

Talk 2: Jeremiah 31:31-40

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[0 : 00] So, the reading this afternoon is Jeremiah chapter 31, and it's verses 31 to 40.

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 their 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 no more. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is his name.

[1 : 27] If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.

Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord, from the tower of Hananel to the corner gate, and the measuring line shall go out farther straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goa.

The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the horse gate, towards the east, shall be sacred to the Lord.

It shall not be uprooted or overthrown any more forever. Thanks Robbie. Keep that open.

[2 : 44] Good. I'm conscious I've got you at the best time of day. Post cake and coffee. Pre-barbecue.

See how it goes. Better get my glasses. So this morning we took a dip into the prophecy of Jeremiah and the deep dive into sin.

And we looked at the condition of the human heart and of human nature. But there is a promise at the heart of Jeremiah's prophecy.

And actually that's reflected in the structure of the book. So I've put there, have I put there on your outlines the structure of the book?

It's not very visual, sorry. But chapters 1 to 29. The book of Jeremiah is actually quite a simple structure. 1 to 29.

[3 : 57] You've got the exposure of sin and judgment. 34 to 52. You've got exposure of sin and judgment.

And then in the middle, these four chapters, 30 to 33, you've got God's promise to restore his people through a new covenant.

So actually 31 to 34, where we are, are at the heart of the book. And what we're looking at here, the new covenant, is at the heart of the heart of the book.

Chapter 31, verses 31 to 34. I sort of wonder whether the Lord has deliberately designed it like that.

I don't know. But it seems an elegant structure when at the heart of the heart of the prophecy of Jeremiah, God promises something about new hearts.

[5 : 05] If Jeremiah therefore, if the book was a painting, most of the painting would be bleak and black and dark, a deep dive into the sin of people and of human nature.

But then if you can imagine it, right through the middle, bursting through the clouds, a beam of light and hope, a way out of the darkness, a permanent solution.

Well, let's look at this together then. So, verse 31, I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

And verse 32, key, really verse 32 is saying one thing, this new covenant will be not like the old.

Do you see that? God promised to make a covenant that is not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I brought them by the hand out of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.

[6 : 18] So, a covenant is literally an agreement, it's a contract, it's a deal where parties make promises to each other. When God had brought his people out of Egypt, he'd made a covenant with them.

Here we are. Some really great visual aid. This worked on this last night. Actually, this is the third of three attempts to do that.

You may be surprised. The covenant that he made with his people. Keep these good commandments, God said, and I will bless you in the land.

Ten commandments, don't worship other gods, don't make idols, don't take my name in vain, keep the Sabbath, don't steal, don't lie, honour your parents, as you know. The sacrificial system was part of that covenant, which became the temple.

And can you see there in verse 32, it was like a marriage covenant in God's eyes. I took them by the hand, though I was their husband. So, God, if you like, he'd taken his people by the hand, like a husband, leading his wife gently to the altar, and then to life together.

[7 : 37] And God had said to her, I'll be faithful to you, you be faithful to me, and we'll live happily ever after. That was the old covenant.

But here we are in Jeremiah's day, 800 years after that covenant was made, and as we saw this morning, God says to his people, you have been nothing except unfaithful.

You have done all the evil that you could. And so God says, finally, after many patient centuries, you've broken it.

The covenant lies in tatters. It hasn't worked because of their sin. He takes this covenant, this old covenant, you've broken it, it's gone.

It's over. It hasn't worked. And here is an amazing moment in the Bible.

[8 : 51] Because what would you do at this point? If your spouse had been unfaithful to you for 800 years, warning after warning, warning after warning, chance to repent after chance to repent, would you want to carry on?

Did God have to carry on with his people? No. But isn't it amazing? Instead of saying, you're for the trash now, I'm afraid, he says, let's start again.

It's so kind, isn't it? So patient, and it almost feels wrong that God should do this.

Let's start again, God says, and this time, it will work. But let's start again with a completely new covenant.

A completely new covenant. This time, it will be different. Look again at verse 32. Not light.

[10:04] The emphasis is on discontinuity. And we've illustrated it. Ripping up the old. Bringing in the new.

Can I suggest, it is not always well communicated in churches, in our churches, that the old covenant, the Ten Commandments, the sacrifices, the temple, has not worked.

It's over. It exposed sin, but it could not deal with sin. We need something better.

Something that will actually deal with the problem of sin. Now, verses 33 and 34 spell out what this new covenant is going to be.

And there are three things that God says that he will do in this new covenant. Changed hearts, intimate relationship, full forgiveness.

[11:08] We start on number one, changed hearts, verse 33. For 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. Now, we need to ask, what does this mean? Changed hearts. Actually, when I first did this talk, I put the title New Hearts.

