

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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[0 : 0 0] Merry Christmas to everyone. Merry Christmas season, that is. I've been thinking about the Christmas season, I've been thinking about Santa Claus, which you might be surprised about, but I've actually been thinking about him because, well, partly because my son went to the tree lighting in the New Haven Green last Thursday, and he stood in line until he got to the door, and then he said, I don't want to go in, I don't want to go in, I don't want to see him, he's scary, which I don't get, but because I think most of us think, who is, you know, who is Santa Claus? Santa Claus is this really nice guy who has a big white beard and a big red suit, and he gives us the things that we want, right? Like, what a great cultural icon of Santa, you know, what better could we have than that? But then I was listening this week to the song, Santa Claus is Coming to

Town. Do you remember the words to it? You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town. It's actually a little creepy. He knows when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake. And in the hearts of many kids, and indeed even maybe in some of our own families, we use this as a motivation during the Christmas season. Be good, or you'll get a coal, lump of coal in your stocking this year. So kids go to sleep every night. If they've actually listened to the song and overcome the cultural picture that we paint of Santa Claus, they go to bed in fear. Have I done enough? Have I been good enough? Have I been good enough this year to get what I want? Friends, I wonder if we do the same thing with our God. I wonder if we live wondering whether we've been good enough this year. Seriously, think back to your year of 2014. Can you think of something that you're pretty sure puts you on the naughty instead of the nice list? A moment of cowardice when you weren't the person you want to be. An ungracious word spoken from the ugliness of your heart. Maybe a missed opportunity to bless or help someone else, missed because of selfish preoccupation.

Maybe a failure to invest your life in this past year in the things you say. We can all start with our prayer life, and that'll pretty much just bury us, right? Maybe helping others, maybe love your spouse or your children or your roommates, maybe just daily Bible reading. All of us can think of the things that put us not on the nice list but on the naughty list. And what do we do with that?

Self-condemnation rises up in our hearts. You're not good enough. It can lead us to despair. Okay, I'm not good enough. I never will be. And we own that. Leads us to performance. I'm going to try better. Try harder. Do better. I'm going to overcome this. I can do this. And in the midst of it all, we live with this insecurity. And it's an insecurity, I think, ultimately rooted in our relationship with God and if God really accepts us. But it plays itself out in all of our other relationships too. And so we look at our peers and we think, will you accept me into the cool crowd at school? We look at our professional peers and we think, will you accept me? Am I good enough to have your respect? We look at our spouse or our families and we think, will you love me or will you leave me? So we think about our naughty list, we can be buried in shame. We live a life hiding those failures, afraid to let other people see them, constantly putting on a face so that others will see, won't see who we really are.

And so we live this life of fear and insecurity like we're on probation. Probation with God, probation with everyone, wondering whether the next step, misstep, is going to actually blow it for us. Well friends, this brings us to our passage this morning. We're continuing in our series about the new things that have come with the advent of Christmas. We're looking at Jeremiah chapter 31. I failed to get the page number, but it's in your bulletin if you want to look there.

[5 : 23] Jeremiah 31, 31 through 34. And as we're looking at this, this is going to be the second in our four-week series on the advent of what is new. Last week, Nick talked about Jesus coming as our new king and the joy and freedom that comes from that. Next week, Greg will talk about having a new heart from Ezekiel. And finally, the week before Christmas, we will talk about the new creation that Jesus will bring when he will make all things new. But today, Jeremiah talks about a new covenant, a new covenant between God and his people. And in it, he proclaimed something that is good news.

Good news to the people in their context, good news to us today. So let's read that together. Jeremiah 31, verses 31 through 34. 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 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. For I will forgive their iniquities and I will remember their sin no more. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you that your word is a book of hope. That, Lord, in the midst of the messiness of our lives and the ugliness of our hearts, the ravages of sin, both in and out, God, you speak words of hope. That you have not abandoned this world, but you are at work redeeming this world for our good and for your glory. God, I pray that we would hear the hope of the proclamation of Jeremiah this morning. God, speak it to our hearts and, Lord, may it enrich and deepen our celebration of this Christmas season. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jeremiah speaks a word of hope that God will secure for his people a certain and eternal relationship with the coming of Jesus to earth. We're going to look at what Jeremiah predicted. We're going to look at how Jesus accomplished it and what it means for us. So, let's do that together this morning.

Jeremiah, as he proclaims it, has kind of two points. He has the bad news and the good news of it. The first thing that he says in verse 31, having announced, I will bring a new covenant, as he says in verse 32, that the old covenant was insufficient. The old covenant was faulty.

[9 : 00] He says, my people were unable to keep it, and that is why it is an old covenant that no longer will work.

