Introduction

Our focus on this segment is going to be on Jeremiah’s promise of the new covenant and as we were looking at Jeremiah’s promise of restoration I think we understand the central importance of this passage. Really central to Jeremiah 30 to 33 in the sense that this new covenant is how God is going to bring about this restoration and salvation. What is God going to do in the restoration of his people that will break this pattern of centuries and centuries of rebellion? How is God going to heal this broken marriage? How is God going to restore the relationship with his unfaithful son? The new covenant is central to that. For us as Christians the new covenant is important because it bridges, in many ways, the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Old Testament gives us the promise of the new covenant, the New Testament gives us the fulfillment of the new covenant. I would lose my credentials as a Christian if I didn’t spend some time focusing on the new covenant.

Review of Covenant History

I’m going to begin by reading the passage and then we’re going to look specifically at what are the promises and what is this new covenant all about. Before we even read the passage though, remember the context of the covenant history of God and his people throughout the Old Testament. Salvation history in the Old Testament is built around a series of covenants that God establishes with people trying to bring humanity back into a right relationship with him. The relationship was fragmented when Adam and Eve sinned and rebelled against God. They were given a position where they were God’s vice-regents. They were God’s image on earth. They were to reflect his glory and his honor. They were to in some sense to spread the Garden of Eden through the earth so that all of
humanity can experience God’s blessing. When they rebelled against that, God like an ancient Near Eastern king is going to implement his rule through a series of covenants. The first covenant with Noah was the promise not to destroy the earth again but the responsibility with that was whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.

After the rebellion at the tower of Babel, God is going to make a covenant with Abraham. He is going to promise him land, many descendants, and he will now become the instrument of blessing that God originally gave to Adam. This covenant is going to establish Abraham’s descendants as the people of God.

The Mosaic Covenant is going to establish for those people how to live as God’s people. They are going to be blessed if they obey the covenant; they are going to be cursed if they disobey. The history of the Old Testament and the ministry of Jeremiah is the culmination of this. They experience the covenants curses because they do not obey God’s commandments.

God gave them a king and made a covenant with the house of David. The Davidic covenant that promised that David’s family would rule forever established David’s throne and rulership over the land that ultimately David and his sons as God’s vice-regent would rule over the entire earth. But the obligation that was placed upon them is that each Davidic king within that line would be blessed or punished based on his obedience or disobedience to God.

There’s a connection between each of the covenants as they emerge in God’s plan with the covenants that had already come before. The Davidic king would enable them to possess the land and be free from their enemies but the Davidic king also had a responsibility if they wanted to keep that land to obey the Lord. What Jeremiah witnesses is the culmination of the failures of the house of David. The judgment that is going to come upon them so God has made these series of covenants: the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. But they’re still working out of salvation history. There’s this long pattern of disobedience. The new covenant is ultimately
going to be the solution for that and also how God is going to bring about his
glorious restoration that’s described for us in The Book of Consolation.

The New Covenant Text (Jer 31:31ff)

Here’s the passage Jeremiah 31:31ff: “Behold, the days are coming,
declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and
the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with your fathers on the day
when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant
that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the
covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the
Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will
be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his
neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know
me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive
their iniquity, and I will remember their sin and more.”

So in this session we’re going to focus specifically on this passage and the
promises that are given here; the specific promises and really how this flushes
itself out, as well as some other parts of the Old Testament. The first thing to
stand out to me as I’m looking at this that in verse 31 is that the Lord says the
Covenant that I’m going to make this new covenant, it will not be like the one that
I made with your forefathers on the day that I brought them out of the land of
Egypt. So what’s central to this new covenant and what’s going to give it the
power to ultimately do what the first covenant cannot is that there is going to be an
act of salvation that would transcend the Exodus. We talked about this new
Exodus in the last session. Remember Isaiah saying that the second exodus will
be greater than the first and that, number one, the Lord’s going to bring them out
of many nations. Number two, they will not have to leave the land of Babylon in
haste the way that they did with Egypt. Number three, the Lord’s going to
transform the wilderness into an oasis. There’s going to be an easier journey back
to the land. Number four, they will come back to the land to worship the Lord and
they will never again be taken away from it. So there is an act of salvation that’s going to transcend the first exodus. It stands out here. This is not going to be a covenant like the one in my love, in my grace, in my mercy, and compassion, when I rescued your fathers out Egypt. It’s not going to be like that.

