



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## A Covenant Religion

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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### Introduction

1. Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet,” not because he was weak, but because he cared.
  - a. He loved his nation and its people, but he loved God more. So, when he saw the impending crisis most of his countrymen did not see, and which their leaders insisted was not coming, he had no choice but to warn them, no matter the cost.<sup>1</sup>
  - b. It cost him plenty, and in one sense, it went for naught—the nation he loved so much was destroyed, obliterated by Babylon because the people would not return to the LORD.
2. But all was not lost. Although he denounced the people for their disloyalty (2:1-6:30), exposed their idolatrous false religion (7:1-10:25), endured various struggles that led him to question God (11:1-20:18), and lived through confrontations with kings, prophets and the people (21:1-29:32),<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah was allowed to fulfill the “build and plant” part of his commission (1:10).
3. Chapters 30-33 declare a coming time when God would restore the nation (30), make a new covenant with Israel (31), bring the people back to the Promised Land (32) and honor the covenant made with David (33). Chapter 31:31-34, with its unique expression “new covenant,” is “the most famous passage” in the book (*ESVSB*).
4. Covenant. It’s been my experience that “covenant” is not the first thing, or perhaps even one of the first several things that come to mind when one is asked to define the essence of biblical religion. That is an error in teaching and emphasis. Think about it.
  - a. The Bible is divided into the Old and New *Testaments*, a synonym for “covenant.”
  - b. The Old Testament uses the word 286 times; several of the eight books that omit it assume the concept. (Only Genesis and Deuteronomy [27 each] use it more than Jeremiah [25].)
  - c. The New Testament only uses the word 33 times in all (17 in Hebrews), but again, it provides the underpinning for the story and is in fact one of its main features.
5. In developing the series, *Some Things We Should Believe*, “covenant” was one of the first topics I added to my list of themes.

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “fire in the belly,” sometimes used with regard to the compulsion to preach, likely has its origins in Jeremiah 20:9.

<sup>2</sup> These are the main points in the *ESV Study Bible’s (ESVSB)* outline of Jeremiah, p. 1368. Paul R. House is the main contributor to the volume’s notes on Jeremiah.

- a. It is so important for understanding the Bible.
  - b. It goes to the heart of understanding how we are to relate to God and live.
6. Like the other subjects in this series, our study of covenant will not try to be exhaustive. But the most important things will be considered: the fact that the covenant idea suggests that we are part of a grand and glorious story, the fact that covenant is at the heart of what Jesus came to do and what we celebrate each week when we gather around his table, and what it means to live in covenant relation with God. We'll start with what a covenant is and how it works.

### Body

#### I. The Context and Teaching of Jeremiah 31.

- A. In the middle of a section on restoration (Jeremiah 30-33), Jeremiah 31 gave hope to despairing people.
  1. He urged them to be joyful and sing praises because no matter how far they had fallen, they remained God's people (vv 1-14).
  2. Taking into account their grief at being exiled—Ramah (v 15) was the departure point for the captives going into exile—he urged them to stop weeping because there would be a return (vv 15-26).
  3. The last part of the chapter (vv 27-40) spoke to the matter of Israel's security, pointing to a coming time when a new way, designed to accomplish the purpose he had always envisioned, would come to pass.
- B. The phrase, "Behold, the days are coming, . . . (27, 31, 38) gives structure to the section.
  1. Just as surely as they had been broken down, they would be built and planted (27-30).
  2. The great city of God would be rebuilt for the Lord (38-40).
  3. In a new covenant, the Lord's people would finally be the spiritual people he desired (31-34)—as surely as the sun, moon, and stars continue in their place (35-37).
- C. The background for understanding the new covenant is the old covenant.
  1. There are some significant differences.
    - a) The law would be written within, on the people's hearts, rather than on tablets of stone; this points to an internal development of spiritual character and knowledge (in the sense of relationship) of the LORD.
    - b) The basis of the relationship would be the pardoning of their iniquities and the removal from memory of their sins.<sup>3</sup>
  2. The Hebrews writer emphasized these things in citing vv 31-34 (8:7-12; 10:16-17) as part of his argument that Christ's better way is based on a priesthood and covenant that is eternal/real, not temporal/shadowy (in the argument of 7:1-10:18).
  3. Just as he expected his readers to understand how the covenant worked from their experience with the Sinai arrangement, so we need that temporal background.

#### II. The Covenant Process.

- A. Covenant: meaning and biblical presence.
  1. "*Covenant* may be defined as a relationship based on promises or sworn oaths" (Ferguson, 2).
  2. The Bible knows of many covenants.

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<sup>3</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, p. 7.

