

# Changes Promised

Devotional Reading: Psalm 103:17–22

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1–40; John 1:17; Hebrews 8:7–13

## Jeremiah 31:29–34

- <sup>29</sup> “In those days people will no longer say,  
‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’  
<sup>30</sup> Instead, everyone will die for their own sin;  
whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth  
will be set on edge.  
<sup>31</sup> “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the people of Israel  
and with the people of Judah.  
<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their ancestors  
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.

- <sup>33</sup> “This is the covenant I will make with the  
people 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.  
<sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbor,  
or say to one another, ‘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.”

## John 1:17

- <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses;  
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

## Key Text

*“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.” —Jeremiah 31:33b*

# Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

## Unit 2: Jeremiah and the Promise of Renewal

Lessons 5–9

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Locate the two places in the New Testament that quote Jeremiah 31:31–34.
2. Harmonize Jeremiah 31:29–30 with Exodus 20:5; 34:7.
3. Notice the Holy Spirit's work of bringing awareness of sin and giving desires to love God faithfully.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Better than Before
- B. Lesson Context

#### I. Change in Attitude (Jeremiah 31:29–30)

- A. Old Proverb (v. 29)
- B. New Reality (v. 30)  
*Shirking Responsibility*

#### II. Change in Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

- A. Why It's Needed (vv. 31–32)
- B. How It's Different (vv. 33–34)  
*Action from the Heart*

#### III. Change in Mediator (John 1:17)

- A. Law (v. 17a)
- B. Grace and Truth (v. 17b)

#### Conclusion

- A. Fresh Start
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Better than Before

Moving into a house with no built-in dishwasher, my father bought a used portable model, the kind that hooked up to the sink faucet with a hose. It was in good shape except for the top, a butcher block deeply scratched and stained. Dad decided to make it like new. It took him many months. Night after night, he would go out to our carport to sand it by hand. He must have sanded a half inch off the top of that butcher block to get past the deepest gouges.

When he was finally satisfied, he began to apply varnish. He would apply a coat, then sand it, and repeat. He must have applied 30 coats of varnish to that wood! When he was finished, it was clean and scratch-free, even better than new. That old butcher block was given a new life.

A vital theme of the Bible is the need and plan for a new covenant, a fresh beginning for God's people. The gouges of sin were deep, and a thorough refresh was in order. Jeremiah was privileged to prophesy the future reality of that new covenant; we are privileged to experience it.

### B. Lesson Context

The book of Jeremiah serves more as a collection of episodes rather than a linear chronology of his ministry. For example, the episode that begins in Jeremiah 32:1 occurs *after* the one that begins in chapter 36. Therefore we should not be surprised when tone and content change abruptly as the book moves from topic to topic. We see such an abrupt change as chapter 30 begins.

The way Jeremiah organized his material has led some to call Jeremiah 30–33 the “Book of Consolation” because its theme gives hope that the Babylonian captivity is not the final word. Today's text takes us into the vital heart of this Book. As we consider our text, we keep in mind how it fits within the larger context: God promised to make the exiles his people once again (Jeremiah 30:22), to return them to their land (32:41), and to establish once and for all time the Davidic dynasty as originally promised (30:9; 33:15–26).

The overall theme of the Book of Consolation

is: “I will restore their fortunes” (Jeremiah 32:44; see also 30:3, 18; 33:7, 26). The covenant theme of “You will be my people, and I will be your God” is also repeated (30:22; see also 31:1; 32:38). The seemingly incurable wound (30:12, 15) could be healed only by the Lord (30:17). Chapter 31 depicts the coming restoration as a time of great blessing, when mourning would be turned into joy (31:13).

## I. Change in Attitude

(Jeremiah 31:29–30)

### A. Old Proverb (v. 29)

**29. “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’**

Many changes are to characterize the forthcoming restoration (see Lesson Context), including the rejection of how a certain proverbial expression is misused. Those who are already exiled in Babylon are using this proverb to shift the blame and exonerate themselves (see Ezekiel 18:2).

The intent of this proverb’s misuse is impossible to miss. Eating a *sour grape* is unpleasant; it causes the mouth to pucker. This puckering effect is transferred from the older generation, who have eaten unwisely, to the following generation, who are seen as innocent victims of their ancestors’ actions. Thus we have a metaphor for generational blame-shifting (compare Lamentations 5:7).

The proverbial expression is actually based in the Law of Moses, where God is seen to punish “the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (Exodus 20:5; compare 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Jeremiah 32:18). Today we readily observe the inter-

generational consequences of parents who are sent to jail for committing crimes. Children often do suffer as a result of the sins of their fathers (compare Jeremiah 32:18–19). But the fact that the sins of one generation have consequences for another is not the same as saying that God punishes an innocent group for the sins of a guilty group.

