

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 8:1-7, 13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31

JEREMIAH 31:31-37

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the
people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.

“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

³⁵ This is what the LORD says,
he who appoints the sun
to shine by day,
who decrees the moon and stars
to shine by night,
who stirs up the sea
so that its waves roar—
the LORD Almighty is his name:

³⁶ “Only if these decrees vanish from my
sight,”
declares the LORD,
“will Israel ever cease
being a nation before me.”

³⁷ This is what the LORD says:
“Only if the heavens above can be
measured
and the foundations of the earth below
be searched out
will I reject all the descendants of Israel
because of all they have done,”
declares the LORD.

KEY VERSE

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” —Jeremiah 31:31

SUSTAINING HOPE

Unit 1: The Days Are Surely Coming

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Tell some ways the new covenant was to be different from the old covenant.
2. Explain the significance of the term *covenant* in the context of God's relationship with his people.
3. Make plans to renew his or her personal covenant relationship with God.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Newer, Better Covenant
- B. Lesson Background

I. New Covenant Promised (JEREMIAH 31: 31, 32)

- A. The Future (v. 31)

When New Really Is Better

- B. The Past (v. 32)

II. New Covenant Described (JEREMIAH 31: 33, 34)

- A. Hearts and Minds (v. 33)
- B. Least and Greatest (v. 34a)
- C. Forgive and Forget (v. 34b)

III. New Covenant's Permanence (JEREMIAH 31:35-37)

- A. Source (v. 35)

- B. Promise (vv. 36, 37)

The Certainty of God's Promises

Conclusion

- A. Old and New Covenants Together
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Newer, Better Covenant

A mortgage is a binding agreement between a lender (such as a bank) and the person or persons obtaining the mortgage. It has obligations and benefits for both parties. The potential homeowners obtain the funds necessary to buy a house, while the lender benefits by receiving the loan back with interest. Not long ago, my wife and I refinanced the mortgage on our home. We did this to obtain a lower interest rate and therefore lower our monthly payments. This required lots of documentation, signing of paperwork, more paperwork, waiting, and finally notification that the new loan had been approved. Our old mortgage was finished, and our new mortgage was in effect. In this case, newer was better.

Covenants in the Bible also feature agreements that express or imply obligations and benefits between parties. The Old Testament sometimes speaks of covenants made between two people, such as the one between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-53). The most important covenants in the Bible, though, are those between God and people. They are both like and unlike human-to-human covenants in various ways. This week's lesson will address God's covenant with Old Testament Israel and look at his promise through Jeremiah of a new covenant—a better one.

B. Lesson Background

The first mention of *covenant* in the Bible is in reference to promises the Lord made to Noah (Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17). This is followed by other God-to-human covenants: with Abram (Abraham) and his descendants Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 15:18; Exodus 2:24; 6:5), with the people of Israel after their departure from Egypt (Exodus 19:3-6), and with King David (Psalm 89:3). The covenants after Noah reflect the progress of the people of God from a family group headed by Abraham to a developed nation with a king, land, capital city, and temple. As such, these covenants are interrelated while having distinctive elements.

There is a big picture to keep in mind: the God of Israel was known as the one who kept his cov-

enant (Deuteronomy 7:9; Nehemiah 1:5; Daniel 9:4). This distinguished him from the fictitious gods of other nations, gods who were fickle and might withhold blessings on a whim. Their worshippers believed these deities needed constant appeasement, even by means of the horrible act of child sacrifice. The God of Israel, by contrast, promised sure blessings in exchange for faithful obedience to the clearly established terms of the covenant. To obey God's commandments was to keep the covenant. Unfortunately, the kings and people of Israel and Judah frequently disobeyed, thereby violating the terms of the covenant.

We should note God's covenants to be one-sided affairs in a couple of ways. First, God establishes the terms of his covenants; there are no give-and-take negotiations in this regard. Second, God always keeps his side of his covenants. Humans may fail, but God's promises are always true. The weakness of the covenant to Old Testament Israel was never on the part of God, but on the part of the covenant people. The relentless cycle of sin, sorrow, supplication, and salvation proved that people needed a new covenant.

