

November 12
Lesson 11 (NIV)

PROMISE

OF A NEW COVENANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 87

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31

JEREMIAH 31:27-34

²⁷
“The
days
are



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coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. ²⁸ Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD. ²⁹ “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

³⁰ Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,

“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,

and they will be my people.
³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
 or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
 because they will all know me,
 from the least of them to the greatest,”
 declares the LORD.
 “For I will forgive their wickedness
 and will remember their sins no more.”

KEY VERSE

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.—
Jeremiah 31:33

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List salient features of the new covenant.
2. Explain the significance of the new covenant’s being written on the heart rather than on tablets of stone.
3. Identify an area of “head knowledge” of God’s will in his or her life that has not become “heart obedience,” and make a plan for correction.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. In Need of a Do-Over
- B. Lesson Background

I. Reversal of Judgment (JEREMIAH 31:27-30)

- A. Sowing Seed (v. 27)
- B. Rebuilding (v. 28)
Grow as You Go
- C. An Old Proverb (v. 29)
- D. A New Proverb (v. 30)
“Did You Do That?”

II. Restoration of Relationship (JEREMIAH 31:31-34)

- A. A New Covenant (v. 31)
- B. The Old Covenant (v. 32)
- C. Written on the Heart (v. 33)
- D. No More Sin (v. 34)

Conclusion

- A. The Power of the New Covenant
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. In Need of a Do-Over

My college alma mater used to hold a golf tournament during homecoming festivities. Sponsoring the tournament was my favorite Old Testament professor, and he went strictly by the rules. As a duffer, I hardly knew the rules, much less played by them. On one of my big swings off the tee, my ball landed up against a tree halfway down the fairway. The professor told me to take a penalty stroke and place the ball a club’s length from the tree.

But that would hurt my score! My golfing partner was much more lenient in the face of my frustration. He said, “Just take a do-over! Just kick it out from the tree and hit it! No penalty as far as I’m concerned.” Well, you can guess which voice I wanted to listen to!

While this experience is trivial by comparison, ancient Israel was given a do-over by God. Israel had to suffer exile for her sins, but God reversed the exile, restored the Israelites to their land, and granted the promise of a new covenant. There would be a new people of God in a day to come. They would know him in the fullest sense, would have his law written on their hearts, and would experience complete and total forgiveness for sin.

B. Lesson Background

Jeremiah’s ministry may have begun about 627 BC; many scholars believe he influenced the law reforms enacted by King Josiah (640-609 BC). Jeremiah lived to see the death of Josiah and the collapse of his reforms. Ultimately Jeremiah encouraged the people of Judah to capitulate to the new superpower, the Babylonians, because Babylon was the instrument of God’s judgment against their sins. Jeremiah’s ministry ended sometime after the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judah (Gedaliah) was assassinated in about 585 BC. The prophet was forced to flee to Egypt, where tradition says he died.

The book of Jeremiah is complicated, and its episodes are often difficult to date. Most of Jeremiah’s oracles are judgments against the Judeans, the people of the

southern kingdom of divided Israel (the tribes of the northern kingdom having been taken into exile by the Assyrians decades before). Those oracles lament the apostasy of the people. The only hope Jeremiah gives is found in a section known as the Book of Consolation, which is [Jeremiah 30:1-33:26](#).

But what a hope it is! God promised to make the exiles his people once again ([Jeremiah 30:22](#)), to “make a new covenant” with them ([31:31-34](#)), to return them to their land ([32:41](#)), and to establish once and for all time the Davidic dynasty as originally promised ([33:15-26](#); [30:9](#)). The theme of the Book of Consolation is restated often: “I will restore their fortunes” ([32:44](#); see [30:3](#), [18](#); [31:23](#); [33:7](#), [26](#)). The covenant theme of “You will be my people, and I will be your God” is also repeated ([30:22](#); also [31:1](#), [33](#); [32:38](#)).

I. Reversal of Judgment

([JEREMIAH 31:27-30](#))

A. Sowing Seed (v. 27)

27. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals.

This verse begins, as does [Jeremiah 31:31](#) (below), with a Hebrew word that means “Pay attention! This is important!” The word, absent a translation here, is rendered *Behold* in other versions of the Bible.