In fact, it is going to be something even greater than that and it is going to be an act of salvation through this new exodus and this larger salvation is what the Lord is going to bring them. This will be the thing that makes it finely stick.

The relationship will work the way that God has designed it and Jeremiah over in chapter 23 verses 7 and 8 also is giving a promise of restoration. It is looking for a second exodus greater than the first one. He says, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of Egypt but as the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Egypt, the house of Israel out of the north country.” So the paradigmatic act in salvation throughout the history of the Old Testament has been the Exodus. But this deliverance is going to be so great that they’re really not going to even reference it anymore. This is going to be a greater act of salvation.

So I think what we have going on in the history of salvation throughout the Bible is that you have a pattern of where God rescues and delivers people. That’s what salvation is about. God rescues the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. In the new covenant God is going to rescue them out of the bondage of captivity. Jesus comes to bring redemption out of the captivity of sin. You have this recurring pattern. The way that God saves in the past is true of the way that God saves in the present and the way that he will save in the future. God is a God who rescues but what G.K. Beale has also emphasized about salvation history in his New Testament Theology is that salvation can also be understood as the series of acts of deliverance and new creation where God is constantly doing a greater work in each aspect of the moving forward of salvation history. So there are these series of new creation acts where God is ultimately bringing fallen humanity or his
people back to himself and with each act of new creation, with each act of deliverance, God is doing a more powerful work that will ultimately bring us to the place where God’s kingdom will be fully restored. Man will be living in right relationship with the Lord and there will never again be the need for judgment because God’s going to do away with sin.

Let’s just think about how salvation history works in this way. Adam sinned and rebels and so God is going to raise up a new Adam, Noah. He says to Noah be fruitful and multiply. He gives to Noah the same position that he gave to Adam and there is a rescue and deliverance. There is a new creation when God restores Noah after the destruction of the flood. Another new Adam in the story of Abraham and just as Adam was given the position in the garden as a priest Abraham’s descendants kings will come forth from you and they will be a kingdom of priests, they will restore to that a dominion position. Then the Lord will do this act of new creation where he brings them out of captivity in Egypt. The Lord will raise of up new Adams with David and Solomon and they are going to help the people of Israel to experience fully the kingdom of God to possess the land that God promised them to remove the enemies that where there to enjoy the presence of God through the temple in a permanent sanctuary. So they are new Adams and acts of new creation are happening there but after the captivity occurs this new creation this new exodus is going to be greater than anything that God has done for his people in the past. Then finally as we move into the New Testament the deliverance that Christ brings in the new covenant being implemented in its initial stages and then in his second coming new creation will bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

So God constantly throughout the Bible there is a story line where God is consistently and persistently rescuing and delivering people. That is what God does in his mercy and grace he is bringing people out of their bondage to sin. He is raising up new Adams that will implement his kingship on earth and ultimately that is bringing us to a new heaven and a new earth where this new covenant will
be experienced in a full way. So the first thing that this passage is promising is that the Lord did something for Israel in the past. They cried out to God in their bondage and from the perspective of what Israel in the exodus looks like there is no deliverance for them Egypt is the most powerful nation on earth at this time. How are they ever going to get out of bondage? The Lord delivers them and in an incredible act of mercy and grace. He raises up a deliverer for them in Moses; he carries out the plagues; and he carries out the deliverance at the Red Sea. The Lord says the new covenant it’s not going to be “like the one that I made when I brought your fathers out of Egypt. It’s going to be a greater demonstration of my love, my grace, and my mercy.” Finally, this is what it’s going to take for the salvation to stick, the Lord made himself Israel’s husband in this previous act of deliverance but in the future act of deliverance through this great act of salvation the Lord is ultimately going to guarantee the fidelity of his wife. Israel will become a faithful covenant partner that’s the beginning part of this.