- a) Between people who were in certain respects equals.
  - b) What are called “charter covenants” (Ferguson, 3) in which God bound himself by oath to certain persons and the people descended from or joined to that person (e.g., Noah, Abraham, David).
  - c) We see what these covenants entailed by the words used in parallel with “covenant” in the reaffirmation of the covenant with Abraham in 1 Chronicles 16:14-17: judgments, word commanded, sworn promise, statute (Ferguson, 3).
  3. By far the most prominent covenant, and the one to which New Testament writers compare Christ’s covenant is the covenant made at Sinai (Exodus 19:5-8; 24:7-8 and the whole of chapters 19-24).
- B. The Israelites would have been quite familiar with the way that covenant worked since, with some adaptations for Israel’s unique circumstances, it followed the pattern of the Near Eastern vassal treaties.<sup>4</sup>
1. “The form of these treaties emphasized the benevolent action of the suzerain and the dependence of the continuation of the relationship on his graciousness” (Ferguson).
  2. Specific elements of the suzerainty treaties found in connection with the Sinai covenant, though not in one place in the biblical text, include the following:
    - a) Identification of the superior power who initiates the treaty (Exodus 20:1).
    - b) Historical prologue that forms the basis of and explains the existence of the treaty (Exodus 20:1).
    - c) The stipulations of the treaty (Exodus 20:3-17).
    - d) Provision for deposit (Joshua 24:26) and periodic public reading (Deuteronomy 17:18-19; 27:11-26) of the treaty.
    - e) A list of witnesses (in Israel’s case, not the gods, but heaven, the earth, and the people—Exodus 20:18-22; Deuteronomy 32:1, 46; Joshua 24:22, 27; Micah 6:1-2).
    - f) Blessings for keeping the treaty and curses for violating it (Deuteronomy 28).
    - g) The ratification ceremony (Exodus 24:5-8).

### III. The Essence of God’s (Covenant) Religion.

- A. Grounded in grace (Deuteronomy 7:7-9) (Ferguson, 5).
- B. Continued in faithfulness.
1. The prior covenant with Abraham, and the idea of continued grace, explains why Israel was not completely cast off when she failed to live by the covenant (Ferguson, 5).
  2. While there are consequences for not honoring the covenant, the fundamental character of God as “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6-7) is repeatedly offered as the reason for God’s reliability in keeping his promises (Psalms 71:2; 116:5).<sup>5</sup>
  3. By his grace, God continued to spare a remnant of his people. “Thus, even for Israel, the situation was not a matter of keeping the law in order to be justified” (Ferguson, 5).
- C. Functioning in community.
1. The covenant was not made with an individual, but with a community.

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<sup>4</sup> The characteristics as cited here are as they appear in Ferguson, p. 5. Other sources cover essentially the same ground. See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, pp. 36-45. Also G. E. Mendenhall and G. A. Herion, “Covenant,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 1, pp. 1180-1188.

<sup>5</sup> See C. John Collins, “The Theology of the Old Testament,” *ESVSB*, p. 29.

2. It was expected that the goal God envisioned for the people as they lived out the expectations of the community would be properly carried out only as they identified fully with the community and participated mutually in its life and for its well being.
3. "Thus the spiritual and moral well-being of the whole affects the well-being of each of the members, and each member contributes to the others by his own spiritual and moral life" (Collins, 29).

D. Conditional on obedience.

1. "The people, out of gratitude and out of their experience of God as gracious, bound themselves to keep the words of God before they even knew what those commands were (Exod. 19:7-8).
2. "Obedience is connected with the covenant as the faithful response of those to whom the gracious promises are given.
3. "The Sinai covenant was a conditional covenant, the conditions being spelled out in the law delivered through Moses. The law and the covenant are not the same, but are related. The covenant was the basis of the relationship, and the law constituted the stipulations of the covenant" (Ferguson, 4).

*Conclusion*

1. Everett Ferguson has not overstated the point when he writes, "Biblical religion is covenant religion" (Ferguson, 2).
2. We understand this, not just from the number of times the Bible uses the word "covenant" or its synonyms, but from the fact that Jesus connected his greatest act of love with the new covenant that he was bringing into existence (Matthew 26:28; cf. Hebrews 8:6-13; 10:16-18).
3. When we partake of his supper, we reaffirm our commitment to his covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25). But the supper alone is not a sufficient commitment. For the covenant to be real, it must be enacted "in the concrete choices" we make as we live (Mendenhall and Herion, 1201).
4. We are still blessed or cursed based on our allegiance to his covenant. We are still to be living evidence of God's love for "all peoples" (Exodus 19:5).

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