

WRITTEN ON THE HEART AND READ BY ALL:
A SERMON ON JEREMIAH 31:31–34

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Jason S. DeRouchie, PhD

Associate Professor of Old Testament, Bethlehem College and Seminary

I am honored that Pastor Jason asked me to preach today. The only power unto salvation is the good news concerning Christ, and I pray that you hear it today. I invite you to open your Bibles to Jeremiah 31 and 2 Corinthians 3; we will begin in 2 Corinthians 3. Jeremiah 31:31–34 is a bridge that leads one out of the old covenant ministry of condemnation into what Paul called the new covenant ministry of righteousness. The vistas over this bridge are glorious, filled with clouds of mercy, waters of love, and shores of hope, and I pray that Christ will be magnified and that your soul will be edified.

Please pray with me. . . .

The Shoreline of 2 Corinthians 3

We begin in 2 Corinthians 3:6, which reads, “[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” According to Paul there are two contrasting ages of redemptive history: the new covenant is by the Spirit and gives life, but it stands in contrast to the letter that kills, which is Paul’s portrait of the old covenant given through Moses. In verse 9, the contrast is stated differently: “If there was glory in the [old covenant] ministry of condemnation, the [new covenant] ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.” People encountered God’s glory through Moses’ old covenant ministry, but the result was condemnation. The result of Paul’s new covenant ministry is righteousness, which magnifies God’s glory even more than condemnation.

Now, what brings the decisive shift from a killing, condemning covenant to a life-giving, righteousness enjoying covenant? Verse 4: “Such is the confidence that we have *through Christ* toward God.” And again, verse 14: “But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only *through Christ* is it taken away.” The work of Messiah Jesus provides the decisive means for moving us from an age of death to life, from condemnation to righteousness, from external letter on stone to internal Spirit working on the heart.

Verses 2–3 bring all this together: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all.³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

According to verse 2, when the law is written on the heart, it is known and read by all. And verse 3 declares that getting the law on the tablets of our hearts is something that is accomplished by Christ through his Spirit—the Spirit of the living God. We can summarize this way: *The old covenant letter kills, but through Jesus the new covenant Spirit gives life. With this, the law on tablets of stone read by none becomes a law on tablets of the heart read by all, because of Jesus.*

The Bridge of Jeremiah 31:31–34

The rest of this sermon has four points:

1. The *problem* with the old covenant (verse 32)
2. The *promise* of the new covenant (verse 33)
3. The *results* of God’s new covenant work (verses 33–34)
4. The *reason* for the new covenant’s effectiveness (verse 34)

1. The Problem of the Old Covenant (verse 32)

Verses 31–32: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.” The problem with the old covenant was this: *Lack of loyalty lead to broken relationship*. Israel was given an opportunity like no other nation on earth to enjoy relationship with God. It was these people that God took “by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.” They were desperate, and Yahweh was mighty to save. But like an unfaithful bride, they turned, craving temporary evil over eternal pleasure.

In the old covenant God had called for right things: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5) and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Moses even called Israel, “These words that I am commanding you today shall be on your heart” (Deut 6:6; cf. Prov 3:3; 7:3). “Get my instruction on the heart!” says the Lord. But as loud as Moses cried, Israel remained deaf. The law never reached their heart. In the purpose of God, in order to bring about the need for Jesus, the law bore a ministry of condemnation. Remember Deut 29:4: “To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear” (cf. Rom 11:8, 10).

The problem with the old covenant was not that the law was bad but that the law remained external. It called for the right things, but it didn’t have the power to change Israel’s hearts. It was, in Paul’s words, “weakened by the flesh” (Rom 8:3). Jeremiah

put it this way in 17:1: “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart.” At the core of Israel’s being was sin, not the law. God’s character was not etched on their hearts, and so God’s character was not being read in their lives.

