

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹Yes, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.

³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers,
when I took them by the hand
and led them out of the land of Egypt.
They broke that covenant of mine,
although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.

³³But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days,
declares the LORD.

I will put my law in their minds,
and I will write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴No longer will each one teach his neighbor,
or each one teach 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 guilt,
and I will remember their sins no more.

Written on the Heart

I.

Brokenhearted. Many have felt brokenhearted. Perhaps there were some unrealistic expectations. You gave your love and affection, but the recipient didn't feel the same way. It left you with a broken heart; at least for a time. Sometimes broken hearts are difficult or impossible to mend—like the broken heart over the death of a loved one. Other deep wounds are felt when a fiancé or a spouse has promised love, but then breaks the covenant agreement of engagement or marriage.

Brokenhearted. That's what he was. Every possible advantage had been given. On *his* side, every promise had been kept, every vow fulfilled. On the other side...not so much.

You certainly couldn't say he had not tried. Again and again warnings were given. From time to time there was even a glimmer of hope. Occasionally there was a change in a positive direction. But then...back to the old ways; back to the previous destructive behavior.

The One who was brokenhearted was God. "The covenant I made...when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 31:32, EHV).

God felt the wounds of the faithlessness of Israel in the same way a person would feel when a husband or wife breaks the marriage vow. The wounds went deep.

God was like a husband to Israel. In spite of her faithlessness, again and again God sent his prophets to them to warn them. At times the people even listened.

Josiah had been one of those who listened. He had instituted large-scale reforms to abolish idolatry and return Israel to faithfulness to God's covenant with them. The reforms were short-lived. Josiah died prematurely. He was the last good king.

Jeremiah had been called by God as a prophet about 5 years before Josiah died. He had witnessed the return of the people to their destructive behavior. Most of his prophecy was filled with harsh warnings to the people.

Warnings were certainly appropriate. God had told them to follow his covenant. A covenant is an agreement—a treaty. When ratified, both sides have responsibilities. God said: “If you walk according to my regulations and keep my commandments and carry them out...” (Leviticus 26:3, EHV). What followed was a long list of things with which God would bless the people. There was, however, another side of the coin. “But if you will not listen to me and do not obey all these commandments... ¹⁷I will set my face against you. You will be beaten by your enemies, and those who hate you will rule over you” (Leviticus 26:14, 17, EHV).

Bible history is replete with evidence of the disobedience of the people and the consequences they faced for failing to keep their side of God’s treaty. The dust wasn’t even settled from the etching on the first tablets of stone Moses was to bring down the mountain when the people rebelled by worshiping the Golden Calf. Last week’s Old Testament Lesson showed the people complaining about the miserable food God had graciously given them from heaven for 40 years—and God’s judgment of snakes to call them back to repentance.

Prophet after prophet came and brought God’s message, encouraging repentance. Though sometimes there was a receptive ear to hear the warnings and turn back to God, a stubborn streak of pride was far too often the reaction.

God had poured everything into taking care of this people. “They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 31:32, EHV). They paid him back by breaking his heart. Again and again. He called to them. Again and again.

II.

Do you ever look at Bible history and see yourself? God has called to you. God has given you warnings. Two weeks ago the Old Testament Lesson was the Ten Commandments. We didn’t go through all the commandments, because we were reminded that every time we break one of them, we break the First: we put someone or something above God. We create false gods for ourselves, no less despicable than the Golden Calf the Israelites worshiped in the desert.

Our disobedience breaks God’s heart. No less so than his special, chosen people when *they* disobeyed.

There is a lesson for us in the Old Covenant. The lesson should be clear. The Old Covenant was a *conditional* covenant. Blessings flow, but only to those who follow all the conditions of the covenant. There are a lot of conditions. While sometimes people *think* they are able to, or have been able to, keep all the conditions—obey *all* the Commandments—they are just fooling themselves. It can’t be done. The conditions can’t be met.

III.

“Yes, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31, EHV). God knew his people of old couldn’t meet the conditions of the Old Covenant. The system of sacrifices he set up for them were to be used to repent and return again and again to the God whose heart they had broken. The sacrifices were also to point them ahead to something that was coming; something that was better.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will each one teach his neighbor, or each one teach 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 guilt, and I will remember their

sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:33-34, EHV).

Most of Jeremiah’s prophecy was filled with warnings. Not here. When the Bible, especially the Old Testament, uses the word “law,” sometimes it refers to the entirety of God’s Word. That is the case here.

God, through Jeremiah, points ahead to Jesus. God would make a New Covenant with his people established through the sacrifice of the Messiah. Unlike the Old Covenant which had stipulations for each side, the New Covenant would be what we call “unilateral,” that is, one-sided. God would do all the work.

Jesus has come. Our Midweek Lenten services help us to focus our attention on everything Jesus went through to be our Savior. Pretty soon it will be Holy Week. We will listen to Jesus say from the cross: “It is finished!” (John 19:30, EHV).

The writer to the Hebrews quotes the Jeremiah passage we have been considering. Then the writer draws a conclusion: “Now where these sins are forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.” (Hebrews 10:18, EHV).

When Jesus said on the cross: “It is finished,” the one sacrifice all those Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to came to its completion. There is no more need for sacrifice.

There is no need—and no *possibility*—for us to do anything to assist God with our salvation. God did it all unilaterally in this covenant. God knew it had to be this way, because over and over again it had been proven that people would break his heart. No matter how much he showed his love, no matter how often he called them back, they would do it again. Jesus finished it all.

IV.

Salvation is completed. There is a tension, though. We call it: “Already, but not yet.” Paul once said: “Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I was fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, EHV). God has *always* known *us* fully. All our flaws, all our faults, every sin we have ever committed. Yet God did not slink away from us, he still sent Jesus to die for us.

We, on the other hand, have the already, but not yet factor. We already know God, but we don’t know him fully until we get to heaven.

“Already, but not yet” also applies to what Jeremiah tells us today. Already we have in our hearts the gospel. Already we know the Lord. Already we have learned about Jesus and that for Jesus’ sake God forgives our guilt and will remember our sins no more. Already we experience that in a new and restored relationship with God.

But not yet. Not yet do we experience any of it fully. Ultimately, the fulfillment of God’s new covenant is completed only in heaven.

Written on your heart is the Good News. During the Lenten season we reflect on our sins. Even though our sins broke God’s heart, he did not stop loving us. He planned our salvation. He carried it out in Jesus. Even as we wait for Easter and its joyous celebration, we know what God in his love has done for us.

God’s love is unconditional. It is written on your heart in faith. Not yet has the time come when we have reached heaven. Not yet has the time come when every friend and neighbor already knows the Lord. Until then, use the “already” knowledge *you* have of God to reflect his unconditional love for the world. God grant that your words and attitudes and actions might show others that his unconditional love extends to them, also. Amen.