

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **A NEW COVENANT**

(Jeremiah 31)

Study #10

### **Sermon series: Faithful**

(Stories from Jeremiah)

#### **Introduction: Lowering the bar...**

Back in the 90's and early 2000's, Northwest held an annual summer basketball camp we call "The Double Bar Basketball Camp" opened to kids entering 3<sup>rd</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> grades.

It was always a great week of fun, sweat, learning, sweat, basketball, sweat, devotionals - and, yes, sweat.

When we first started, we decided that we would invite children to the basketball camp who were entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, despite the fact that such children are notoriously small.

Don't get me wrong. I think 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are great. Generally speaking, though, they're not very tall, can't jump very high, and can't dribble all that well.

And you also know basketball rules and regulations. Free throws are to be taken from a distance of fifteen feet from the hoop. The goal height is ten feet. There is a standard basketball size.

The Double Bar Camp was a basketball camp. We wanted the kids to learn basketball skills. So, every day at camp we taught, drilled, and played games.

But there was a problem, and the problem was apparent from the very beginning.

The children entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade were, almost without exception, unable to shoot free throws from fifteen feet. They couldn't throw the ball up to the ten-foot rims. They couldn't really handle the regulation sized basketballs.

It was weird.

We coached them. We taught them. We trained them. We tried scolding and shaming them (no, not really). We tried everything we could think of, and they still couldn't deal with the well-established rules of the game.

There was nothing wrong with the game. Ten-foot baskets make sense and so do regulation-sized basketballs.

But after watching the youngest children repeatedly fail, we realized that we would have to either consign these children to a very frustrating week or lower the bar.

We decided to lower the bar.<sup>1</sup> We accommodated to their weakness. We let the youngest kids compete under a different set of rules. They used smaller basketballs, shot to eight-foot high goals, shot ten-foot free throws.

We changed the rules in ways that made it possible for them to win - and 3<sup>rd</sup>-graders ended up having a great time at the Double Bar Basketball Camp.

Every illustration breaks down. And this one does, too. But what we are going to see this morning is that, in Jesus, what we decided to do at our basketball camp, God decided to do for people.

After multiple centuries of failure to live according to the rules and regulations He had put in place, He decided to "lower the bar". By providing new equipment, He made it possible for those who believe in Jesus to "win", and lead lives that were pleasing to Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, of course we actually lowered the bar before the camp began. :-)

The Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, looked forward to the day when the bar would be lowered, and he wrote about it in his book.

### *Review*

This morning we'll be taking our last look at the life and times of Jeremiah. We started exploring the book he wrote back in September. He was an amazing man and lived a remarkable life, and I hope that you have come to love Jeremiah as much as I have.

He was a towering figure who trusted and obeyed God - even when doing so caused him lots of problems.

God called him to be a prophet while he was still a teenager, and he never balked at the assignment to declare what the Lord told him to say. Even when it might have cost him his life, he still obeyed.

Over these weeks, we have heard Jeremiah rail against injustice, and we have watched him suffer for his faithfulness. He was slandered, put in stocks, thrown into prisons, and dropped into mud-filled cisterns. We have listened to his courageous preaching - and to his brutally honest prayers.

His book is a long one, and we've only hit a few of the highlights.

But, in the portions of Jeremiah's stories that we've seen, he's called us to God-centered living, to love the big, broad world He has made, to be courageous people of conviction, and to find our fulfillment in a relationship with Almighty God.

During Jeremiah's life, his nation, Israel, was a mess. As he got older, his nation got messier. He lived to see it subjected to foreign powers. First to Assyria, then to Egypt, and finally to Babylon.

Things on the national and international stage were always in turmoil during his days, and the one consistent reality in Jeremiah's times was Jeremiah, always faithful, always standing for God.<sup>2</sup>

It can be tempting to settle for the *status quo* and to swim with the current. That was something Jeremiah never did.

He swam upstream and calls us each to a life that isn't wrapped up in a small package called "me", but in service to our world in the Name of a loving, holy, all-wise God.

