

Jeremiah 31:31–34 (CEB)

³¹The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³²It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "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 wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 (CEB)

²³I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. ²⁴After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." ²⁵He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." ²⁶Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

Ephesians 2:14–22 (CEB)

¹⁴Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. ¹⁵He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. ¹⁶He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.

¹⁷When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. ¹⁸We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. ¹⁹So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. ²⁰As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. ²²Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

A new covenant, written on our hearts, not on stone tablets.

New life, new heart, and now . . . new covenant. The word translated "covenant" is *bērît* in the Hebrew, occurring 286 times in the Old Testament. But only once in the Old Testament is there a reference to a "new covenant," the Jeremiah passage above. A "covenant" is akin to a contract or an agreement between two parties. Laban and Jacob make a covenant as do Jonathan and David. But a covenant in the Bible isn't quite the same as a contract. Elmer Martens offers a good suggestion: think of a contract as "thing-oriented" but a covenant as "people-oriented." And the *bērît* that matters most is the covenant between God and his people made at Mt. Sinai after the flight from Egypt.

There, at the foot of the mountain, God made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt. God taught them how they were to live with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of God's instruction for his people. Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unwilling to live as God had taught them; unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

The consequences of the people's endless abandonment of God and God's ways culminate in the death of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, God, through his prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their faithlessness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

If Israel's sins in the past brought such fearful judgment upon the nation so that it came close to total annihilation, what assurance can there be that after a future restoration has taken place the same fate will not befall Israel again? The theologically conceived response to this is that God will, by the very creative power of his love, write the law of the covenant upon the hearts of the men and women who make up Israel. This is to be understood as a radically new type of covenant (cf. G. von Rad, *Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 212–213). The old covenant of the law is dead; instead there will be an inner power and motivation towards obedience on the part of Israel written on the very hearts of the People of God, not on tablets of stone. Although the word "spirit" is not used [here in Jeremiah, though it is used in parallel passages in Ezekiel], the implication is certainly that God's Spirit will move the hearts of Israel to be obedient to the divine law.¹

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally potent, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and the despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction," (Deut. 16:3). But Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper?

The earliest record of the communion meal is not from the gospels, rather, it is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written more than a decade before Mark. There are lots of problems with the communion meal in Corinth; for one, the rich are eating all their food in private and leaving little for the poorer among them. Paul seeks to help them understand the meaning of this holy meal:

Thus, in Paul's rendering of the tradition, two closely linked themes stand out: the sharing of the Supper calls the community to think of Jesus' death for others, and that death is understood to initiate a new covenant (v. 25; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). To be in covenant relation with God is to belong to a covenant people bound together by responsibilities to God and to one another; the character of this new covenant should be shown forth in the sharing of the meal. The trouble with the Corinthians

¹ Clements, R. E. (1988). *Jeremiah* (p. 190). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

is that they are celebrating the Supper in a way that disregards this structure of covenant obligations and demonstrates an odd amnesia about Jesus' death. By showing contempt for those who have nothing, they are acting as though his death had not decisively changed the conditions of their relationship to one another.²

We are people of this new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us. Jesus has ushered in the new covenant foreseen centuries before by Jeremiah.

The community of New Covenant people

Who are we? We are people of this new covenant. We, the body of Christ, are a covenantal community, bound by covenant to God and to one another. In Paul's words, we have all been reconciled . . . as one body . . . to God by the cross and God is building us into a place where God lives through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:16, 22).

This "people-oriented" agreement God has made with us means that, as Bishop N. T. Wright writes, "it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself," for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God's creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." To put it another way, we can't expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who, in his very being, is inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in covenantal community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to be God's people.

In his important book, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays proposes that there are three focal images in the New Testament that cut across all the diverse writings: community, cross, and new creation. We'll close with a bit from Hays on community:

The church is a counterculture community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives. The biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a covenant people. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. Paul's formulation in Romans 12:1-2 encapsulates the vision: "Present your bodies [*smata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular], holy and well-pleasing to God And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Hays' translation). The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. Thus, "community" is not merely a concept; as the term is used here, it points to the concrete social manifestation of the people of God.³

² Hays, R. B. (1997). *First Corinthians* (p. 199). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

³ Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (Kindle Locations 5443-5450). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. If you had to choose *one* law or idea from the Christian faith that you think is truly written on your heart, what would it be and why?
2. When do you struggle with the idea of being part of a greater community of faith, and why? When do you most enjoy being part of a community of faith, and why?
3. What walls have you seen broken down through the community of the church, both for you and for others?
4. What does it mean to you to be called a member of “the household of God”? How is this family different than the family you grew up in?
5. How do you respond to the idea that the church, through our relationships as Christians, is where God lives on earth?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on the new covenant*

Monday, Genesis 15 God makes a covenant with Abraham

Tuesday, Genesis 31:22-55 Jacob and Laban end up making a covenant between them.

Wednesday, Exodus 19 The people arrive at Mt. Sinai and state their readiness to enter into and to keep a covenant with God.

Thursday, 1 Samuel 18:1-4 Jonathan makes a covenant with David.

Friday, Jeremiah 31:23-40 The fuller “new covenant” passage from Jeremiah.

Saturday, Hebrews 9:11-28 Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant, sealed with his blood.

An archive with more than 700 of these studies can be found at www.scottengle.org

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.
Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.
Our current series: *Rescue: Images of Salvation*