

The New Covenant

One of the mistakes Christians make is to think that the New Covenant God promises here means the Old Covenant, and therefore the Old Testament are null and void after Jesus. They assume that the New Covenant supersedes the Old Covenant.

This is called supersessionism and it can be the first step on the march to anti-Jewish sentiments. The thinking goes, If Jesus supersedes the Old Covenant, then Jews who did not convert are wrong and therefore inferior...maybe even condemned. That's not a good path to go down.

At the same time, it's hard not to read prophecies like this one as pointing to Jesus.

So, let's imagine ourselves hearing this prophecy from some different vantage points.

First...you are a Jewish person in exile in what we now would call 585 BC. You have been through unimaginable horror. You've seen neighbors killed. You were captured by Babylonian soldiers and taken off to a foreign place. You've lost your little craft shop and your home. You don't speak the language of your captors and have no idea what's going to happen to you.

You've heard Jeremiah's words...this isn't going to end soon. 70 years! You've resigned yourself to dying in captivity. But what about your children's future? What about the future of your people as a nation?

For generations, your leaders have failed you. They've led the people to repeatedly break the covenant God made with them. The priests have sought power by backing the corrupt kings instead of trusting God and working God's justice and mercy for the people. The kings were supposed to be the solutions to your problems! But they've brought out the worst in everyone and they've led you into disaster.

Is this the end of God's promise for you?

Now you are hearing a new word from Jeremiah. You've learned to trust him. After all, his dire warnings have all come true. But this new word is different. It's a word of hope...of promise. God has not given up on God's people.

In fact, God is going to forgive it all. God is going to wipe the slate clean. The covenant is being renewed. But this time in a new way.

Your people have been to the bottom. But God promises to bring them back out, and when that happens, they will be transformed. God's judgment, but even more God's forgiveness is giving them a whole new start. They will return home, and things will be different.

This new covenant will not need the external guardrails to keep people in line. Instead, this covenant will be so much a part of the people...etched in their hearts...that how they live will be in that beautiful way of peace and justice and love that God intended.

And, the line of kings and priests will continue...only this time the king will be righteous and lead in God's way. The kings and priests will no longer be the very leaders who led the people astray.

You may not see this great new day or the fulfillment of the new covenant. But it is God's promise, and you believe it for the sake of your people's future. It gives you strength to carry on.

OK, now we move forward 600 or so years. Now you are a Jewish person living in Jerusalem. God did keep the promise to bring your people back home. Many of the people returned to Israel, rebuilt the Temple, built homes, planted fields, and harvested crops in the land once again.

But it doesn't seem like the rest of Jeremiah's promise has come true yet. There are priests...and in some ways they have become the rulers of the Jewish people. Because there is not a king from David's line.

There's the Roman emperor and his puppet kings – the Herod clan. But the nation itself has been ruled by one after another foreign king ever since the exile.

The priests, many of whom are very faithful, have worked to help the Jewish people maintain their identity in an occupied land. And they have relied on the Law for that. In fact, in some cases, the Law has assumed a too rigid form.

But it doesn't seem like the promise Jeremiah issued is coming true completely. And sadly, some of the priests have been too much like the priests in the days of Israel's corrupt kings.

But now, there's this Jesus. You traveled around with him some and heard his teaching. You're especially intrigued by his astonishing birth story. It very much seemed that the angels announced his birth like a herald would announce the birth of a king. Son of God...yet also human. OK, you've heard that before – Caesar called himself the son of God.

But you...and many others have become convinced that he really is. And then, in Jerusalem, he got some of the priests all riled up – same way the prophets like Jeremiah did.

His followers kept waiting for him to take command – to rise up and defeat the Romans. That's what a king like David would do.

But he didn't. He got arrested. And crucified. So much for being a king. Except...now he's been reported to have been raised from the dead.

And it clicks. Could it be you wonder if this is God's new way of crowning a ruler once and for all – a ruler who does meet the criteria of the promise. A truly righteous king.

But instead of ruling through power and might, Jesus's reign is established, not by avoiding suffering and death, but entering right into it...not by fighting evil with violence but by letting it do its worst to him. At first, everyone thought they were wrong about him.

But then, he was raised. His resurrection firmly establishes his reign after all. The victory is not just over Rome and its soldiers. The victory is over evil itself...and even death. And it's a rule that cannot be ended – it's eternal. And it's a rule over all the world, not just the Jews.

Grasping what Jesus actually did is breathtaking. You remember his teaching and his humility and his love. You realize he forgave all those who betrayed him and abandoned him...even the ones who killed him.

Then, the change in your heart begins. You want to be like him. You want to love like him. That's the law written in your heart. Nobody has to tell you how to live as a follower of Jesus. You just know. And as best you can you want to live the whole of your life the way he taught.

Now, over 2000 years later, Jews, Christians and the entire world still wait for the final fulfillment of the promise God made through Jeremiah.

We continue to struggle with rulers who mainly seem to seek power and wealth for themselves. We continue to see religious leaders who preach a message that is not good news to the poor...or really anyone. It's just the same news spoken by the priests who backed all Israel's corrupt kings so many centuries ago.

But nonetheless, we do get stunning glimpses of people who do live as though the law is written in their hearts. People who truly care about others...people who live in harmony with the created world. We see people who are willing to sacrifice something of themselves for the sake of another. People who gently but courageously resist the forces of evil.

And they don't all seem to be Christian.

Christians, Jews, and the whole world alike await the final fulfillment of the New Covenant. But the promise still stands. The promise was originally made to the Jews, and the New Covenant did not rescind that. Christians were adopted into the promise through their baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

We come here each week to hear the word...to hear the good news of what God has done...is doing...and will continue to do. We come here to let that word sink deeply into us...to work on our hearts. We come here so that word can help us know God...and be transformed by God's saving work in Christ.

People who have God's love and mercy and forgiveness written on their hearts can be a powerful force for good...a force that can build the kind of world where Jesus does reign...the world he called the kingdom of God.