

COVENANT CHRISTIANITY: JEREMIAH AND THE NEW COVENANT

Slayden Yarbrough
First Baptist Church, Boulder, CO
November 8, 2009

TEXT: Jeremiah 31:31-34

INTRODUCTION: Last Sunday I began a series of sermons on the concept of the covenant in the Scriptures. We began by focusing on the Hebrew covenant with God established at Mt. Sinai following the exodus or deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. The covenant was conditional – "if" – based upon the actual commitment of the people in carrying out the demands of the agreement. God does not force us to do anything against our will. We have the freedom – and the responsibility – to determine our response to God in our lives.

As far as the Hebrew people go, in 722 B.C. Israel, the northern Kingdom, was conquered by the Assyrian army, and came to an end. In 587/586 B.C. Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was conquered the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was taken, the walls were torn down and the magnificent temple, which was considered by the people to be the dwelling place of God, was razed to the ground. The leaders of the now defunct nation, including the artisans and craftsmen, the politicians, and the leading soldiers were taken in what proved to be the fourth deportation in the last decade, as exiles into Babylonia. The confusion and frustration and sorrow of these transplants was clearly expressed in Psalm 139, where they poetically ask the question "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

In light of these developments, the conclusion seems to be that the Sinai covenant failed the people. In fact, the Biblical historians interpreted the loss of the land and the kingdom of Israel as simply a failure to keep the covenant. The question is "Why did the covenant fail, or at least seem to fail?" I propose that there are at least three reasons. First, the covenant was too closely connected to the idea of a theocracy that centered around the monarchy. On the one hand the ideal of a theocracy seemed like a great idea. It was rooted in the rejection of Gideon of the offer of kingship by the leaders of his tribe Manasseh during the time of the judges. Gideon responded to this offer by clearly stating the principle behind the theocracy. "I will not rule over you. My son will not rule over you. God will rule over you." Theocracy sounded great and was incorporated into the establishment of the monarchy when Saul was selected as the first king over Israel. But it did not work. The marriage between government and religion, between the kingship and the priesthood, and the failure to recognize the difference between a human kingdom and a spiritual kingdom doomed the idea to failure. At least that's the way that I see it.

Digressing for the moment, theocracy has failed time and again in the history of Christianity. Examples are the Holy Roman Empire, John Calvin's Geneva, and Puritanism in New England during the Colonial period. Yet, even today there are those who would like to impose a theory upon our country. Maybe they should have studied their Christian history more thoroughly.

Second, the covenant wound up focusing too much on the law and not the purpose of the covenant, to be "a kingdom of priests." Rulers, priests, and even the common Hebrew folk found the law as an easy way to be God's people. Everything was spelled out, everything clear, and everything was open to interpretation in order to make the followers of the law feel good about themselves. The law made them special. It was easy to judge other nations and other people by the Hebrew law. But again, the purpose of the covenant was left behind with an over emphasis on the law. It may have been that the effort to balance the ideals of mission and morality was much too difficult. And the focus upon the law was rather simple in comparison.

Third, for too many of the Hebrews the covenant focused too much on the land. God had promised the father of the nation, Abraham, the land of Canaan. As long as the Hebrews dwelled in and controlled the land, which will be called Palestine during the New Testament period, then God certainly must still care for his people. If the Hebrews kept the law, if they worshipped in the temple, then surely God would preserve the nation in the land that He had given to Abraham and his descendants. Such an emphasis resulted in limiting the presence of God throughout the world, of seeing God as being very territorial rather than universal in outlook.

What the Hebrews failed to realize was the kingdom was not to be identified with a nation or a monarchy or place but, as we shall see in Jeremiah, through the inward presence of God in the lives and the commitment and the mission of His people, wherever they were, however they worshipped, and where they practiced their faith. God was to be found not in the land and not in the temple but in the hearts of His people.

Back to my initial observation that the covenant as understood by most of the leaders and the people failed. How do we know these approaches failed? Because in 722 and in 587 B.C., respectively, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms fell to foreign powers and the nation was no more. Why? Again the answer was that the Hebrews broke the covenant and lost the land, lost the nation. They failed primarily to be a holy nation.

The land was lost, or at least control of it, to the Assyrians and the Babylonians, respectively. The temple was lying in rubble in Jerusalem after the vengeful assault of the Babylonians. The walls to the holy city were torn down. The leaders of the nation of Judah, the politicians, the artisans and craftsmen, the business leaders, and the military leaders found themselves captives in a foreign land. The blessings of the covenant had not materialized. Therefore, all was lost. Again, the question of the poet in Psalm 139, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land," clearly expressed the dilemma of the exiled Hebrews. And yet, the plight of the people supplied the answer concerning the covenant.

