

Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets

A NEW KIND OF COVENANT

Jeremiah 31:31-34

I Corinthians 11:23-26

God has a New Deal for us!

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Recently Carey and I enjoyed watching a documentary on PBS entitled “The Roosevelts: An Intimate History.” It was a Ken Burns chronicle of one of the most influential political families in 20th century America. Even though Teddy Roosevelt got his face on Mount Rushmore, Franklin Roosevelt probably had even more impact on national and world history.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became President in 1932, the nation was in crisis. Even today, the Great Depression of the 1930’s is the yardstick for economic disaster. Unemployment stood at 25%; part-time or underemployment was another 25%. Half of America’s workforce was being under-utilized. Poverty in the rural areas was rampant. The value of money and stocks had plummeted. It was a mess.

The policy initiatives of FDR became known as the New Deal. It focused on three objectives: Relief, Recovery, and Reform. Though much too complicated to go into here, the New Deal included many things that we now take for granted: things like Social Security and unemployment insurance, public works projects and rural electrification, bank regulations and labor laws. Much of that was developed as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Not everyone thinks the New Deal was great. It also gave us a much more powerful federal government and introduced the national debt and deficit spending, which we are still dealing with today. But imperfect as it was, the New Deal pulled America out of the ditch and kept it from going down the path of totalitarianism, as happened in Russia, China, Italy, Japan, and Nazi Germany. One writer says, “Historians argue that Roosevelt restored hope and self-respect to tens of millions of desperate people, built labor unions, upgraded the national infrastructure and saved capitalism in his first term when he could have destroyed it and easily nationalized the banks and the railroads... The New Deal preserved democracy in the United States in a historic period of uncertainty and crisis when in many other countries democracy failed.”¹ The New Deal gave hope to America 90 years ago. You need to understand that history in order to have an informed opinion about what’s going on in America today.

If you want to have an informed understanding of the Old Testament prophets, you also have to know their history. Today, we are changing

prophets, from Isaiah to Jeremiah. The historical Isaiah lived in the 8th century BCE, when the Assyrians were conquering Israel. Second and Third Isaiah were prophets who lived 150-200 years later, after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and taken the people into exile.

Jeremiah fits historically between these two times. He was active in the 7th century BCE. He began his ministry in a time of great revival in the land of Judah. King Josiah had begun what we call the Deuteronomic reform. (The book of Deuteronomy came from this period.) The nation was turning to God and asserting its strength against the invading Babylonians. This worked fine until King Josiah was killed in battle. Then a series of three weak kings spelled doom for the Jewish nation. In 597 BCE, there was a great deportation of leadership to Babylon. Then the last king, Zedekiah, tried one more revolt. It didn't go well. The Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. They captured the royal family and killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him. Then they put his eyes out and carried him off to Babylon.²

Jeremiah was actually in Jerusalem when all of this happened, but he was taken hostage by a group of renegade Jews and carried away into Egypt, where he was never heard from again. It's a fascinating story.

The point is, our Scripture text today was written or spoken and recorded on the eve of this catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem. What Jeremiah does, in a way no other text does in the Old Testament, is to offer the people of God a New Deal.

Specifically, Jeremiah offers them a new covenant: "*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*"³ So what is he talking about? What's a covenant? It simply means an agreement between two parties. Covenant was sometimes used to refer to treaties between nations. In the old Disciple Bible Study series, Dr. David Lowes Watson defined a covenant as "an agreement made in a moment of strength so that in a moment of weakness, it cannot be undone."⁴ That goes for any kind of covenant: baptism, marriage, trade agreements, whatever.

Any new covenant, of course, has to be rooted in the old covenant. Our God is a covenant-making God. God made a covenant with Abraham to

give him the land of Canaan and innumerable offspring. God made a covenant with Moses to guide the Hebrew people through the wilderness if they would follow his commandments. God made a covenant with David to give him a political dynasty in Jerusalem that would rule forever. The problem was, while God was faithful to the covenants God made, the people weren't. They broke the terms of the covenant time and again. So God says this new covenant "*will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.*"⁵ The Hebrew people in the time of the prophets primarily broke the covenant by following other gods and by practicing injustice and oppression on the poor and vulnerable in their own communities. They did it so blatantly and so often that it led to their destruction.

But the promise of God through the prophet Jeremiah is a new deal, a new covenant. Notice that this new covenant is made with the "house" of Israel and the "house" of Judah. There is no more nation to be in covenant with. The Jews have been scattered and were about to be scattered into far-flung communities. But the new covenant reaches out to them wherever they are.

The new covenant looks like this. It is an internal and spiritual relationship, not an external agreement. It's not about land, as it was with Abraham. It's not about laws, as it was with Moses. It's not about political power, as it was with David. It's a matter of the heart.

