

The bread and wine

Part 5 – The opening up of the New Covenant

Going back to **Luke 22:20**, Jesus “took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’” But the people he said that to were Jews, so how would it have come across to them?

Well imagine being a Jew growing up with **Leviticus 17:13-14** which explicitly stated, “**You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh**, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.” But here was Jesus holding out a cup and saying it represented his blood, and then he says - according to Matthew’s version of this incident - “Drink from it, all of you.” So now they had to drink from a cup that represented **partaking of the blood of Jesus’ flesh**, which surely was asking them to break a clear commandment in Scripture. It must have been a very awkward moment for them.

But that wasn’t the only surprise Jesus landed on them in Luke 22:20, because the cup he was telling them to drink from not only represented his blood it also represented the “new covenant.” And that would have flashed another Old Testament verse through their Jewish minds, the one back in **Jeremiah 31:31** that said, “The day is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a **new covenant** with the people of Israel and Judah.” For 600 years that verse had sat quietly in their scriptures waiting to be fulfilled on their behalf, but here was Jesus saying the day of its coming had arrived. And the reason God was making this new covenant with the Jews at that time was the pouring out of Jesus’ blood for them.

The mention of blood and covenant together like that would, of course, take their Jewish minds back to the original covenant God made with Israel in Exodus chapters 19 to 23, because that covenant was sealed with blood too. In **Exodus 24:7-8** Moses “took the **Book of the Covenant** and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood (of young bulls), sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is **the blood of the covenant** that the Lord has made with you.’” The sprinkled blood sealed the promise God had made in **Exodus 19:5-6** that “if you Israelites obey me fully and **keep my covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (and) you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The rest of the Old Testament then tells the story of what happened.

But why do we as Christians need to know that story when Jesus replaced all that old covenant stuff with a “new” covenant? Doesn’t the new covenant mean we can forget all about Israel and the Old Testament? No, it doesn’t, because when Jesus took that cup of wine and told his disciples it represented his blood sealing the new covenant, he was deliberately taking their minds (and ours) back to the new covenant in Jeremiah, and the story behind it.

And his disciples would have known that story too, because it was all about the worst time in the history of their Jewish nation. It was the “tenth year of Zedekiah, king of Judah,” according to **Jeremiah 32:1**, when Jerusalem had been under siege for a year already by the Babylonians led by king Nebuchadnezzar. In less than a year’s time Nebuchadnezzar would blast through the city wall, kill Zedekiah’s sons before his very eyes, cart the Jews off to Babylon, and burn Jerusalem and its Temple to the ground. And with Zedekiah gone, the Jewish monarchy (which had lasted 350 years) came to a sad end.

Conditions inside Jerusalem, meanwhile, were desperate. With no supplies able to enter the city, there wasn’t even a loaf of bread to be found. But this was the end result of the inhabitants of Jerusalem “doing nothing but evil in God’s sight” (30). They’d totally turned their backs on God (33) and filled the Temple bearing God’s name with their own idols instead (34).

Jeremiah, meanwhile, had been “confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah” (Jeremiah 32:2), charged with treason for saying the Jews, including the king, should give themselves up to the Babylonians, because God was handing the city over to Nebuchadnezzar (4-5).

But if Zedekiah had been willing to listen, he would also have heard Jeremiah say in **Jeremiah 30:2** that “The days are coming when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess.” Jeremiah was passing on a message of hope too, that everything the Jews lost would be restored to them.

But that surely raises the question as to why God would even want to restore the Jews in the first place when he’d also said in **Jeremiah 30:12-13** that “your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing,” and there’s “no remedy for your sore or any healing for you.” Again and again the Jewish nation had broken God’s covenant with them, so how could God make such promises when there was no hope of the Jews’ hostile attitude toward him changing?

But Jeremiah answers that in **Jeremiah 31:31-32**, when God tells him the time is coming “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It won’t be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them out of Egypt, because they broke that covenant, though I loved them like a husband loves his wife.”

So God has a solution to Israel’s helplessness at keeping the old covenant: it’s the creation of a new covenant. But that doesn’t seem right at all, though. It’s like a renter who hasn’t paid his rent for months, but the landlord’s solution is to rip up the old rental agreement, ignore what’s owed, and start all over again with a new rental agreement. It means the renter gets away with not paying any back rent at all. So is that how God operates too?