I’d like to go to the end passage in verse 34 and focus on the second aspect what does this incredible act of salvation, this greater act of new creation, this new exodus what does it involve? Why is this so much better? I think a second thing that is emphasized in this text as part of this new salvation will involve a radical a free forgiveness of sin that even goes beyond the grace and forgiveness that God showed to Israel in the past. At the end of chapter 31, verse 34, “I will forgive their inequity, and I will remember their sin no more.” In the experience of exile this is exactly and precisely what Israel needs because the exile was God’s punishment for their sin. So as God is promising this radical and free forgiveness that’s what makes the salvation possible in the book of Isaiah. The Lord says, “announce to the people that their years of hard labor and service are over.” Now it’s the time of forgiveness. God is no longer holding his sin or holding the sin of the people against them.

In chapter 14 the people in Jeremiah’s day come to the Lord and they give God this confession of sin. It looks good; it sounds good; they say the right words;
it’s everything you would want in a confession of sin except for one thing, there is no real genuine repentance in their lives. The Lord says, I don't accept their confession and there is a specific statement made. The Lord does not accept them; the Lord will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. So why does Israel go through the experience of exile? Why is Judah taken away into captivity? Because the Lord remembers their sins and they are going to have to be punished for that.

The deliverance obviously in the new covenant the Lord is no longer going to remember their sins. So there is this promise that Israel absolutely deserved what they experienced in the exile but there is this promise that the Lord is going to radically and freely forgive their sins. He is going to blot them out; he is going to take them away. Again, the message of Jeremiah and the message of the second half of Isaiah is also talking about the deliverance from exile. We see the same thing here in Isaiah chapter 43 verse 25. In the second part of Isaiah it says this: “I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake.” Why does God forgive Israel? It is not because of who they are. It is for his own sake and the Lord says he blots them out. In other words, he takes an eraser and simply removes them from the record. Through the exile, God has held them accountable for their sin. He's punished them; he's put them in servitude because of their sin. But this forgiveness will mean the removal of the sin that has necessitated the punishment in the first place. The Lord says this: “and I will not remember your sins.” So Isaiah 43 verse 25 says exactly the same thing as Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 34. He says put me in remembrance and let us argue together, set forth your case so you may be proved right. Your first fathers sinned and your mediators transgressed against me but the Lord is getting ready to forgive his people. Chapter 44 verse 22 is another promise in the second half of Isaiah about the forgiveness of Israel’s sins. The Lord says, I have blotted out your transgression like a cloud and your sins like a mist.” So the Lord says your sin is like the fog in the morning that disappears. The Lord had sent them into captivity for their sin but when he delivers them their sins are going to be wiped away. They are going to disappear
like a cloud. Then he says this in Isaiah 44:22 “Return to me for I have redeemed you.” Here is how radical this forgiveness is going to be in Isaiah 44:22 the Lord forgives them even before they return to him and sometimes in the prophets there is an interplay between divine initiative and human responsibility.

Now you might be asking well we have all kinds of examples of forgiveness throughout the Old Testament. One of the key characteristics about God’s character and one of the things God reveals about himself up front is Yahweh, the covenant keeping God, is that he is a God who is slow to anger, abounding in mercy and all of those kinds of things we’ve seen that throughout the history of the Old Testament. But I believe that in the new covenant there is a degree of forgiveness being offered here that wasn’t true even under the first covenant. In the old covenant in the way that things were set up under the Mosaic law, sacrifices that provided atonement for sin there was a requirement of sacrifice. Sacrifice only required atonement for certain types of sins and only provided atonement for unintentional sins.

When someone like David committed a defiant act of sin against God and he committed adultery Bathsheba and murdered her husband, David has no sacrifice that he can offer at that point to resolve that issue with God. So he has to come to God in Psalm 51 and throw himself on the mercy of the court and plead for God to blot out his sin God did that for David and God throughout Israel’s history does that for them. Often when there’s no sacrifice for the sin, God provides it, but what this covenant is promising is that type of free mercy and grace and forgiveness doesn’t necessarily distinguish between intentional and unintentional sin the way that the sacrifices did. God’s going to give that to Israel.

Israel constantly had the need on a yearly basis for the Day of Atonement to cover all of the sins that were not covered by the other sacrifices. There was no way that even an individual Israelite could have offered a sacrifice that would cover everyone of their sins. So, that yearly need for atonement reminded them that if they were going to live in the presence of God, they needed those sins
atoned for. They needed the defilement of their sins that was accumulated on the altar cleared away so that they could actually have the opportunity to live in God’s presence for another year. So God graciously did that for them on a yearly basis but I believe that what the promise of the new covenant involves is that there is going to be a level of mercy and forgiveness beyond what Israel has even experienced in their past history. It’s the radical nature of that forgiveness and the depth of mercy that is what’s going to grab the heart of the wife and ultimately convince Israel to be faithful people.