This is a new delivery system for covenants. The content of the covenant is not changed that much. God still expects loyalty above any other gods. God still expects righteous behavior. God still expects people to "*do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*"⁶ It's like the difference between a paper document and an electronic document. They can say the same thing, but you have to carry the paper document with you. If you don't have it, you have to go somewhere else to get it. But if you have an electronic document, you can access that document anywhere. Just pull it up on your phone or tablet, and there you go.

The new covenant is like an electronic document. Wherever you are, God is there, because God is now inside you, in your hard drive, so to speak,

in your heart, in your spirit. God says, “*This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days ...: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*”⁷ You don’t have to be in Jerusalem; you don’t have to have a Torah handy. You have direct access to God. It’s not about the rules of religion; it’s about the reality of the relationship.

The poster child for the covenant of the heart is our Methodist forefather John Wesley. He tried for years to follow the rules, to be a good Christian, to be a priest and a missionary. He did it all, but it left him empty, because John Wesley never had a heartfelt, personal relationship with God. He never felt at peace; he never felt the joy of God’s forgiveness. Finally, at the point of despair, he attended a prayer meeting in London: “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”⁸ Now it was personal! The rest, as they say, is history.

The central feature of this new covenant is forgiveness: “*for I will forgive their iniquity,*” the Lord says, “*and remember their sin no more.*”⁹ It’s a covenant of grace. This is a word of hope for the people being destroyed by the Babylonians because it means God is not through with them yet. In fact, God wants to come and live in them. God’s grace can repair the brokenness. God can set things right again. And one day, God will bring them home.

Sometimes forgiveness works instantly. Sometimes it takes a while. But if there is a relationship, there is always hope. Joe Bayly, a Christian author and minister, had a rebellious son named Tim. Joe tried to reach Tim with arguments and rules, but he still rebelled. Tim eventually left his home, left the faith, and lived a prodigal life in an old house in Chicago. Tim's rebellion broke Joe's heart.

Late one night, Joe got a phone call. “This is the police,” the voice on the other line said. “Your son was arrested for a DUI. We have him here in the town jail.” Joe got out of bed and drove a half hour to the jail where his son was being held. When he got there, they told him that his son wasn't there. Joe checked the other police stations in the area. No Tim.

Finally, around 4:00 a.m., Joe decided to drive to the old house where he knew Tim had been sleeping. The door wasn't locked, so he stepped inside and looked for his son. In the faint light of a darkened room, he saw him asleep in a sleeping bag that was strewn across an old mattress. He walked over to the mattress and stood over Tim. Then, moved with compassion, he bent down, lightly kissed Tim on the cheek, and left.

In the months that followed, Tim started visiting his parents again. He returned to church and recommitted his life to Christ. He even announced he was going into the ministry. Today, Tim Bayly is a pastor in Bloomington, Indiana.

Years later, Joe finally asked Tim what made him want to come back home. Tim said, "Don't you know? Remember that night when you got a call that I was in jail? Dad, that was my friend. It was a prank. When you came to the house, I only pretended to be asleep. I was wide awake. I knew you'd driven all night in the cold, and I wondered what you were going to do to me. And all you did was bend down and kiss me on the cheek. Dad, the kiss brought me back."¹⁰ No matter how far away from God you have strayed, no matter how broken you are, no matter how disrupted your life might be, the kiss of forgiveness can bring you home.

God's kiss of forgiveness comes to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to be our Way, our Truth, and our Life. Jesus came to offer us a personal relationship with God. This relationship is a new kind of covenant: internal and spiritual, based on grace and forgiveness, not on law or land or power. The new covenant was ratified in blood on the cross of Calvary. The night before he was crucified, Jesus shared a last supper—a Passover meal—with his disciples. The last cup of wine in the Passover, shared after the meal, is the cup of Elijah, which looks forward to the day when God will send the Messiah. So it is especially significant that when Jesus lifted up the cup of Elijah, he said, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often*

as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”¹¹ Here is your Messiah. Here is your New Covenant. His name is Jesus.

The new covenant announced by Jeremiah found its full expression in Jesus Christ. We are participating in the new covenant which God promised through Jeremiah when we share Communion. We are re-presenting the words and actions of Jesus. And we are proclaiming this Word: God has a New Deal for you and me and all humankind. It is not like the old covenant, based on law and impossible to fulfill. It is a new covenant in our hearts. This is where we find the forgiveness of our sins. This is the basis of our hope today and for all eternity.

¹ “New Deal,” *Wikipedia*.

² II Kings 25:7.

³ Jeremiah 31:31.

⁴ Richard B. Wilke, *et al.*, *Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), video component, lesson 34.

⁵ Jeremiah 31:32.

⁶ Micah 6:8.

⁷ Jeremiah 31:33f.

⁸ John Wesley, *Journal*, May 24, 1738.

⁹ Jeremiah 31:34b.

¹⁰ Peter Hiatt, “The Most Neglected Commandment in the Bible,” *PreachingToday.com*.

¹¹ I Corinthians 11:25.