Jeremiah 31 mostly speaks of a time of restoration. Such restoration was not to come until after 538 BC, the year the exile ended. The prophet pictures this restoration as a great parade of the "remnant of Israel" returning from all directions. This throng is not a victorious army, but includes pregnant women, the blind, and the lame, all weeping with joy (31:7-9). This sets the tone for Jeremiah's broader vision of a new covenant.

HOW TO SAY IT

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Abraham | <i>Ay-bruh-ham.</i> |
| Abram | <i>Ay-brum.</i> |
| Hebrews | <i>Hee-brews.</i> |
| Isaac | <i>Eye-zuk.</i> |
| Israel | <i>Iz-ray-el.</i> |
| Jacob | <i>Jay-kub.</i> |
| Jeremiah | <i>Jair-uh-my-uh.</i> |
| Judah | <i>Joo-duh.</i> |
| Laban | <i>Lay-bun.</i> |
| Noah | <i>No-uh.</i> |
| Sabaoth (<i>Hebrew</i>) | <i>Sab-a-oth.</i> |

I. New Covenant Promised

(JEREMIAH 31:31, 32)

A. The Future (v. 31)

**31. "The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.**

The book of Jeremiah includes perspectives of the past, present, and future. The verse before us is clearly a look into the future. The promise of *a new covenant* might seem to have some reference to the return of the Jews from exile, since the covenant-breaking that led to their exile means that something has to change. Although God promises to establish this covenant *with the people of Israel and . . . Judah*, the New Testament makes clear that Jeremiah's vision of the future extends far beyond the time of Jerusalem's destruction and rebuilding in the sixth century BC.

The term *new covenant* is found only here in the Old Testament, although the idea of a new or renewed covenant is found in other verses (see Isaiah 42:9, 10; Jeremiah 50:4, 5). *New covenant* is a key concept, and the verse before us is a key passage in connecting the Old Testament with the New Testament. At the last supper, Jesus used this concept to describe the significance of his coming death: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20; compare 1 Corinthians 11:25).

The connection between old and new covenants is seen clearly in Hebrews 8:8-13, where the author quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 as his key text to explain the Christian system (compare Hebrews 10:16, 17). Consideration of Jeremiah's words leads to the sweeping statement, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13).

God's firmly established intention to make a new covenant is seen in the verse before us in the *I will* statement, the first of six in today's text.

✠ WHEN NEW REALLY IS BETTER ✠

New is better . . . or is it? We're used to being bombarded with advertisements telling us that this year's version of a product is "new and improved,"

when perhaps it has been given no more than a facelift. That “all new” automobile may have strikingly different styling on the outside while keeping last year’s power train underneath. Most likely, the price will be “new” but not necessarily “improved”!

Sometimes we may even question whether something needs to be “new.” Mattress stores advertise sales so they can clear out inventory to make room for “next year’s models.” But is there really that much difference in mattresses from one year to the next?

By contrast, when the Lord says something will be “new,” he really means it! The new covenant was not merely a restyled version of the old one. The old covenant was sealed by the sacrificial blood of animals, which dealt with the sin problem only temporarily; the new one has been sealed by the sacrificial blood of the Son of God (Hebrews 10:1-18), which deals with the sin problem permanently. What a difference! —C. R. B.

B. The Past (v. 32)

**32. “It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.**

Before God (through Jeremiah) explains the promised new covenant, he speaks of Israel’s older covenant. This was the one mediated by Moses after God rescued the nation from slavery in Egypt. God upheld his side of this covenant, but the Israelites did not. Instead, they repeatedly broke it. This covenant-breaking began in a most shocking way even while Moses was on the mountain receiving the terms of the covenant, the law. (See Exodus 32:1-8.) Incredible!

Jeremiah includes a beautiful way of describing how God originally intended this covenant relationship to be understood. The Lord is pictured as a faithful *husband to them*, implying Israel to be his beloved wife. This touches on a couple of ways the prophets speak of the relationship between God and Israel. Sometimes the prophets refer to idolatrous worship of false gods as *adul-*

tery (see Jeremiah 3:9; Ezekiel 23:37), the violation of a marriage. Other times the prophets use the love a husband has for his wife as a way to depict God’s love for Israel (see Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:19, 20; compare Revelation 21:2, 9). The point in the verse before us is that God has been a faithful husband in the covenant, but the Israelites have behaved like an unfaithful wife.