The phrase *the days are coming* occurs numerous times in this book ([Jeremiah 7:32](#); [9:25](#); [16:14](#); [19:6](#); [23:5](#), [7](#); [30:3](#); [31:27](#), [31](#), [38](#); [33:14](#); [48:12](#); [49:2](#); [51:47](#), [52](#)). Sometimes the phrase introduces a prediction of wrath and punishment. Those cases are entirely consistent with God’s warning, through Moses, that if the Israelites broke the covenant he made with them at Mount Sinai, then serious consequences would ensue ([Deuteronomy 28:15-68](#)). The bitterness of the forthcoming exile will be so profound that Jeremiah describes it with an image of Rachel “weeping for her children” ([Jeremiah 31:15](#); compare [Genesis 30:22](#); [Matthew 2:18](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyrians Uh-sear-e-unz.

Babylonians Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.

Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.

Ezekiel Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.

Gedaliah Ged-uh-lye-uh (G as in get).

Jeremiah Jair-uh-my-uh.

Josiah Jo-sigh-uh.

Pentecost Pent-ih-kost.

Philippians Fih-lip-ee-unz.

Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.

Yahweh (*Hebrew*) Yah-weh.

In the case at hand, however, the phrase *the days are coming* introduces a prediction of blessing and restoration. The depopulation of the Judean homeland that results from exile ([Jeremiah 33:10](#)) will be reversed, since God promises to *plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals* when the exile is over (compare [33:12](#), [13](#)).

We note that the promise includes the northern kingdom of Israel as well as the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrians. For all that we can perceive today, the northern tribes never recovered and never returned. Some Christians today look for that yet to happen. Others, however, interpret the return of “Israel” as the ingathering of Gentiles into the church (compare [Acts 15:12-21](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways our lives should demonstrate trust in God to fulfill his promises?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As the church corporate

In family life

As individuals

B. Rebuilding (v. 28)

28. “Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD.

In an obvious and a nonobvious way, this verse echoes [Jeremiah 1:10-12](#), which describes the call of Jeremiah, God’s plan for him, and God’s intended actions regarding Judah and Jerusalem. The obvious parallel consists of the words and phrases that are identical in the two places (*tear down, destroy, build, plant, etc.*).

The nonobvious parallel is a play on words in the Hebrew that isn’t apparent in English. The wordplay is set up when Jeremiah says, “I see the branch of an almond tree” ([Jeremiah 1:11](#)). God’s reply “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled” ([1:12](#)) then completes the wordplay because the noun translated “almond” and verb translated “am watching” are virtually identical in the original Hebrew. This connects with [31:28](#) in the fact that the same Hebrew verb occurs here twice, being translated *watched* and *will watch* (compare [44:27](#)).

In essence, these two segments reflect the twofold purpose of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry to Judah: (1) pronouncement of judgment upon the nation because of their sins and (2) the subsequent restoration after the people have “gotten the message” regarding who is behind both—none other than God himself. This theme occurs repeatedly throughout the book (compare [Jeremiah 18:7](#); [24:6](#); [31:40](#); [32:41](#), [42](#); [44:27](#); [45:4](#), [5](#)).

GROW AS YOU GO

One summer I found a packet of mixed flower seeds and decided to plant them. It was a simplistic effort on my part: not much soil preparation other than digging up some weeds, scattering the seeds, and covering them over. Amazingly, one by one, here and there, tiny little shoots began to emerge. Some grew quickly, others slowly, but eventually there was a hodgepodge of flowers of various heights, sizes, and vibrant colors. A later attempt to repeat this success brought only dismay. My neglect in the second effort was apparent—as was my silly assumption that a garden would reinstate itself without nurture.



Sheet 4—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 11. Point to this visual as you ask, “In what sense is it now 10 minutes to midnight? In what sense is it 10 minutes to high noon? Why?”

There are times when we treat the spiritual garden of our walk with God the same way. Planting with deliberation and intent yields spiritual results ([1 Corinthians 3:6](#); etc.). This includes planting the Word of God in our hearts. To fail to do so is to stagnate spiritually. Stagnation eventually becomes regression as worldly philosophies seep in and persuade us to trust our own strengths and abilities (compare [Colossians 2:8](#)). Before we realize it, the pressures to succeed and guarantee our futures in this world have come to dominate our thoughts and actions (compare [Luke 12:16-21](#)).