And friends, to understand the significance of this, let me tell you a little bit about where Jeremiah was speaking and to whom he was speaking. If you remember your Old Testament history, going back to Abraham, God called a man and said, I will make your descendants a great nation.

And then through his descendants over many years, he raised them up to be a large nation. But remember, they were in slavery in Egypt. So, God came and he rescued them with a mighty hand and doing great things. And he delivered them out of Egypt and brought them through great trials and overcoming insurmountable odds into a promised land where they were meant to be blessed and be a blessing to the world. And God raised up David to be their king. And they were going to be a kingdom which displayed the greatness of God. And yet they failed over and over and over again. The covenant, the old covenant that was made with Moses and with the people, through Moses, with the people at Sinai as God delivered them from Egypt, was the Old Testament law. It's what the book of Deuteronomy is all about and Leviticus and all those things. And it was God's instructions on this is what it means for you to be my people.

I will be your God and you will be my people if you keep these laws and commandments and statutes that I give you today. But the flaw in it is that they could not keep it. And nor could we.

And so God begins to bring judgment to his people. And so if you remember in the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom in 722 was conquered by a pagan nation. Assyria came in and those tribes no longer held that land.

[11 : 05] For another, I got to do math here, about 130 years or so, the southern kingdom held on.

But with kings who over and over again would turn to other things rather than the Lord. With people who over and over again, rather than worshipping the one true God, would turn and worship the idols of their neighbors and their friends.

And if you read the first 30 chapters of Jeremiah, you see that it is a message of judgment. My people have deserted me. They have turned away from me.

They have forsaken me and I will bring judgment on them. And Jeremiah, if I understand the history right, spoke this word of hope to people between the dates of 598 and 586.

Now, you may not remember what happens then. 598 is the first incursion of the Babylonian empire into Israel. They came and they took away many of the people and many of the treasures as tribute.

[12 : 24] Babylonians came and said, if you give us all these things, we won't completely wipe you out. So their nation had already lost most of its glory, had become a vassal state under the Babylonian rule.

But there was still a puppet king in place and he rebelled. And in 586, the Babylonians would come back and they would tear down the walls of the temple and they would destroy the walls of the city and they would salt the fields and they would make it an unlivable place.

The destruction was great. And in the midst of it, the people must be thinking, God, where are you? Have we blown it so badly that you have forsaken us forever?

Have we violated our probation in such a way that all we get is judgment? Friends, I wonder if you ask the same question.

Have I blown it so badly? There's no hope for me. God has abandoned me. There's no way that he can bring me back.

[13 : 47] When you look deep at the heart of what drives you, what drives you to be a great student, what drives you to be a great husband and father, what drives you to succeed in your career, what drives you to please your friends in your high school, is it this fear that maybe you're not good enough at all and you're trying desperately to overcome it?

Friends, this is why what Jeremiah has to say to Israel in 590 B.C. is also what he has to say to us today. And he says, the old covenant is faulty, but the good news is that I'm not done.

The good news is that there is a new covenant that will come. And a covenant is the words that we don't use today, but that God uses in his Bible to talk about what is the arrangement or what's the framework, what are the stipulations on how God and his people relate?

How does that work? And what God said is, I know that you can't keep the old covenant. I knew it when I gave it to you.

Go back and read Deuteronomy carefully. He knew it. He knew it when he gave it. He said, I'm going to tell you how to do it, and you're not going to be able to do it. And that's why I've put in provisions for God, for my gracious work to cover over your sin, even in the law.

[15 : 26] But as Galatians reminds us, the law was given to point us to something greater than that. And Jeremiah, in the place of the deepest darkness and the greatest despair of the people of Israel, spoke this word of hope.

Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant. I'm going to rework this relationship. I'm going to reframe it in a different way. What does he say that he does?

Let's look at it. So, the new, he says, I'm going to bring a new covenant that's better. I'm going to bring a better plan for my people. And look with me again, verses 33 and 34.

Do you see what he says? There are lots of things that he says here. One thing he says is, look, I'm going to change the place of the law. Rather than it being something that's posted on the wall, I'm going to write it on your heart.

Rather than being something that's simply held out for you to hold on to, I'm going to actually put it inside of you so that you can actually do it. Greg is going to preach on this next week, so I'm not going to say a lot more about this.

[16 : 38] Come back next week for the great heart transformation that God will work to make his people not only able, but wanting to please and honor and obey him.

He says it's not going to be an external ritualism anymore. It's going to be this internal transformation that produces the kind of people who reflect the kind of God that he is. He reminds them of the promise in Exodus 19.