What Do You Think?

Which Scripture do you find most useful in helping you maintain covenant faithfulness to Jesus? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- 1 Corinthians 11:25
- Galatians 3:13, 14
- Ephesians 5:8
- Hebrews 10:26-29
- Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9
- Other

II. New Covenant Described

(JEREMIAH 31:33, 34)

A. Hearts and Minds (v. 33)

**33a. “This is the covenant I will make with
the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.**

Jeremiah returns to his discussion of God’s covenant to come. In so doing, he shifts to an image of the future by telling the reader that he is passing along something that will be realized *after that time*. In that regard, he reveals the second of the Lord’s “I will” promises: *I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts*.

The prophet intends us to understand the phrases on either side of the word *and* to be parallel or equivalent in picturing God’s law being internalized. This is a vivid contrast with the old law, which is written on stones and parchment (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 4:13; etc.). God intended that the old law should make its way into hearts (Deuteronomy 32:46; Psalm 37:31; etc.), but that never seemed to happen for the vast majority of Israelites.

In Jeremiah's day, the ark of the covenant is a repository for the stone tablets of Moses (2 Chronicles 5:10); a central purpose of the Jerusalem temple is that of a place where the ark rests (see 1 Chronicles 28:2). But in the future, believers themselves will become what we could call "personal arks of the covenant" as we house God's laws in our hearts. God's expectation is that of an inner code that stands at the core of our being. This involves the ministry of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:3). The emphasis changes from obeying the law to producing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23).

As Christians, we do not place ourselves back under the law, for that would be a return to bondage. "Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1; compare Romans 2:28, 29; 7:6).

What Do You Think?

What can you do to make your heart more receptive to having God's Word written on it?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding habits, people, places, and things to embrace
- Regarding habits, people, places, and things to avoid

33b. "I will be their God, and they will be my people."

The third "I will" statement is seen here (compare Jeremiah 30:22 from last week's lesson). This is to be the essence of the new covenant as it was intended to be with the old. Under the new covenant, God creates a people for himself by writing his law on their hearts and in their minds in calling them out of spiritual bondage to sin rather than out of a physical bondage in Egypt. He calls people into the marvelous light of knowledge of him and relationship with him (2 Corinthians 4:6).

B. Least and Greatest (v. 34a)

34a. "No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

What will personal relationships be like in the new-covenant situation? Jeremiah presents a perfect state of affairs: no one is needed to teach a knowledge of the Lord because everyone (*from the least of them to the greatest*) already has that knowledge. All of our neighbors know. All of our relatives know. They all know!

This prediction raises questions since we understand that a teaching function exists under the new covenant (Matthew 28:19, 20; Romans 12:7; etc.). One interpretation proposes that this looks to the time after Jesus' second coming, when our presence with God in Heaven yields our fullest knowledge of him. Another interpretation proposes that Jeremiah's prediction contrasts the need for human mediators under the old covenant (priests of the tribe of Levi) with the direct access to God that people have under the new covenant (1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-22; 1 John 2:27).

Either way, the time of the new covenant will be an era when the people of God include more than the peoples of ancient Israel and Judah. Knowledge of God will spread to peoples of all nations and languages (Revelation 7:9).

What Do You Think?

What more can you do personally to help spread the gospel to peoples of all nations and languages?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In the exercise of spiritual gifts
- In reevaluation of financial priorities
- Other

C. Forgive and Forget (v. 34b)

34b. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This partial verse features the fourth and fifth "I will" statements of the Lord. Some students are puzzled by the latter: is it possible for God to delete certain of his memories in order to *remember their sins no more* permanently? That is not what this text is saying, and we can better understand if we take these two "I will" statements as parallel expressions of a single thought: for God, "forgiving" and "not remembering" are the same thing. He no longer holds our sins against us.

This does not come about because we have offered the proper sacrifice in a temple or prayed a certain prayer; forgiveness under the new covenant is not a reaction by God to something we do. It happens at God's initiative, an act of grace freely given to us by our Lord. Our forgiveness is possible because Jesus, God's Son, bears our sin (Isaiah 53:4). As the sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29); this is what opens the gate for our forgiveness.

