




Jeremiah Prophesies a New Covenant

THEOLOGICAL THEME: In the new covenant, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to obey God's law.

When I was a kid, I indiscriminately hated to eat vegetables. As usually happens, vegetable eating became a test of the wills between my parents and me, a contest to see who would break first. Most of the time, my parents would command me to eat the vegetables, and I would obey them and choke a few down. Now imagine that one night at the dinner table, my parents didn't say to me, "Eat the vegetables"; imagine instead that they told me to "Love the vegetables."

That changes the conversation, doesn't it? Yes, because my parents would have given me a command that I was incapable of obeying. In order to obey, it wouldn't be enough for me to force myself to swallow a few bites; I would need something much deeper to change in me. I would need a new set of taste buds.

 What is the difference between commanding someone to obey outwardly and commanding someone to obey inwardly?

 Why does the attitude and desire for obedience matter to God?

Date of My Bible Study: _____

In this session, we see that the heart of humanity is desperately wicked and in need of replacement. Because no one is able to perfectly obey the law, God promised a new covenant, one not written on stone or parchment but written instead on the hearts of His people. This is a promise concerning the coming day of Jesus, fulfilled in the gospel. In the gospel, God not only writes His law on our hearts but also gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, who indwells every believer.

Voices from the Church

“Jesus does not offer to make bad people good but to make dead people alive.”¹

—Ravi Zacharias

1. The Problem of a Heart Engraved with Sin (Jer. 17:1-10)

¹ *“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, ² while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree and on the high hills, ³ on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. ⁴ You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.”*

The word of the Lord here was bleak. It served as a reminder, both then and now, of just how desperate is our situation. Like the people of Judah, we are tempted to look outside ourselves for danger—but we should look first and foremost inside ourselves, for our sin is “engraved on the tablet” of our hearts. And it has been this way since the garden of Eden in Genesis 3.


The Greek definition for *sin* is simply this: “to miss.” We were created in the image of God with the intent to glorify Him through our worship and enjoyment of Him forever. In that, we have missed. Big time. We choose to worship money, sex, and other pretend gods and to focus our enjoyment on the menial pleasures of hamburgers rather than the Almighty. We have missed. That’s a simple definition for the far-reaching condition in which we find ourselves.


Let's not miss this too—sin isn't so much an action as it is a condition. It's true that whenever we violate God's revealed will, we sin, but we do so because it's in our nature. Let me put it another way—we don't become sinners when we sin; we sin because we are sinners. That's our heritage. It's the spiritual DNA that we inherited from the parents of the human race.

Voices from Church History

"Atheism, pride, self-will, and idolatry, it is true of all, that 'the heart of man,' of every natural man, 'is desperately wicked.'"²

—John Wesley (1703–1791)

 Why is it important to understand that we don't only commit sins but that we are also sinful?

 How does knowing this impact the way you understand the effect of the gospel?

⁵ *Thus says the LORD:*

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. ⁶ He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ *"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."*


⁹ *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*

¹⁰ *"I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."*



Because our hearts are engraved with sin, we have an amazing propensity toward self-deception. We lie to ourselves over and over again. We cannot, then, obey when we feel like it, pray when we feel like it, or act lovingly when we feel like it. Because our hearts are engraved with sin, our feelings are not to be trusted. God’s Word tells us the truth, including the truth about ourselves, even if it’s uncomfortable for us to hear.


Also, because our hearts are engraved with sin, our salvation cannot be a message focused primarily on our behavior. Any message that fails to deal with the primary issue of the heart is like putting a Band-Aid on internal hemorrhaging. Therefore, the gospel must meet us at the level of the heart if it is truly going to be a message of good news.

 The wisdom of the world tells people to “trust your heart” and “believe in yourself.” How does Jeremiah 17:1-10 confront this way of thinking?

Voices from the Church

“The sin of idolatry lies deep in my heart. This sin deifies my supposed independence. I want to be God. I want to set my own rules for living and terms for happiness. Sin transforms God’s holy ‘Thou shalt not’ into my stubborn ‘I will.’”³


—Rhett Dodson

 When have your feelings led you astray? What did you learn from the experience?

2. The Promise of a Heart Indwelt by God (Jer. 31:31-33)

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

There are a couple of key things regarding this new covenant Jeremiah prophesied about that we must understand. This covenant is, first of all, **new**. God's plan was not new to God, but it was new to the people. For generations, the people had a history of trying and failing, trying and failing, never able to live up to the written code of the covenant of God. God was merciful time and time again, pursuing them to bring them back to Him, but even so, the old covenant only imposed the law. It did nothing to empower the people to keep it. But here in the new covenant, God would not only provide the knowledge of His will, He would write it within the new hearts of His people.

 Why is it important to know that the new covenant was new to the people but not new to God?

