

Jeremiah: The Promise of God in Us Forever

Theme: Under the New Covenant, we are given a new heart of desire for the Lord because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This intimacy is analogous to the covenant of marriage.

If you were to follow me through my week and observe the variety of things on my plate (yes, pastors do work more than Sunday mornings), one of the places, if not the place, where you would experience me as most alive is in a small men's group of three or four, we call triads and quads. Why is this setting so life giving? We truly share life in Christ together. In smaller unit of three or four we can get close and comfortable in a fairly short period of time. In our weekly gatherings we interact over Scripture and apply it to our daily life; we share the ups and downs of following Jesus; we develop enough trust to take each other into our confidence, such as our happenings at work, our marriage relationships, the joys and traumas of parenting, etc. Even though these groups tend to start at 6:30 a.m., I rarely have difficulty getting myself out of bed, because I am replenished here. Invariably I leave our group at 8:00 a.m. even more energized than when I came.

Why does this work? I believe one of the major reasons is that we begin our journey together by making a clear covenant with each other. The covenant commits us to show up weekly, short of death (our own). We promise to come with the study materials completed, even Scripture memorized. I confess I get more grief and protest over memorizing the Bible than anything else. I smile, and Nike them, "**Just do it.**" We pledge to go to those risky places of self-disclosure that only an environment of trust can call forth. Once we have reviewed this covenant together, and prayerfully contemplated the time it will take and place it will have in our life, at our first meeting date we take out our pens and sign our covenant in each other's presence as our act of commitment together. Since we are careful to count the cost up front, I have on only rare occasions had to remind someone of the commitment they have made. One of the values of having an explicit covenant is that it gives a clear basis to call ourselves back to what we have all committed ourselves to follow. As I have lived this life of following Jesus over the years, I find that much of the Christian life is simply recommitting myself to the foundational practices that keep me rooted in the Lord.

If you haven't been with us the first two Sundays of the new year we are exploring the theme, "Promises to Keep". We have noted that our Lord at the very core of His being is a promise making and promise keeping God. In the Bible the Lord's promise keeping takes the form of a binding covenant. We observed that there is a special Hebrew word for covenant love, *hesed*, that captures its enduring nature, most often translated, "**steadfast love.**" Yet with each covenant God makes *to* us, He calls forth a promise *from* us as well. We noted two weeks ago that God came to Abraham with the promise that through

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his line or ancestry would come a people, who would be a blessing to the nations. Abraham responded on his part by embracing that promise by faith, even though he and Sarah, his wife, were well into their geriatric years. Last Sunday we explored the covenant with Moses that followed Abraham 500 years later. With Abraham God formed a people, under Moses they became a nation. We explored the parallels between God's choosing Israel as a nation and the purpose for the church.

Yet when we assess Israel's history of keeping God's covenant, it is a sad picture. The people of God were more often than not covenant breakers, than covenant keepers. Consistently they wandered after foreign deities in spite of explicit instructions, "you shall have no other gods besides me"; they acted like their pagan neighbors fashioning gods out of precious metals, stone, and wood, in spite of the clear command, "you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath..." They constantly forgot God's heart for the underdog by oppressing the poor, fatherless, and the widow, or corrupting the courts to favor the rich and powerful. When this happened the Lord would raise up a prophet, who would thunder, "Thus saith the Lord..." The prophet's role was to call people back to the covenant that they had made with the Lord. They must return to the baseline, the original agreement that served as the foundation for the relationship.

One of those prophets was Jeremiah. This troubled figure was chosen by God from birth to be His mouthpiece of warning to the southern kingdom of Judah, who were on the verge of being conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Once Jeremiah "swallowed" God's word, there became a fire in his bones that he could not hold within. From 627 BC through the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would destroy Israel, because of their unfaithfulness and that they would be dragged into captivity for 70 years. Being a prophet put Jeremiah at the bottom of political popularity polls. If you read Jeremiah's unrelenting word of judgment, you can understand why. In fact we speak of someone issuing a "jeremiad", meaning a "prolonged lamentation or tale of woe."

Thus it might seem strange to find that Jeremiah 31 contains one of the most hopeful promises found in the entire Old Testament. In this, our primary Old Testament text this morning, we will find the only mention of the promise of a "new covenant".

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"The time is coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.
(Jeremiah 31:31-32)

The Lord through Jeremiah promises a "new covenant" because there appears to be something incomplete about the covenant that had been made. In Hebrews 8 the writer quotes this same text in total, and precedes it with the assertion that the covenant which Jesus mediated as the ultimate high priest through his sacrificial death is superior to the one that came before. He quotes Jeremiah to support his argument.