That's a vision that will sustain us through a wacky 2020 and beyond: Leading a life of transcendent purpose, investing our resources into an eternal kingdom, pedal to the metal for God.

### **Hope in Times of Despair (Jeremiah 30-33)**

#### **The Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-33)**

##### *The delight of bringing consolation after judgment*

Now, it's way more fun to bring a message of consolation and hope than it is to bring a message of judgment.

And Jeremiah often brought the hard truth of judgment to the people of his day.<sup>3</sup> (We even have the word "jeremiad" to describe a message of judgment.)

Because he spoke so often about coming judgment, there was a desperate need for a word, too, about coming consolation and comfort.

For that reason, sandwiched near the middle of His book is a section we refer to as "The Book of Consolation." These are four chapters devoted to consoling the people of Jerusalem with a great hope for the future.

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<sup>2</sup> There is so much more to Jeremiah than what we have seen. More prophecies. More life stories. More calls to holiness. Stories of deliverance and stories of judgment. We could spend months - even years! - studying this man and his book.

<sup>3</sup> Check out 20:7-18.

*The end goal of judgment/discipline: restoration*

Consolation is the word that follows the word of judgment. When God deals with His people, judgment may be a necessary word, but it is never the last word.

Judgment is purposeful and it is given to produce repentance, which will lead to restoration.

Ultimately, God's dealings with His children are not punitive. His discipline is mingled with tears. It is always with a redemptive purpose in mind.

In the days of Jeremiah, bringing His people to repentance and restoration was behind the judgment God had in mind. But He did have a very severe discipline in store for them.

He was going to allow the Babylonian armies to overwhelm and overthrow Jerusalem. The city would be destroyed. The city would be sacked. The people would be taken away to captivity.

The Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-33) was necessary as it is filled with promises of God's eventual restoration of the nation.

### **A Glorious Restoration**

After predicting the Babylonian devastation, Jeremiah also predicted that following captivity in Babylon, the Jews would return to live and to worship again in the Promised Land of Palestine. God will bring them back home. (31:1-9)

God will pour out His mercy on His people. Israel will again be prosperous and blessed. Yes, the Lord will overthrow, but He will also build them back up again (31:10-30)

As Jeremiah wraps up, he declares God's undying love for His people and God's promise to make them holy. (31:35-40).

In this section in which Jeremiah gives such wonderful news, we find the best of all possible news tucked away near the end of chapter 31. God is going to make a new covenant with His people.

The question that might come to mind when you hear about a New Covenant is, "*What was wrong with the Old Covenant?*"

Good question...

### **Needed: A New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)**

#### **The Problem with the Old Covenant (vv. 31-32)**

*God's covenant-keeping loyalty to His people*

#### Covenants Israel knew and loved

Think of covenants as treaties where each party agrees to certain conditions.

Over the course of American history, we have entered into lots of covenants that bind us with other countries. Each country makes promises to keep these covenants.

When a man and a woman marry, they enter into a covenant with each other, promising to love and respect, to leave and to cleave, and to have and to hold "*till death does them part.*"

We are all familiar with covenants among nations, individuals, and companies. Through the ages, God has related to people on the basis of "covenant."

In the covenants we find in the Bible between God and people, some are what we call "unilateral" covenants. That is, God will fulfill them. Period. No matter what people do, He will abide by the covenant.

For instance:

- God made a unilateral covenant with mankind after Noah's flood that He would never destroy the earth again...by flood.

- He made another unilateral covenant with Abraham, promising that He would multiply Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Palestine as an inheritance.
- He made another unilateral promise to King David that one of His descendants would sit on the throne of God's kingdom forever.

These unilateral covenants won't ever be replaced. They are "last words" kinds of covenants. So, the "New Covenant" Jeremiah writes about will not replace a unilateral covenant.

***[31] "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah [32] not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt ...***

The old covenant Jeremiah refers to is the Mosaic Covenant, the covenant of Law. Unlike the other covenants I have mentioned, the Mosaic Covenant was a bi-lateral covenant.