You see as we look at forgiveness in the Bible and as we look at God’s grace, really experiencing that forgiveness does not lead us to say look at what we can get away with. Real forgiveness transforms our heart to the point that we want to say, I want to live for God and I want to express back to him my devotion and my love for the great love that he has shown to me. Forgiveness doesn’t motivate liaisons, forgiveness motivates love and commitment. Paul says we should not say, “let us sin more that grace may abound God forbid,” we’ve been delivered from our sin and part of the way God delivers this from that sin is the power of the love of forgiveness. Israel has experienced that in all kinds of ways in their past history when they cheated on God on their honeymoon by worshipping the golden calf before the tablets had even been fully worked out. God extended mercy and grace to them “but the covenant I make with them in the future is not going to be like the one that I made when I brought them out of Egypt.” It’s going to be better than that offering a deeper level of forgiveness and a deeper experience of the forgiveness of God is going to be a part of that.

In making the new covenant how does the new covenant resolve the issues that have been raised by the failures under the old covenant? With regard to the past it provides forgiveness for all of the sins and the failures that have occurred in the hundreds of years up to this point. But there also needs to be something if this new covenant is going to work well, what about the future? How are we going to guarantee that this pattern of sin doesn’t continue? Well, the forgiveness in part is
going to motivate that. But a second component of this new salvation that God is promising to Israel, what’s going to be at the heart of this new covenant is that the Lord is going to give his people a new enablement and a new capacity to obey the Lord. The way that that is explained in the book of Jeremiah is that Jeremiah says the Lord is going to write his law on their hearts. So in the old covenant the law was written on the stones and it was this commandment that stood externally to the people and commanded them to do certain things. In the same way that when we see a “don’t walk on the grass” or “wet paint” we just have this internal desire. Without an internal desire to keep that external commandment we’re not going to follow. So what God is promising there is I’m going to give you a desire not to walk on the grass. When you see that wet paint I’m going to put the desire of the person who put that sign there in the first place in you. I’m going to give you the enablement and the capacity to obey me and to keep these laws and these commandments.

It is again the solution to the problem that was especially true of the people in Jeremiah’s day. The forgiveness of sin the Lord had said to Jeremiah “I’m going to remember their sins and punish them.” So the solution is the Lord says, “I’m going to forget their sins and not remember them.” When the Lord says, “I’m going to give them a new heart and I’m going to write the law on their heart,” this specifically reverses what we read about in Jeremiah 17 verse 1. Here’s the condition of the people that Jeremiah’s ministering to. He says, “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of a diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart.” So think about these iron tools that were used to inscribe messages and letters and words on tablets. In the same way the sin of Israel is deeply etched into their hearts and their character. It’s their nature and they do not have a desire to obey God. So what God is going to do is take hearts that have sin etched into them and he’s going to erase that and replace that with a heart that has his word etched into it and then they will have the eternal desire to obey God. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick, who can
understand it.” The Lord is going to do heart surgery for his people and he’s going to cure their heart problem.

Chapter 32 verses 39 to 40 clarifies that when God writes the law on the heart of his people they will have the desire to obey him; they will always be faithful. The Lord is going to put his fear within them and they will keep the law and this disaster of exile that the people experienced in the days of Jeremiah, they’re never going to have go through that again because the new covenant will give them the ability and the capacity to obey.

New Heart in the Old Testament

So as we start thinking about this idea of new covenant and new heart there’s all kinds of passages from the Old Testament that start running through my mind. This idea that God is going to give a new heart to his people is something that has already been talked about back in the book of Deuteronomy and I want us to notice a movement that takes place in the book of Deuteronomy that I think is reflective of what’s going on in Jeremiah as well. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 16 the Lord says to the people “circumcise therefore the foreskin of your hearts and be no longer stubborn.” Cut away that hard part on the outside of your heart that is keeping you from obeying God. Circumcise your heart and experience a heart transformation. Give your heart to God so that you will have a desire to obey him. Notice here God is commanding Israel to do that. We know that the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Old Testament are a hard hearted people and ultimately they are going to be sent away into exile. So in Deuteronomy 30 what is God going to do for his people when they’re in exile. He says this: “when they come back to him and when they repent and when they turn to the Lord when they’re living in these countries the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all of your hearts.” Deuteronomy begins with the idea circumcise your heart to the Lord that’s your responsibility. The people cannot do it, ultimately God will give them a new heart and God will give them the capacity to obey. Now, they had the
ability to obey, we’ll talk about that but they chose not to follow the Lord. The Lord ultimately is going to intervene and do heart surgery that will transform them.