What was missing or incomplete with the first covenant? Jeremiah takes us right back to the covenant of Moses when he speaks of the covenant "made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt." There was certainly nothing faulty with the commandments of God for they were an expression of His holy character. What made the covenant faulty was that the people of Israel substituted rules for relationship. The Lord in his covenant making established his unconditional commitment first, as the rescuer of his people from captivity. He said, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." Only after the relationship had been established were the terms of the relationship spelled out. Yet the people forgot the One who brought them to Himself, turned their faith into dry, servile regulations. The trouble with the law apart from relationship is that it tells us what to do, but it does not give us the desire to do it. Martin Luther used to say, "The law may point the way but it is far from being the strength in our legs." There is nothing wrong with the law, but there is something wrong with our desire to keep the law. We have heart problems.

This is what is new about the "new covenant" of which Jeremiah prophesies.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,

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and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."
(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

In other words, under the New Covenant God not only shows us what to do, but He gives us the desire so that we want to do it. What has been external now becomes internal. When Jeremiah says, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" to what does he refer? Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, fills out the picture, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your old heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26) The new covenant moves from the external letter of the law to the internal work of the Holy Spirit. It is the difference between following a recipe to the letter and cooking by instinct.

Jeremiah foresees the New Covenant in Christ when the Holy Spirit is the universal gift of Christ's indwelling presence to any who put their trust in Him. Jesus said to his disciples at the end of his ministry, as they gathered in the upper room just prior to his crucifixion, that it was to their advantage that He go away. Yeah, how so, Jesus? "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate (can also be translated "comforter", "helper", "counselor", literally *paraclete*) to help you and be with you forever...for he lives with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17) We have so many words that translate *paraclete*, because you can't do it with one word. The *paraclete* or the Holy Spirit is "one who comes alongside to help."

Let me tell you a wonderful story that conveys the new covenant of the Lord's inner work of the spirit. Becky Pippert, the author of *Hope Has Its Reasons*, was living for a time in Israel. Being new to the area, she got off at the wrong bus stop and found herself in an Orthodox Hasidic Jewish neighborhood. Her face obviously registered bewilderment, when she heard the question, "Can I help you?" When she turned there was a man with the bearded earlocks, and long black coat. Knowing that Hasidic Jewish men were not allowed to address women in public, amazement crossed her face. The man said, "Sometimes we are permitted to help people in distress. Where do you need to go?" As he walked with her in the direction she needed to get to her apartment, Becky, was told that his name was Moshe, he lived in an ultra-orthodox community, though he had been raised in Chicago.

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Becky said, "We have something in common. We are both religious." He asked Becky, "Are you Jewish?" Becky replied, "No, I am a follower of Jesus." Moshe said, "I have never talked with a religious Christian before." Moshe said that if he was seen holding this conversation in public he could be in trouble. So they quickly made arrangements to get to Becky's apartment in order to explore their mutual faiths.

Once they settled in Moshe began to pepper Becky with questions. What he wanted to know was, what happens to human nature as a result of being in relationship with God through Christ. Becky responded by saying that when we put our faith in Christ, he gives us His Spirit, who transforms us day by day and enables us to live as new people with new power. Then he asked a wonderful question, "What is the essence of this new nature?" Becky listed the fruit of the Spirit.

With all the eagerness of one with a hungry heart Moshe said, "Wait, say those words again." She again recited them. "Say them again", he asked.

Then Moshe said with wonderment, "What beautiful, beautiful words. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Imagine it! All of these qualities come into your heart as a result of being in relationship with God. Just think, to receive the very nature of God as a gift. No more beating down the evil inclinations with negatives (the law) but rather fighting evil with positives, with the very attributes of God himself! Ah, what a precious gift you have inherited, Becky. Do not take it lightly."

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus taking up residence in our life. He is the one who turns our heart of stone into the heart of flesh so that our hearts become malleable in the hands of God. Augustine takes us back to Jesus' post-resurrection Ascension to His Father and captures the mystery of the Holy Spirit. "You [Jesus] ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts." What we find in our hearts is the spirit of Jesus living in us when we repent of our sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. He gives us a new desire that points us to and creates a hunger for Christ.

The apostle Paul gives us two powerful images for the Holy Spirit that remind us of God's permanent covenant with us. "When you believed, you were marked with a **seal** [note the language of covenant], the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit **guaranteeing** our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13b-14)

(1) Seal: The seal of the New Covenant is the permanence of the Holy Spirit in us. A **seal** in Paul's day was the insignia that was the particular mark of

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ownership. An owner would press his signet ring on soft wax leaving an impression on the seal of an envelope as a sign that it had not been tampered with. The seal is a mark of ownership that the genuine character of the product sent was guaranteed. The Holy Spirit is the seal, the mark, that we forever belong to Jesus.

(2) Guarantee: The Holy Spirit is also **"a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance."** The word **guarantee** is a commercial word which means down payment or first installment. It is what we call today earnest money. It is the sign of good faith. It is a pledge that the rest of the amount is forthcoming. God makes a deposit of the Holy Spirit in us with the guarantee that we are His forever and that the full blessings of salvation will be ours. The Holy Spirit is like an engagement ring which is the pledge of marriage. The ring is the guarantee that sometime soon you will be your beloveds and he will be yours.