Even so, Israelite history does indeed record instances of children dying as a consequence of their parents’ sins (see Numbers 16:23–33; Joshua 7:24–25; 2 Samuel 11:1–12:19; 21:1–9). Although there are times when the all-knowing and sovereign God deems this to be fitting, it is rare and certainly not the norm. The problem in today’s text is that when exile comes, the people will apply the proverb to disavow any culpability for their situation. Indeed, that was already happening by those who were already in exile; Ezekiel 18:1–20 records the Lord’s lengthy refutation.

### What Do You Think?

What life consequences have you been tempted to blame on a past generation’s or a family member’s sin?

### Digging Deeper

Where might there be truth in this? Where might this be a faulty assumption?

### B. New Reality (v. 30)

**30. “Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.**

In Jeremiah’s prophetic scenario, the shifting of blame will cease. The old proverb is replaced by a new statement about reality. Each person will be liable and, as a sinner, will *die for his own iniquity*.

In some ways, this is a hopeful promise, for it dispels any idea that the nation is cursed and incapable of thriving in the future. Each generation determines how faithful or sinful it will be based on its own actions. We should be careful to point out that this is actually a “new again” reality because the Law of Moses has consistently prohibited imposing the death penalty on children for parental sin or vice versa per Deuteronomy 24:16.

## How to Say It

Babylon	<i>Bab-uh-lon.</i>
Deuteronomy	<i>Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.</i>
extispicy	<i>eks-ti-spi-see.</i>
Hosea	<i>Ho-zay-uh.</i>
Jeremiah	<i>Jair-uh-my-uh.</i>
Thessalonians	<i>Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz</i> <i>(th as in thin).</i>

We see that prohibition honored in 2 Kings 14:6 and its parallel in 2 Chronicles 25:4.

**What Do You Think?**

Under what circumstances do you struggle most to take responsibility for your own actions?

**Digging Deeper**

What image or metaphor would you use to describe how it feels to face the consequences of your sin?

**Shirking Responsibility**

I was a very curious child growing up. One summer when I was about 10 years old, I decided to explore the cabinet under the bathroom sink. My mom had previously given me strict instructions not to touch anything there, but I disobeyed. Exploring a packet of single-edged razor blades, I had barely opened the package before I sliced my finger. Blood gushed everywhere; I panicked. Should I tell my mom the truth, or should I lie?

While cleaning up, I planned out the story I would tell when my mother saw the two bandages on my fingers. I went into the garden, picked some roses, and put them in a vase on her dresser. When she got home, I excitedly told her that I had a surprise. I led her to the room and showed her the roses I had picked. When she saw my fingers, I said the rose thorns had cut me. She looked quite distressed about the cuts but at the same time was overjoyed at the thoughtful act I had done for her.

I never confessed this lie until I was an adult. That memory is still seared in my mind. I deliberately avoided taking responsibility for my disobedience by means of an elaborate narrative. Under what circumstances do you do the same? —S. S.

**II. Change in Covenant**

(Jeremiah 31:31–34)

**A. Why It’s Needed (vv. 31–32)**

**31. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.**

The verses that follow this new (or renewed) approach to generational culpability forms the basis for one of the most important texts in the Old Testament for anticipating the new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31–34 is quoted in its entirety in Hebrews 8:8–12 and is the longest single quotation of any Old Testament text by a New Testament author (see also Hebrews 10:16–17). It is a groundbreaking message.

The beneficiaries of the *new covenant* are to be those who broke the old one: *the people of Israel* and *the people of Judah* (Jeremiah 11:10). Correcting the blame-shifting will not be enough. The Lord is moving beyond attempts to guide people back to him via the old covenant.

But when is this to occur? When will *the days* come? Although Jeremiah speaks of *Israel* and *Judah*, additional context in subsequent verses and later fulfillment establish that this comes with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

**32. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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.**

Here the old *covenant* is portrayed in marriage language. *The Lord* is the *husband*, and the people, collectively, are the wife. This kind of metaphor is frequent in the prophets. Ezekiel symbolically pictures the Lord as finding Israel as an abandoned baby girl, raising her, and then entering a marriage covenant with her (Ezekiel 16:4–8). But this wife becomes a prostitute, a symbol of Israel’s worship of other gods, including sacrificing their own children to idols (16:15, 20–21, 36). The book of Hosea is built around the prophet’s marriage to a prostitute, whose unfaithfulness is likened to the idolatry of Israel (Hosea 1:2). Jeremiah himself pictures the Lord as married to two unfaithful sisters, Israel and Judah, who both commit spiritual adultery and must be divorced (Jeremiah 3:8).