We see this same movement in the book of Ezekiel chapter 18 verse 31 which says this: “Cast away from you all of the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourself a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel.” So what does God tell Israel to do, get a new heart? Get right with God, turn away from your sin, get a new heart. Why should you die for your sin and if you don’t experience this heart transformation that’s where you’re heading? So it something that God tells the people of Israel to do, they are to circumcise their heart.

The Lord says to the people in Ezekiel chapter 11, verse 19, “I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.” So Deuteronomy says circumcise yourself to the Lord, circumcise your heart. The people are rebellious and stiff necked when they are sent away into exile, but God will circumcise their hearts. The book of Ezekiel, get yourself a new heart, why should you die. But ultimately they experience the judgment of exile because they will not turn back to God. What does God promise them? “I will give them a new heart.”

That same movement, is present in the book of Jeremiah. In the call to return that is given at the very beginning of the book, remember the metaphor that’s used there. Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 2, “Circumcise your heart, plow up the soil resistant and return to God, circumcise your heart.” The people ultimately do not do that. Why? Because the sin that they love is engraved on their hearts, that’s their desire, that’s their heart. So what does God promise to do to Jeremiah? He promises to give them a new heart.

So the same movements from get a new heart, the people don’t do it. God ultimately gives them a new heart, that’s not just Jeremiah, it’s Deuteronomy, and it’s Ezekiel as well. There’s a pattern, God is going to do the heart surgery that
will bring about the transformation of his people.

Coming Restoration

We may ask ourselves the question, God’s going to write the law on their heart and give them the desire to obey, God’s going to do the heart surgery on them. How? How does that happen? How does God ultimately write the law on his heart? We begin to bring in some other passages and some other promises from the prophets. You see Jeremiah is somewhat unique in the terminology of the new covenant. But there are a number of other prophets who are basically talking about the same thing. This covenant that God is going to make with Israel in the future, the timing of the new covenant is going to the timing of the kingdom and the restoration. So, the new covenant is not something that is exclusive to Jeremiah, it really goes along with the promise’s of restoration that we read throughout the prophets and the specific way, as we take Jeremiah, and as we lay that passage beside these other promises about what God is going to do in the lives of the people of Israel to bring about this restoration.

Here’s the way that he is going to write the law on their hearts. He is going to do that by pouring out in a new way, in a fresh way, his own spirit. So the writing of the law on the heart in Jeremiah is connected to a number of other prophetic passages that are specifically going to talk about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the pouring out of God’s spirit. Let me just mention a couple of these. Isaiah chapter 32 verses 14 and 18 “Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, but Judah and Israel are going to be under judgment.” Verse 14 says, “The palace is forsaken, how long is that going to last.” Verse 15, “Until the spirit is poured out from us on high and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.” What’s going to bring about the transformation? The Lord is going to pour out his spirit in a new way. How is the Lord going to write the law on his hearts of his people? He’s going to put his own spirit into them. Chapter 59 in Isaiah verses 20 and 21 the Lord says there, “a redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn away from their transgressions, declares the Lord. And as
for me, this is my covenant with them.” Doesn’t talk about new covenant, but this is the future covenant that God’s going to make with his people. The Lord says, “My spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth shall not depart out of your mouth or out of the mouth of your offspring. I’m going to pour out my spirit and the spirit is going to put the words of God into the mouth of his people.”

Now what you remember in Jeremiah chapter 1, that’s what God did for Jeremiah as a prophet. Jeremiah swallowed those words and they were sweet to his taste and as a result of that Jeremiah became an embodied representation of the word of God, and he started to live out the word of God. That is what is ultimately going to happen to all of the people of Israel, they are going to become living representations of God’s word. Why? Because of the enablement and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Joel chapter 2 says that the last days will be the points in time where God pours out his spirit on all of flesh and all Israel, the young men, young woman, old men, old women, all of Israel, not just on the leaders the prophets, but the people themselves. There is going to be a pouring on the people of God, unlike anything that has ever been experience in the past. And that’s what’s going to make it possible for the law to be written on their hearts, so that they will have the power to obey.