It doesn't quite say New Hearts. It says changed hearts. But when you understand what he's actually saying, it means essentially new hearts.

What does God mean when he says, I will put the law within them and write it on their hearts? Now, maybe you discuss this in those twos and threes. Let me suggest, firstly, what it doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean that they would know the law better. In a deeper, a deeper kind of knowledge of the law. Can't mean that. Because the problem was not that they didn't know the law well.

[12:13] They knew the law very well. They knew what it said. The problem was that they didn't want to obey the law. Deeply ingrained in the human heart was rebellion against God and they could not change their hearts.

In fact, the heart has been the age-old human problem. Can you just turn back with me to Genesis chapter 6, verse 5?

We're going to do an important whole Bible context to what the point God is making here. Genesis 6, verse 5.

God looks around the whole world. This is just before the flood. And he saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

now, just come back to Jeremiah. So that is God's early diagnosis of the problem. You get to Jeremiah and you see that the diagnosis is still the same.

[13:31] Just come forward to Jeremiah 4, verse 4. Because as you read Jeremiah, you see again and again that it is the heart that God points to as the problem.

Why is it that his people had only done evil continually? Why is it that they'd done all the evil that they could? It was because of the heart.

So 4, verse 4, back in Jeremiah, circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts. 4, verse 14, O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil.

The problem is in the heart. God says. 5, verse 23, 5, verse 23, this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart.

7, verse 24, you flick forward, they walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts. 9, verse 14, they have stubbornly followed their own hearts.

[14 : 45] 9, verse 26, at the very end of that verse, 9, verse 26, all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.

And then 11, verse 8, this is the last one we'll do, there are more, 11, verse 8, 11, yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart.

Now, can you see the point? The point is that there has been no progress since Genesis chapter 6, verse 5, all the way to now, at the end of Israel's history, in dealing with the problem of the human heart.

They could not change themselves. And that's why there's a reasonably well-known verse, we won't go there now, in Jeremiah, in just a few chapters time, chapter 13, where God says, can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots, then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.

In other words, you can't change yourselves. It's impossible. Because this is who they are, it is who they are by nature. The problem is in the heart.

[16 : 12] So not only have we done all the evil that we could have done, it could not be otherwise, we are helpless, God declares through Jeremiah.

Now come back to chapter 31 and see what God is saying here. It's a massive moment in the Bible.

He says, but I will change you and I will change you at the deepest level of the heart. The problem of the rebellious human heart will be solved.

I was reading of a Japanese soldier post-World War II who reflected on everything that had happened and he began to realise that the mess that the world is in is due to human nature and this thought haunted him.

He thought, who can change people? He began to realise that the problem was deep. Well, God says here, I will change you at the deepest level of the heart.

[17 : 36] And so the point in where he says, I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts. The point is not that they will know the law better. The point is that God will give them changed hearts that love him and want to obey him.

Remember the summary of the law, love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. That's what it means. God says, I will write it on your hearts so that you will love me and you will begin to love your neighbour.

I will change you at the level of your hearts. The old covenant didn't work because the solution it provided never went deep enough.

God says, in the new covenant, it will work forever because I will deal with the root problem. I still remember Andrew Ma's History of the World watching.

It's a great series actually. It was about maybe six or seven, maybe ten years ago. He traces the history of the world over about 12 hour long episodes. He gets to the end, this very striking, the final scene of 12 hours of footage.

[18 : 51] He's there with Brazil, Rio de Janeiro behind him. He's saying, mankind has made so much progress in so many ways. Those who know Andrew Ma, he's not a Christian by any stretch, I don't think.

But even he says, and yet, we have made no progress when it comes to how we treat each other. Isn't that interesting?

It's very obvious for the world, it's very obvious to people to see, nothing can change the heart. except Jesus. Of course, when Jesus came, what did he say?

He said, come to me and out of your hearts will flow rivers of living water. I will change your hearts. Speaking of his Holy Spirit coming into our hearts, he said, come to me and I will dwell in your hearts through faith.

Ephesians. He said, come to me and you will be born again. I will change you. Wholesale internal change. Think of Zacchaeus meeting Jesus and that encounter with Jesus completely transformed.

[20 : 04] Lord, whatever I took, I've given back for fault. Jesus changes people who never wanted to worship and live for God to people who love God and live for him, however falteringly.

And if we're Christian here today, which most of us are, we know that what he's done in us is a miracle.

He's changed our hearts. Okay, secondly, so firstly changed hearts, secondly intimate relationship. Verse 33, And I will be their God and they will 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.

