**A New Covenant of Forgiveness**

Based on [Jeremiah 31:31-34](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Je31.31-34)

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Lent 5

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Many of you had to memorize the books of the Bible in your confirmation classes when you were younger. Maybe you still know them, maybe you've forgotten. But one thing you know about the books of the bible is that they are distinguished into the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament." Have you ever wondered why?

If you grew up on the King James Version of the bible, you probably know. In instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus says in Luke 22:20, "**This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.**" Apart from the KJV, you might have missed this, because the way most modern bible's translate testament is "covenant." Which simply means a promise, usually with a sign attached to it. After the flood, God made an everlasting covenant through Noah, for all flesh, that he would never again destroy the earth by means of a flood (Genesis 9:9-17). And the sign that he attached his promise to is the sign we still have today, the rainbow. That is an old testament, part of the old testament though it still applies today, for God's promise never to flood the earth again was forever.

Noah's wasn't the only old covenant. God made a covenant with Abraham that He would multiply his descendents, give them the promised land, that this covenant would extend through his son Isaac, and He would be their God and the sign of this covenant was circumcision (Genesis 17:2-21).

And so this should shed light for you on what the Prophet Jeremiah means when he writes this oracle in the OT lesson. Neither of these covenants I've mentioned so far are spoken of here. Instead is spoken of the Mosaic Law, the covenant of God's Law with Israel. And also the Covenant with the House of Judah, the messianic covenant first shown in King David, whom God promised he and his house would rule his people forever (Genesis 49:10, 2 Samuel 23:5). God says, "**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 [old] covenant that I made with their fathers...**" (Jeremiah 31:31-32). The old covenants are not scrapped, but the new covenant will be different from them in two ways. First, God says in Jeremiah, that by the New Covenant, God will write his Law on the hearts of His people; second He promises to forgive injustice, and forget sins.

A brilliant Christian Apologist, GK Chesterton once said how ironic it is that--in the modern era--those who consider themselves wise and rational are everywhere denying that man is sinful by nature; it's ironic because, Chersterton says, "it is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." Now throughout the bible, we are clearly taught that we are sinful by nature. Ephesians 2:3 says we “**were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”** But the wisdom of the world can’t take God’s word at what it plainly says, so everywhere it denies that people’s hearts are naturally evil, saying maybe we learn sin but are not born that way. But it’s just another devilish twisting of the Bible. The God warns his people Jeremiah 23:17 about false prophets who would tell people to follow their evil hearts: “**Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. Thys say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who *stubbornly follows his own heart*, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.”**

The teaching that you are brought forth in iniquity, and conceived in sin is fundamental bible teaching (Psalm 51:5). To deny that is to exit off the freeway of the gospel into “false doctrine-ville” and nothing and no one is safe in that town.

But "the Gospel" is not that we are not sinners, but that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us for love (Romans 5:8). "The gospel" is not that you are fundamentally a good person; the gospel is that even though you have a bad heart, God loves you anyway and will give you a new heart, unless, that is, you don’t think you need one. God is a top-notch cardiologist, but He will not transplant a hardened-heart, for it will reject the new one He so desperately wants to give you.

And so the people in Jeremiah's day were under the Old Covenant of Moses and the commandments. The Law of Moses was Good, but there was a problem. The Law was written on stone; not on the people’s hearts. The Law told the people what to do, but didn’t give them the power to do it (Romans 7:18). **You can tell me all the rules of hockey so that I’m a genius about the game, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m a terrible skater, and having a competitive heart, if I did play and fail, I’d resent losing.** Likewise, to a people who are by nature sinful and rebellious, telling them what to do, only increases their sin and their desire to rebel and stubbornly follow their own heart. (Romans 5:20)

But Paul reminds us in Romans 5:20 that the law [of Moses] was given to increase the trespass, but where sin increased grace abounded all the more. God gave the old law on tablets of stone first, so that God’s people could see just how much they needed it written on their hearts.

And so Paul also says in 2 Corinthians 3:6, “**God has made us [that is holy ministers of the Word] sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**.” Of ourselves we have nothing to offer God. We don’t have the ability to play hockey as it were, even though he’s taught us the rules, because our hearts are evil by nature. So if any good work is to be accomplished in us, God has to do it himself. And that’s what he promises by the new covenant, that His law, the only law, the Law to love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself, will be put within them and written on the hearts of his people who receive that new covenant. Paul writes to the saints in the Corinthian church, “**And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us [ministers of the Word], written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tables of stone but on tablets of human hearts”** (2 Corinthians 3:3).

And in this new covenant, God promises precisely this, that He will give you His Holy Spirit through it, that your heart truly desires to do God’s will. And though your sinful flesh will continue to war against the Spirit, the Spirit will prevail in those who abide in the Word of Christ.

The second thing God promises in this new covenant is that he will forgive injustice, and will forget the sins of those who receive it. “But Pastor, are you saying that there was no forgiveness in the Old Testament?” Not at all. There was a promise of forgiveness in the Old Testament, but that promise was attached to the Law, not to the Gospel, the forgiveness was contingent upon the blood of goats and bulls offered in sacrifice on the altar. “So Pastor, you’re saying there was no free, gracious, “gospel” forgiveness before Christ came? No, God was patient and forgiving and longsuffering with his people over and over and over again even before the New Covenant. He forgave David his sin with Bathsheba, he forgave it freely. The difference though is that, before Christ, God’s people didn’t have a promise and a guarantee of that forgiveness, they didn’t have a covenant, an unconditional promise of God to forgive sins attached to a sign.

**14**And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. **15**And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. **16**For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” **17**And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. **18**For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” **19**And he took bread, and when he had 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 likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying,  “This cup that is poured out for you is ***the new covenant in my blood***.  (Luke 22:14-20).

It’s not that the Old Testament was all Law and the New Testament was all Gospel. Folks, there’s Law and Gospel throughout both; there is lots of Gospel in the Old Testament, and lots of Law in the New. But what came in the New Testament was a New Covenant, a new promise of forgiveness with a sign attached to it. And this sign is more than a sign, it is the life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion.

**Holy People of God know this, you have a place to go to receive the forgiveness of sins and to receive the Holy Spirit in you that has the imprimatur and guarantee of God himself.** The people before Christ had to offer bulls and goats and rams on the altar through the priest in order to make atonement, and that atonement was only temporary. These temple sacrifices, (both Paul and the author of Hebrews tells us), were mere shadows, and that the reality is Christ (Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 10:1), who offered himself once for all on the cross for our sins (Romans 6:10).

God’s people always knew this forgiveness was coming. And before Christ, God’s people were justified and saved simply by believing in the forgiveness to come. Now, today we *have* that forgiveness. **We know how the all-righteous God can forgive sin, because we know he paid for it all himself on the cross. Ransom paid; you are debt-free, victory won on the cross.** And you receive that forgiveness and enter into that new covenant every time you eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. There you are forgiven, there you are given the Holy Spirit, and there you are assured that your forgiveness is as sure and as trustworthy as the God who speaks it to you at this altar. You have an unconditional promise from God to forgive you in the body and blood of Christ in tangible bread and wine that is the body and blood of our Lord to eat and drink, for it is a new covenant of forgiveness.

We should share it every week, don’t you think?

*They that drink shall live forever;  
 ’Tis a soul-renewing flood.  
God is faithful; God will never  
 Break His covenant of blood,  
Signed when our Redeemer died,  
Sealed when He was glorified*.

(Come to Calvary’s Holy Mountain; Hymn LSB 435)