Now it’s especially helpful to take Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31-34, and lay them beside what I think most closely parallels this in the prophets, Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 26-28. Let’s look at this passage. In our class, in this passage, I often hear my students take these two texts and lay them side-by-side and compare what things are in this passage that are similar and what things are in these passages that maybe are different. They inform are understanding of each. Here’s what Ezekiel says verse 26, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.” Jeremiah says, the Lord is going to write the law in our hearts. The message in Ezekiel is even more, the Lord is going to give you a new heart all together. He says, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a
heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and to be careful to obey my rules.”

So what was it in Jeremiah that enables them to obey? The Lord is going to write the law on their hearts. What is it in Ezekiel that is going to give the people the capacity to obey the Lord is going to put his Spirit in them. Therefore, what does Jeremiah mean when he says that God is going to write the law on the people's hearts. It means the Lord is going to enable obedience through the giving of his own Spirit. It’s as if Israel has been an unfaithful covenant partner, so the Lord is going to come within them in a way and in a capacity that will enable them to finally be a faithful covenant partner.

Now in light of all this and in light of what is promised for the future, I think it’s important to understand what Jeremiah is saying and what Jeremiah is not saying about the old covenant. He is promising that in the future there is going to be a greater enablement and greater empowerment. There is going to be a pouring out of the Spirit unlike anything Israel has ever experienced before. There is going to be a more radical forgiveness and all this is part of the enablement. What Jeremiah is not saying is that he is claiming that God had not provided power and enablement under the old covenant. I think many people have this understanding, if Israel was ever going to obey God in the old covenant they were going to have to do it basically in their own strength. Circumcise your own heart, get yourself a new heart. If they were going to keep the law it was basically this kind of external thing, where they live by the rules. That it was a legalistic system. They didn’t have grace to help them to do that. That’s not what Jeremiah was saying about the old covenant.

He is also not saying that God set his people up for failure and made it so that it was impossible for them to obey him under the old covenant. That’s not true! God through the salvation that he provided at the exodus, God had provided a salvation that offered spiritual transformation to the people of Israel. The problem was that many of the individuals that lived within the nation of Israel at
that time did not avail themself to the grace that was there. It is not saying that there was no grace in the old covenant and the difference is the new covenant is going to provide grace. It is saying that what will be different about the old covenant and the new covenant is that the people will fully avail themselves to this overwhelming grace that God is going to pour out on them. When the Lord says in Deuteronomy 10, “Circumcise your hearts” or when the prophet Jeremiah says “circumcise your hearts,” if the Lord did not give them the ability to determine in their heart that they were going to follow the Lord then that’s basically an empty command. The fact that the Lord is commanding them to do that seems to reflect that they had capacity if they responded to God in the right way to obey him and to keep his commands. When Moses gives them the Mosaic Law he reminds them of their covenant responsibilities in Deuteronomy 30. He does not tell the people of Israel you can’t keep the Mosaic Law because it is impossible. He tells them God has given you the ability to obey his law. Also in Deuteronomy 30, verse 11, “The commandment that I command today is not too hard for you. It is neither a far off in the heavens that you have to ascend up into the heaven to get it. It’s not down into the depths of the earth where you have to dig. It’s right in front of you.”

The Lord by what he did for the people at the exodus through the miracle of salvation, the Lord had made spiritual personal transformation available. The problem is that many of the people under the old covenant never availed themselves of that. Under the old covenant as individuals responded to the grace of God they believed in God. I believed that they experienced a spiritual regeneration and a transformation that is similar to what we experienced as believers today. As they came to know the Lord in a personal way, God did a work of transformation in their lives where they had the capacity to love him, obey him, and have the law written on their hearts. The Psalmists says in Psalm 37, verses 30-31, “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.” So there were people under the old covenant that experienced exactly what Jeremiah is promising, “I’ll write
the law on their hearts.” The Psalmist says, “I got that.” In chapter 40, verses 7-8, David as the king says, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. “ David says as the king I realize that the book of law has some things to say to me, it’s written about me. I wrote a copy of it as I came to the throne, but then he also says verse 8, “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

