

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – ³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,” says the LORD. ³³ “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the LORD: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” says the LORD. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

A 2/12/17

Ephesians 1:3-14

Matthew 5:17-29

Ps. 100

Hymns: 339, 723, 779, 391

WE ARE GOD’S PEOPLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST!

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

Our text is from the book of Jeremiah, one of God’s faithful Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah served through the reign of the last king of Judah to the time of the Babylonian Captivity. When Jeremiah first spoke these words of our text, all that was left of the nation of Israel was a tiny part of Judah in the hillsides around Jerusalem. The majority of the Jews had turned away from God. Jeremiah was sent to call them back to God in repentance, and to assure all the Jewish people that God had not forsaken His gracious promise of salvation in the coming Messiah.

In our text the Lord speaks of “*the covenant I made with ... the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ... the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.*” Another word for “covenant” is “testament.” The old “covenant” refers to the way things were during the time of the Old Testament before Jesus came. The old “covenant” was a conditional, two-sided covenant. On Mt. Sinai God had told His people, “*If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people*” (Ex. 19:5). “**If**” the Jews remained faithful to God, He would keep their nation as His people.

God didn’t give the Jewish nation His commands under the old covenant as a list of rules they were supposed to obey to get to heaven. The Old Testament believers were saved in the same way we New Testament believers are saved: by faith in the Son of God. The Old Testament believers were saved by faith in the Christ who was to come. We New Testament believers are saved by faith in Jesus Christ who has come.

The old covenant was like a hedge around God’s people to protect them. When the Jews lived according to the old covenant, it made them very different from all the other nations and kept them separate from the other nations. The Jewish people were to avoid the unbelieving ways of the nations around them, and live their lives in devotion to God and His Word.

God intended that the old covenant, with all its laws and commands for His people to obey, would make them see their sinfulness. No matter how hard they tried to obey God’s law, they should realize that they were sinners because they fell far short of what God commanded them to do.

The old covenant was a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah. The efforts of God’s Old Testament people to obey all of God’s laws and keep themselves pure were a type, or picture, of

Jesus' perfect life in our place by which He earned heaven for us. All the sacrifices under the old covenant were a picture of Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross in our place, once and for all, that paid for our sins (He. 7:22-28).

The old covenant pointed to Jesus. Speaking of the old covenant Paul told the Galatians, "*The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:24-26).

The Lord says about His Old Testament people, "[*They broke My covenant*], though I was a husband to them." The Old Testament Jews were God's chosen people who belonged to Him. God loved them and poured out His blessings on them. God wanted to keep them as His people and save them all. But so often the majority of them were unfaithful to Him. They "*broke [God's] covenant*" with them. "*Broke*" in the original text is the word used for the annulment of a marriage. Think about that. The Old Testament Jewish nation, which was supposed to be God's faithful 'bride,' "*broke*" their covenant with God, their "*husband*." Most of them turned their hearts away from God and became attached to the world, and to other religious ideas and gods. The Lord said through His prophet Isaiah, "*These people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me*" (29:13). Whatever worship and service they offered God was simply 'going through the motions,' and not done from believing hearts.

Today we have liberal churches which ignore so much of what God says in His Word. Their focus is on human 'goodness.' They don't talk about our sinfulness and need for repentance, about our forgiveness in Christ's cross, and about faithfully serving God in loving obedience to His Word. Liberal theology boils down to nothing more than, "Be a good person." In the end, liberal theology is a religion of 'salvation' by good works! As in Jeremiah's day, the hearts of more and more people today are turning away from God and becoming attached to the world and to empty human philosophies and false religions.

God told His people through Jeremiah, "*Behold, the days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*" In spite of the unbelief of most of the Jews, the Lord still held out hope to all who would listen to Him. He prophesied of the future when He would send the Messiah – of our New Testament era when Jesus would come. Although most of the children of Israel had rejected God, He always kept at least a "*remnant*" (2 Ki. 19:30-31) – at least some who believed in Him.

