

The Covenant

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Preacher: Rhys Bezzant

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of July 2004. The preacher is Rhys Besant.

His sermon is entitled The Covenant and is based on Jeremiah chapter 31. The book of Jeremiah this month.

And we've reached chapter 31 which is right at the centre of the book. Though in some ways kind of like the book's climax. So let me pray as we read this fantastically encouraging part of Jeremiah. Dear Lord Jesus, we pray that these words of mine might be your words speaking to this congregation. That the things you would have us learn tonight we might learn by the secret working of your spirit in our hearts and minds.

Please grant this our request for we pray it in your strong name. Amen. Well Franklin D. Roosevelt was the 32nd President of the United States.

[1 : 20] And unusually Franklin D. Roosevelt served for four terms before they changed the rules and allowed American presidents only to serve two terms.

He was an unusual president not just because he served four terms. But because he began using the media broadcasting on the radio as it were.

Fireside chats with the nation. His radio broadcasts were enjoyed, were listened to, became his feature, his call sign.

But beyond these two distinctives of his presidency he comes to us as the one who wrote into law the New Deal.

For he served as president during the Great Depression. A period not just in American history but in much of the Western world where there was great unemployment.

[2 : 22] And beyond that great depression and despondency. In this period of great need in his own nation's life he reformed labor relations.

He began great public works. And provided financial support particularly to farmers for whom life had become so difficult.

And this package has become known as the New Deal. In a moment, in a time, in a period of crisis, of despondency, of depression in the nation.

He exercised great leadership and gave hope by presenting to the nation this New Deal. Because America could look beyond its moment of despondency to a brighter, better future.

Well, in some people's eyes, the prophet Jeremiah was not a patch on Franklin D. Roosevelt. He didn't seem to wield the same kind of power. But like the president, Jeremiah exercised his leadership in a time of crisis.

[3 : 40] And though he'd preached judgment that the Babylonians were soon to arrive and take the people of Israel into exile. Beyond preaching judgment, Jeremiah also preached hope.

That after the exile, there would be a bright new day. If only the people kept believing.

And this bright new day is the subject of the chapter we're reading together tonight. For though it falls in the middle of the book of Jeremiah, much of Hebrew writing placed some of the most important things, not at the end of a piece of writing, but squarely in its middle, to signal how important the ideas contained therein would be.

Jeremiah announces the New Deal. Verse 31. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

God, God, God himself will strike a new deal for the people. And not just with the house of Israel or the house of Judah.

[5 : 01] The divided nation together would receive this new deal from God. God had previously made a deal, we learn in verse 32.

It won't be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. A covenant they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. God had formally made a covenant, a deal with his people.

Not just as a harsh lawgiver, but when God brought his people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, he was leading them by the hand, tenderly bringing them through the waters into that place of promise. God, though he was tender, though he was like a husband to his wife, nevertheless found his people rebelling and breaking the covenant, renouncing the deal that God had provided for them. Even while Moses was up the mountain receiving the law, the people were in the valley, finding new ways to spurn the one who loved them. There will be a new covenant, the prophet Jeremiah announces, but it won't be like the old deal.

[6 : 19] How will it be new? Well, we read that in verse 33. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they shall be my people. In a way, there were things that weren't very new about this deal. For God had previously said to the people, I am your God, you are my people.

That phrase, I am your God, you are my people, recurs throughout the Old Testament. God was in one sense doing nothing new. But what is new is the mode of delivery.

God is now impressing his law on people's hearts. The newness of this new deal would be expressed through God writing his law not on stone tablets, but within us.

Impressed on our hearts, impressed on our minds, impressed on our will. God will do it. I will do it, says the Lord.

[7 : 30] And when this law is written on our hearts, we learn its outcome in verse 34. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

When God has impressed his law on our hearts, the outcome is that we can have an intimate relationship with God.

Anyone can have access to God. We're not dependent on people mediating outside of us. Anyone can know God. You can be smart or not so smart.

You can be privileged or poor and in exile. Anyone can know the Lord. And the reference to there no longer being in need of a teacher isn't so much saying that there won't be the role of teacher, otherwise I'm doing myself out of a job tonight of course, but rather that there is equal access to God by the teacher or by anyone else for that matter.

When God writes his law on our hearts, we can say that God is closer to us than our own breath.

[8 : 57] The old covenant relied on human mediators, people who were between us and God, helping us to receive knowledge of God.