So the old covenant did not involve people straining and trying as hard as they could in their own effort in some human external way to obey God in a legalistic way. They experienced spiritual transformation. I believe that some of them experienced a regenerative work of the spirit and the ministry of the spirit. The work of the spirit in the Old Testament is not clearly laid out and expanded for us, but I believe that it was there in some real way. There was a transformation that people like David truly knew the Lord; they experienced that. In Psalm 119 David in these lavish ways expresses how much he loves the law of God. It’s more precious to him then honey, sweeter to him than honey, more precious than gold. Their saying if David is this excited about Leviticus imagine what he would feel like if he could read Romans and 1 John. But even as an old covenant believer he loved the law of God and in that Psalm he doesn’t just express love for God’s word, he also says God do your work in my life that will give me the disposition and the will to obey this. He realizes he can’t do this on his own, give me the grace that I need. God willingly afforded that to people that came to know him in a personal way.

When David had sinned, after his sin with Bathsheba, and after he had hidden this sin, finally, after the long period of just turning away from God he comes to God in Psalm 51 and says this, “Created me a new heart and renew a right spirit within me.” What David is envisioning there is the work of spiritual transformation that makes it possible whether their under the old covenant or the new covenant for an individual to obey the Lord and follow his commands. That was provided for the people under the old covenant.
If that’s true and it makes sense, when what we do with passages like Deuteronomy 29 verses 2-4 Moses says to the people here, Moses summoned all the people in Israel. “You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants.” Your eyes have seen this. “But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” What’s going on there? I think the point is more of the fact that the people have not availed themselves to the grace that God has made available and as a result of that their punishment has been that they have not experienced the transformation of the heart that Lord did for those who truly knew him. For the generation that came out of Egypt all of them died in the wilderness because they had a rebellious heart. Even in the generation that’s preparing to go in to the land, there are large numbers of those people who do not know the Lord in a personal way.

So these descriptions of Israel as being stiffed necked and rebellious and hardhearted, we might look at that and say well you know what God just set his people up for failure. In an ultimate sense that is true, ultimately there needed to be a savior. But in that old covenant when individuals came to know the Lord, God provided the capacity for them to obey.

So here’s the different between the old covenant and the new covenant. The old covenant was a national covenant that was made with the entire nation of Israel. As a national covenant, that covenant involved and included both believers and unbelievers. It involved people that as ethnic Jews experienced the deliverance of the exodus. But there were also people within that group that had never personally placed their faith and trust in God. They have never experienced that personal transformation. As we go through out Israel’s history it appears that the remnant of those who truly knew the Lord and had experienced personal salvation was often a tiny minority. The nation that did not know the Lord; they were stiff necked, they were rebellious and they were hard hearted. They were the ones who the Lord had not yet “to this day given you a heart to understand to obey.” But that
was their own choice; that was not the failure of the covenant itself. Those who truly knew the Lord who in personal repentance and faith came to know him they experienced heart transformation. The difference between the old covenant and the new covenant is that in the new covenant every individual who is a part of that covenant will know the Lord in a personal way. Every person who belongs to that covenant will truly have a saving relationship with God. When people come into that saving relationship with God through faith and repentance God does this work of transformation.

The old covenant was in many ways like our church roles. Our church roles are made up of members and people who know the Lord in a deeply personal way. But, our church roles are also made up with people who have no relationship with God. They may be a member of the church, but they don’t know the Lord. That’s Israel under the covenant. In most cases, it seems like the majority of the people were those who had never experienced a personal salvation. The empowerment of the new covenant is that God will enable the entire nation to follow him. Here’s when the pattern of sin is going to be broken; here’s why exile will never have to take place again because everyone who is a part of this covenant is going to know the Lord, and be a part of God’s people.