This new covenant would also be **within** His people. Many people today think of believing the gospel as a choice between going to heaven and going to hell. They know they don't want to go to hell, so they choose to trust in Christ in order to be saved and live eternally in heaven instead.

While it's true that trusting in Christ for forgiveness and righteousness is indeed the only way to God, if that's all we think of when we think of the gospel, then we are falling far short of its implications. The gospel is the message that because our hearts are so corrupted by sin, we need a new heart that is turned toward God.

When we believe the message of the gospel, the old person we once were dies and we are spiritually resurrected with Christ. Our new self, with a new heart, has new desires, new tastes, and most importantly, a new Master. No longer are we imprisoned by sin; instead, God indwells our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

65. *Work of the Holy Spirit in Life of the Christian*

The Spirit's work in the life of a Christian begins in the work of salvation in bringing a person to faith in Christ and is continued through the work of sanctification in helping the Christian to become progressively more like Christ throughout the course of his or her life. He also empowers and indwells believers, intercedes on their behalf, and equips them with special gifts for the service of God's kingdom. He is the Comforter to the believer and aids us in properly interpreting the Bible.



How does knowing that you have a new heart change the way you approach obedience?

3. The Privilege of a Heart That Knows God (Jer. 31:34)

³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

We were created to live in intimate fellowship with God. We see this in the first days of creation, before the world was broken by sin, when God created man in His own image. Part of being made in the image of God means having the capacity to relate to God in a way unlike any of the rest of creation. So these first humans were able to live in complete, unbroken fellowship with their Creator.

But sin caused a cosmic divide between God and humanity. We have been separated from our true purpose by the chasm of sin. Because God is perfectly holy, He cannot abide sin in His presence. And yet, so great is God's love for us that He has provided a way for us to return to our true purpose—to know God and to make Him known throughout the world.



How important would you say knowing God is to you right now?



What are some ways you could cultivate a greater desire to know God in your life?

Jesus knew that the greatest end of humankind is to know and enjoy God forever. He put that truth very succinctly in John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” For Jesus, the very essence of eternal life is the knowledge of God, only available to men and women through the gospel.

This is different than what we typically think of as eternal life, isn't it? When we think of eternal life, we think of the golden streets, happiness, and lack of pain in heaven. In heaven, there's no more need for tissues or chemotherapy or funeral processions or goodbyes. It's where the streets are paved with gold and the eternal worship of a multitude of Christ-followers rings for all eternity. All true, and all wonderful. But are all those attributes, good as they are, really what makes heaven heaven? The answer, surprisingly, is no. Or at least, not exactly.

Much like the reason why hell is hell is because it's the realm where God is not, the reason why heaven is heaven is because it's the realm where God is present and most fully known. Paul pointed to this reality in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Amazing!

How fully known are we from God's perspective? He knows the number of hairs on our heads. He knows our deepest thoughts and motivations, and they are laid bare before Him. He knows us, in fact, better than we know ourselves. He knows our past, present, and future. God knows us completely. Fully. Without exception.

That's how well we will know God in heaven. Face to face. No matter how hard we seek after the Lord here on earth, we will always see a refracted image of Him. The image will always be in some way distorted by our humanity. But in heaven? No distortions. Perfect and complete intimacy with God Almighty. The way we get there is through the gospel.

Because the gospel has solved our problem of a heart engraved with sin and given us the promise of a heart indwelled by God, we can live in the privilege of a heart that knows God.



Voices from Church History

“[True spirituality] is not just that we are dead to certain things, but we are to love God, we are to be alive to him, we are to be in communion with him, *in this present moment of history*.”⁴

—Francis Schaeffer
(1912-1984)



In what ways should our knowledge of God motivate us to make God known in the world?

Conclusion

Knowing God is a two-sided coin. The first side of that coin is our personal relationship with God—a return to the intimacy of the garden to be fully realized in heaven. The other side of that coin is the desire to make God known. This too is a return to God’s original intent for humanity. Adam and Eve not only knew God, but they were given the job of ruling over and subduing the earth. As they did so, they would spread the glory of God throughout the earth. As God rules the universe, so humanity was meant to reflect that rule over the world.

When we come to know Jesus in the gospel, we are joyfully pushed outward to spread the glory of God throughout the rest of the world. As we know God, we want to make God known to our families, neighbors, and eventually to the ends of the earth.

CHRIST CONNECTION: The problem in Jeremiah’s day was the people had God’s law but were unable to obey Him due to the sinfulness of their hearts. Jeremiah prophesied about a coming day when God would forgive sin and write His law on the hearts of His people. This prophecy is fulfilled in the gospel. Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness. Through the Holy Spirit, God enables us to obey His commands.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we obey God's commands and live on mission for His kingdom.

1. What role should speaking about sin have in our conversations with unbelievers regarding the gospel of Jesus?

2. As Christians, what should be true about us if we believe that God resides within us in the Holy Spirit?

3. How should the privilege of knowing God shape the way we interact with and serve our community?