This really was not the end of the covenant, when viewed through the eyes of the prophets? Was there a new way of understanding the covenant? Could it be interpreted not as an external response to the law but rather as an internal commitment that resulted in sacrificial living and servant responsibilities? Could it be that the ideal relationship between God and his people was not based upon a theocratic ideal but upon a spiritual ideal? Could it be that the centuries of suffering and loss and agony at the hands of powerful foreign invaders was not rejection by God, but preparation of His people by God for a great task, a great work that would fulfill the covenant responsibilities.

Therefore, we need to look at a new generation of prophets who dared to dream dreams and who dared to interpret the failure of the people and the loss of Israel and Judah to foreign powers as a part of God's preparation for the actual fulfillment of the Sinai covenant in terms of both mission and ethics. We begin with Jeremiah.

A NEW COVENANT: The nation didn't and couldn't keep the covenant. That is when the prophets began to redefine the covenant relationship. Or, as I was reminded by a Jewish friend who led music at the SoulJourners Conference, the covenant was not just something from the past, it was for all generations to commit to and to obey. What was really important was for the contemporary generation to accept the covenant. But with the nation gone, with exile a reality, with hopes and dreams shattered, a new understanding was essential. In this context, the prophet Jeremiah during the last days of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and the early years of the Babylonian Exile, in chapter 31:31-34, reframed the covenant. The covenant with God was not something external, not the law that could be written on tablets of stone, or upon pages of parchment or papyrus. Jeremiah internalized the covenant within each

believer, and no matter whether there was a nation or whether there was exile, the covenant would always continue. Jeremiah proclaimed to a disheartened and dispirited people, a lasting message of hope:

³¹ *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*

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

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

³⁴ *No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, '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."*

Jeremiah was a prophet of courage. He always seemed to be in trouble with the political and religious leaders. After his famous denunciation of the dependency upon the Temple and worship in the Temple, he was arrested. He was released only after some leaders remembered that Micah had pronounced a similar message, which brought about a brief revival under King Hezekiah.

Other prophets echoed a similar hope, often constructing new metaphors to get their messages across. In the Latter Prophets, there is a move from national responsibility, which had failed, to individual responsibility. **Ezekiel** wrote of a *new heart* which God would place within His people, not a cold heart of stone but a new vibrant heart. God would place a *new spirit* within his people, one which led to hope and life. God would raise the old dead, cold bones, and restore the flesh of the people, they would breathe anew, and life would be recovered and experienced in new and dramatic ways.

Isaiah of the Exile would interpret their suffering not as defeatism, not as punishment, but as mission, as service with a universal application. The *suffering servant*, God's chosen, God's elect, would be a dimly burning flame that could not be extinguished, a reed beaten by the rain, the wind, the storm, that would be bruised but never be broken, and one who would be a light to the nations, proclaiming God's redemptive love for all. {Corporate personality is useful in this setting. The hopes and the dreams, the mission of the people, would be fulfilled in the vicarious sacrifice of the lowly, humble, suffering servant.}

See Isaiah 42:6 "And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations. In the new realities of the destruction of the nation, and the exile to a distant land reflected in the Babylonian Captivity, the historians would not write the final chapter. Rather they would be amazed at what they saw, shocked at what was to be, a servant people whose identity was not in external laws and a piece of land, but rather in their hearts and spirits and responsibilities. The formula of the old covenant didn't work. The covenant with the nation had not resulted in utopian dreams, although such dreams would not die.

In a very legitimate sense, the call to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, as defined in the covenant with God at Mt. Sinai, came to fulfillment in the message of Jeremiah even in the disaster seen in the crumbled walls of Jerusalem amidst the ruin of Solomon's magnificent temple now a piece of

rubble, even as the leaders, the artisans, and the craftsmen were carried off into exile in a foreign land. The story was not over. The covenant was not to be set aside. Rather it was to be replaced, to be redefined, to be reinterpreted. God was not finished with His people; the covenant was not broken. The flame flickered but the light still would shine to the nations. The reed was bruised but would not be broken.

The new covenant was proclaimed by the old prophet, Jeremiah. A new relationship based upon something ***greater than the law***, something ***greater than the land***, something ***more universal in understanding and application***, something that moved well beyond the words of the external commandments, which would fulfill all of the highest hopes and dreams as expressed in the covenant as seen in the call for obedience and faithfulness in a much greater manner than most ever could have imagined. A new covenant etched in the hearts and the minds and the spirit of God's people

Jeremiah said that a new covenant was on its way, more wonderful and more real than ever before. For those of us who are people of faith in another prophet that came several centuries later, Jeremiah's new covenant would be realized in the person of a new prophet who spoke with such authority that the old law was both superseded and fulfilled with something so much better. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, and the covenant will be interpreted in a new way through His life, teachings, and example in another session.