What Do You Think?

What wrongs against you do you find particularly difficult to forgive? What will you do to overcome this problem?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Broken promises
- Betrayal
- Character attacks
- Other

III. New Covenant's Permanence

(JEREMIAH 31:35-37)

A. Source (v. 35)

**35. This is what the LORD says,
he who appoints the sun
to shine by day,
who decrees the moon and stars
to shine by night,
who stirs up the sea
so that its waves roar—
the LORD Almighty is his name:**

Having contrasted the old and new covenants to explain how people will relate to God, Jeremiah now begins describing the new covenant's permanence. Its permanence is based on the fact that the maker of the covenant is none other than the Creator of the universe. The phrase *the Lord Almighty* is the Hebrew expression "Lord of Sabaoth," which literally means "the Lord of the heavenly hosts of armies" (see Romans 9:29; James 5:4). We are reminded here of the line "Lord Sabaoth, his Name, from age to age the same" from Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

To reflect on the creation of sun, moon, stars, and sea is to reflect on the eternal nature of God

as Creator. Jeremiah also underlines the continuing orderliness of God's creation. In predictable ways, the sun lights the day, while the moon and stars light the night. The waves of the sea continue to be measured and controlled by the Lord of creation. God is in control, even when our lives are chaotic and don't seem to make sense.

What Do You Think?

When was a trying time that consideration of creation led you to a greater appreciation of the Creator? How do you pass this lesson along?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- During a spiritual crisis
- During a financial crisis
- During a health crisis
- Other

B. Promise (vv. 36, 37)

**36. "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,"
declares the LORD,
"will Israel ever cease
being a nation before me."**

The text notes the orderliness of God's creation to undergird a promise: the likelihood of God's abandoning *Israel* is as likely as his allowing the orderliness of nature's patterns to vanish. It is like saying, "Just as you can depend on the sun continuing to shine, you can depend on me to remember Israel—and that is forever."

**37. This is what the LORD says:
"Only if the heavens above can be measured
and the foundations of the earth below
be searched out
will I reject all the descendants of Israel
because of all they have done,"**

declares the LORD.

The Lord's commitment to Israel is now illustrated in another way. God promises that the day when humans are able to measure *the heavens above* and search out *the foundations of the earth below* is when he will renege on his covenant relationship with *the descendants of Israel*. We may think that such measurements are possible in our scientific, technological age. But if science has taught us anything, it is that the universe

is impossible to measure and its size is beyond human comprehension. It seems that the more we learn about the cosmos, the more we realize the limitations of our knowledge!

The same is true of our knowledge of the earth itself. For the original hearer of Jeremiah's oracle, the idea of exploring the depths of the oceans is unthinkable. But even as we use various submersibles to explore those depths today, every increase in knowledge brings with it a realization that there is so much more that we do not know. God's commitment to the descendants of Israel is as certain as our inability to know everything.

✠ THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S PROMISES ✠

Jeremiah's audience would have been astounded at what we know about God's creation. Think of Mount Everest towering 29,000 feet above sea level, its height more than matched by the depth of the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean. How surprised they would have been to learn that the universe is populated by as many as 70 sextillion stars—that's 7 followed by 22 zeros!

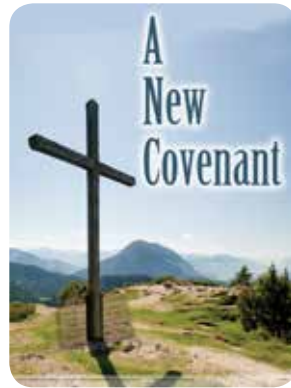
In essence, God said through Jeremiah, "If the time ever comes when you can accurately measure the scope of the creation, that will be the day when I will no longer keep my promises to you." We have discovered various facts about the world and the universe, but even the "fact" of 70 sextillion stars is just a rough order of magnitude estimate. It will undoubtedly change as scientific instruments and methods improve.