But Jeremiah, and the Old Testament as a whole, is not saying that people in the old covenant did not know about or did not experience this kind of transformation. Remember when Jesus says to Nicodemus in John chapter 3. “You must be born again…” you must experience a spiritual transformation in order to come into the kingdom of heaven!” And Nicodemus says, “What do you mean by ‘new birth’? What are you talking about? Can I enter into my mother’s womb again and be reborn? Jesus what are you talking about?” And Jesus says to him, “Are you telling me that as a teacher of Israel, you don’t know about these things? You don’t know about Ezekiel 36?” This is a heart transformation that God has always done for those who truly knew him, but the empowerment and the enablement of the new covenant is that everyone who is part of the covenant will
know the Lord. So there’s the forgiveness for the past, and then there is the enablement for the future.

Promises of the New Covenant

Now quickly, we’re coming near the end of our time here, I want to work through what are the other specific promises given about the new covenant in chapters 31-34. After God put the Law in the hearts of his people, it says in chapter 31, verse 33, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” So, this is the restoration of the covenant relationship. That expression is known as the “Covenant Formulary.” The Lord is their God, Israel is God’s people, that’s going to be restored. “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother saying ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest.” Every one who is part of this covenant will have a direct, personal relationship with God. In many ways, in the old covenant, because it was a national covenant, the way this was set up between people there were both believers and unbelievers. God’s presence was largely mediated to the people of Israel through their priests, through their prophets, through their leaders. In the new covenant there is going to be a more direct relationship with God because every one who is a part of the covenant will know the Lord.

Then finally, we come back to the promise that we focused on earlier in the lesson. God says, “I will forgive their iniquity; and I will remember their sin no more.” All of those things: the forgiveness of sin, the writing of the Law on their heart, the restoration of the covenant relationship, and the direct knowledge of God, that’s the enablement, that’s the empowerment, that’s the great work of salvation, that’s the second Exodus that will be greater than the first. As believers in Christ, we should be excited about this because the New Testament is going to clarify that this new covenant is not just for the house of Israel, it’s not just for the house of Judah. As the people of God, we’re experiencing this new covenant now.

Jesus says as he goes to the cross and he gives the cup to his disciples on the night before his death, “this cup represents the blood that is going to affect the
new covenant that Jeremiah promised.” Jeremiah promised the new covenant.
Jesus enables and brings into reality what the new covenant promised. We live as
followers of Jesus, experiencing the blessings of new covenant where God has put
his spirit within us. We are not just forgiven. We are empowered to live in a new
way.

Christ and the New Covenant

Now in light of that, I want to close with a quote. John Goldingay says, “we
as New Testament believers live in the time of fulfillment, we live in the time of
the new covenant, we live in the time where there has been this pouring out of the
Spirit. And whatever ministry the Spirit had in the Old Testament, we realize that
through the death of Christ there has been a greater pouring out of the Spirit. The
love of God because of what Jesus did for us on the cross has a greater capacity to
grip our hearts and to change our lives.” But Goldingay says, “Think about that in
light of what we see often in our own experience, and in the life of the church as a
whole.” He says, “In practice and lives of Christian believers are not very different
than from those of Old Testament believers… We are like Ruth and Hanna, who
produce the fruit of the Spirit. But we are also like Jacob and David, who more
obviously live according to the flesh.” Then he goes on and says, “Think about
this pouring out of the Spirit. When we look at our own lives sometimes or the
lives of the believers in the New Testament (for example in the book of
Corinthians).” Goldingay says, “It is as if the Spirit is not yet given. Or rather, if
we look at it from the perspective of 1 Corinthians, it is not as if the Spirit is not
yet given; far from it. In fact, it is as if the giving of the Spirit has brought more
problems to be solved.” So the Corinthian church is as liable to covenant lawsuit
and divine casting out as was the people of God in Old Testament Israel.

As believers in Christ, we need to come to understand the enablement and
the empowerment that we have under the new covenant. God has given us the
eternal desire and the ability to obey him. Those of us who are ministers of the
Gospel and ministers of the new covenant need to realize the power of the
message that we share, and the power of that message to change peoples’ lives. We do not change peoples’ lives by our preaching, our personalities, our programs, or our churches. We change peoples’ lives by the life-changing message of the new covenant that God forgives the sins of the past, and God enables us to obey as we look toward the future.

In our next lesson, we will reflect more on how we understand the new covenant in light of the New Testament and the added revelation that’s given us there. But as we close this lesson, we can celebrate the empowerment and the enablement that we have because we have already begun to experience what Jeremiah promised to the people of Israel and Judah, that would be a part of their restoration and their return to the Lord.

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