

Winning Hearts and Minds: God's New Covenant with Jeremiah!

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Scripture

Jeremiah 31:3 & 4: The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with lovingkindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful."

Jeremiah 31:31-36

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar-- the LORD Almighty is his name: ...

Sermon

The prophet Jeremiah was born in a small town
outside Jerusalem most likely in 626 BCE.
His birth, then, would have been between, oh 600 or 700 years
after Moses' visit with God on his holy mountain, Sinai.
Jeremiah was prophetically active from 609 till his death in 586,
which coincided with the final years of Israeli independence
and the last of the monarchies of the Kingdom of Judah.
And a whole lot happened in that 700 years.

Following the Exodus from Egypt, the nation of Israel
began as a loose confederation of 12 tribes all named
after 12 sons of Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

During that period God spoke to his people
through individuals called Judges.

No doubt you have probably heard of few,
like Samuel, Eleazar and Deborah.

The Judges were called by God to serve a variety of roles such as,

priestly, prophetic, law enforcement and adjudication
and even military leadership when needed.
But that structure of shared and decentralized power
soon gave way to a monarchy.
And what I find so interesting about this shift
was that the biblical account was not at all flattering.
In summary, “the people” of Israel were said to have clamored for
and demanded that God give them a King.
According to the biblical account it was specifically so
that they could be more like other nations.
I guess they wanted to be hip and modern like everyone else?
God, on the other hand, was heartbroken
since he thought that he had been a pretty good “King”
for his chosen people ever since that starry, starry night in Ur.

Now Saul, the first King, interestingly enough
proved to be a horrible mistake and so David
was then selected by God to replace him.
It was then during his son Solomon’s reign
that the Kingdom of Israel reached its zenith!
But those glory days would not last long as Kingdom split in two
with the northern half calling itself Israel
and the southern portion taking the name Judah.
Then in 722 BCE the Assyrian Empire invaded the northern Kingdom,
carting off most of Israel’s population to serve the empire as slaves.
Judah however was spared, and managed to retain
various levels of autonomy over the next century and a half.
Judah’s existence was a delicate dance of ever changing alliances
between the Empire of Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south and
the new kid on the Fertile Crescent block, Babylon in the east.

Then in either 641 or 640, King Josiah ascended to the throne of Judah
at a time when Assyrian power had taken a nose dive after they
and their ally Egypt were defeated by the Babylonians.
Into this vacuum, King Josiah enjoyed a great deal of autonomy
and was able to implement a number of socio-political reforms.
These reforms not only increased the power
and prestige of the royal house of David,
but his religious reforms re-instituted the laws of Moses
and purified the land of foreign idols that had been championed
by Josiah’s predecessor, Mannaseh.
The temple in Jerusalem was restored
as the the ritual center for the worship of Yahweh.
And while some of the ethical and socioeconomic consequences
of Moses’ laws were also being addressed,
many scholars agree that the reforms of Josiah were mostly focused
upon centralizing political and religious power in the royal house

and at the Temple both located in Jerusalem.
Religious reform then, focused on the revival of rituals and sacrifices
conducted by the priestly class in the Temple complex
as well as the reinvigoration of purity codes all of which
would have been a much higher burden for the poor.

That heady time of nationalistic and religious revival
was suddenly cut short when Josiah was killed in Battle in 609.
Josiah's successors failed to continue his reforms
and several engaged in revolts against Babylon
which resulted in two waves of exiles being sent to Babylon
and the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem.
But this was not the end of the Jewish people,
because many of those exiles did manage to return
when Cyrus, the King of Persia, invaded Babylon sending the exiles home
to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

But let's get back to Jeremiah the prophet and his message...
It was during the year of King Josiah's death
that Jeremiah's prophetic career began
and it spanned the final years of Judah's existence.

"The burden of Jeremiah's message was that Judah's internal order was so corrupt that it
would be swept way by Babylon, unless the leadership repented and practiced the social justice that
had been so long violated. In his view, the covenant traditions and the cult of Jerusalem
provided no basis for security in the absence of social justice... In hinging so much of his reading of
events on a summons to repentance or 'turning,' Jeremiah called for a fundamental realignment of
the nation in keeping with its covenantal laws based on true change of values and allegiances."
(*Gottwald, Norman. "The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction" p. 396)

This would suggest, that Jeremiah was committed
to an aggressive implementation of those social reforms
also found in the laws credited to Moses.
Jeremiah's public efforts, however, were met with hostility
and rejection especially by those with political and religious power.
This reaction became especially harsh when he began to publicly call
for Jerusalem's surrender during Babylon's final siege.
But in so doing, Jeremiah exposed his fundamental belief
which would have been a very radical notion for his day.
His radical vision was that God's people could
and would survive even without a king to rule them
or a temple based religion to worship God.