Then I will be their God, and they will be my people. It's the exact same words that he used when he established the Mosaic Covenant. Here he repeats it again. He says this new covenant is going to be not simply overrunning the old one.

It's going to be fulfilling it. It's going to be finally enabling this relationship to happen where I will be a God to my people, and they will be mine.

And it will give them an identity, and it will give them a purpose in the world. They will know that beyond anything else, they are my people, and that will be the most important thing about them.

[17 : 48] And their purpose will be to live for my glory, and that will be for their good in the world. And they won't have to have other people speaking to them, saying, Know the Lord!

Know the Lord! There will be no priests. There will be no temple. There will be no courtyards. There will be no curtains. But as you see in verse 34a, they will all know the Lord from the least to the greatest.

God opens up his doors. That not only will his people be restored, but he will open up the invitation wide to the whole world. And what good news that is for us, because for most of us, we aren't descendants of Abraham.

And yet he says to us, Come, this new covenant is for all people, for all tribes and tongues and nations. But the most important thing, I want you to look with me in verses 32 and 33.

I'm sorry, 33 and 34. I want you to look at the subject and verb again. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days.

[19 : 13] I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God. And they shall be my people. And then skipping down to the end of 34, I will forgive their sins.

And I will remember their sin no more. Friends, the most amazing and the most wonderful thing about the new covenant is that God says, I will do this.

In the Mosaic covenant, there was this amazing mix of conditionality and unconditionality where God makes great promises, but then there's always this, if you keep my commandments, if you will obey me, if you will keep my laws.

And constantly throughout the Old Testament, you see the people wrestling with these two things, the unconditionalness and the conditionalness of what God has done. In the new covenant, God says, I will do this.

I have seen your weakness. I have seen your sin. I've seen your failure. And I know you can't be good enough. I know you will never be able to measure up to what is necessary to be my people.

[20 : 22] And I will accomplish this. I will do it. I will make a new covenant with my people. This is the word of hope for us.

Isn't it? Because like Israel, we know we can't keep it. We know that if there is a cosmic list of naughty and nice, we are on the naughty side.

Maybe not in the balance. Maybe some of you are really good people, and there's only some over on the naughty side. There's a lot on the good side. I know when I look into my heart, there's as much on the naughty side as there is in the good.

Probably more. I look at my life. I see how little I live out what I hope and what I want to be. But like the nation of Israel, our personal history can hear this word of hope.

Because when we see that all of our trying and all of our efforts to be good enough, to try to measure up, to try to get out of probation, can't ever do anything but ultimately bring us to a point of despair.

[21 : 34] I can't do it. I give up. Only condemnation. God speaks this word of hope.

I will do this for you. I will do for you what you can't do for yourself. Friends, this is what Christmas is all about.

This is about God initiating His plan of establishing this covenant, not because people had earned it or deserved it, but simply because out of God's eternal redemptive plan, He had determined that He would do this, that He would show the kind of God that He is by redeeming a people for Himself, that He would establish this final covenant on His own terms and by His own work.

Friends, this is what Jeremiah predicted, and this is what we celebrate at Christmastime. Because Jesus, as He comes, establishes the new covenant.

Look at verse 34b. This is at the very core of it, isn't it? Because it was their sin and their iniquity, their inability to obey the law that condemned Israel.

[23 : 09] And it is our sin and our inability to live a life of goodness perfectly that puts us in this same place of failure before God.

And God comes and He says, alright, my beloved human beings who are unable, I will send a human being to do for you what you can't do for yourself.

At Christmas, we celebrate the incarnation, God become flesh. Jesus really was a human being, and it was really, really important that He was. Because only a human being, living out the life that He did, could solve this conundrum.

Jesus came to live the perfect life that Israel was called to live. Jesus came to be the perfect good human that we long to be, but aren't.

And He couldn't have done this if He wasn't actually human. Hebrews reminds us that the blood of bulls and goats can't deal with the problem of sin.

[24 : 28] Sometimes, I think, we wonder, can't God just wave His hand? I don't know if you know the movie, The Prince of Egypt, but there's this great scene where Moses comes back and he sees his brother and he's like, hey, and Moses is feeling like, I broke the laws.

And Pharaoh says, I am the Pharaoh, the morning star, and the evening sun, and I say that it is not so. And it's, we wish that God would do that. Just wave His hand and say, ah, don't worry about it.

But in fact, God had a much better plan. Because for God, sin is just a terrible, terrible thing. It is evil in the world and it is evil in our hearts.

And He's not willing to just say, it's not as bad as you think it is. He's actually going to say, it's worse than you think it is. It is. But the good news is that I will take care of it for you.

And so Jesus, this God man comes and He lives a life of perfect obedience for us. He is the perfect human. He is the Israel that was not, the Son who actually followed all of the laws.