The Bible is the light for our way ([Psalm 119:105](#); compare [2 Timothy 3:16](#)). In Christ we have within us “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” ([John 4:14](#)).

To neglect the things of God is to invite him to neglect us. But to embrace his way fully is to invite his blessing. Have we learned anything from the history of Israel? See [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#).

—C. M. W.

C. An Old Proverb (v. 29)

29. “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

When the future exiles wallow in the misery of their situation, they naturally will try to come to grips with the reason for it. In so doing, many will latch on to a proverb that becomes popular, the one we see in the verse before us (compare [Ezekiel 18:2](#)). This proverb is a “Why me?” complaint. The effect is to blame God for being unjust in punishing the wrong people (compare [Ezekiel 18:25-29](#); [33:17-20](#)).

But lest we be too quick to dismiss this proverb as mere blame-shifting, we should recognize precedent for it in [Exodus 34:7](#). That passage affirms that God “punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (also [Exodus 20:5](#)). Today we readily observe the intergenerational consequences of parents sent to jail for committing crimes. Children often do suffer for the sins of their fathers (compare [Lamentations 5:7](#); [Jeremiah 32:18, 19](#)).

The fact that the sins of one generation have consequences for another is not the same as saying that God punishes an innocent group for the sins of a guilty group. Even so, Israelite history does indeed record instances of children dying as a consequence of the sins of their parents (see [Numbers 16:23-33](#); [Joshua 7:24, 25](#); [2 Samuel 11:1-12:19](#); [21:1-9](#)). Although there are times when the all-knowing and sovereign God deems this to be fitting, it is rare and certainly not the norm. The problem in today’s text is that when exile comes, the people will apply the proverb to disavow any culpability for their situation.

What Do You Think?

How would you counsel a fellow believer who blames distressing circumstances on the actions of others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When the claim is true
- When the claim is false

D. A New Proverb (v. 30)

30. “Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.

The old proverb will not do! People will be punished for their own sins, not the sins of others (compare [Ezekiel 18:3, 4](#)).

Scholars often emphasize the element of “corporate responsibility” in Hebrew thinking to the point that a concept of “personal responsibility” seems almost nonexistent. That is not accurate! Both levels of responsibility are part of Hebrew thought. For example, Moses tried three times to blame the people for his not being allowed to enter the promised land ([Deuteronomy 1:37](#); [3:26](#); [4:21](#)), but God put the blame squarely on Moses himself ([32:51, 52](#)). Other examples could be given.

All of us have enough sin in our lives to justify any punishment from God. To blame someone else will not do. Not only is the old proverb thrown out, a new one replaces it: *whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge*.

“DID YOU DO THAT?”

We see the humor in videos that show dog owners accusing their pets of having committed some catastrophe in the home. The accusatory “Did you do that?” results in sad expressive eyes and slumped body on the part of the dog, giving the sense that he realizes he has been caught in a wrongdoing. With circumstantial evidence stacked against the creature, he looks guilty whether he actually is or not.

A little toddler might react the same way as a parent pretends to appear serious because of some mishap—a spilled bowl of cereal, food covering the toddler’s face and hair, etc. But all the while the parent tries to hide his own laughter at the child’s surprise at being caught. The retelling of the tale to others and the ensuing chuckles validate the less-than-serious nature of the misdeed.

However, the age and culpability of the accused and the nature of a crime can affect our humor, or lack of it, at some offenses. We are likely to consider these quite differently—with sadness of heart for bad choices, or maybe with demands for justice to be swift and severe for the horrendous actions.

If we are honest and discerning, though, a sense of fairness will sometimes point its finger back at ourselves. If we judge our wrongdoings to be less reprehensible than those of others, [Romans 3:23](#) is a pointed reminder otherwise. Even so, we do not forget the eternal judge whose love and mercy far surpasses the transgressions anyone commits ([Romans 4:7, 8](#)). All of us can be glad for that.

—C. M. W.

II. Restoration of Relationship

([JEREMIAH 31:31-34](#))

A. A New Covenant (v. 31)

31. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

The phrase *the days are coming* refers to “the last days” of prophetic utterance ([Isaiah 2:2](#); [Micah 4:1](#)) when the Messiah comes to establish God’s reign. In addition to places in today’s lesson text, similar words are found in [Jeremiah 30:7, 8, 24](#); [31:38](#); [33:14, 15](#), all of which are located within the Book of Consolation (see the [Lesson Background](#)).