It's safe to say that we will never in this life know all the facts about creation. God's promises are just as certain. —C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Old and New Covenants Together

We should remember that speaking of an Old Testament and a New Testament does not imply a "bad" covenant and a "good" covenant. The New Testament depends on the foundation of the Old Testament to make its claims. It is the sacrificial system of the old covenant that allows us to understand the atoning, sacrificial death of Jesus—a central doctrine of the Christian faith. The Scripture



Visual for
Lesson 2

Point to this visual as you discuss the superiority of the new covenant to the old.

of the earliest church was the Old Testament, and the New Testament authors quote from it hundreds of times. We are people of the new covenant, but the old covenant is still of inestimable value (see Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

When we put Jeremiah 31:31-37 alongside Romans 4:16 and 9:6-8, we see the old covenant being replaced by a new covenant that is not based on law and biological descent, but on faith. This expands the covenant people to include the possibility of every person regardless of tribe or nation.

When we read the new covenant promises in light of the eternity of God, the Lord Almighty, we have the complete picture of an eternal people of God. They accept his offer to write his laws on their hearts; they accept his promise of forgiveness of sins through Jesus. There will never again be a need to send God's people into exile to punish them and cure them of sinful idolatry. The new covenant is the final covenant, and this is the covenant Christians embrace today.

B. Prayer

Mighty God, please keep shaping our hearts. Keep forgetting our sin. Keep accepting us as your people. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who made the new covenant come to life; amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The greatest blessing of all is to be part of the new covenant!

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask learners to open their Bibles to the end of Malachi, which is adjacent (perhaps with an intervening page) to the beginning of Matthew. Ask, “What do we know about the two major parts of the Bible?” Jot responses on the board.

Probe deeper by asking, “Why is one part called the *Old Testament* and the other the *New Testament*?” If no one does so, point out that another name for *testament* is *covenant*. Say, “The Old Testament tells about God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants—the nation of Israel. The New Testament is about God’s new covenant with all who believe in his Son Jesus. There are important differences between the two covenants, as is explained in today’s lesson text.”

Alternative. Before learners arrive, place in chairs copies of the “Differences Between Old and New” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Do not discuss results at this time; instead, begin by saying, “Understanding the differences between the old and new covenants can be puzzling. Let’s read what Jeremiah has to say on the subject.”

Into the Word

For an oral reading of the text, divide the class in half, with one group representing the *Old* and the other representing the *New*. Ask learners to read the lesson text aloud, with members of the *New* group reading verses 31, 33, 34 in unison and the *Old* group reading verses 32, 35–37 in unison.

Option 1. Distribute the following questions on handouts: 1. Who drew up the terms of the covenant? 2. Why was a new covenant necessary? 3. Where is God’s law to be written under the terms of the new covenant? 4. What changes in the way people “know the Lord” under the new covenant? 5. What is the sign of God’s assurance that he will keep his promise? 6. How does all this give you confidence?

Allow a few minutes for completion, either individually or in small groups. Call for answers after learners finish, pausing after each to allow discussion. Make sure to discuss why we should be grateful that we live under the new covenant. *Answer sources:* 1, verse 31; 2, verse 32; 3, verse 33; 4, verse 34; 5, verses 36, 37. *Responses to question 6 may vary from individual to individual.*

Option 2. If you used the “Differences Between Old and New” puzzle to introduce the lesson, allow learners to discuss their answers now. Then ask, “What were some limitations of the old covenant?” (*Possible responses:* needed to obey many rules, required continual animal sacrifices, etc.) “What changed under the new covenant?” (*Possible responses:* covenant is open to all who accept Jesus, depends on faith not law, Jesus’ sacrifice is sufficient, etc.)

Into Life

Have learners pair off to discuss this question: “What would it be like to be in a gathering of Christians where the emphasis is on legalism rather than grace?” As some learners will want to share actual experiences in this regard, caution them not to use real names. After a few minutes, ask learners to share stories about being part of a group that exhibits grace and forgiveness.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Identify the Covenant” activity from the reproducible page. After learners have picked either *old* or *new* for each quote, ask, “What are the dangers of falling back into old covenant thinking, speaking, and behaving?” and “How can doing so damage our relationships with others? with God?”

As learners depart, give each a cross cut from a large index card. Say, “I encourage you to write on your cross a commitment to God to renew your covenant relationship with him, a commitment that includes your intention to practice grace and mercy rather than judgment and condemnation.”