

Commemoration of the Reformation A 29 October 2023

Jeremiah 31:31-34

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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 ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Let's pray: ...

The most important question of all is: How do I get right with God? This was the question that led to the 16th century Reformation in Europe as Luther anxiously wrestled with the reality that God was righteous but he [Luther] wasn't.

Imagine a time when you had no scriptures and had to rely on what the priests told you about God and about what was right. Imagine that you couldn't ever be sure of your salvation, although you were encouraged to do various acts of penance or hand over cash to buy a pardon for your sins.

No gospel, no assurance, no certainty as to what was right and wrong and, above all, no sure way of being right with God. The way of relating to God was based on outward performance, attendance at religious gatherings and false hope. The church before the Reformation was little different to the situation the prophet, Jeremiah, faced in his day.

Even though 500 years have passed since the Reformation, we must never forget that our relationship with God isn't based on outward performance. It's crucial to remember that we're children of the new covenant; not the old. We need to cling steadfastly to the glorious freedom of salvation by God's grace alone.

Our standing with God isn't based on our performance, our prayers or our good works, but only on the finished work of Christ.

The problem [:31,32]

Jeremiah is the prophet who lived at the time of the southern kingdom of Judah. He saw God's people falling into greater sin and idolatry. He warned them about the coming invasion by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and about the exile, and he urged repentance. He saw the exile itself and it's out of this seemingly impossible situation that God's promise of the new covenant arose.

The new covenant is about God's faithfulness to his original promise of a redeemer (Genesis 3:15). So, it's founded on grace. But also, that God's purposes can't be destroyed even by the failures of his people. The people are going into exile. The king is going to lose his throne. From what seems to be the end, comes God's promise of a new covenant. Likewise, the Reformation began at a time when the church was far from God and the true people of God were a tiny remnant. Out of the darkness of the mediaeval Church, God shone a Reformation of light that transformed lives and nations.

The same hope remains today. The new covenant is an unbreakable and everlasting covenant. And even though the Church seems, in some places, to be a tiny remnant, God's faithfulness remains steadfast.

A problem is suggested in [:31] where God says, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." The people need something new, not because of a problem with God, but with them. The reference to Israel and Judah reminds them that they're a broken and divided people. Yet, the promise would extend to embrace all people, including us Gentiles who're adopted as spiritual children of Abraham by grace.

The children of Israel "broke" the original covenant [:32] by disobeying God's commandments and worshipping idols of Baal. In (Deuteronomy), the people had pronounced curses on themselves and their descendants if they failed to keep the commandments [27:15-26].

God comes to the rescue with a solution in (Jeremiah 31:33): "I will put my law within them." The good and righteous laws that the people weren't keeping were transferred from tablets of stone to the human heart.

It was a covenant “cut”, as it were, because the making of a covenant involved the sacrificial cutting of an animal as the sign of what should happen to the person who breaks the covenant (Jeremiah 34:18). In the new covenant, Jesus took that punishment upon himself, and died in the place of sinners.

This is no mere contract, Saints; it’s a “covenant” in which God has bound himself to fulfil his promises to us. We too are bound to God, yet we’re kept by grace. It’s an agreement of loyalty, commitment, love, and self-giving. The Lord has bound himself to us and we’re bound to him. And it’s “new” in contrast to the old covenant because it’s full of promises that come from God and it isn’t linked to our performance.

Transformed lives [:33]

God has written the law (or Torah) on our hearts, and the Hebrew word for “written” is the same word used for the tablets of stone written with the finger of God (Exodus 31:18). So, the word is no longer external; but has been internalised, enabling us to believe. This also ensures that the gospel of grace isn’t a gospel without obedience. God’s grace saves us, empowers us to become new creations, and frees us from the power of sin.

That doesn’t mean we’re perfect. Far from it! That’s why the end of [:34] provides such comfort. The Lord says; “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more”. This allows us to be born again each day; renewed people with new life and new power to obey the Lord. God claims us as his people, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people”. The fulfilment of God’s covenant with Abraham is found in the new. We’re not physical descendants of Abraham but are born again, recipients of “[Christ’s] precious and very great promises ... and [we] become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

This, Saints, is precious and personal. It’s always been God’s purpose to establish his own special people. For most people under the old covenant, God was their God simply because they lived in the land of Israel. But for people under the new covenant, God is their God personally. Each believer has the law on their hearts. Each believer knows God. Each believer is set apart for him (Titus 2:14).

Knowing God [:34]

We're set apart for God but we don't just belong to him; we know him. Each of us personally knows and has a relationship with God. "No longer shall they teach one another ..." – this isn't to say that there's no need for teaching; rather, that the teaching is no longer pleading with God's people to know the Lord; but, growing in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Now, teaching is received and not resisted because God's people are alive. We have a desire to hear the word of the Lord. There's heart knowledge that transforms rather than head knowledge that simply instructs.

Furthermore, it's impossible to be a believer without knowing God. In theory, under the old covenant you could perform the outward rituals and live a reasonably moral life and think that all was well. The new covenant exposes and removes all reliance on outward pretence (Jeremiah 3:10). Christianity is a matter of the heart. It's a matter of being born again, made new, and coming to know the true and living God personally because of the blood Christ shed to redeem us.

Sins forgotten [:34]

And the foundation of knowing God is the removal of our sins. We can't know him while we're still a sinner because sin can't exist in his holy presence. This is the heart of the glorious assurance that we have. Sins forgiven and sins forgotten. Let's hear it again from [Psalm 103:8-13]:

- 8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
- 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
- 13 As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

Our sins aren't forgotten because the Lord has amnesia, but because he chooses to remove them from his consideration. Our sins aren't held against us because they're removed by Jesus.

By grace through faith in the One (who cut the covenant) and gave up his life for us, as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Praise the Lord for the glory of the new covenant, for salvation by: grace alone (*sola gratia*), faith alone (*sola fide*), Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), and Christ alone (*solus Christus*), for the fact that he has rescued us, and he himself has fulfilled the covenant for us and is our righteousness.

Praise God for:

- the assurance of sins forgiven.
- the joy of knowing him.
- the comfort of belonging to him.
- the power of a transformed life to live for his glory.
- the daily reformation of our lives. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.