

Jeremiah 31:31-34^{New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)}

A New Covenant

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Jesus Speaks about His Death

²⁷"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people^[a] to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Jeremiah 31:31-32; John 12:20-33

Kerra Becker English

“Broken Promises, Renewed Covenant”

Nothing hurts quite like a broken promise, and yet the human condition almost guarantees we will have that experience, running from the minor indiscretion of a missed appointment to the excruciating pain of marriage infidelity. Every time we trust another person to meet our expectations, we run the risk of being hurt. When we have been so wounded, it can be rough to start over and begin to trust again. We harden our hearts and harbor grudges. We lose friendships rather than risk the intimate act of admitting how we've been hurt by the other. We blame our parents, and we stop trying with our children. The pain is enough to isolate us into the bubbles where we feel the safest so we can protect our hearts, and patch up the wounds of our souls.

So when God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah to tell us how we have broken our side of the deal - that may not be new news, but what happens next is a crucial insight about God's amazing love for humankind. I have a number of favorite passages in scripture, but this is one that gets to the heart of my faith in who God really is. God led us toward freedom. God protected us through the wilderness. God took vows to be our God, and we took vows to be God's people, and just like an unfaithful spouse, we cheated. We broke our promise. Now within these few verses, we don't get a particular list of the people's misdeeds. God has already had words on that through the prophet's multiple anguished conversations with God's people. They had strayed pretty far out there, and this isn't just about returning to obedience and posting the 10 Commandments in prominent places around the neighborhood. This is about infidelity and the lasting kind of wounds that broken promises put between the parties involved. God has every right to be furious, to exact

judgment by any means necessary, and once again wipe these evil, no-good, lying, cheating humans off the face of the planet.

But that's not what happens. Not even close. God, the wounded party in this case, decides to forgive US, of absolutely everything, and to draw US closer by writing GOD's promise of steadfast love and faithfulness across our hearts forevermore. Now you need to know that I say that God forgives "us" because this passage ultimately is about "us," even though we typically think about this passage as a conversation between God and those "might-be-chosen-but-not-so-faithful" Hebrew people. Somehow, in some way, no matter how far we try to remove ourselves or separate ourselves from God; God won't stop loving us. That's the promise, and God's promises are not like human promises. They are unbreakable.

So how do we know that God's promises are good for all time? That's the big question of our faith. How do we know that God is still our God even as we know that we still are at high risk for breaking that promise to be God's people? For me, the answer is clear, it's because we know the depths of God's love through Jesus. It's because we know the stories of a real life human example of what it looks like to keep the promise.

Jesus' perfection lies within that truth for me. Though he was a regular kind of human being like you and me, he kept the promise that we are hopelessly unable to keep. He was completely and utterly faithful in and to his relationship with God – even to the point of suffering a criminal's death rather than flaunt his connection before his accusers. Now, the radical part of that example is this: *then he asks us to follow him?* It doesn't seem fair. We aren't so good at keeping our egos in check, especially when death is on the line. Jesus knew somehow that it would be from his death that new life would spring forth. We struggle with that understanding something fierce. We don't want to believe that we must lose our lives to save them, that we must be like seed buried in the ground to

produce the fruit God desires, or that we must hate some things our world values if we are to live our lives fully integrated into God's plan. In fact, we so annihilate these terrifying parts of our faith tradition that we distance and distract ourselves from the message the cross was meant to convey. We avoid death by pointing year after year to what Jesus did on the cross rather than hear him boldly calling us to die to ourselves on crosses of our own making.

Jesus died to save us from our sin – that part of our doctrinal theology is true – but God was already working to free us from sin long before Jesus' sacrifice made that plain to see. God is ever revealing to us the choices we make between good and evil – whether we see it in the breaking of God's laws, or in failing to love our neighbors, or in the wounds that we've caused to someone we care about. And in those times when we forget and lose our way, God is ever reaching out to us, wiping away our sin and forgetting our iniquities, sometimes forgetting even what we cannot let go ourselves. Our sin is not without consequence. Going back to those broken promises for a minute – let us not forget the painful nature of our actions. Sin always, always, always leads to death. But because God loves us, we can see the way clearly to a new kind of life.

We have broken our promises, but God acts definitively to restore the covenant every time, through the law, through the prophets, through our hearts and prayers, and ultimately through the love shown to us in Jesus Christ. The love God demonstrates to us in the life of Jesus speaks to the most hurt places in our soul. Like those Greeks, we too wish to see Jesus so we will know him in his glory. This love that God has for us is so powerful that it must be too good to be true. It's almost too amazing to think that the cross is about our freedom to live without fear of punishment for our mistakes, bad choices, and flat out sin. In fact, it's so amazing that we start to think of the cross as an ultimate punishment rather than our path to salvation. That warps the story. That gives sin more power than God has ever given to it. In our theological history frequently we are pinned with an

understanding of the cross that is very limited in its approach. When we think of the cross as “substitutionary atonement” and little else, we do damage in the name of Jesus. That theological blip on the radar screen isn’t the whole picture. What it teaches is that all of human sin was pinned on Jesus, God’s little boy, because we were so bad, and only a “sacrifice” of the highest purity could make it right. That’s old tribal stuff. It says some things about our brokenness, but leaves out volumes about God’s real love for us. It’s sad to think that we’ve let people believe that the cross had final say, that we let some innocent man die because of some kind of horrific punishment that we deserved. To ignore the magnitude of God’s love is erroneous and only seeks to serve the power of the church as the covenant keeper rather than remember that GOD is the covenant keeper.

God is the one who restores the covenant. We really don’t need the church as the mediator. We never did. It helps to talk about it, to live in community, and to tell the old old stories of Jesus and his love. But when the church makes itself out to be the only source of healing of the breach, it doesn’t tell the whole story. The whole story is for all of humankind. Let’s give a little look-see at another famous text, John 3:16. For God so loved the _____ - that he gave his only Son. That’s news, good news, big news for all sinners and broken ones everywhere. It’s about the WORLD being told of God’s great love, of God’s great gift of healing, forgiveness, and restoration which comes through Jesus, the covenant made flesh, Immanuel. The church, rightfully, has a place in telling that story, but the story is not ours to keep for ourselves. It is for the whole world to know the depths of God’s love.

I don’t know about you, but for me, I want to know this love of God that makes my heart explode with joy. I want to know the depths of what it means to follow Jesus, even though it’s really, really scary. I want to trust that the story, the biblical story, reveals that God is not a punisher, God

is the covenant keeper, the restorer of life for all time. That's the God I trust. That's the God I believe in. That's the God shown to me most clearly in the promise kept - Christ Jesus. Amen.