No, it isn’t, because in **Jeremiah 30:14-15** God tells the Jews “I have struck you as an enemy would and punished you as would the cruel. It’s because of your great guilt and many sins **I have done this to you.**” So God isn’t letting them get away with anything. He makes sure they suffer the consequences of their actions, because he’s a just God and justice demands punishment (verse 12).

God wasn’t sweeping their rebellious past under the carpet as if it never happened. He’d purposely made the Jews suffer for breaking his covenant with them, and not just for their blatant rebellion against him either. It was also because they’d been unfaithful to him. He said he loved those Jews like a husband loves his wife (Jeremiah 31:32), so it hurt him deeply when again and again the Jews chased after other gods instead.

So why would God even bother making a new covenant with these unfaithful rebels - **and** take the risk that they wouldn’t keep that covenant either?

Well, it’s here in Jeremiah that we learn something else about God that helps explain why he made a new covenant with people who wanted nothing to do with him and chose other gods instead. It’s because he never hated the Jews for what they’d done. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” he said in **Jeremiah 31:3**, so despite everything they’d done to him he could never give up on them, which is a great message of hope and encouragement for people who think God must hate them forever for the awful things they’ve said and done. But nothing could be worse than what the Jews did to God, and he never stopped loving them, did he?

But it still leaves us with the question as to how God is going to “restore the Jews to health and heal your wounds” (30:17) when they’re not the least bit interested in God doing anything for them. Here they were, in the middle of the worst situation they’d even been in, but they’d rather hold out against the Babylonians and starve to death than cry out to God for help. And how insane is that?

But again it helps explain why Jesus took a cup of wine and told his disciples to drink from it as a reminder of this very incident. By Jesus mentioning the new covenant it would immediately take the disciples back to Jeremiah 31:31 - because it’s the only verse in the entire Old Testament where the new covenant is mentioned by name. So this is the story that would have popped into their minds, but why was a new covenant needed in the first place?

Well, it’s made clear why in this terrible dilemma the Jews are up against in Jeremiah, of facing sure death and the horrible agony of starvation, but not wanting God involved in helping them one tiny bit. Their hearts have become so hardened against God that the thought of asking him for help doesn’t even enter their minds. And for years it had been this way.

But for years it’s been that way for billions of people in our world too, who are stuck in the same groove as those Jews. Like the Jews under siege in Jerusalem, they’re under siege too from all kinds of stresses and fears that they can’t cope with either, but the last thought on their minds is God. It’s a sad fact of life for us humans that it comes so naturally to us to turn to anything **but** God when our lives are falling apart.

So why don’t we humans naturally turn to God for his help and wisdom? Well, if we’d all taken note of what Jesus said about the new covenant - and gone back to the story behind it in Jeremiah - we’d know why.

It’s the same reason the Jews couldn’t turn to God when facing their impossible situation with the Babylonians, and the same reason they couldn’t keep the covenant God made with them in Exodus 19 either. According to **Jeremiah 31:32** it’s because they’d never been able to grasp that God “was a husband to them.” It’s the one great missing ingredient in our human make-up. We can’t see that God loves us like a husband loves his wife. We just don’t get it, which explains why Adam and Eve fell for a serpent that told just one obviously ridiculous lie about God and they so easily and stupidly believed it.

All thoughts about the God who had loved them enough to provide them with life, the love of each other, a wonderful world oozing with possibilities just waiting to be discovered, and a close, free, open and intimate working relationship with him at all times - all of those things went out the window just like that. And how many times does that happen to people today too, when along comes a so-called scientist or a pompous atheist blathering blatant nonsense about God, and people love the excuse to believe it?

And how quickly God gets the blame for letting bad things happen too. A disaster happens and it's automatically called an "Act of God." And we're so quick with questions like, "Well, if God's so loving why does he let innocent people suffer?" - as if we're the innocent ones and he isn't. It all makes clear, though, that naturally we don't hold God in high regard at all.

But that's the story behind the new covenant. It's about the awful mess people got themselves into for not being able to see that God is as smitten with us as a husband is with his wife. He's just as committed too, feeling utterly responsible for our welfare and our future. In his hands, therefore, we should be feeling totally secure. But it doesn't come naturally to us to feel that way, does it? It's what we so desperately need to enable us to love and trust him, but as we learn from those Jews in Jeremiah, God can love us to pieces but we don't get it, so we end up just as stubborn, stupid and helpless as they were. The story of Israel and the Jews, therefore, is really just the story of all of us, which explains why God took up so much space in the Old Testament writing it.