Under the Mosaic Covenant, God promised that He would bless the nation of Israel. But those promises were conditional.

He would bless Israel IF AND ONLY IF Israel fulfilled her side of the covenant. And if Israel did not keep her side of the covenant stipulations, rather than blessing, judgment would come.<sup>4</sup>

The Old Covenant began with Moses and continued through the rest of the Old Testament. The Jews lived under this arrangement from Exodus to Malachi. Actually, from the Exodus out of Egypt until Jesus came

During those fifteen-hundred years, Law reigned supreme. It was the way things were done.

It is that Law-centered, Moses-inaugurated covenant that Jeremiah says God is going to replace with a New Covenant. And the changes ushered in under this New Covenant would be revolutionary.

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<sup>4</sup> The book of Deuteronomy is filled with lists of covenant blessings if Israel obeyed and covenant curses for disobedience, especially chapters 27-30.

### God's grace to Israel under the Old Covenant

Jeremiah is going to describe some of what this New Covenant will be like. But he first reminds us of some Old Covenant reality.

The Lord ***[32]...took them*** (i.e. - the Jews) ***by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt***. That was an act of grace, and we could list dozens of other gracious rescues God performed for His people under the Old, Mosaic Covenant.

He ***[32] ... was a husband to them***. Yes, He was a patient, loving, protective, providing husband. And there were times - sadly, not that many - when the Jews responded to His grace and goodness with faithfulness.

### *Revival of interest in the Old Covenant*

#### Times of faithfulness

For instance, there was a season of faithfulness during the days of Joshua when the Jews obeyed the Lord. Then, when David was king, the nation followed the Lord.

In fact, whenever a godly ruler sat on the throne in Jerusalem, the people would live as the Law required, as a covenant-keeping people.

#### Josiah's reforms

We find one great example of Israel's faithfulness in the early days of Jeremiah's ministry. The people followed the Law then because of the leadership provided by King Josiah.

When Josiah discovered the Mosaic Law,<sup>5</sup> its' commands became the template for overthrowing idolatry and for re-establishing right worship and justice in the land.

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<sup>5</sup> What is called the lost "Book of the Covenant". (2 Chronicles 34:30)

So, there were a few seasons of Jewish faithfulness when they lived as they were redeemed to live. Those seasons were remarkable because they were few and far between.

Without question, the most prominent behavior of the Jews throughout their long history was disobedience. God's faithfulness responded to by the Jews' rebellion defines the story of Israel.

### *Death of interest in the Old Covenant*

Jeremiah highlights that with one comment. He says that the New Covenant will not be **[32]...like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant WHICH THEY BROKE...**

**"WHICH THEY BROKE."** Yep. Over and over again.

### Disloyalty after Josiah died

In Jeremiah's day, the people broke the covenant immediately after King Josiah died. Which is to say that the reforms of Josiah were never more than skin-deep.

Truth be told, the Jews, in general, **"BROKE"** the covenant.

### Israel - generally unfaithful...

Just a minute ago, we had to think hard to come up with eras of Jewish history when they obeyed the Lord. A part of a generation here. The reign of a good king there.

Those were isolated decades of obedience interspersed in a long run of century after century of disobedience.

From the establishment of the covenant forward, Israel chronically failed to live up to what the covenant required of them.

The Old Covenant was a good and fair covenant God had made with His people. It was well laid out and crystal clear in its expectations

and requirements. The Jews were rewarded for obedience; judged and disciplined for breaking it.

But the Old Covenant never worked as it was designed to work. And the reason it didn't work right was the inability of the people to keep it.

Even though God had led them by the hand from Egypt and had delivered them repeatedly, Israel STILL did not keep the covenant.

What had become abundantly clear from Moses forward was that not only DID Israel not obey, she COULD not obey.

Jeremiah put it this way:  
**[13:23] Can the Ethiopian change his skin  
 Or the leopard his spots?  
 Then you also can do good  
 Who are accustomed to doing evil.**

Israel was just as incapable of keeping the Old Testament Law as most 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are incapable of handling a regulation-sized basketball and shooting a fifteen-foot free throw to a ten-foot goal.

