

The New Covenant: A DTR with God

Jeremiah 31:27–34

If you are under 30, you are probably familiar with the term DTR. It stands for . . . “define the relationship”. It’s a conversation that a dating couple might have as they are getting more and more serious, but they haven’t yet really talked about how they feel about each other and where they see the relationship going. And so at some point one of them might say to the other, “We really need to have a DTR.” It can be a frightening moment to have the DTR, because it is all going to be laid out there. You people over 30 getting the idea?

Ever heard of the website *eHow.com*? It’s a website that has information about how to do all sorts of stuff like fix your washing machine or how to do your taxes or plan a great trip. Well, I saw this week that there is even an *eHow.com* article on how to have a DTR. So, guys, if your excuse for avoiding that DTR has been that you just don’t know how to do it, that excuse isn’t going to work anymore - *eHow.com* is going to tell you in 9 easy steps how to do it.

When it comes to God, He is really good at having a DTR. God’s DTR is called a covenant. Generally speaking, a covenant is an agreement that defines the terms of a relationship. And so when God makes a covenant with His people, that covenant defines the terms of His relationship with His people. Throughout biblical history, God has made a number of different covenants with His people. Today we are going to look at what is called the New Covenant, which is God’s DTR with us as New Testament believers.

Today, we are looking at Jeremiah 31:27-34. This passage is found in the context of group of prophecies in Jeremiah 30-33 that has been called “The Book of Consolation.” Up to this point in Jeremiah almost all of the prophecies have been warnings to the nation. But these chapters are very different. They offer hope.

The context for The Book of Consolation is found in Jeremiah 32:1-2, which says:

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. 2 Now at that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard, which was in the house of the king of Judah,

Zedekiah reigned for 11 years and so if these words came to Jeremiah in the 10th year of Zedekiah’s reign, these prophecies came right in heart of the most distressing time for Jerusalem. Jerusalem is in the middle of an 18-month long siege by the Babylonians. In the midst of this time of desperation these words of hope come. The overall theme in these chapters is that Israel will not perish. It will have a future despite the current situation.

In these chapters, God promises deliverance from captivity; He promises a return to the land; He promises restoration and He promises a new covenant. It is this last aspect of hope that we want to look at today – the new Covenant.

And so let's start by looking at verse 27:

27 "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast. 28 "As I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the LORD.

The phrase, "*days are coming*" points to a distant future, not the immediate future. We know that Judah will be in exile for 70 years and so it will be at least that long before any of these promises take place. But as we will see, much of this passage actually looks forward to an eschatological future – to the time of Christ.

God says that the time will come when He will relent from the disaster that He has brought upon the nation. Under the Mosaic covenant, God had warned Israel that if they did not keep the obligations of the covenant judgment would come. That is exactly what they were experiencing at this very time when Jeremiah writes these words. The Babylonian army, an instrument of God's judgment, had devastated the land and its population. Both man and beast had been wiped out or carried away into exile. But God says there will come a day when there would be a reversal. God will no longer *break down or overthrow or bring disaster*; rather God will *watch over them to build and to plant* (Ezek 36:9, 11).

This reversal of fortune is for the days that were coming. Now, however, the people were suffering God's discipline. And as they were they thought that they were suffering unjustly. They thought that they were being punished for the sins of their father. Verse 29:

*29 "In those days they will not say again,
'The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
And the children's teeth are set on edge.'*

The meaning of the proverb is that children suffer because of what their fathers have done. And so when the inhabitants of Judah spoke this proverb they were blaming their current suffering on their ancestors. But Jeremiah says:

30 "But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge.

Each individual is responsible – *everyone will die for his own iniquity*. Right now as the nation suffers from the long siege of the Babylonians and the impending destruction,

Jeremiah is saying each person is responsible. No one could claim that he or she was not guilty.

Now as we come to verse 31, Jeremiah introduces the new covenant that God would make with His people.

31“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

There was a need for a new covenant, because Israel had failed under the covenant that God had made with them when He brought them out of Egypt (Ex. 19:1ff). That covenant, which was known as the Mosaic covenant, God says, *they broke*. God had been faithful to His part of the covenant; He was like a faithful husband. But the people were repeatedly unfaithful. They continually violated the terms of the agreement through their constant disobedience.

God had been long-suffering with the nation. He had been patient. Time and time again He sent messengers, the prophets, to warn the people and urge them to return to living under the covenant. But the people continually rebelled. They continually failed to live out their obligations under the covenant. And as a result, they were facing the consequences of their disobedience. This is the very reason that the Babylonian armies were encamped outside of Jerusalem. This is why they would soon be carried off into exile. They had failed under the Mosaic covenant.

There was a need for new covenant. Not because there was any fault with the Mosaic covenant. The fault lay with the people’s inability to keep the Mosaic covenant. This new covenant, God’s says, would be different. As we come to verse 33 God describes how it would be different.

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

God is making this new covenant with the house of Israel, but the New Testament is clear that ultimately, this covenant is for all people and that it is only fulfilled in Christ. Do you remember what Jesus said when he instituted the Lord’s Supper? He said,

This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood (Luke 22:20).

The new covenant is bound up with Christ. Earlier when this passage spoke of the, *days that are coming*, it is speaking of the day of Christ. This new covenant, established through Christ's shed blood, would bring about significant changes from the old covenant.