Various passages speak of something new to be done or established for people of God (examples: [Ezekiel 11:19](#); [Malachi 3:16-4:1-6](#)). But the verse before us is the only place in the Old Testament where the term *new covenant* is used. Some have proposed that if we could pick the single most important verse in the Old Testament, [Jeremiah 31:31](#) would be it.

[Hebrews 8:8-12](#) indicates the vital importance of [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) by quoting it in its entirety—the longest quotation of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament. Much of what follows [Hebrews 8:8-12](#) is commentary on this Jeremiah passage. Jesus referred to this new covenant when he instituted the Lord's Supper ([Luke 22:20](#); [1 Corinthians 11:25](#)).

As noted in comments on [Jeremiah 31:27](#), above, interpretations vary on the meaning of the word *Israel* in the sense intended in this passage. Some students propose that the historical northern kingdom of Israel was so sinful that it was or should be considered Gentile or pagan (compare [2 Kings 17:15](#); etc.). Thus to unite Israel and Judah would be like adding Gentiles to the people of God (see [Romans 15:8-13](#)). Others think that [Jeremiah 3:11](#) calls the basis of this viewpoint into question: "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah" (see also [Ezekiel 16:51, 52](#)). Even so, Gentiles are promised a blessing through Abraham ([Genesis 12:3](#); [22:18](#); etc.).

B. The Old Covenant (v. 32)

32. "It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

The old covenant was received at Mount Sinai by the generation that God rescued *out of Egypt* in the exodus ([Exodus 19-24](#)). Tragically, the Israelites repeatedly broke that covenant (see [Exodus 32](#); [Jeremiah 7:21-26](#); [11:1-17](#)). The relationship between God and his people is therefore analogous to that of a faithful husband who has an unfaithful wife (compare [Hosea 2](#)). Israelite unfaithfulness is frequently described in terms of adultery ([Jeremiah 3:6-10](#); [5:7](#); etc.).

What Do You Think?

How does covenant faithfulness toward God compare and contrast with other types of covenant keeping?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding marriage covenants
- Regarding community (neighborhood) covenants
- Regarding financial contracts
- Other

C. Written on the Heart (v. 33)

33. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

The not-that-but-this format of [Jeremiah 31:32, 33](#) signifies that contrasting elements of the two covenants are to be noted. The old covenant has been written on stone ([Exodus 24:12](#); [31:18](#); [34:1](#)), and the people of the era are to internalize its laws ([Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#)). The new covenant, by contrast, is written *in their minds* and *on their hearts*, and God is the one who puts it there (compare [Hebrews 10:16](#)). It is through the Holy Spirit, who indwells each and every Christian, that God does so, as suggested by [Romans 8:5-11](#).

The contrasts invite examination of similarities as well. We see one such similarity in the verse before us: *I will be their God, and they will be my people* (compare [Jeremiah 24:7](#); [30:22](#); [31:1](#); [32:38](#); [Ezekiel 11:20](#); [14:11](#); [36:28](#); [37:23, 27](#); [Zechariah 8:8](#)). This is also the typical phrase for creating covenants of the Old Testament era (see [Exodus 29:45](#); [Leviticus 26:12](#); [Jeremiah 7:23](#); [11:4](#)). We note that this similarity speaks to the intended result, while the contrasts speak to differing methods for achieving that result. Those living under the old covenant could have lived under God's desired outcome, but their law breaking made that impossible.

So a new method was needed. That new method is not explained fully in our lesson text. But our historical perspective affirms that the new covenant is founded on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

What Do You Think?

How can you make your heart more receptive to having God's Word written on it?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding things to do more of
- Regarding things to do less of
- Regarding things to abandon altogether

D. No More Sin (v. 34)

34. "No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This verse predicts a perfect state of affairs: no one is needed to teach about the Lord because everyone already has the knowledge. This seems puzzling, since we understand that a teaching function does indeed exist under the new covenant ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#); [Romans 12:7](#); etc.).