Jeremiah pictures the very beginning of Israel as a nation like a marriage between the Lord and the people. At that time, the Lord *took them by the hand*. The Lord’s rescue of the Israelites from *Egypt* was like the husband leading his new wife from the

home of her father to his own home. Such imagery stirs our hearts, suggesting the care and closeness possible within the closest of human relationships.

However, the vows of this symbolic marriage between the Lord and Israel were soon and often violated. Israel *broke* the Lord's *covenant*, resulting in the language of adultery for their breaking of the covenant given through Moses (Exodus 19:5–8; 24:3–8). They violated this covenant before they even entered the promised land! This happened by making and worshiping a golden calf idol on the very day Moses was on the mountain receiving the terms of the covenant (32:1–8). Moses was even forewarned that after the people entered into the promised land, they would continue to break the covenant and worship false gods (Deuteronomy 31:20).

That warning proved sadly true as the Israelites proved themselves incapable of keeping the covenant. The all-too-numerous episodes that follow help us understand why the new covenant was not to be *like the covenant* the Lord *made with their ancestors*. A new method was necessary.



Visual for Lesson 8. *Display this visual and ask participants to discuss what it means to have God's law "written on their hearts."*

every Christian, that God does so, as indicated by Romans 8:5–11. Obedience will not depend merely on human ability. Rather, God's people will exhibit Spirit-empowered, loving obedience to his ways, which will flow from the inside out.

During Jeremiah's ministry, Israel's collective "heart" is described as uncircumcised (see Jeremiah 9:26; compare 4:4; 9:14; 11:8; 18:12). This imagery depicts self-exclusion from the covenant God made with his people. Reference to this covenant goes back even further than that of the Mosaic covenant, to the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15, 17). The only way for a covenant with the Lord to succeed was to begin with new hearts (Ezekiel 18:31; 36:26), hearts that are spiritually circumcised (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:29).

Older English versions of this verse use the phrase "inward parts" in place of "minds." The expression of God's law being written on "inward parts" may be a reference to the ancient Near Eastern practice known as *extispicy*. In this practice, diviners would seek revelation from a deity, asking that the truth be written on the entrails of an animal to be sacrificed. While admittedly an odd image to us today, consider how it would be taken by an audience familiar with such a practice. God's revelation—his truth, his law, his ways—would be written on his people's own inward parts.

Note the relationship made possible through this new covenant. The Lord says, *I will be their*

**What Do You Think?**

When has someone overlooked a past offense and showed you undeserved grace?

**Digging Deeper**

What did it feel like to receive that grace? What did it enable in that relationship?

**B. How It's Different (vv. 33–34)**

**33. "This is the covenant I will make with the people 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.**

Jeremiah reveals a new approach. The old covenant is written on stone (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 34:1), and the people of its era were to internalize its laws (Deuteronomy 6:4–9). The new covenant, by contrast, is written on *minds* and *hearts* by God himself (compare Hebrews 10:16). It is through the Holy Spirit, who indwells each and

God, and they will be my people. When initially establishing his covenant with Israel, the Lord told them they would be his special people, his “treasured possession,” if they “obey me fully and keep my covenant” (Exodus 19:5–6). But as we see countless times throughout the Old Testament—particularly in the prophets—the people could not maintain what it took to be God’s very own.

**What Do You Think?**

How does your life look different when you know something “by heart” instead of needing to look it up?

**Digging Deeper**

What are things you do know “by heart”? In what ways do they shape how you live?

**Action from the Heart**

My mother grew up Roman Catholic, but claims she came to true faith as an adult in a Protestant church setting. There she finally understood God’s grace. As a child, I took her story to heart and incidentally inherited a distaste for anything rote or ritualistic. Faith was supposed to be lively, from the heart.

Little did I know that I would one day belong to a church where liturgy is central. The liturgy I participate in week after week is not rote—quite the opposite. Our church family experiences what some might call “rules and rituals” as life-giving and grounding. They are this way for us because we engage them from our hearts. Our concern is not for performance, but for words and actions done in response to God. These are not in order to get something from him, but because of what he has already done in and for us.

Such words and actions flow naturally and lovingly from hearts enlivened by the Holy Spirit. How might actions in your life of faith be better directed by the Holy Spirit’s work in your heart?

—J. J. S.

