

New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:33–34, “For 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. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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.”

Question: What advantages do Christians under the New Covenant?

Key Verses: 1 Cor 6:19-20; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:13; 9:14-15

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet and for good reasons. First, he constantly suffered for saying what God told him to say. He was beaten, mocked, arrested, and threatened. In one of the most memorable events of this book, Jeremiah is dropped into an empty cistern by his arm pits as punishment for preaching. Apparently the king didn’t appreciate his prophetic predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, the original copy of Jeremiah’s prophecy was destroyed by king Jehoiakim: “It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire in the fire pot, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the fire pot” (Jeremiah 36:22–23). His majesty preferred a happy fiction to a grisly reality. Perhaps Jeremiah made it worse by being verbose. He went on and on in what became the longest book of the Bible.

Another reason Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet is because of how deeply he grieved over the fate of his homeland. For decades he predicted the demise of his capital city. With his own eyes he saw Jerusalem fall to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. It was unparalleled destruction that left her citizens decimated and the temple in ruins. Many Bible scholars have noted the strong similarities between Jeremiah and Jesus (who also wept over the city of Jerusalem, Matt 23:37-39). Even during Jesus’ day, the disciples heard others compared him to Jeremiah (Matt 16:14). This was natural since Jesus himself cited Jeremiah’s words standing on the very spot where they were first uttered (Matt 21:13; Jer 7:11) as he threatened another destruction of God’s Holy Temple.

The Need for a New Covenant

Through all of Jeremiah’s tears and above all his prophecies, there is a ray of light that pierces the shadows. It is the high point of his career and his most famous prophecy predicting a new and better covenant for God’s people (31:31-34). If we take a running start of this prophecy, we track through some amazing lyrics. The chapter opens with a moving poem of God’s extraordinary love for his people: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (v. 3).

“Again I will build you” (v. 4). “Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock’” (v. 10). “I will turn their mourning into joy,” (v. 13). These are extraordinarily comforting promises coming from a weeping prophet.

The crescendo rises in verses 33-34 with one of the great jewels of Scripture: “For 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. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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.”

With these words Jeremiah gives expression to one of the deepest longings of Israel. They loved God and his law but it was not working for them as a nation. Why? Because they kept sinning, kept sacrificing, and kept getting punished by God for their rebellion. They needed a better law, and deeper relationship, a stronger tie to God. Many in ancient Israel felt the sting of the law and therefore longed for something new. The hope of a new covenant was isolated to Jeremiah 31. It is echoed in Ezekiel 36:26-27, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Or again we read it in Joel 2:28-32, “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.... And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” Similar sentiments were found in various Jewish scrolls written between the Old and New Testaments (Jubilees 1:21-25; also 1 Maccabees 4:46; 14:41; Testament of Judah 24:2-3; Testament of Levi 18:11). The bottom line is that the Jews felt the failure of the Old Covenant of Moses. Just so we’re clear, the problem was not with the law but with us. We couldn’t keep it. So the promised punishment fell on the nation during Jeremiah’s day. The sacrifices multiplied but moral failures surpassed them. The Law of Moses was perfectly fitted to do what it needed to do and that is to point out our need for a savior.

The Difference of the New Covenant

Hence, Jeremiah gave us a promise of a new covenant. This new covenant would differ from the old in three crucial elements. First, *everyone would know God personally without a mediator*. There would no longer be a need for a priest, prophet, or arbitrator between men and God. All would have equal access to God—men/women, old/young, rich/poor, all nations, ethnicities, and political affiliations. We are all supposed to be able to approach God with confidence according to Hebrews 4:16, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Though that was

never the reality under the Old Covenant, it was always God's intent. He said so himself, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God" (Exod 29:45) and "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Leviticus 26:12).

How can this be? Doesn't our sin separate us from a Holy God? It does, indeed. Thus the second difference between the Old and New Covenant: *our sins are forgiven through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus*. Hebrews 10:19-22 expresses it powerfully, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." This is truly an extraordinary promise. Think back to the Old Covenant where only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the temple and then only one day a year. Remember how Moses had to remove his sandals on the Holy Ground of God's presence. Without our sins forgiven, the presence of God is a terrifying place. His power, holiness, and divinity separate him from our fallen state. Given this fact, it is significant that the term "New Covenant" is first used by Jesus in the New Testament. This term defined and introduced the Lord's Supper at a Passover meal (Luke 22:20). The Apostle Paul would later borrow those very words in his own instructions on Communion to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 11:25). In short, the New Covenant is embodied in the blood and bread of the Eucharist.

Element #1 of the New Covenant is a personal relationship with the Father. This is made possible by element #2, the forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of God's Son. Element #3 is the internalization of God's Law through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. While the sacrifice of the Son clears our past, the indwelling of the Spirit assures our future. Joel 2:28-32, cited above, is a parallel promise to Jeremiah 31:33-34. The prophet promised that anyone of any nation at any time could be forgiven of anything by calling on the name of the Lord and receiving the Holy Spirit. Peter quoted Joel on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21) in his first Gospel message as the Holy Spirit made good on the promise. The Spirit descended on the Apostles and empowered them to speaking in foreign languages. It was a striking miracle that captured the attention of the crowds. Even more impressive than the miracle, however, was the promise that those three-thousand baptized at Pentecost received the permanent indwelling presence of the Spirit.

Right now, those who accept Jesus Christ by faith not only have their past sins forgiven, they receive the indwelling gift of the Spirit to guide them in following God. Do we always obey the guidance of the Spirit? No. But he is always there, prompting, instructing, cajoling, and correcting. Can we still be forgiven of sins after our Baptism? Of course. The blood of Jesus flows both ways across our past and toward our future. This future is not just marked by the blood but by God's Spirit. Because of our internal connection, the Spirit inside of us will guide us to lead different lives in the future. In the Old Covenant, the law of Moses was like an electrical fence. It jolted everyone who crossed the barrier. It was designed to protect through punishment. Under the New Covenant the Spirit inside of us is very different. He is more like a compass than an electric fence. He doesn't limit our movement but frees us by pointing us in

the right direction. By the Spirit we have a magnetic pull to righteousness. Through the Spirit we have a change of heart. In the Spirit we have hope, power, and peace. We don't live in fear of punishment behind a fence. Rather, we live in the freedom of the Spirit to engage our world.

This new way of living is described powerfully in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Or put succinctly in 2 Corinthians 3:6, “The Letter kills but the Spirit gives life.” By the Spirit in us, there is no need for a law around us. Our behavior is internally motivated rather than externally constrained.

P.S. The entire book of Hebrews is an exposition on the superiority of the New Covenant. It can be confusing because it is written from a Jewish perspective to Jewish converts. Nonetheless, the topic was so substantial (and shocking) that it deserved an entire book of the New Testament to answer our question: What advantages do Christians under the New Covenant?

Key Points:

- Jeremiah promised a new covenant during the days of Jerusalem's destruction.
- The hope of a new covenant was common in ancient Israel because of their perpetual sin and punishment.
- There are three things promised in the New Covenant: Personal relationship with the Father, forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of the Son, and the law of God in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Action Step: Read the book of Hebrews making a list of advantages the New Covenants offers Christians.