One interpretation proposes that the verse before us looks to the time after Jesus' second coming, when our presence with God in Heaven yields our fullest knowledge of him. Another interpretation proposes that Jeremiah's prediction contrasts the need for human mediators under the old covenant (priests of the tribe of Levi) with the direct access to God that people have under the new covenant ([1 Thessalonians 4:9](#); [Hebrews 4:16](#); [10:19-22](#); [1 John 2:27](#)).

Either way, the time of the new covenant will be an era when the people of God include more than the peoples of ancient Israel and Judah. Knowledge of God will spread to peoples of all nations and languages ([Revelation 7:9](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways should forgiveness change one's behavior?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Toward God
Toward fellow believers
Toward unbelievers

Conclusion

A. The Power of the New Covenant

The restoration promised in today's text began with the return of exiles and the rebuilding of the temple. But the promised restoration was not fully inaugurated until the coming of Jesus in the first century AD. [Hebrews 8](#) establishes that the promises of [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) are fulfilled in Jesus, our high priest.

When we put today's text alongside [Romans 4:16; 9:6-8](#), we see the old covenant being replaced by a new one—a covenant based not on law and physical ancestry but on faith in the one whose death paid the price for our sins: Jesus Christ. This expands the covenant people to include potentially every person regardless of ancestry, nationality, etc. It was possible for “a foreigner” to be included under the old covenant ([Exodus 12:48, 49; Numbers 15:13-16](#); etc.), but the division between Israelite and non-Israelite was still there. A power of the new covenant is to tear down that barrier ([Ephesians 2:14](#)). All are welcome!

B. Prayer

Father, thank you for the new covenant we have in Christ! By his sacrifice we experience daily forgiveness. You have transformed our wills and minds to yours, and we are grateful. May we love you with all our hearts, with the entirety of our being. We pray in Christ's name, amen.

C. Thought to Remember

May God's law be written on our hearts.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

On the board write the following in large letters:

CTRL-Z

Ask the class if those letters look familiar. Have someone explain what they mean.

Say, “Those familiar with computers will know that the letters stand for a computer shortcut for an ‘undo’ command. When the Control and Z keys are pressed at the same time, the last change a user made is reversed. A typo disappears. An accidentally deleted address is restored. An altered photograph is changed to its original state.” After discussing the value of an “undo” command on a computer, ask learners to tell of a time they wished they had had an “undo” command for a life situation.

Alternative. Download and distribute copies of the “Out with the Old” activity. Ask students to complete it individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “We all have experienced times when we wished we could do something over again or take back words spoken in haste. Although we cannot undo the past, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of a ‘do-over’ that God would grant His people.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into an equal number of pairs or small groups. Instruct each group to read what Jeremiah said in today's text and write a brief summary as though they were TV news reporters. Half of the groups are to focus on the bad news in his words, and the other half are to focus on the good news. The bad news groups should mention the coming exile and why it will happen. The good news groups should talk about God's promise to sow seeds and replant after the exile, along with his promise of a new covenant.

Below are some possible contents of the reports. Use parts of these as hints for groups that have a hard time getting started.

Bad News Report—*In his speech today, the prophet Jeremiah had more gloomy predictions about what God is going to do to this nation. Using images of God's uprooting, tearing down, destroying, and bringing disaster, Jeremiah let the audience know that they could expect terrible times ahead. He reminded them of how they had broken the covenant. Using some proverbs, Jeremiah said that the people had no one to blame but themselves.*

Good News Report—*In his speech today, Jeremiah seemed determined to lift everyone's spirits with his encouraging words about a hopeful future. Even though God will punish the nation and tear it down, there is a day coming when he will rebuild and replant. God will also replace the old covenant written on stones with a covenant written on hearts. It will be a time when God's people will be just that in the fullest sense.*

Ask for volunteers to read their reports as a TV news reporter would.

Into Life

Lead a discussion on the new covenant by asking these questions: (1) What is it about us humans that just knowing what we should do to please God is not enough to help us do it? (2) Why is the new covenant more helpful than the old? (3) How does God's gift of the Holy Spirit make a difference? (4) In what ways was your life changed for the better since you became a Christian?

Distribute tiny heart-stickers and suggest that class members place them where they can be reminded frequently of their new hearts—on a mirror where they get dressed for the day, on the edge of a computer screen, on the case of a smartphone, etc.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the reproducible page activity “In with the New.” This can serve as a homework assignment to help class members review the differences between the old and new covenants.