I want to highlight three things from this passage that this new covenant would bring about for all who are part of the covenant. First, God says that he will **give us a new inner nature that enables us to obey**. He speaks of this when He talks about what he will do with our heart. Instead of having laws written on tablets of stone, in other words, laws that were external, God says, "*I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it.*"

Under the old covenant God's people were to have His law on their hearts as well. For instance Psalm 119:11 says this:

*11 Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.*

And so this was supposed to be a person's experience with God under the old covenant, but in most cases the people repeatedly did not take God's Word into their heart. This was part of their failure that led to their disobedience. And so in the new covenant, God says, that He will write in on a believer's heart. In the new covenant, God gives his people a new heart and a new desire to follow and do His will.

Here is how the prophet Ezekiel speaks of this new heart:

²⁶ "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. (Ezekiel 36)

In the new covenant, God changes our hearts. The New Testament term for it is regeneration; we are born again (John 3:3-8) and we become a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The law is written on our hearts; it is something that we want to do. And it is something that we are empowered to do because of this new experience of God's Spirit being placed within us. Under the old covenant, God's Spirit was given to certain people for certain tasks at certain times, but under the new covenant, God's Spirit is given to dwell permanently in all believers. And so under the new covenant, we are no less responsible for obeying God's law, but we have the advantage of a new heart that wants to obey and the advantage of the ability to actually do so through the empowerment of God's Spirit who dwells within each believer.

Secondly, in the new covenant we have direct knowledge and experience of God. In verse 34, Jeremiah says that there will not be a need for a person to teach another person to know the Lord, because, as he says, *for they shall all know Me, from the least*

of them to the greatest of them. This doesn't mean that we have no need of instruction; we do. But when it comes to knowing God, we have direct knowledge and experience of Him.

The word, *know*, communicates close, intimate, personal knowledge of another. In the new covenant, each believer will have this inward, personal relationship with God. Under the old covenant knowledge of God was communicated by priest and prophets, but under the new it would be an immediate experience of each believer. In the new covenant, every believer has the same rights of access to God – not just prophets and priests.

Finally, God says that the new covenant cannot be broken because through it He deals ultimately with sin. The basis of God being our God and we being His people; and the basis for each one having this direct knowledge of God; and the basis for the new heart is the forgiveness of sins. Right at the end of verse 34 when God says,

“for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The “*for*” is indicating that the basis for all of what God does in the new covenant is this forgiveness of sins. This is why the ultimate fulfillment of this promise is through Christ because it was through his death and resurrection that sin was dealt that it would never again break our relationship with God. And it is exactly why this new covenant cannot be broken, because even when we fail to obey, our failure is paid for – our sin is forgiven and God refuses to remember it. And so, through Christ, God has guaranteed that this is a better covenant (Heb. 8:6).

That we have the privilege to live in this era of time under the new covenant is an amazing thing. We are living in days of fulfillment. What God spoke almost 2600 years ago to Jeremiah was fulfilled in Christ and we today live in this new covenant. This is how God defines the terms of our relationship with Him.

There are a lot of implications of what we've looked at today. I want to mention a couple of thoughts. First, know that if you are a genuine believer in Christ that all that we have looked at today applies to you. You do have real experiential knowledge of God. He is your God and you are His. And you have been given a new nature; a heart that is incline to obey. And God's Spirit lives within you to empower you to obey. This is absolutely true. This is how God's has defined your relationship with Him.

Now, does this mean that you will never struggle with sin? No, we all still struggle with sin. And here's the deal, sometimes when we are struggling with sin, we begin to believe that that is who we truly are – a person dominated by sin with no hope for change. But God says, according to His DTR, that you actually do have a new heart and the real you wants to obey and please Him. You do! And you have the resource of His powerful Spirit living within you to help you obey. If you are in a battle with some area of sin, you need to cling to this truth.

But here's the good news for us when we do sin: that sin is not what defines your relationship with God. It doesn't cause your relationship with Him to be broken, because God has paid for your sin through Christ and He chooses to remember your sin no more. That forgiveness is forever the basis of your relationship with God. Under the terms of the new covenant, nothing can break your relationship with God.

Now, here's a second implication to consider. If you find that you honestly don't have any inclination to obey God; if you don't care about that at all; and yet you call yourself a Christian, this passage would call you to do some soul searching, because if you have truly experienced the new covenant, you would have a changed heart, a changed nature. You would have a disposition to obey God. And so if you don't sense any of that within you, don't convince yourself that you truly know Christ just because you grew up in a Christian home or attend church or are involved in Christian activities.

Growing up in a Christian family doesn't make you a Christian, nor does attending church or being involved in Christian activities; rather it is a real encounter with the living God that changes one's life. It begins when we come to God in humble faith and acknowledge that we cannot earn a relationship with Him because of our sin. We look to Christ and trust that He has paid for all of our sin on the cross. When we do this in genuine faith, we are fully forgiven and God's Spirit comes to live within us. And at that point we are given a new heart. We are made a new creation with desires to please God.

This morning as we close, I want to give you a few moments to reflect. If you truly know that you are living in this new covenant, express your thanks to God. Let your heart be filled with gratitude. If however, you sense that you really aren't sure, ask God to search your heart and make it clear to you where you stand. Ask Him in these moments to have a personal DTR with you. And after a few moments of silent reflection, I'm going to pray a prayer that if you are not sure whether you've ever truly entered into the new covenant through Christ, this would be a way to express that desire. Okay? Let's pray.

Silent reflection.

Prayer: God, thank you for being clear in defining what it looks like to have a relationship with you. Thank you for the new covenant that makes it possible to actually know you. God, I want to know you . . . personally. I agree that I have sinned against you and that I am in need of forgiveness. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for me and that He rose on Easter morning, for me, that I might be forgiven for all of my sin and be given a new heart; a new life. Thank you, Father, for saving me and making me truly yours in this new covenant. Amen.