If our basketball camp needed special rules for the youngest kids, it was also obvious that what Israel needed was a New Covenant.

It wasn't hard to accept that would be new rules for the Double Bar Basketball Camp to accommodate the limitations of 3<sup>rd</sup>-graders.

But it was a major announcement when Jeremiah announced a New Covenant that would take the place of Moses' Old Covenant for the Jews.

At the time of his writing, the Old Covenant had been in place for almost a thousand years. For a Jew, it would have been tough to imagine anything more radical.

Think about how radical it was when the founding fathers of our nation settled in for a long summer of drafting a constitution for a new nation at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

*“OK. We’re starting over. The old relationship with Great Britain is done. The Articles of Federation we’ve been operating under for the last decade are woefully inadequate. Let’s decide how we are going to be governed.”*

That’s radical. Jeremiah’s New Covenant was way more radical than that. In what ways?

Well, first, as opposed to the Old Covenant, which was externally focused and concerned primarily with behavior, the New Covenant would emphasize heart change.

### **The New Covenant’s Glory (vv. 33-34)**

#### *Internal change*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,”<sup>6</sup> declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”***

Of course, the Old Covenant was not strictly external. After all, the last of the Ten Commandments says, ***“Thou shalt not covet.”***<sup>7</sup> Well, coveting is an internal thing.

But by and large, the Mosaic Law was about rules and regulations and measuring up and works - good and bad.

Recipients of the New Covenant, though, will not simply be commanded to take action and to obey rules and regs. They are equipped to take that action by the gift of an internal, heart change.

The promise is that something in the heart of God’s child will change when the New Covenant is in effect. There won’t just be a set of laws written on tablets of stone telling people what to do.

Internal, intrinsic, “want-to” motivation will rule the day under the New Covenant. There will be a change in the inner nature of the New Covenant believer that will enable obedience.

And there is more to the New Covenant.

#### *Knowledge of God*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord...[34] “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them”***

Teachers are good and necessary, both under the Old Covenant and under the New. Teachers help us understand God and His ways.

BUT, under the New Covenant, each individual relates to God personally, with no human mediator.

Under the Old Covenant, there was a system of Levites and priests and High Priests who all stood between the common, everyday believer and his or her God.

Under the New Covenant, there will be no intermediary necessary.<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah says that in that day, each believer will know God, personally.

And one more fact about life under the New Covenant. There will be forgiveness of sins.

#### *Forgiveness of sins*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord... [34]...“ for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”***

<sup>6</sup> Speaks of an unspecified time in the future. But fulfillment is certain.

<sup>7</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:6; 10:12; 11:18; 30:6, 14.

<sup>8</sup> See Joel 2:28-29, which looks forward to a day when all people will have the same rights of access to God as did the prophets. Joel eagerly looked forward to the time of the New Covenant.

Under the Old Covenant, forgiveness was available through sacrifices and offerings. But these sacrifices had to be repeated regularly for each infraction of covenant law.

To speak of forgiveness was to speak of a temporary thing. The Old Covenant believers were forgiven - until the next sin.

BUT, under the New Covenant, forgiveness will be a full and complete gift, given once and for all.

The New Covenant Jeremiah describes will come with a tremendous set of promises.

We can only imagine how eager the Jews of his day would have been for the arrival of this New Covenant.

After all of the failures, God was finally going to set up a covenant relationship with them where their sin problem would be eradicated, they would enjoy a personal, unmediated relationship with their Redeemer, and they would receive the necessary internal resources to obey Him.

So, when will this happen? When will the bar get lowered?

Well, it wouldn't happen in Jeremiah's lifetime. Nor in the next generation or the next or the next. In fact, the next time we read about a "New Covenant" in the Bible is 600 years past Jeremiah.

The One who speaks of it is Jesus. It was Jesus who inaugurated the New Covenant, and He ushered it in at the end of His life.