If your life was written into a book, what would people read? Would it be a story of increased victory and God dependence, or a story of failure and defeat? Would it be a story of hope or a story of hopelessness? Would they find a healthy transparency and the closets of your lives open for cleaning, or would they see your shades closed and doors shut, not wanting anyone to know what goes on in the darkness? For Israel, their lives were controlled by sin, not the law. The portrait of God’s character remained outside of them, and merely having a copy of the law did not overcome their spiritual disability. Sin, not the law, controlled the wills of the majority.

2. The New Covenant Promise (verse 33)

Into this world, God made an amazing promise of hope: *loyalty would be empowered* as the law would be internalized. Verse 33: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” By Yahweh’s decisive, new covenant work—ultimately through his Spirit, he would do what the people could not do. He would write the law on Israel’s hearts, empowering loyalty and love, overcoming pride and prejudice, enabling care and concern. God’s character would be embodied in human lives, and humans would finally fulfill their purpose of imaging God (cf. Jer 3:16–17; 1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16).

Where passions and pleasures were once rebellious, people’s internal dispositions become changed to align with the ways of God. Perceptions and thoughts are no longer controlled by sin but are progressively controlled by righteousness. People value what God values, and begin to treasure the worth of God above all else. Missionaries are born, families are reconciled, neighbors are loved, widows are cared for, orphans are adopted, purity becomes a priority, pride becomes an enemy, and a tragic character in the plot of the story becomes a transformed image of hope. People in the new covenant have encountered the God of the universe in the person of Christ, and will never be the same. The new covenant is about the law of God being on the heart. Has your heart been changed like this?

3. The Results of God’s New Covenant Work (verse 33–34)

The rest of verse 33 and verse 34 describe the results of this new covenant work. Those who experience internal change will (1) enjoy lasting relationship with God and (2) experience an intimate knowledge of God.

First, people will *enjoy lasting relationship* with the living God. Once hearts are changed, the covenant will not be broken. The great bridegroom will enjoy his bride forever: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (verse 33). Hear both the commitment and the expectation in Yahweh’s words (cf. Jer 32:38–41).

I will be their God—their supreme master, sole savior, and sovereign satisfier. I will watch over them and provide for them in pleasure and in pain—through miscarriage, I will be there; through broken relationships, I will be there; through sickness and loss, I will be there. I will be their God. All my power, indeed all authority in heaven and on earth, will be used for them taking them out of trial or sustaining them through it. And their hearts will be strengthened and completely satisfied, confident that in my presence is fullness of joy, and at my right hand are pleasures forever” (Ps 16:11). I will be their God. Are you tapped into this hope, this help?

They shall be my people. . . . They shall not run to others but will live knowing they are mine. They will celebrate that I am for them, and they will rest confident that I will protect them. When the storms rise, they will know peace; when the enemy lies, they will declare, “I am God’s.” Their loyalty will be to me—when desires for lust are awakened, they will say, “No!”; when they are tempted to despair, they will remember, “My God is with me!”; when they are delighting in health and life, they will remember, “My God has supplied all!” And when they are without a job or when their home burns to the ground, they will remember “My God will supply all!” Their love will be to me; their lives will be to me. They shall be my people.

The first result of the new covenant is enjoying lasting relationship with God. Are you enjoying lasting relationship today?

The second result is *experiencing intimate knowledge* of God. Read with me Jeremiah 31:34: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” The old covenant was a mixed community of remnant and rebel, saved and unsaved, so that people like Jeremiah had to call those within the covenant to turn to the Lord, to repent and be saved. Most people in the old covenant were hard, rebellious, unbelieving, and condemned, and the disloyalty against God spanned all ages and social classes. So Jeremiah says 6:13: “From the least of them to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.” The new covenant is not like this, for God himself will instruct every heart and all will know him (cf. 1 John 2:20–21, 27).

The final phrase of Jeremiah 31:34 helps us understand what Jeremiah means: “They shall all know me. . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Those who are forgiven have already been taught by God; they have already been converted; they already have a personal, intimate knowledge of God. They don’t just know about him like I know about the president of the United States; they know

him like my wife knows me. They hear his voice; they follow his lead; they enjoy his protection; they love him. Here is how Jesus put it in John 6:44–45: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.” Have you come to Jesus yet? If you have, you have been taught by God. In the new covenant every member has experienced forgiveness, and therefore every member knows God personally.

