

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for July 31: Check your direction

July 20, 2011

Jeremiah 31 unveils one of the greatest and most unexpected developments in the Bible: the promise of a new covenant. This signaled God's continuing interest in the lives of his straying people and would become the way God chooses to relate to all people.

The new covenant establishes a high-level relationship in the lofty territory of the human heart. At the core of the human being, God would inspire people to commit to walk with him and to know and love him. In essence, the new covenant offers new life to a people being destroyed by their personal sinfulness.

Promise of new life (Jeremiah 31:27-28)

Verse 27 introduces God's plans for Israel's future. Verses 29, 31 and 33 also refer to the future, making for a four-fold emphasis on God's continuing purposes for Israel. The reference to the future was meant to boost Israel's morale. Despite Israel's great sins and the extreme action God took to expunge her sins, God remained unwaveringly committed to Israel. This point alone is good news.

Six words from Jeremiah's call in 1:10 are used in verse 28: uproot, tear down, overthrow, destroy, build and plant. "Disaster" summarizes the first four words, succinctly describing the destruction of Israel as a political entity and its exile from its homeland.

Verse 27 begins the delivery of a new, unanticipated promise, featuring the

word “plant.” The promise extends to the two “houses” of God’s people: Israel (the north) and Judah (the south). Here is a great example of God’s marvelous way of planning an impressive and undeserved future for his people.

The promise of a glorious future is then delivered with marvelous timing—when his people’s wickedness has cornered them in the depths of despair. One way God ministers to his suffering people is to focus their attention on the bright future he has graciously and mercifully planned for them.

Individual responsibility for sin (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

The people of Israel would argue they deserved a bright, promising future. After all, they were God’s covenant people. This reasoning, however, ignored the people’s repeated breaking of the covenant and the saturation of sin in their lives. Their sufferings were fully deserved. What they didn’t deserve was a promising future.

Humans consistently transfer blame for their sinful behavior (Genesis 3:12-13). Verse 29 quotes a proverb popular in Jeremiah’s day (Ezekiel 18:1-4). The proverb insisted the people innocently suffered for their fathers’ sins. Jeremiah set the record straight in verse 30: Each person is responsible for his or her own sin. Israel’s sufferings were not unjust, but just.

Transformation of the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

The political destruction of the nation of Israel and the exile of its people allowed the Lord to build a new nation for his name on new terms. The exile marked the end of “old” Israel. A “new” people of God would be built on a “new” covenant. Verse 31 extends this new covenant to the two houses of Israel.

The problem with the old covenant was that it didn't turn the people away from involvement in sin. Accordingly, Israel's greatest covenant need was salvation from sin. The old covenant required God to provide for all of Israel's needs. The battleground where sin wages its war on mankind is the heart. Therefore, God, Israel's great covenantal Provider, provided a heart-level remedy. The new covenant expressed God's definitive answer for mankind's greatest need.

The new covenant would assume all the characteristics, teachings, purposes and requirements of the old covenant, yet at a different level—the heart level. Verse 33 speaks of God writing his covenant on his people's hearts. The heart is the place of self-determination. Thus the Lord will transform the hearts of his people to desire to fulfill their covenant requirements with the Lord.

Writing his law on the hearts of his people meant the Lord would govern his people at the highest level of life. Keeping the covenant no longer would be a matter of keeping meticulous laws and rituals. It would be a matter of responding whole-heartedly to the Lord's purposes.

God chooses to win the battle over sin at its source—the heart. Once the battle is won and the heart is transformed, the details will work themselves out. With the new covenant in operation, it will be seen that God is Israel's God and Israel truly has become his people.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus established the new covenant at the cross (Luke 22:20). The "covenant of the heart," which has subsumed the old covenant, now defines God's method for drawing people to himself.

Personal relationship with the Lord (Jeremiah 31:34)

Verse 34 provides two great points. First, the new covenant promises to guide people to know the Lord. God's transformational work in the human

heart will render people fully capable of knowing the Lord. This is not merely intellectual knowledge—a catalog of things known about God. This knowledge will be “heart knowledge,” the knowledge of interpersonal experience.

Second, the covenant will provide adequately for human sin and wickedness in that it will provide forgiveness. Healthy human relationships cannot exist where forgiveness is lacking. The new covenant will transform the human heart to a degree that completely satisfies the Lord. In response, the Lord offers forgiveness. This point, above all, is great news.