So flowing out from changed hearts will be intimate relationship. This is the goal of it all. And so through this new covenant, God will finally have a people who he's able to call his own forever.

[21 : 13] But it will be even better. Do you see that? Where he says, no longer will each teach his neighbor, but they will all know me.

The point is, God is saying, that in this new covenant, the quality and closeness of the relationship between the everlasting God and each of his people will change.

it will no longer be one step removed. It will no longer be second hand as it was in the old covenant, as people relied on the priest and the prophet to act as a go between.

God says here, no, in the new covenant they will all know me personally from the least of them to the greatest. A direct one-to-one relationship between an individual and the creator God.

It will not be like the old, it will be better, God says. And again, when Christ came, he came to bring us into relationship with God as Father.

[22 : 20] Each of us is able to call out to God, Abba, Father, Galatians 4, verse 6. Think of the Son of God with individuals, Lazarus, whom he loved as an individual.

This is the high point of the gospel message, isn't it? That through the work of Christ, we can know God personally as our Father and our friend. So secondly, the new covenant will be not like the old because it will be a better relationship, even closer, one-to-one, God says.

changed hearts that love me and want to obey me. And then one-to-one relationship, God says, in this new covenant.

And then thirdly, in the new covenant will not be like the old because it will be founded on total, complete, irreversible forgiveness. Verse 34, the end there.

For, all this will be possible, for I will forgive their iniquity. and I will remember their sin no more. Now, this is a promise of forgiveness that was never available under the old covenant.

[23 : 36] The blood of animals, bulls and goats, could never take away sins. In this new covenant, God says, I will forgive their iniquity.

This time, it will be permanent and final. It carries that sense of once and for all. Do you see that? I will forgive their iniquity. Not some of their iniquity, but all of it.

The whole valley lot of it. But also notice, he will not even remember them. Do you see that? At the end there? I will remember their sin no more.

God God God promises to forgive them. God promises instead to find a way to forgive them, even though they've done all the evil that they could.

The new covenant then will be founded on full forgiveness, God says. Of course, when he made this promise, he knew how he was going to be able to do it by sending his one and only son to die on the cross to bear our sin and its punishment in full.

[24 : 52] I'll just pause here for a second. When we come to Jesus, we find that our sin is forgiven and forgotten by God.

Can I just, if I may, just speak to the person who struggles to believe it, that we are forgiven, which is all of us, I take it. whatever it is in your past that haunts you, the things we've done in our past, we may remember it, but God says he doesn't.

Do you see that? I will remember their sin no more. So let me ask, why are you worrying about something that God in Christ has forgotten?

You may remember it, God says I've forgotten it. There's no slip of paper at the bottom of the drawer that he can refer to and go back to.

It's God. It's as if it was never happened. I've forgotten it. Well, we're just going to take a step back at this point.

[26 : 12] God should have abandoned his people, but he didn't. Instead, he promised a better covenant which would actually work and through which he would have his people forever.

It was different from the old covenant because it would deal with the problem of the human heart once and for all. It would bring full and final forgiveness and it would open up beautiful, close, eternal, intimate relationship between God and his people.

But in one other sense it was different. There are actually four senses. Three plus one equals four.

Did you notice that the old covenant was I will if. I will be faithful to you if you are faithful to me. The new covenant here, you see that, is just I will.

I will put my law within them. I will forgive their iniquity. That is that none of these things in the new covenant were going to depend in any way on the people, on us, but only on God.

[27 : 47] God simply says, I will do it. I will do it. I will do it. I will do it. I will do it. I will draw this now. So here is the new covenant.

The point is this. This is not very good drawing.

Don't draw on the hoof. Let's see. Lesson is it. Okay. The point is that Jesus is the new covenant.

Jesus is the new covenant. The new covenant is not a set of laws, but a person.

Through faith in him, we find new hearts, his spirit within us, just as God promised. We know that's true if we've come to him. He's completely changed us.

[28 : 53] We've begun to love God. We've begun to want to do what he says. It will all be finished in the new creation, of course. We're faltering, we fail, but that change has begun and will be perfected then.

Through his death, we find forgiveness forever. Jesus is the new covenant. And through faith in him, we find ourselves to be children of God, brought into an eternal, intimate, one-to-one relationship with God.

They will know me from the greatest of them to the least. And so there we have a God of grace. Incredible, wonderful grace.

God of God of God of God of God of Christ. One is he's been faithful to his promises.

We can see that, can't we? He's done exactly what he said he would do. Exactly. In Christ. Isn't that wonderful? He's been faithful, yes, but he's been good.

[30 : 10] Wonderfully good. The new covenant is not a set of laws, it's a person, Jesus, to be received by faith.

Thank you. Thank you.