But this is what Jesus had his disciples drink from the cup for, to take them back to Jeremiah 30 to 32, because this was the time in Israel's history that best illustrates what happens when we humans can't see the love God has for us. And now the Jews are in a situation where God is punishing them so severely for their rebellion against him that they probably feel justified in believing he doesn't love them.

And the same thing happens today, when people feel justified in rejecting God because he lets bad things happen. But we're only reaping what we ourselves have sown. It's because of centuries of rejecting God's teaching and correction, that we, just like the Jews, are in such a mess. And God lets it happen, but where he's been going with all this is to show us why we need the new covenant. It's because it provides us at last with the missing ingredient - and the perfect antidote to the natural hardening of the human heart against God.

It is the only solution too for those who feel so hurt at God (and by him) that it's become an incurable wound that won't heal. They can never forgive God for what he's done. And there's nothing anyone can say or do to change their attitude to God either, just as there was nothing anyone could say or do to change the attitude of the Jews to God in Jeremiah's day.

But it's at this very moment in Scripture that God offers the solution. One day, he says, "I will make a new covenant," in which "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." God never said that in the old covenant in Exodus 19, because we need to learn, first of all, through Israel, that it's not naturally in the human heart to obey and trust him. There is something terribly missing in us that blinds us to God's love for us, so that we're not naturally motivated to love him in return. It means we never get to experience a loving relationship with the God who so loves us.

But along comes Jesus who **does** grasp how much the Father loves him, and because of it he acts out of pure love for his Father in everything he says and does. And HOW does he grasp the love his Father has for him? He gets it from the Holy Spirit, who descends on him like a dove at his baptism and the very first words Jesus hears as he sets out on his ministry are, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Those words were inscribed on Jesus' heart and mind so that no matter what happened to him from that point on he knew his Father loved him - and that was the reason he was able to love the Father in return, and the reason he obeyed and trusted God at all times.

Jesus was the first human, therefore, to experience the wonder and brilliance of the new covenant, because he was the first to have God's law and the understanding of God's love written on his heart and mind in full by the Holy Spirit. He then became a living demonstration of what God had promised in Jeremiah as the solution to our natural resistance to him.

Jesus also became the blood that sealed it, so that all the promises in this NEW covenant would officially become Israel's. That being the case, Jesus' Jewish disciples could now go back and read the rest of what Jeremiah wrote, knowing it had been sealed in Jesus' blood too. Not only, then, did they have the absolute guarantee that God's law and the understanding of God's love would be inscribed on **their** hearts now by the Holy Spirit, they would also begin to experience what God meant in **Jeremiah 31:33** when he said "I will be their God, and they will be my people," which as Jews they'd **never** truly experienced yet.

What they could now look forward to was **Jeremiah 31:34**, that “No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

This was an amazing promise that one day there will be a family of people from all walks of life whose natural resistance to God has simply evaporated, because, as Jeremiah says, they “know” God. They see him at last for the God he really is, that he loves them like a husband loves his wife, and because of that love he never gave up on them. He willingly and totally forgave them for all their stubbornness and stupidity too, wiping the slate clean. And what that does is give them a love for God in return. Now they want him involved in their lives and in all their impossible situations. In other words, **they’ve got the missing ingredient** that those Jews in Jeremiah didn’t have.

No wonder Jesus “eagerly desired” to share the bread and wine with his disciples, because he knew that this part of the new covenant would kick in - just as soon as it was sealed by his blood. And how fortunate it is that he quickly **included us Gentiles** in that covenant so that we could be in that family of God’s people too, because there’s another promise tucked away in that new covenant in Jeremiah that has so much meaning for us in the church today.

It’s in that statement, “No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me.” Here is a promise of a group of people one day who all share the same understanding of God. They “all know him,” meaning they all share the same love for God, same goals, same motives and same passions, providing them literally with a family of friends and kindred spirits who can easily come to know and love each other despite their differences. They can happily relax in each other’s company, knowing **this was meant to happen** because of Jesus sealing this part of the new covenant in his blood too.

It’s in the church, therefore, that people see what God had in mind all along. It’s a love relationship with him and each other, but we had to learn first - through the grim story of Israel and the Jews - that we could not create it on our own. It comes only from God inscribing it on our hearts and minds through the Holy Spirit, and only from the blood of Christ opening up the new covenant in Jeremiah for us. And one day those poor Jews in Jeremiah will get to experience it too, because it was **to them** that all these wonderful promises in the new covenant were originally made.