

New Covenant Christianity
Jeremiah 31:31-34
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Our passage today is the Jeremiah 31 new covenant prophecy. By way of introduction, I want to mention two significant features of this prophecy. First, the New Testament frequently alludes to this prophecy. The inspired light which the New Testament sheds on this passage should help us considerably in interpreting it correctly. Studying this prophecy should be like learning to ride a bicycle equipped with training wheels. The experience we gain interpreting this prophecy should then help us in interpreting other prophecies which have no training wheels; that is, prophecies which have little or no commentary upon them in the New Testament.

Second, a person's interpretation of this prophecy can greatly affect his understanding of the nature of the church in this age. The Jeremiah 31 new covenant prophecy prophesies a day when the people of God "shall all know [God] from the least of them to the greatest of them." The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy looks to a day when everyone who is outwardly a member of God's people is also a member inwardly. Under the old covenant, to use the language of Paul, "they [were] not all Israel who [were] of Israel" (Romans 9:6). In other words, under the old covenant, not all who were Jews outwardly were Jews inwardly. The ultimate fulfillment of this Jeremiah 31 prophecy looks to a day when this is no longer the case, to a day when everyone who is a member of the covenant community outwardly is also a member inwardly.

Some say that this new covenant ideal of an unmixed fellowship is already realized in this age because the visible church in this age is by definition a regenerate only fellowship. This model excludes from the church the children of the church who are too young to have a profession of faith. It also excludes adults whose profession of faith is not genuine. Though such adults may have their names on the church roll, they cannot really be a member of a body which is by definition a regenerate only fellowship. Under this model, it is impossible to know with any certainty if everyone on a church roll is indeed a valid member of the visible church.

Others say that this new covenant ideal of an unmixed fellowship will not be realized until the age to come because the visible church in this age remains a covenant community where not all who are members outwardly are necessarily members inwardly. This model sees greater continuity in this age with the old testament experience. The children of the church are still regarded as part of the covenant community and thus are baptized as infants. Non-baptized adults are baptized and admitted to the church based upon a credible profession of faith, which does not necessarily mean they are regenerate. Under this model, it is acknowledged that not everyone who is a valid member of the visible church is necessarily a genuine member of the invisible church.

Let's now examine what the Bible has to say about the fulfillment of Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy, and see what light that throws on our understanding of the church in this age. We will examine the fulfillment in three phases: the preliminary fulfillment, the principal fulfillment, and the perfect fulfillment.

Let's begin by looking at the preliminary fulfillment. This preliminary fulfillment is a partial fulfillment that occurred even before Jesus came, a partial fulfillment that occurred in the latter days of the old covenant. There is a bit of an overlap here between the old covenant and the new covenant. In his new covenant prophecy, Jeremiah is speaking in the context of the prophesied return of Israel to Jerusalem after the seventy year Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy is first of all a prophecy about the revival and reformation in Israel that occurred under Ezra and Zerubbabel and Haggai and Zechariah.

I need to give you a little background. During the time of Jeremiah's ministry, the people of the kingdom of Judah increasingly worshipped idols instead of the living and true God. Some of them even sacrificed their infant children to pagan idols. In judgment for this idolatry and this shedding of innocent blood, God used the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and to deport the people to foreign lands. Jeremiah prophesied that this chastisement would not last forever. God would one day send a revival among the people. God would one day write His law on their hearts in the sense of making obedience to God's law their heart desire in life. God would one day give the people new hearts with a renewed faith relationship with the living and true God. And God would bless their repentance and faith and new obedience by one day returning them to the land of Canaan and enabling them to rebuild their nation. This prophecy was fulfilled after seventy years of exile as the first and preliminary fulfillment of Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy.

The word from the Lord to Jeremiah which includes the new covenant prophecy covers all of Jeremiah chapters 30 and 31. There are several verses in these two chapters which demonstrate the original context of the new covenant prophecy. I will limit my comments to the verses beginning and ending these two chapters. First, the verses at the beginning of Jeremiah chapter 30:

- 1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,
- 2 "Thus speaks the LORD God of Israel, saying: 'Write in a book for yourself all the words that I have spoken to you.
- 3 'For behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'that I will bring back from captivity My people Israel and Judah,' says the LORD. 'And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it.'"

