

The New Covenant

The Old Covenant

A "covenant" is an agreement, promise or bond (obligation) which defines a particular relationship between parties. In the Old Testament period, God made several covenants. God made covenants with 1) Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*Genesis 15:9-21; 17:2-21, Exodus 6:3-5*); 2) Israel and Moses (*Exodus 19-24*); and 3) David (*2 Samuel 7:5-16, Psalm 89:3*).¹ These covenants, especially the covenant with Moses, dealt directly with the nation of Israel and are considered "the Old Covenant."



Keeping or Forsaking the Covenant?

God was always faithful to his covenants, and He expected his people to be faithful. God warned them: If they did not keep his covenant, they would be cursed, uprooted from the Promised Land and dispersed (*Deut. 29:9-28*). However, the Israelites forsook (abandoned) God's covenant (*29:25*). As a result, Israel was destroyed and the people were exiled outside the Promised Land.²

Jeremiah the Prophet

Jeremiah ministered around 627-583 BC, during the time of Judah's fall. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah did not get a positive response to his message. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah had bad news and good news.

- ☹ Jeremiah was called to preach against sin and proclaim God's judgment. Disaster was coming (*4:5-31*). Judah would incur God's judgment (*5:14-6:30*). Jerusalem would eventually be destroyed, and the people would be exiled in Babylon (*52:1-30*).
- ☺ Jeremiah was also called to "build and plant" (*1:10*). Thus he also proclaimed a message of hope and restoration. The Jews would be restored to the land.

📖 "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess," says the LORD." (*Jeremiah 30:2-3, NIV*)

Problem Solved?


When the Israelites returned to the land, would they be faithful to God? Or would they return to their old ways, disobeying and forsaking God? It seems they could not remain faithful to God.

1. Why did the Israelites fail to remain faithful to God? Read the following verses (*below and on page 2*). How might this apply to people in general, including us today?

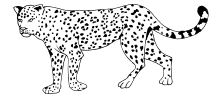
📖 *Jeremiah 7:23-24*: [God said], "I gave [Israel] this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward." (*NIV*)


¹ These are commonly called the 1) Abrahamic Covenant, 2) Mosaic (or Sinai) Covenant, and 3) Davidic Covenant. Other covenants could be mentioned (e.g., the Noahic Covenant [*Genesis 6:18; 9:9-17*], but these three covenants, along with the 'New Covenant' are the ones most pertinent to this study series.

² See Lesson 11 concerning the division of the kingdom. Israel (the northern kingdom) was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah (the southern kingdom) was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

 Jeremiah 13:23: Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots?

Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil. (NIV)



 Jeremiah 17:1: Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint (hard) point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars. (NIV)

The Problem: "Heart Disease"




Jeremiah emphasizes the problem: bad hearts,³ inclined to do wrong (*Jeremiah 3:17; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 12:2; 17:1*).⁴ This is the consistent message of the Bible for all people. In our fallen, natural condition, *all* are sinners (*Romans 3:9-18, 23*). No one meets God's perfect standard. We may have good intentions,⁵ but we cannot succeed because we all have "heart disease" (8:3).

The New Covenant

God promised he would restore his people to the land (*Jeremiah 29:10-14*), and He also promised a "new covenant." The "new covenant" is given in *Jeremiah 31:31-34* (cf. *Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 16:60-62; 36:26-27*). This passage is quoted in its entirety in the New Testament (*Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17*).⁶

2. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. What does God promise in the "new covenant?"
3. How does the "new covenant" compare and contrast with the "old covenant"? Complete the table ("what is new or different" column) on page 3, and read the "what continues" column.

 Ezekiel 36:26-28: Thus says the LORD, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God." (NIV)



4. How does the New Covenant address the problem of "bad hearts?" How do we receive the benefits of the New Covenant?

Reflection & Application

- Do you want the knowledge, desire and ability to do God's will? Do you want to know God personally and intimately? Do you want to experience forgiveness and inner peace? Review the table on page 3 (including the verses under "present application"). To receive the benefits of the New Covenant we must trust in Jesus as Lord. Do you need to do that?
- Brothers and sisters, ask yourself: "How do God's promises listed in the table personally encourage me? What can I do to more deeply experience the benefits of the New Covenant?"
- What about "God's Promise for the Nations?" Read page 4 and come back for Lesson 13!

³ Of course, in this context, 'heart' does not refer to the bodily organ that pumps blood. The 'heart' refers to the innermost being – the seat of one's intellect, emotions, desires and will.

⁴ Even 'religious people' can have 'bad hearts.' (e.g., *Jeremiah 12:2*).

⁵ As Israel said after receiving the Law, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey' (*Exodus 24:7*).