But in this new covenant, there won't be need of human mediators, for they kept stuffing up. Indeed, we've learned in Jeremiah chapter 2 that these mediators were actually inhibiting people getting to know God.

For we read in 2 verse 8, the priests did not say, where is the Lord? Those who handled the Lord did not know me. The rulers transgressed against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal and went after other things that don't profit.

The problem with human mediators is that they can actually get in the way of us knowing God, rather than doing as they ought, helping us understand God ourselves. Knowing God in chapter 2 of Jeremiah is knowing the story of salvation.

Knowing God in Jeremiah 22 is obeying him, knowing him in such a way that his will becomes our will. And even when we fail to live obediently, God says that our sins, our iniquities will be forgiven and our sins remembered no more.

[10 : 23] Well, Franklin D. Roosevelt could provide new material support. He could provide some extra cash for people who were despondent or unemployed.

But the new deal which Jeremiah here flags is not merely speaking of material support, but a new spiritual intimacy. Intimacy for me.

For you. New responsibility. New privileges that are given to us as individuals. And it's not just that when this new day dawns, in the future there would be this new personal individual intimacy.

For we read in the paragraph 27 to 30 that this new individual intimacy with God was actually emerging even in the time of the prophet. Verse 29.

In those days they shall no longer say the parents have eaten sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge, but all shall die for their own sins, the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

[11 : 43] For while people were complaining, will the exile ever end? Won't God visit the sins of the fathers on the heads of the children? Jeremiah is reminding, now actually there can be hope because God will, as it were, create a line in the sand and say, no, there can be hope even if your parents sinned.

You yourself have to bear the penalty for your own sins. You yourself are receiving more responsibility because you're receiving more intimacy.

There's a new deal coming, but does that mean that the old deal was a mistake by God? Is the Old Testament plan A, God's stuff up, and the new deal that's to arrive, plan B, God's well-revised purposes?

Well, no. We read in verses 35 to 37 that God's purposes for his people are as solid as his purposes for the creation. There's no plan A or plan B.

There was only ever one plan. Verse 35, Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of the moon, the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is his name.

[13 : 10] If this fixed order were ever to cease from my presence, says the Lord, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before me forever. Just as there's only one creation, there's only one purpose of God for his people.

Or verse 37, Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, the foundation of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel because of all they have done. Fully expecting that the ends of the earth and the universe could never be measured, therefore God's people would never be rejected.

There's only one plan of God. The new covenant, the new deal, is not, as it were, an abandonment of God's purposes, but an intensification of God's purposes, a recommitment to do what he'd always planned to do.

something new is needed because the old covenant was never planned to be the final word.

The old covenant had built-in obsolescence. Why is it that light bulb manufacturers only build light globes to last for 200 hours?

[14 : 33] I've been told that actually you can design and build light globes that will never burst, will never bust. But there's a kind of desire in the light globe manufacturers' hearts, obviously, that light globes bust, so that why?

Well, we'll go and buy another one. They have designed built-in obsolescence. They're never meant to last long range. The old covenant is exactly the same.

It was never meant to last forever. It was the preparatory stage. It had built-in obsolescence. But don't take my word for it. Listen to these words from Hebrews chapter 8.

8 verse 6. Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted through better promises.

For if the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. Jeremiah 31 is quoted. In speaking of a new covenant, he has made the first one obsolete.

[15 : 46] And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear. or to put it in a slightly different way, the Old Testament is our primary school.

The new covenant, the new deal, the new testament is kind of like the advanced syllabus, the high school of faith. Our primary school education is only meant to take us so far.

It's meant to teach us, I gather, the foundations of reading or writing, spelling, basic manners, how to hold hands when you're walking into class, don't spit at the teacher, all those kind of basic rules that we need to know in life.

Remember that bumper sticker, if you can read this, thank a primary school teacher. The lessons of primary school are limited, but they're foundational.

Without them, you can't move on to the advanced syllabus. Jeremiah is making exactly this point.

The old deal is the primary school lesson.

[16 : 57] The new deal is the advanced syllabus for adult, grown-up believers. Paul makes this point as well in Galatians chapter 3.

Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our tutor, the law was our disciplinarian, the law was our primary school teacher until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to this disciplinarian, this tutor, for in Christ Jesus you're all children of God through faith.