True political power he advocated, did not ultimately arise
from the centralized authority of an elite few
or from military advantage but in and through a community,
a community where there is equality and justice for everyone.
And God's people are not ultimately saved,

by engaging in shrewd alliances with other nations,
but by seeking allegiance to their God and by follow his laws.
True worship of God is not mediated through priests in Jerusalem,
or in the purchase of expensive sacrificial rituals,
or in following purity codes that marginalize the poor.
True worship of God is about filling our minds with God's law
and to living it out with our entire being and passion.

Jeremiah's ultimate commitment to this hope
was exhibited through his choice to stay behind
in Judah and to work for its implementation.
But his efforts at that radical experiment would be short lived
as a combination of political intrigue, assassinations,
ill conceived alliances and rebellions, once and for all
brought the full wait of Babylon crashing down on Judah.
And in the end God's people did have to find a new way
to carve out a religious existence outside of a magnificent Temple
and beyond the walls of Jerusalem that were both
leveled to the ground by those ruthless invaders.
A fate that perhaps could have been avoided had
the nation had only stopped and listen to Jeremiah.

The words we read earlier are from a letter written by Jeremiah
sometime between the first wave of exiles of 597
and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586.
It was meant as a message of hope;

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,"

Jeremiah's new covenant foresaw a fresh relationship
between Israel/Judah and Yahweh.
He saw it as a relationship that would be internally grounded
and motivated rather than based upon external rules and ritual.
But it did not mean an abandonment of Mosaic law
or the long held tradition of God's previous covenants.
Make no mistake about it, Jeremiah does cross
one heck of a threshold into a new understanding
of what it means to belong to God's people.
And he beckons all to follow.
Sadly too few, in his day chose to follow his path.
But his legacy was preserved through centuries of prophetic tradition.
A tradition that eventually compelled
and nurtured a young carpenter from Nazareth.

Jeremiah's willingness to cross over that threshold,
became a precursor for so much of what we as Christians
understand to be at the center of our faith.
The reason this passage is probably so familiar to us
is that it is quoted at least four times in the NT.
In both Luke 22:20, and 1 Corinthians 11:25, these words became
Jesus' preamble as he introduced the cup of forgiveness
during his last supper with his disciples.
And then later in the letter to the Hebrews (chapters 8 and 10)
it became part of the argument proving that it really was Jesus
who most fully encapsulated the words and vision of Jeremiah.
But alas, I am jumping ahead another 600 years or so of Jewish history
and to what I want say in a couple of weeks
when I finally bring my series on God's covenant to an end.
But Jeremiah has let out, the proverbial Genie from the bottle
and it will simmer in the in the collective consciousness
of God's people, animating and inspiring them,
as they seek to remain faithful and hopeful through difficult times.

Last week I said, regarding Moses Covenant,
that having God's expectations laid out clearly
in writing can certainly be handy at times.
Having something in writing is consistent
Putting it in stone, also means its solid and long lasting.
But we also know that there is a downside to this,
such as less flexibility and adaptability as the world changes.
Laws and rules we also know just don't seem to work all that well.
They lack something?
Maybe they fail to capture the imagination?
Or they fail at inspiring the motivation to keep us on track?
But if our minds are saturated with the knowledge of God
and when the core of our being, our feelings and our passions
are captivated and bought in 100% then following close after God,
in my perspective does seem a bit more likely.

And the ability and willingness to fill one's mind
and to allow one's heart to be captivated are likely the two
most egalitarian of religious practices I can think of.
The winning of hearts and minds transcend not only family,
race, nation, gender and age but even perceived disabilities
such as illiteracy, blindness, deafness and speech impediments.
Once again as God's covenant is made new again
those who are included as a part of God's people expands.
I think it is becuz of what we read earlier;
The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying:
"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."

Which leads me to a potentially exhilaratingly troubling question,
“Is the love of God similar to the universe that God has made,
both ever new and ever expanding?”