In our New Testament era God's people are **spiritual** Israel – **everyone** who believes in God's Son (Ro. 4:9ff; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:9-14). God was speaking of us New Testament believers when He said, "*The days **are coming** ... when ... I **will** put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.*" The basic meaning of the Hebrew word for "*law*" is "*teaching*." In this context in which God is speaking of the "*new covenant*," the "*teaching*" is salvation in the Messiah. Through the Gospel in the Word and Sacraments God "[*puts ... into our*] minds, and [*writes*] ... on [*our*] hearts" faith in Jesus. God first worked faith in Jesus in our hearts when we were baptized. Galatians 3:26-27 says, "*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" As we continue to hear God's Word and receive Jesus' body and blood in Communion (which Jesus calls "*the **new covenant** in My blood*" – 1 Cor. 11:25), God keeps us in our faith in Jesus.

As was said, the old covenant was a conditional, two-sided covenant. If the Jewish nation would remain faithful to God He would keep them as His people. God says, *"I will make a new covenant. ... I will be their God, and they shall be My people."* The *"new covenant"* is an unconditional, one-sided covenant in which we are God's people, not by anything we do, but completely by what **God** has done for us. Under the *"new covenant,"* no longer is one particular nation God's people. God's *"new covenant,"* or New Testament people are from all nations: everyone who believes in Jesus.

God says of us new covenant people, *"No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me."* Many of the Jews during the time of the Old Testament didn't *"know"* God – didn't believe in God. All of God's New Testament people *"know"* Him – believe in Him: *"They will all know Me."* *"Know"* in the original text refers to a personal knowledge of God. Every believer *"[knows]"* God personally by faith in His Son. Jesus said to His Father, *"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"* (Jn. 17:3). To know God is to place our trust in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation. We can never obey God's commands well enough to make ourselves right with Him and deserve to go to heaven. We don't have to. Jesus perfectly kept all of the Law – God's commands and commandments – in our place, and earned heaven for us. Jesus died for our sins on the cross in our place. All of our sins are forgiven. Jesus covers us with His perfect righteousness. For Jesus' sake God declares us sinners to be righteous in His sight and has given us eternal life in heaven!

The Lord tells us, *"I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more."* The original text expresses this as on-going. We continually sin and repent, and God keeps forgiving and forgetting our sins. In the original text *"sins"* refers to missing the mark, and *"wickedness"* refers to that which is perverse and crooked. Liberal theology teaches that people are basically good. On the contrary, ever since Adam's and Eve's Fall into sin, **everyone's** heart is completely perverse and crooked by nature, and we miss the mark when it comes to obeying God as we should. But when we tell God we're sorry for our sins, He *"[forgives our] wickedness"* and *"remembers [our] sins no more."* One commentator says: "The Lord has buried our sins deeply in the one place where He never will look for them – in the empty tomb of the Savior!" (Sermon Studies On The Old Testament, series A, p. 368, © 1998 NPH) *"Forgive"* in the original text has the idea of lightness, lifting up. We come to Jesus with our sin and guilt weighing on our conscience, and tell Jesus we're sorry. Jesus forgives us, lifting that heavy burden off of us and making our heart light. The psalmist says, *"When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long."* (When he didn't bring his sins to God in repentance his conscience really bothered him.) *"For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me. ... I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'; and You forgave the guilt of my sin"* (32:3-5, NASB).

Jeremiah knew that God had forgiven him and saved him. He knew that the Lord wanted to bring His faithless people to repentance so He could forgive them and save them as well. This is what kept Jeremiah going in the face of terrible persecution and the rejection of God by most of his fellow Jews. In the face of opposition and the rejection of God and His Word by so many today, our forgiveness and salvation in Jesus keep us going. We want to tell other people about Jesus so they can have His forgiveness and salvation, too!

God always remains faithful to His promise of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus. Praise God,
WE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST! Amen.