

Surveying the Text XL: Jeremiah

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INTRODUCTION:

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah is a vast mountain range, rich in ore. But while Isaiah has mines all through it, the number of times that the New Testament quotes Jeremiah is fairly limited. But using the analogy of precious metals, Jeremiah is where the largest gold nugget ever found is located (Jer. 31:31-34).

THE TEXT:

“For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin” (Heb. 10:14–18).

BACKGROUND ON JEREMIAH:

The ministry of Jeremiah extended from about 627 to 585 B.C. He served under the last five kings of Judah—the nation of Israel to the north had fallen to the Assyrians about a century before. The five kings who reigned during his ministry were Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He also ministered at the end of his life to the band of refugees who wound up in Egypt. Jeremiah was a citizen of Judah, and the culmination of his ministry was when he prophesied during the time of the revolt against Babylon. He was a true patriot branded as a traitor because he insisted the Jews surrender to Babylon. They needed to accept the chastisement for their sins, and to not make everything worse.

For Jeremiah the central domestic enemy of the Jews was their idolatry. His denunciations of their idolatrous practices give us the word *jeremiad*. Closely related to this, we see that Jeremiah held to an unflinching and uncompromising antagonism to the professional religious class, the kept prophets and priests. The Jews were still zealously religious, just idolatrously so. This accounts for Jeremiah’s insistence that the moral law greatly outranks the ceremonial law. Reformation of the externals without reformation of heart is worse than useless.

“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?” (Jer. 5:30–31, ESV).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Jeremiah prophesies that a new covenant will be made with the house of Israel and the

house of Judah. The basic message of Jeremiah is sobering in the short term, and vastly encouraging in the long term. Judah's fecklessness to the terms of the covenant will result in judgment. Jehovah will visit them with all the curses of Deuteronomy, and Jeremiah also draws on the rebukes delivered by Hosea. At the same time, a bright future awaits God's people. He will make a new covenant with them, will forgive their sins, and will write His law on their hearts and minds.

Jeremiah was resolute but affectionate, uncompromising but tender, inflexible but loving. He is often called the weeping prophet, but one of the brightest visions of the future are brought to us by him. Weeping is for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JEREMIAH:

The Lord Jesus pointed to the words of Jeremiah when He established the sacrament of the Lord's Table. "And he said unto them, This is *my blood* of the new testament, which is shed for many" (Mk. 14:24; cf. Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20). The epistle to the Hebrews quotes from the extended Jer. 31 passage twice. The first time is found in Heb. 8:8-12, and the whole passage is quoted. Two chapters later, he cites it again (Heb. 10:14-18), but this time he selectively quotes from the passage, indicating what he believes the two great features of the new covenant to be. His second quotation provides us with his emphasis.

We know that the "Israel" involved is the Christian church. The covenant that was made with old Israel has now been expanded and is made with anyone who is in Christ. But what are the terms of the covenant? There are two—the first is the internalization of the law, and the second is forgiveness of sin and lawlessness. That is it in a nutshell. What is the result of the new covenant? When the new covenant comes, God will write His laws on our hearts, and He will forgive our sins.

CAN THE NEW COVENANT BE BROKEN:

One of the dangers for us here is to equate the new covenant with election, and to say that everyone who is in the covenant is therefore decretally elect. Jeremiah says that the new covenant will be dramatically different from the old covenant, but we have to take care. In what do the differences consist?

With whom is the new covenant made? With the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This means that *in some way*, the same categories found in the old covenant carry over. We also know that some do not carry over—because that is the whole point of even having a new covenant.

Now Scripture teaches explicitly that the new covenant can be broken. Let us limit ourselves just to the book of Hebrews (Heb. 2:1-3; 3:7-4:2; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted *the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified*, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of

grace?” (Heb. 10:29).

We must not draw *contrasts* between the covenants at the very point where the New Testament repeatedly draws *parallels*. Consider the warnings of 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and Romans 11:17-24. You do not support the root—the root supports you. The Jews were cut out by unbelief and you stand by faith. Covenant membership is not identical with covenant keeping. Covenant membership is not identical with decretal election.

The new covenant, like all God’s covenants, has an external aspect. Covenant keeping, a matter of faith alone, begins with the internal. The new covenant in its external aspect can be broken. But a true son or daughter of that covenant cannot ever break it. Why? Because his sins are forgiven and the law of God is engraven on his regenerate heart. What makes the new covenant new? It is not a calendar thing — this is *qualitative* newness.

THEY WILL ALL KNOW ME:

We have seen what the fulfilled promise looks like—those for whom this promise is fulfilled are those who have the law of God inscribed on their hearts, and who have had their sins forgiven. What then does Jeremiah mean by “from the greatest to the least”? Doesn’t this mean that every last member of the new covenant, head for head, has to know the Lord? No.

Jeremiah uses the phrase seven times, and every time he is referring to ranks or classes of persons (Jer. 6:13; 8:10; 16:6; 31:34; 42:1, 8;; 44:12). He is talking about rich and poor, kings and peons, celebrities and regular folks. The same usage is found in the New Testament, where the words *mikros* and *meGas* are used. The phrase is used in the New Testament in the same way (e.g. Acts 26:22).

Therefore, the meaning is that no class of person is excluded. The covenant is open to all. In Christ, the nations may come. Your daughters will prophesy and your old men will dream great things. The babies of princes and peasants will both be baptized. Those who agree with this are welcome and those who disagree . . . are also welcome. God’s bulldozers can take care of *any* of our walls.



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