### **The New Covenant - and You**

The scene is the Last Supper. The Lord has gathered His disciples together for one final meal before His trials, sufferings, and death.

As they are all reclined around a low table, Jesus spoke.

He told His disciples that this was a very special Passover meal - the last one they would eat together. He let them know that He wouldn't be eating a Passover with them again until God's kingdom is established.

Then, ***[19]...when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." [20] And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the NEW COVENANT in My blood.***<sup>9</sup>

The events that would take place over the next days - Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection - would usher in the first fruits of the New Covenant promises Jeremiah predicted.

So, all that Jeremiah predicted is true for us, today, and for all who believe in Jesus. Change has come to the believer in the most fundamental ways.

- *WE have truly changed*

Spiritually speaking, we were dead; we now possess and are possessed by eternal life. We were enemies of God; we are now His children. We were on our way to an eternity without God; we are now heaven-bound. We were devoid of God's presence; we are now indwelt by and led by the Spirit of God.

We look the same as we did before, but the core has changed. The One who made all the difference is Jesus, and now, we are being transformed, by degrees, from core to crust, as we trust and obey.

- *EACH of us relates personally to God!*

In addition, every believer in Jesus has unmediated access to the presence of God. A Christian doesn't wait for a pastor, a priest or an elder to get to God.

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<sup>9</sup> The New Covenant is also mentioned, and its theme is developed in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 11, 2 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:16-17.

You believe in Jesus? God welcomes you pray, at any and at all times. He is listening to you. He cares for you. You call Him "*Father*", something no Old Testament Jew would have dared to do.

In Old Testament times, drawing near to God was something that only the High Priest was allowed to do as he served in an official capacity in the temple.

Now, all who belong to Jesus are invited to **[Hebrews 4:16] draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.**

- *Our sins are ALL forgiven!*

Under the Mosaic Law, specific sins were forgiven for which specific sacrifices had been made. That's the way it was then. That is not the way it is now under Jesus' New Covenant.

Before Jesus began His ministry, He went out to the wilderness of the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. As He came near, John recognized who Jesus was and said, **[John 1:29] "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"**

And that - take away the guilt of the world's sin - is exactly what Jesus did when, three years later, He died on a cross.

Jesus was abandoned by His Father at the moment when He did for all people and for all time what a spotless lamb did for the Jews living under the Old Covenant, temporarily.<sup>10</sup>

He took away the sin of the world.

The barrier that separated you and everyone else from God - sin - has been removed in Jesus. That means that now, you and anyone else can come to God through faith in Jesus and find God's outstretched arms waiting to give you the one thing you still desperately need: LIFE!

### **Conclusion:**

At the Double Bar Basketball Camp, the bar was lowered so that 3<sup>rd</sup> graders could win.

God gave us the bar-lowering New Covenant so that you and I can have victory in our walk with Him. The cost of lowering that bar was the raising of the bar on which Jesus was crucified.

Today, we are grateful to Jesus that Jeremiah's New Covenant was ushered in by our Redeemer's broken body and shed blood.

What a difference it will make to your 2020 and beyond when you remember the New Covenant under which you walk with God.

- He is transforming you by the Spirit's power as you trust and obey.
- You have direct access to a God who loves you; no intermediaries.
- Your sins are all forgiven - because Jesus paid it all.

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<sup>10</sup> Imagine that I have borrowed \$10,000 from you on a ten year note at 10% interest owed per year. Now, imagine that every year after taking the loan from you, on December 31<sup>st</sup> I repay you \$1,000. On December 31<sup>st</sup> of the tenth year I give you my tenth \$1,000 payment and tell you, "*The loan is repaid! Now I don't owe you any more money.*" You would say, "*No so fast. All you've done is paid interest. You still owe the principal of \$10,000.*" Sadly for me, you would be correct. The Old Covenant sacrifices were "interest payments" looking forward to the final payment of the principal. The New Covenant into which we enter through faith in Jesus says that He paid the entire debt when He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.