Secondly, the verses at the end of Jeremiah chapter 31:

- 38 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, that the city shall be built for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.
- 39 "The surveyor's line shall again extend straight forward over the hill Gareb; then it shall turn toward Goath.
- 40 "And the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be holy to the LORD. It shall not be plucked up or thrown down anymore forever."

The opening verses of chapter 30 talk about the return from the Babylonian captivity, and the closing verses of chapter 31 talk

about the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. This proves that Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy had a preliminary fulfillment back at the time of the return from exile and the rebuilding of the city. Yet these verses also indicate that the return and rebuilding were far from the complete fulfillment of this prophecy. These verses prophesy events that go far beyond anything that happened during the times of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah. The last verse of this prophecy says that even the most unclean places once associated with Jerusalem, specifically "the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes," will one day be holy to the LORD. The prophet is saying that there is coming a day when the whole city of Jerusalem and not just the temple in the city will be a holy sanctuary to the LORD. Because the whole city will then be holy to the LORD, it will never again be destroyed in judgment. Jerusalem was rebuilt during the times of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, but that is as far as this preliminary fulfillment went. The rebuilt city was not all holy to the LORD as if it were in its entirety a big temple, and the rebuilt city was later destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. This prophecy about this totally holy Jerusalem that will never again be destroyed must be pointing beyond the earthly Jerusalem to the heavenly Jerusalem which we read about in the New Testament. There was a preliminary fulfillment when Jerusalem was rebuilt, but that first fulfillment was but a partial fulfillment.

The new covenant prophecy that the people of God "shall all know [God] from the least of them to the greatest of them" also had a real but partial fulfillment back at that time. There was a revival in Israel associated with the return from exile. During that revival, many in Israel came to a greater heart knowledge of the Lord their God. They were cured as a people from their

previous addiction to idolatry, a prophesied development especially stressed in Ezekiel 36:25:

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols."

Yet there were still those in Israel who were Jews outwardly but not inwardly. That is evident enough from reading the book of Nehemiah (cf. 6:12,14; 13:28-29). The age of the all regenerate visible church had not yet come.

That brings us to the next fulfillment. First we had this partial fulfillment which occurred before the coming of Christ. Next came the fulfillment that was associated with the coming of Christ some 2000 years ago. This was the principal fulfillment, the main fulfillment, the fulfillment in substance. This is the fulfillment we read about when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and said, "This cup is the **new covenant** in My blood, which is shed for you." This is the fulfillment we read about when Paul referred to himself as a minister of the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:6. Paul used the language of the Jeremiah 31 new covenant when he said concerning the Corinthian Christians, "clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3). This is the fulfillment we read about in the book of Hebrews where Christ is called the Mediator of a better covenant established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6) and the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 9:15).

What is so significant about this principal fulfillment is that here is where we go from old covenant shadows and types, such as the earthly city and the earthly temple and animal sacrifices, to new covenant substance and new covenant spiritual realities. A prophecy which was initially given and partially fulfilled in terms of the rebuilding of the earthly Jerusalem and the physical temple in Jerusalem has its principal fulfillment in terms of the heavenly Jerusalem and the building of a temple made with living stones.

This involves not merely a change of degree but a change of kind. The blood of old covenant animal sacrifices never really took away sin, but the blood of Jesus does. Jesus is our new covenant Priest and our new covenant Sacrifice. He has once for all offered the one sacrifice for sins which enables God to forgive the sins of His people.

Jeremiah 31:34 says, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." This new covenant statement obviously points to the saving work of Jesus. God is able to forgive the sins of His people because Jesus paid for their sins through His suffering on the cross. This work of Jesus within history is the basis for our forgiveness. It is also the basis for the greater heart knowledge of God which characterizes this age.

After His death, Jesus rose from the dead in a glorified body and ascended into heaven. And then on the day of Pentecost, Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit on His people in new covenant fullness. The Holy Spirit is poured out on God's people with a fullness in this age which previously was associated only with prophets. Thus we read in 1 John 2:27:

But the anointing which you have received from [Jesus] abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you;

...

