

## Sermon for October 16, 2016

### "Written in Blood!"

#### **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant." A "new covenant?" What's a new "covenant?" According to the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible a covenant is "a solemn promise made binding by an oath." It's a contract or agreement. Another word for covenant is "testament." Hence, the old contract between God and humanity was the Old Testament, and the new agreement is the New Testament.

There are covenants throughout the Bible. God said to Abraham, "Walk before me and be blameless for I will make you a great nation."(Genesis 17) In Noah's day, God promised never to flood the world again. At Mount Sinai God said, "Keep my commandments and I will be your God."(Exodus 20)

In ancient times these covenants were sealed with a sacrifice. The Hebrew uses the word *qatar* (קָטַר), to cut, to speak of making a covenant, which literally translates to "cut" a covenant. The reference is probably to cutting a sacrificial animal, usually in half. It was a way of ritually and symbolically saying, "If I don't keep the deal, let what happened to this animal happen to me." Hence we get the expression to "cut a deal." But when the deal was with God, the animal sacrifice also served as a means of worship.

So here in Jeremiah, God is saying, "Look out, because I am about to cut a new deal with the human race."

But to understand the significance of this new covenant, we have to know what the Old covenant was all about. It is called the covenant of law. It was the covenant made at Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments carved in stone. God gave the people the commandments and said, "Keep these and be my holy people."

This covenant was rather straightforward. The people would keep themselves holy, set apart unto God by keeping the Ten Commandments. Ten rather simple rules. And God would bless them and protect them and live in their midst.

But people would break these rules from time to time. Sometimes it was by accident, which was understandable. Even the most diligent and faithful follower of God can make mistakes. So God also gave them rites and rituals to make up for these human breaches of the contract. An important part of this was the sacrifice of lambs and goats and other animals as a way of renewing the covenant and asking for forgiveness for times the covenant was broken.

The problem with this covenant is it just didn't work. Apparently it simply asked too much of humanity to keep ten simple rules. People are just too evil and hard hearted. Many didn't even try to keep the laws. They just ran around doing what they wanted to: cheating, stealing, mistreating the poor, oppressing the powerless. They even bowed to and worshipped idols. Much like people today, they just did whatever made them feel good for the moment and disregarded their agreement with God.

As if the hardness of people's hearts was not enough there was another problem. Even when people tried to keep the law they often perverted it to their own use not God's. They would define the law in the way that suited their purpose. It said you shall not have other gods before me. So some rationalized and thought they could have other gods as long as they didn't put them before God Almighty. It said, "Thou shall not kill." But if you hire someone else to do the killing then you are not guilty of breaking the law. They found ways to keep the letter of the contract while they violated its spirit.

The best example of this was the way they used the Sabbath laws to persecute Jesus. Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and people were mad. By the power of God he performed a miracle and relieved a man of this suffering in the name of God. But people were upset because

they said he broke the law. But the Sabbath law was supposed to help people glorify God. What better way to glorify God than to relieve the suffering of one of God's children? The Sabbath law was meant to glorify God, but the religious folk used it to persecute God's Son.

This Old Testament simply was not working. People were either blatantly disregarding the laws or they were perverting them in subtle ways. God's commandments were designed to relieve human suffering and produce righteous living, yet just the opposite was happening. But the problem wasn't with God's law. They were fine. They were a perfect creation of God which, if sincerely followed, would produce righteousness and mercy. The problem was with humanity. We are just so morally twisted that we can't keep God's laws. Even when we try we become legalistic and twist them to serve ourselves and not God.

The laws didn't need to be changed; the people needed to be changed. So God proposed a new covenant, a New Testament. Under this New Deal, God would write the laws on people's hearts. In other words, God would alter the people's hearts to conform to the law. It was humanity's evil hearts that were causing the disobedience and perversion of the law to begin with.

This changed the way things were done entirely. The old covenant was a covenant of law, but this one would be a covenant of grace. Under the Old Testament the focus was on keeping the law. Under the New Covenant the emphasis was on God's gracious gift of salvation. Salvation was no longer a matter of a person changing his or her own behavior to conform to God. Now salvation was just a matter of letting God change their hearts and as a result their behavior. All that God required of people now was that they accept the gift of forgiveness and the Spirit.

But to cut this deal God had to do something else that was new and different. God wanted to make the laws, and their spirit of love and righteousness, a part of our beings. But to make them a part of us God first had to make the Law flesh and blood so it could be grafted to us. So God's word became human flesh. We called him Jesus and he lived love and righteousness. He was God's law in the flesh and his life was a living example of that law put into practice.

All that was required was that people believe in Him. But even that was too hard for many. Instead of accepting the gift many rejected Him. And out of our ignorance and evil we killed Him. And God wrote a new contract with humanity with the blood of his only begotten Son.

Jesus became the sacrifice for our sins replacing the innocent lambs of the Old Covenant. He was the one cut down to cut this deal. And now because of his sacrifice, all who come to God for salvation are offered a new deal. Simply accept Jesus and God will change you. No longer would God's law be written on stones, they would become part of God's children. No longer will people need to study the law to come to God. Instead God would come to them and bring the law to life.

This New Testament written in the blood of Christ is wonderful! The problem is there are still a lot of people trying to live by the Old Testament. I am not talking about Jews. I mean Christians. They are trying to keep the laws to save themselves. They are trying to be righteous by their own means.

It's impossible. It can't be done. Humanity is too twisted and perverted to be righteous on its own. The history of God's people under the Old Testament demonstrates that. More importantly being righteous by our own means is unnecessary.

God does not require that we make ourselves holy to be saved. All God requires is that we let Jesus into our hearts. Then he will make us righteous by writing his law on our hearts. Salvation is not something we earn. It's a gift of grace. This grace is free, but it is not cheap grace. It is grace that begins a lifelong effort to live into the righteousness of Christ.

Stop trying to save yourselves. Just let Jesus in. Let him change you. Let him save you.