Friends, we have received the new deal. We are part of this advanced syllabus. We can be grown up in our faith.

because we've come to believe in Jesus Christ whose death inaugurated this new covenant. After the supper he took a loaf of bread and when he'd given thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying, this is my body which is given for you.

[18 : 28] Do this in remembrance of me. And he did the same with the cup after supper saying, this cup is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Jesus' death inaugurates the new deal. Jesus' death secures our heart transplant that our hearts will be living and impressed by God's law.

Jesus' death achieves for us a new intimacy with God because of his blessed Holy Spirit.

But I only have one question for us tonight. Are you prepared to be spiritually grown up? Do you understand what it means to be spiritually grown up, to live under the new covenant, to live having committed yourself to the new deal?

What are the privileges and responsibilities of being spiritually grown up, having this intimacy with God?

[19 : 44] Well, the first thing I need to say is that because we live under the new covenant, the new deal, we can do business directly with God.

you can, believe it or not, enjoy God even when you're not in church. You can be assured of your forgiveness even when the minister isn't reassuring you of it.

You can learn God, you can learn Christ, in the language of Ephesians, on your own. You can have immediate access to God through Jesus Christ.

We can do business directly with God. Just think about it for a minute. What extraordinary privilege. When was the last time you prayed that you'd know God more deeply, that you'd follow God more nearly, that you'd see God more clearly?

Or, are you like me, making excuses for not being grown up? That's what children do, isn't it?

[21 : 07] They make excuses. They blame someone, something, preferably their younger brother, perhaps their lack of the latest, coolest toys, but children blame, make excuses.

That's what immaturity does to a person. when you're grown up, you give up making excuses. You own your own life before God.

I've been watching the program on TV called The Apprentice, and Donald Trump, who is the guy who fires at the end of every episode, said last week, I'm sick of people making excuses for their performance, for their achievements.

Do you relate to God through someone else? Is your connection to God via your partner, your spouse, your boyfriend, your girlfriend, are you kind of relying on them as it were to keep you going as a Christian?

Do you rely on your parents? Do you rely on your pastor? or are you grown up doing business directly with God through Jesus Christ, his son?

[22 : 42] And secondly, if we are grown up living in this new covenant relationship with God, do you believe that the best is yet to come?

For it's of the essence of being a child that you want everything now, you want it now, and if you can't get it, you, well, you kick a tantrum.

But it's of the essence of being mature that you can see that waiting might be indeed good for you. And though our world is a now and me world, Christians, of course, as adults, can see that waiting might actually be exactly the right thing.

Christians talk a lot about love and faith, but do we talk about hope? What do you hope for? Are you prepared to wait because the best is yet to come?

I wonder whether in those conversations we had just a few minutes ago, whether one of the things you were hoping for was heaven. How easily this world distracts us.

[24 : 06] Even while I was preparing this sermon this week, I had my Jeremiah papers on the left side of my desk, and on the right side of my desk, I had the cuttings about houses and flats that I'm thinking of buying.

I don't think of buying one of them, but there was a sack of papers anyway. I emotionally gravitate towards the newspaper cuttings and think about buying a house or buying a flat, and then I think, goodness me, goodness me, I'm thinking about heaven, this is the new covenant, this is a greater hope than anything I could see in a paper or magazine.

Do we believe that the best is yet to come? How easily this world disappoints us, the way our world works, our church works, our family works, our own Christian experience can all be of great disappointment to us, which should just remind us, even as Christians, that the best is yet to come. For being a Christian is not about avoiding pain, but hoping despite the pain. just as Jeremiah encouraged the people of his own day to look beyond their own situation to hope, so he encourages us to do the same.

Or as G.K. Chesterton put it, as long as matters are really hopeful, hope is a mere flattery or a platitude. It's only when things are hopeless that hope begins to bear strength at all.

[25 : 40] Like all Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable. As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is a mere flattery or platitude.

It's only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. In the darkest days of the nation, Jeremiah preached judgment.

The Babylonians were coming to take God's people into exile. But beyond the exile, Jeremiah also preached hope that there would be days when God would inaugurate a new deal, give a fresh start, establish a new and intimate reign in an individual's life.

And though they found it hard to believe, Jeremiah preached it nevertheless. less. We are part of the new covenant, the new deal, with new intimacy with God.

But though we have this new deal, there is of course yet for us hope. Just as it's appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

[27 : 33] The best is yet to come. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.