

Oh, come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who endured the shame and pain of the cross, that we might stand before him in glory forever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ "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. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers 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. ³³ "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, and they will be my people. ³⁴ 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."

Many Americans were upset recently when the news broke that AIG executives received huge bonuses. How could that be when the company had just been bailed out by American taxpayers? The answer: It was part of a previous contract. Whether we like them or not, contracts are a part of our lives. Very few people would be able to survive without them. I'm talking about formal contracts, agreements between individuals and other individuals or individuals and companies. When we buy a car or a house, we take out a loan, which is a contract between us and the bank. They promise to provide us with the funding we need and we, on our part, promise to repay the money over a period of time, along with interest. Workers sign contracts. They will work for a specified period of time and in return their employer will provide them with a certain wage scale and benefits. Even in the field of education, students sometimes sign contracts with their teachers, in an attempt to help them understand that they have a responsibility in the learning process.

Normally we think of a contract as unbreakable. Both parties must carry out their obligations as written in the contract. Only when both parties agree that the contract should be renegotiated can the original agreement be undone. It's not uncommon for people to renegotiate their home loans in order to get a better rate of interest. Nor is it uncommon for athletes to renegotiate their contract with teams. The player gets more money and the team gets the player's services for a longer period of time.

The text before us speaks of contracts and agreements. In this case, however, the term used is "covenant." As strange as it may sound the Lord is renegotiating his contract, his agreement, with us. This is good news. Thanks to our Lord, **"We Have a New and Better Covenant!"** It is: 1) better, because it will not fail; 2) better, because it is written in our hearts; and 3) better, because it offers full and free forgiveness.

I.

Some of God's people had already been carried off into captivity by the Babylonians when the prophet Jeremiah wrote this book. Through the prophet the Lord promises that they will be able to return to their homeland after 70 years. Only the Lord could bring about such a miracle. Just as the Lord delivered his people from slavery in Babylon, so he will also deliver his people from the slavery to sin, death and the power of the devil.

For God to make such an agreement with his people was nothing new. Throughout the Old Testament the Lord had made a number of covenants with his people. God made one with Noah and promised that he would never again destroy the entire world with water. God made another covenant with Abraham. God promised that Abraham's descendants would be many and that they would possess the land of Canaan. The most familiar agreement which God made in the Old Testament was the covenant established at Mount Sinai. This is the "old" covenant of which the Lord speaks in our text.

God's covenant at Sinai had several distinctive features. It set out in detail how the people were to live. Almost every aspect of life was regulated, from the kind of food they could eat to the touching of dead bodies. This old contract required endless animal sacrifices, day after day and year after year. The old agreement established a priesthood based on membership in one family. No one else could serve at the Lord's altar. Likewise only one group of people was privileged to be called God's people. But no one could keep this covenant as the Lord demanded. A quick survey of the Ten Commandments makes that clear. Yet this failure was not God's fault. The old covenant failed because God's people proved that they were unfaithful.

Therefore the Lord determined to make a new covenant with his people. This covenant is one-sided, God will do all the work so that it will be successful. He says, **"It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers."** It contains no laws, rules or regulations that had to be kept. It does not keep anyone from

approaching God. It invites all to believe. The invitation goes to all the world. Because of our sins, we are no better than the Israelites of old. We, too, have been unfaithful to God. We do not deserve to be called “God’s people.” That is why we need this new covenant as much as they did. This covenant is completely dependent on God’s faithful love rather than on our worthiness. Rather than dooming us to fail, God’s new covenant is better, because it will not fail.

II.

The old agreement which God made with his people at Mount Sinai was characterized by commandments written on tablets of stone. But God’s new covenant is different. He says, **“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.”** The new covenant emphasizes the second great teaching of the Bible which is the gospel, the good news of God’s forgiveness which was won for us by Jesus. Notice that the Lord promises to be put this teaching in our minds and hearts. God sends his Holy Spirit to teach us his truth continually.

Once again we see that the Lord doesn’t take any chances. He doesn’t permit us to mess things up. He takes matters into his own hands and establishes the covenant for us. That’s why we can be certain that everything has been done right and that we are his people. God does not say, “if they will be my people, I will be their God.” He says, **“they WILL be my people.”** This is God’s promise. Jesus fulfilled that promise when he redeemed us as his own.

The Lord adds, **“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.”** At first it might seem as if these words suggest that evangelism and Christian education are not all that important. They don’t say that at all. To “know the Lord” means to believe in him as our Savior. All who know the Lord are “neighbors” and “brothers and sisters,” that is, they are fellow Christians. We don’t need to tell fellow Christians to become Christians. By the working of the Holy Spirit, they are already Christians.

We share God’s Word with fellow Christians in order that they and we might grow in faith and in our knowledge of God. When we do this, we are tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who is working through us. Because of the new covenant which God has made with us, the Lord who kindles the first spark of faith in us, also promises to fan that faith into a strong fire. Since God does this in us, we can be certain that our relationship with God is better than it was, better because God leaves nothing to chance and carves faith into our hearts.

III.

The last two lines of our text summarize why our new relationship with God is better than the old. The Lord explains “why” when he says, **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”** This is the heart and core of God’s new covenant. The new covenant guarantees forgiveness, full and free. This forgiveness is so full that God says he will not even remember our sins. It is free because no human work is set as a condition for forgiveness. God forgives, period. That is why we can confess in Luther’s explanation to the third article of the Apostles’ Creed, **“In this Christian church he *daily and richly* forgives all sins to me and all believers.”**

There is nothing more reliable than the agreement which God makes with us. God’s faithfulness in keeping his promises has been demonstrated generation after generation. Just as we are certain that day will follow night, so we can be certain that the Lord will keep his promises to us. When we look at Jesus, we know why this is true. Christ poured out his holy precious blood to give us the forgiveness which his Father promised.

Could God’s covenant of forgiveness ever fail or be broken? NO! For God himself established this as an everlasting covenant. He sent his Son to be our Savior and to serve as the guarantee to his agreement. This covenant has been signed and sealed with the blood of Jesus. Nothing could make the forgiveness of our sins more certain.

When Jeremiah wrote these words of the Lord, he was living under God’s old covenant. Given through Moses, this agreement was for the Israelites and served as a shadow of things to come. How fortunate we are to have something better. Our agreement was guaranteed by the Savior Jesus and is for all believers. Because the Savior has come we know that this covenant will never fail. It is written in our hearts and offers us full and free forgiveness. This is one contract we won’t renegotiate, because there is nothing better than what we already have. Jeremiah could only look forward to this day in faith. We have tasted Jesus’ victory. Nothing is better than Jesus. Amen.

29 March 2009
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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