Throughout this emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the covenant seal, lurking in the background has been an allusion to marriage. Jeremiah compares God to the faithful husband who remains true His bride, God's people. The apostle Paul in Ephesians 5 says that one of the signs that we are filled with the Holy Spirit is mutual submission. He then goes on to describe what this looks like in the husband and wife relationship. Yet in the midst of his discourse on marriage he says that in a mysterious way this love at its best reflects on Christ's love for his church. It is this human relationship that conveys the permanence of our relationship to Him and his faithfulness to us. Let me attempt to weave together two inseparable strands: The Holy Spirit as God's loving and faithful indwelling presence, and the covenant of marriage.

Marriage begins with a vow. When I have the privilege of performing the wedding ceremony I say to those gathered that when we come to the exchange of vows we have come to the very core of the wedding ceremony.

The traditional vows are indeed a covenant,

"I, _____, take thee, _____, to be my wedded wife (or husband); and I do promise and covenant; before God and these witnesses; to be thy loving and faithful husband (or wife); in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; so long as we both shall live."

Walter Wangerin writes, **"A promise made, a promised witnessed, a promise heard, remembered and trusted—this is the groundwork of marriage."**¹ A vow is an act of trust in the face of an uncertain future: in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health. In all the changing tomorrows our

¹ Walter Wangerin, *As For Me and My House*, p. 18

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pledge is an audacious one, "I will be there, count on it. Whether it be 5, 10, 20, 50 years from now, I will be at your side." A vow is a wager on an unseen tomorrow. Marriage is held together by a promise.

Yet, we know that the fabric of this promise can become very tattered, torn, and ripped apart. I have a cartoon in my files of a woman sitting in front of the desk of her marriage counselor. The woman says, "I married an ideal; it has become an ordeal; and now I want a new deal." I have often thought that the second worse pain in life would be the fracturing of a marriage in divorce; losing a child being the worst. Many of you have lived that story and thankfully there is grace to heal and build a new life. Others are perhaps currently living in less than the ideal nurturing relationship. Marriages need the continual recommitment to the promise initially made.

In Thornton Wilder's 1940's play, *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, Maggie and George's marriage is all but over. George has fallen in love with another woman. Wilder provides the dialogue for what George hopes is his final conversation with Maggie as he moves on to his new life.

George: Maggie, I'm moving out...I'm going to marry Miss Fairweather. I will provide for you and the children. You're a fine woman, Maggie, but a man has his own life to lead in this world.

Maggie: George, I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise...that promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. When our children were growing up, it wasn't the house that protected them, it was that promise."

George: [WWII changed things for George]: When you're at war you think about a better life; when you're at peace you think about a more comfortable life. I've lost it.

Maggie: Oh, George you have to get it back again. Think! What else kept us alive all these years? Even now, it's not comfort we want. We can suffer whatever's necessary; only give us back that promise.

George began to wake up to what really keeps life together and he gave her back the promise.

Stephen Covey recounts a conversation that he had after one of his seminars. A man approached Covey and stated that the love had gone out of his marriage, the feelings were just not there anymore. He said to Covey, "What can

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I do?" Covey repeated what he heard, "The feeling isn't there anymore?" "That's right. And we have three children we're really concerned about. What do you suggest?" Covey replied, "Love her." "I just told you, the feeling isn't there anymore." "Love her." "But how do you love when you don't love?" "My friend, love is a verb. Love—the feeling—is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?" We should never allow marriage to be tyrannized by our cultural emphasis on the feelings of love that can come and go. We chase the next feel-good experience. John Piper has put it in a pithy and penetrating way, "Selfishness seeks its own private happiness at the expense of others. Love seeks its happiness in the happiness of the beloved." That in a nutshell is the love of God.

This is why I weave together God's promise of a new heart with the covenant of marriage. When I speak to a couple on their wedding day, I ask them, "Where will you get the resource necessary to keep your promise to be a loving and faithful spouse?" We need a heart continuously filled and renewed by the love of God. The apostle Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as "the love of God poured out in our hearts." (Romans 5:5) This is the love that seeks the happiness of the beloved. Here is where the strands of the Holy Spirit indwelling presence and love and faithfulness of the marriage covenant converge with the same language. James K. Baxter interweaves the Holy Spirit with images of human love: "Can we say it more simply? Lovers have many ways of expressing their love, but especially two. One is the words, 'I love you.' The other is the kiss. God's word to me reduced to its essence is 'I love you.' His Spirit, as the mystics long ago observed, is his kiss. And the baptism of the Holy Spirit? That's simply allowing myself to be kissed." What is it that the pastor says after the bride and groom have been declared husband and wife? "You may kiss the bride." Sealed with a kiss.

We are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. Our part in the covenant is to open ourselves to His renewing love. Sometimes couples express this by formally renewing their wedding vows at a milestone year. That is not nearly enough. Daily, all of us, regardless of our marital status need to allow ourselves to be kissed by the Spirit. It is only then that we have what we need to keep our promises. "We are most like God when we keep our promises."