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. Jesus has given us the completed Scriptures and has poured out upon us the illuminating Spirit in new covenant fullness. Compared to the old covenant saints who were dependent upon new revelations from living prophets, we have no need of anyone to teach us. That is what it says in 1 John 2:27. Surely this is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:34, which says, "No more shall every man teach his neighbor," because "they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them."

We see a new and substantial fulfillment of the new covenant in this age. A prophecy given in terms of old covenant shadows and types finds a greater fulfillment in terms of new covenant substance and realities. But is this principal fulfillment the full and final fulfillment? The answer is no. Christ in this age continues to send out pastor-teachers for the edifying of the saints. We have come a long way from the situation of God's people under the old covenant, but we haven't gotten to the point where God's people can do without gifted teachers altogether. Hebrews 5: 12 says,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; ...

We also have not yet reached that stage when every member of the visible church is truly regenerate. I believe Paul makes this clear in Romans chapter 11.

In Romans 11, Paul explains God's judgment upon the unbelieving Jews of his day. Paul here uses the figure of an olive tree to represent Israel, the visible church of the old covenant. The Jews who did not believe in Jesus are branches which God broke off in judgment. These branches had been on the olive tree but they never bore the fruit of saving faith. That is consistent with the Old Testament situation where one could be a Jew outwardly but not inwardly, where one could be a member of the visible church but not necessarily truly know God in his heart. What is so significant about Romans 11 is that Paul then goes on to warn that what happened to these unbelieving Jews can also happen to professing Christians in the new covenant church:

- 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.
- 22 Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

This proves that the visible church has not yet reached the point where every branch on the olive tree bears the fruit of a genuine heart knowledge of God. It is still possible in this age to be a branch on the olive tree which never bears the fruit of genuine saving faith.

And that brings us to our last fulfillment, the perfect fulfillment. This will occur when Christ returns and fully applies the redeeming effects of His atoning sacrifice to all those who are genuine members of the invisible church. At that time, Christ will make all His people perfect in holiness, removing every remnant of indwelling sin. At that time, Christ will give all His people glorified resurrection bodies which will not be subject to disease or to death. At that time, Christ will make a new heavens and a new earth, a new creation which no longer groans under the burden of the curse. In that day, the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). In that day, the church will be a glorious church, not having any spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27). In that day, the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to earth, and there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 21:27). This is the point in redemptive history when the visible and invisible aspects of the church will coalesce into a consistent unity, when valid outward membership will become an infallible sign of genuine heart regeneration, when the people of God "shall all know [God] from the least of them to the greatest of them."

In review, there was a preliminary fulfillment of the new covenant before Jesus was born. The principle fulfillment of the new covenant occurred during Jesus' earthly ministry at His first coming. The perfect fulfillment will occur when He returns again and fully applies the redeeming benefits of His atoning work.

As we anticipate that coming day, let me ask you, Do you know the Lord? In John 17:3, Jesus prayed in His high priestly prayer, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Being on the church roll is a great privilege with many spiritual benefits, but you need to remember that being on the church roll is not enough. Being a valid member of the visible church will not of itself get you into heaven. You also need to have a genuine faith relationship with Jesus Christ. You need to have a heart knowledge of Jesus Christ. You need to look to God for the grace and blessings of the new covenant.

"Hence the ancient predictions generally had three relations (*scheseis*): to the state of the law in the Jewish church; to the state of grace in the Christian church; and to the state of glory in heaven. Thus the prophecy about the people walking in darkness and beholding a great light (Is. 9:1,2) has three degrees of fulfillment: (1) in the Babylonian restoration; (2) in the preaching of the gospel (Mt. 4:14-16); and (3) in the last resurrection in which those who sit in the valley of the shadow of death shall see the great light of God's glory. The same remark applies to the prophecy about the dry bones (Ezk. 37:1-14), which was fulfilled when the people went forth from the most mournful Babylonian captivity as from a sepulcher (Ezk. 37 :12); it is fulfilled every day in the spiritual resurrection (Eph. 5:14); and will be perfectly fulfilled in the final resurrection (Jn. 5:25).

Turretin, 1:152