But we must ask, “What does Jeremiah mean by knowing God?” This is an important question, for where there is no knowledge, there is no relationship, for “they shall all know me.” Elsewhere Jeremiah tells us what he means by knowing God.

- Jer. 9:23–24. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴but let him who boasts boast in this, *that he understands and knows me*, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.
- Jer. 22:15–17. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. *Is not this to know me?* declares the LORD. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

For Jeremiah, knowing God means *recognizing and reflecting God’s character* in steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. To know God means that we have such a personal relationship with him that we begin to act and think like him. We begin to hate what he hates, to grieve over what he grieves over, and to love what he loves. John says it this way: “Whoever loves has been born of God and *knows God*. ⁸Anyone who does not love *does not know God*, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8).

Now look again at our text: “They shall all know me *because* I will forgive their iniquity.” There is something about the gospel of forgiveness that empowers people to run from sin and selfishness and to become better lovers of others, which is what it means to know God. How does this work? Let me provide some clarifying examples:

- Because God’s wrath-overcoming love conquered our own rebellion and sin, we who know God are empowered to love even those who are hard to love and not to retain bitterness.
- Because Jesus died for all without partiality to sex or race or color, we who know God realize that prejudice and pride have no place in the new covenant heart.

- Because sin was an enemy that was defeated in the cross, all forms of sin become the enemy of all of us who know God—pride, apathy, laziness, deceit, lust, selfishness, racism, envy, bitterness, or any other evil.
- Because sin was indeed conquered and because sin is indeed forgiven, we who know God move ahead with a new blood-bought power. We are not working to make God for us, but we are resting, knowing that he is for us. All authority in heaven and on earth is at our disposal, because wrath has been removed, mercy has been secured, sin has been conquered, hope has been gained.

All who have been forgiven know God, and it changes who we are. Do you know God today? If not, seek forgiveness in Jesus. Do you see areas in your own life where your lack of loving what God loves testifies that you don't know him as well as you should? Bathe yourself in the gospel. The cross reminds us of our sinfulness and neediness and crushes pride. The cross reminds us of God's amazing love, removes all condemnation, and provides the antidote to depression. The cross defeats fear by reminding us that the greatest enemy has been defeated and the Victor is our helper forevermore. If you do not know God like you should, saturate your mind in what it means to be forgiven.

4. The Reason for the New Covenant's Effectiveness (verse 34)

Yahweh declares in verse 34, "They shall know me. . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." No more! In the new covenant there is no more condemnation (Rom 8:1), no more possibility of being put to shame (Rom 9:33; 10:11), no more wrath of God (Rom 5:8), no more an enemy of God (Rom 5:10), no more need to fear suffering (Rev 2:10) or death (Heb 2:15). Why? Because wrath has been appeased, sins have been forgiven, righteousness has been declared, and God will remember our sins *no more*.

In Jeremiah, forgiveness of sins means cleansing from guilt: "I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me" (30:8). Sinners are guilty of rebellion against the God of all the universe. If God is just, which is he is, he must punish the sinner or allow his wrath to fall on a substitute. In love, Christ becomes the substitute and bears the wrath of God for all who believe, and the new covenant has at its basis this great exchange: our sins transferred to Christ and his righteousness declared over us, if we turn to him in faith. "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:20). Forgiveness means cleansing from guilt. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

But it also means that the sinner has repented, with a broken heart before God that requests pardon in light of God's provision of the substitute (36:3): "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every

one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” You cannot enjoy forgiveness apart from repentance. To be part of the new covenant relationship with God, set free from sin and set free from curse, there must be a true reorientation away from sin and toward God, not perfectly overnight but a true change of direction. New covenant members are those who recognize their sinfulness and turn to the cross. The bedrock of our lives must be the mercy of God, ultimately shown in Christ, or we have no relationship with God.