⁶ Hebrews 8:8-12 is the longest sequence of Old Testament verses quoted in the New Testament.

The New Covenant

Promise	What is New or Different?	What Continues from Old?	Present Application ⁷
1. Heart change relative to God's law. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." <i>(Jeremiah 31:33a)</i> ⁸	Read Ezekiel 36:26-28 <i>(page 2)</i> . ⁹	God's moral standards have not changed. God's law was always supposed to be "on their hearts" – in the sense of being committed to memory and practice. <i>(Deuteronomy 6:6; 11:18)</i>	2 Corinthians 3:3-18. ¹⁰
2. Personal knowledge of God. "I will be their God and they will be my people...they will all know me..." <i>(Jeremiah 31:33b-34a)</i>	¹¹	God is the same, and knowledge of Him still takes place in a covenant relationship (that is, knowledge of God is not merely intellectual under either the old covenant or new covenant.)	1 Timothy 2:5; John 1:10-13; 1 John 3:1, 5:20; Romans 8:15-17
3. Complete forgiveness of sins. "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." <i>(Jeremiah 31:34b)</i>	¹²	"Atonement" is still needed for a right relationship with God. A priest and sacrifice are still needed. However, Jesus Christ would fulfill both.	Hebrews 8:13; 9:12-25; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; 1 John 1:8-9

⁷ God says He will make a new covenant with 'the house of Israel, and the house of Judah' (*Jeremiah 31:31*). However, the book of Hebrews makes it clear that the new covenant is not limited to ethnic Israel, but applies to the Church (*Hebrews 8:1-12; 10:16-17*). Jesus Christ is the 'mediator of [the] new covenant,' and all who identify with him receive the promises (*Hebrews 9:15*). The New Testament (Covenant) is called the 'New Testament' because of this passage.

⁸ Under the Old Covenant, God's law was written on stone (*Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 4:13; 5:22*) or in a book (*Exodus 24:7*).

⁹ God will give his people a 'new heart' (a change in their inner nature) and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The external law will become an internal principle.

¹⁰ We still need to read and study God's written word and commit it to memory and practice. However, because we have 'new hearts' and the indwelling Spirit, we have a new capacity to understand and apply God's word. The result is transformation into Christ's moral likeness, which is a lifelong process.

¹¹ There is direct knowledge instead of a human-mediated knowledge (through Moses, priests, prophets). There is greater intimacy because of the indwelling Spirit of God.

¹² God "will remember their sin no more." The sacrificial system would end because Christ would fulfill it. Total forgiveness is found in Christ.

What about God's Promise?

Jeremiah and the other prophets said God would restore Israel to the land, and give Israel a Davidic king (in the line of David) who would establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

📖 "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior." (*Jeremiah 23:5-6, NIV*)

📖 *This is what the LORD says, "My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart."* (*Jeremiah 24:6-7, NIV; also see Jeremiah 29:10-14*)

📖 "This is what the LORD says...
 who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
 of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,
 and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'
 who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,
 and I will dry up your streams,'
 who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd
 and will accomplish all that I please;
 he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,'
 and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'" (*Isaiah 44:24a, 26b-28, NIV*)



In 537 BC (at least 150 years after Isaiah said the above), the first group of Jews returned to the land (under Zerubbabel). The Persians had taken over Babylon (in 539 BC) and the name of their king was "Cyrus."¹³ He allowed them to go, and he assisted them (*2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4*). They rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. A second group of Jews returned in 458 BC (under Ezra). The last group returned in 445 BC (under Nehemiah), and rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem.¹⁴

Though Jews had returned to the Promised Land, their numbers were relatively small, and they did not possess the land. Their restoration was far short of what the prophets had proclaimed.¹⁵ However, their restoration to the land was a significant beginning.¹⁶

How would God's promises to Abraham and David be fulfilled? How would God use Israel to bring blessing to all nations on earth? Stay tuned for Lesson 13.

¹³ This is another amazing example of fulfilled prophecy. See Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

¹⁴ The historical books Ezra and Nehemiah record the Jews' return and reestablishment in the land. Esther records a wonderful story of God's preservation of Israel during the period of its exile and return.

¹⁵ Daniel and Ezekiel (prophets during the exile) continued to proclaim the coming of a glorious messianic kingdom. But Zechariah, Haggai & Malachi (prophets after the exile) reveal that Israel's restoration was only partially fulfilled.

¹⁶ 'The prophets affirm that the restoration from exile marks the present realization of redemption. Even though the redemption was not complete when the Jews returned from exile, they were always to remember that it was the *beginning* of their restoration. The era of God's favor extends from the Exile to the return of Jesus Christ and to the complete restoration of all things.' (Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988], 311)