[25 : 43] He was tempted in every way as we were because He was human, yet without sin. And so He lives this perfect life for us.

And then, having done that, He offers Himself up as a substitute to pay the penalty for our sin.

sin. So having lived the perfect life for us that we could not live, now He does, in His flesh, He receives upon His body the punishment of sin that we deserve.

The death that we deserve. The wrath of God against cosmic evil that resides in our hearts and plays itself out in our petty unkindnesses every day.

Jesus went to the cross in our place to remove that stain of sin, to take the punishment for that sin, and He could only do it as a human.

[27 : 04] And friends, there's one more stage in this, isn't there? because the human who came and lived a perfect life, the human who then died the most unjust death in the world, is a human who rose again from the dead.

He rose not as a spirit, but as a man with a body. And His disciples could put their hands and touch the nails, the holes in His hands.

They could feel the scar in His side where He was pierced. Jesus rose as a man so that in His victory over sin and death, He might then invite us to join with Him.

Nick, Greg, this is what you guys get to unpack for the next two weeks. A new heart and a new creation. The outworking of the human who rose from the dead.

That we get caught up in His train. Caught up in Him as He establishes this new kingdom for us. By rising from the dead, He reminds us that the old covenant doesn't have the last word.

[28 : 23] But by rising from the dead, we now have this new covenant. Because do you see what Jesus has done through His life and death and resurrection? He has now become the guarantor of our relationship with God.

He comes and He says, I have met all the stipulations. I have met all the requirements. What God requires of His people, I have done.

So there's no more probation. There's no more fear of, if I blow it this time, will He just cast me off?

There's no more wondering, can I be good enough? Because the answer is, no, you can't. But He has been for you. Friends, this is the last covenant that God makes with His people.

This is the final covenant. This is what the writer of the Hebrews reminds us is the eternal covenant. That before the beginning of time, God planned that this would be the pinnacle of His work of relating to His creation.

[29 : 37] And that's what we celebrate with Christmas. Christmas is the opening movement of this final work that accomplishes this new covenant with God.

We've sung this song a lot in the last year and a half. What reason have I to doubt? Why would I dwell in fear?

All I have known is grace. My future in Christ is clear. My sins have been paid in full. There's no condemnation here. I live in the good of this.

My Father has brought me near. I'm leaving my fears behind me now. The old is gone. The new has come. What you complete is completely done.

We're heirs with Christ. The victory won. What you complete is completely done. I don't know what lies ahead. What if I fail again?

[30 : 41] You are my confidence. You will keep me till the end. The old is gone. The new has come. What you complete is completely done.

Friends, what we celebrate in the coming of Jesus is the establishing of this new covenant between God and his people. God is not out to get you.

He's not watching you when you sleep and when you wake, wondering if you'll be naughty or nice anymore. God has come not to get you, but to make you his.

He has come to rescue you from your insecurity, from your fear, from your performance, from your ritual.

He has come to make you his. And he has done everything necessary for him to make you his in Christ. So if you're here this morning and you're wondering what is this Christianity about, this is what God calls you.

[31 : 56] God calls you to look at Jesus and what he has done and consider that he alone has done the one thing that you need to know God, the one thing that you can't do.

And he calls you to come and humble yourself before him and throw yourself on faith, on Christ, what he has done, forsaking all your goodness and all the things you're trying to do in hopes that God might accept you.

He says, come, enter into this new covenant relationship that I have established and I have sealed. Come and by faith enter in. Friends, for those of you who have already entered into that relationship, the new covenant reminds us that we are called to live as his people now, to be freed from the fear and insecurity that consume us, from the performance that so easily drives our every, to free us from the despair in the face of our failure that buries us, we are now free to love, free to serve, free to worship, free to rest, free to trust and obey, free to sing of a great God who has done this great thing for me.

Celebrating Christmas is celebrating this new work. As the angel told Joseph, you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sin.

let's pray. Lord, we thank you. We thank you that you have done what we could not do.

[33 : 51] God, what a great Savior we have in Jesus. What a great hope and a great joy we celebrate every Christmas as we remember your initiative that you will do this for us.

God, I pray, I pray that in the midst of the busyness of our cultural celebration of this holiday, God, that you would work in our hearts, Lord, that a deeper, more rich appreciation of what we are celebrating when we talk about comfort and joy.

Lord, that what would spring from our hearts would be a true worship of knowing that we are yours because of what you have done for us. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. We're going to stand and sing, Hark, the herald angels sing, and it doesn't mean that the angel's name is Harold. It means that he is pronouncing the good work of God, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.

[35 : 26] Wraith to the