Speaking of the contrast between the old and new covenant eras, Paul declared in Colossians 1:13–14: “[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” At the very foundation of the new covenant is the mercy of God brought through Christ. There is no new covenant relationship apart from forgiveness of sins. In Paul’s words, all new covenant relationship, all new covenant ministry is *from Christ* or *through Christ* (2 Cor 3:3–4, 14).

Application Points

We began this sermon with this summary of 2 Corinthians 3: *The old covenant letter kills, but through Jesus the new covenant Spirit gives life. With this, the law on tablets of stone read by none becomes a law on tablets of the heart read by all, because of Jesus.* This is what Jeremiah 31:31–34 is about. With this in mind, I offer four application points.

1. *Celebrate a biblical basis for being a Baptist.* This may sound strange, but one of the reasons I am a Baptist and not a Presbyterian is found in this text. Verse 34 contrasts the makeup of the new covenant community with that of the old. The old covenant included both remnant and rebel, saved and unsaved. From the days of Abraham forward, children were born into the covenant, and babies would receive the sign of the covenant—circumcision—identifying that from the womb they were part of the covenant community, even though they themselves had not yet believed in God. Those who baptize babies today take this same view about the new covenant, but verse 34 suggests that all members of the new covenant know God personally because all members have been forgiven. In the new covenant, ecclesiology and soteriology are united. You can’t be considered part of the covenant until you personally have experienced reconciliation with God by faith, and that is why Baptists only baptize believers. So in this room are new covenant members who have experienced salvation from sin and in whom God’s character is progressively being seen in their lives, and then there are others, some children and some adults, who are not part of the new covenant, who do not yet have a personal relationship with God. One hope of this text is that all who repent of their sin and turn to God in Christ will experience a life-transforming mercy. You can know God today and begin to enjoy a personal, lasting relationship with

him, and you can today see your own ugliness of heart begin to be overcome. Celebrate a biblical basis for being a Baptist.

2. *Spend consistent time with God in Bible study, prayer, and community in order to know him more.* This text states that forgiven people know God, gaining eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts to know. Before you knew God, you had a spiritual disability; God's Word would have no impact. But now, if you have been forgiven, the eyes of your heart have been opened to see and to savor the beauty of God like never before. He is inviting you to have personal fellowship with him, to know him personally. We encounter God through his Word; the more you read it, the more you'll know his will, his ways, his passions, his desires, his loves, his hates. Talk to him in prayer, and pray according to his will as revealed in his book. And continue to meet with others, who are progressively expressing God's character in their lives. We get to know more of God as he discloses himself in the lives of his saints. So spend consistent time with God in Bible study, prayer, and community in order to know him more.
3. *Pursue holiness with blood-bought power and in light of blood-bought pardon and blood-bought promises.* At the very foundation of the new covenant is Jesus' redeeming work. "They will all know me because I will forgive their sin." All new covenant relationship is done on the basis of blood-bought pardon. The only sins you will conquer are sins that have already been addressed at the cross, which means God is 100% for you already in Christ, working for you with all authority in heaven and on earth. We pursue the life of holiness with the law written on our hearts not as a quest to earn God's favor but in the power of his favor and in light of blood-bought promises. Loyalty to God is driven by faith in future grace, trusting every promise that is already Yes in Christ. Blood-bought pardon fuels your pursuit of holiness, because you are confident that he who began the good work in you will be faithful to complete it. Trust God today. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32)
4. *Remember that it is the greatness of God and not your greatness that is to be read in your lives.* New covenant members are all sinners, who celebrate the cross. God's character is most clearly displayed in our lives in the context of dependence, humility, and weakness—in lives that recognize our own insufficiency and Christ's sufficiency. More than any others on earth, Christians should be the most transparent about our sin if it gives opportunity to magnify the greatness of Christ. In the end, what distinguishes us from non-believers is not who we are but what is within. "We have this treasure [—the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ—] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7). All we have is Christ. He has secured our pardon; he is our power; he has won all our promises. When people read you, may they see less of you and more of God.