**34. “No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘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 verse predicts a perfect state of affairs: no one is needed to teach about the Lord because everyone already has the knowledge. This seems puzzling since we understand that a teaching function does indeed exist under the new covenant (Matthew 28:19–20; Romans 12:7; etc.).

One interpretation proposes that this verse looks to the time after Jesus’ second coming when our presence with God in heaven yields our fullest knowledge of him. Another interpretation proposes that Jeremiah’s prediction contrasts the need for human mediators under the old covenant (priests of the tribe of Levi) with the direct access to God that people have under the new covenant (1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 4:16; 10:19–22; 1 John 2:27). Either way, the time of the new covenant will be an era when the people of God include more than the peoples of ancient Israel and Judah. Knowledge of God will spread to peoples of all nations and languages (Revelation 7:9).

The paradox and tragedy of Jeremiah’s time was that many Judeans did not know the Lord or follow his ways even though they were hereditary members of God’s chosen people (Jeremiah 2:17–19, etc.). What will it be like for people with new hearts, those under the new covenant? They will *know the Lord!* The express teaching of God’s Word by a select group of priests will no longer be necessary because *they will all know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest.* While this statement of inclusion initially appears to refer to social class, it also points forward to the eventual inclusion of Gentiles in the new covenant (see Ephesians 3:6).

The people will not only have God’s Spirit in their hearts to guide and instruct them; they will also be a forgiven people. The Lord promises to *forgive their wickedness* and will *remember their sins no more.* This is the fresh start that the new covenant promises, beginning anew with a clean slate not encumbered by the sins and failures of the past. This brings back to mind the change indicated in Jeremiah 31:29–30, above. Not only will everyone be responsible for their own actions, but once forgiven, those sins are remembered no

more—no more to condemn us or those who come after us.

**What Do You Think?**

What does it feel like to consider the fact that the sins you can't forget, God doesn't remember?

**Digging Deeper**

How does knowing that you are forgiven affect how you view yourself and interact with others?

**III. Change in Mediator**

(John 1:17)

**A. Law (v. 17a)**

**17a. For the law was given through Moses;**

To understand the contrast introduced here in John 1:17a, we should consider what immediately precedes it. There, the author declares, “of [the Son’s] fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given” (John 1:16). The translation “in place of grace already given” could be understood to signify something like “grace on top of grace already received.” Or it may carry the idea of the replacement of one kind of grace with another kind. Both ideas carry the significance of “unmerited favor” and set the stage for understanding verse 17.

*Moses* experienced God’s gracious favor (see Exodus 33:12–17). And the law that came through him was by the initiative of the gracious God. Yet the primary characteristic of the Law of Moses is its “commands,” “decrees,” and “ordinances.” There was nothing inherently wrong with these—quite the opposite! But the passage of time proved humans to be incapable of keeping these 100 percent of the time. So the initial grace of the old covenant received through Moses as mediator needed to be replaced by the grace of a new and superior covenant, the one about which Jeremiah 31:31–34 speaks.

**B. Grace and Truth (v. 17b)**

**17b. grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**

This superior covenant is mediated by a far

superior mediator: *Jesus Christ*, the Word become flesh (John 1:14). Compared to the Law of Moses, his “yoke is easy” and his “burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).

Like our analysis of the word *grace*, to attribute the coming of *truth* to Jesus is not to deny that Moses received truth! The truth Jesus brings is the truth regarding the new covenant.

**Conclusion**

**A. Fresh Start**

Many Christians who read their Bibles faithfully struggle with understanding what to do with the commands and regulations they find in the Old Testament. Because we believe in the inspiration and value of the entire Bible, we must take these passages seriously. The prophecy in Jeremiah 31 helps us put other portions of the Old Testament into perspective. The Law of Moses revealed God’s will for the people of Israel and in so doing revealed many things about his nature and character. Jeremiah’s perspective shows that this initial covenant did not work for Israel. This was not because God failed, but because of the people’s disobedience. Eventually, Israel was punished by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple followed by exile.

The new covenant Jeremiah speaks of is a fresh start for humanity. This new covenant defines its adherents not in terms of obedience to law, but as those who have experienced the grace of being forgiven through Jesus’ atonement for our sins.

As new covenant people, we have much we can learn from the old covenant, but we rejoice in the reality of the new covenant. What the prophets searched for diligently, we now experience (1 Peter 1:10–11).

**B. Prayer**

Lord, we marvel at the new covenant mediated by your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We thrive because of your grace and rejoice over your truth. We thank you for giving us your Spirit so we may truly know you. It is in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**C. Thought to Remember**

Jesus mediates a new covenant based on grace.