with you and you became Mine... I gave you expensive clothing and sandals. I gave you lovely jewelry and a crown for your head. You ate the finest foods. You looked like a queen, and so you were!" (16:6-14).

The Lord continued, "Your fame spread on account of your beauty, but **you thought you could get along without Me**, so you trusted in your fame and beauty. You gave yourself as a prostitute to every man who came along. You used the lovely things I gave you to make shrines and idols. How could such a thing happen? In all your years of adultery and loathsome sin, **you have not once thought of the days when you lay naked in a field**" (16:15-22).

Finally, He said, "**What a sick heart you have**, to do such things as acting like a shameless prostitute. Prostitutes charge for their services, but not you! No one pays you; but, instead, you pay them!" (16:30-34).

Daily Reflection

Wow, can you sense the sorrow that the Lord had towards His people and their unfaithfulness? Does He feel that way when He thinks of you?

I like the analogy of a baby lying naked in a field. How does this picture perfectly describe us before the Lord came along?

How does the picture of the baby becoming a queen capture what the Lord has done for us in salvation?

How does the picture of a prostitute oftentimes describe our relationship with the Lord?

Have you repaid the Lord's faithfulness with unfaithfulness? Have you forgotten the days when you once "lay naked in a field"?