

GOD'S LAW IN THE HEART

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 31:1–40;
John 1:17; Hebrews
8:7–13

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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.
(Jer. 31:33b)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Oct. 20	Joel 2:28–32	A New Salvation
T	Oct. 21	Ezek. 36:25–35	A New Heart
W	Oct. 22	Deut. 10:12–21	The Law's Essence
Th	Oct. 23	2 Cor. 3:1–6	A New Covenant
F	Oct. 24	2 Cor. 3:7–11	A New Spirit
Sa	Oct. 25	2 Cor. 3:12–17	A New Freedom

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

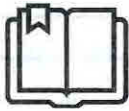
This lesson on Jeremiah highlights the hope he held during the dark time of exile. Jeremiah 30–31 is part of the book of Reconciliation (chaps. 30–33), which follows Jeremiah's letter to the exiles telling them to settle down for an extended stay in Babylon. This section of the prophetic writings is made up of poems with one basic theme: salvation after judgment. The time of redemption will be a time of joy.

The focus of Jeremiah's good news is the new covenant God promises to write within the people's hearts (Jer. 31:33b). As some scholars point out, this is more a renewal of the original covenant agreement than something completely new. God still seeks a relationship with human beings that is based on love, trust, and commitment—only now, Jeremiah says, God will help the people understand the gifts of the covenant better so that they may be more inspired by gratitude to honor it.

Jeremiah's first task had been to let people know that God had canceled the existing covenant because the people of Israel had not kept their part of the bargain. Once in exile, the prophet was to reassure the people that God still longed for a relationship with Israel. To this end, God would bring an inner change—a spiritual transformation—to the commu-

nity of faith. The people could not change themselves; their natural inclinations were all in the wrong direction. If God brought about their change, however, it would be real and lasting. Change would come, not because of any human effort, but only by the grace of God.

Loving God, you give us so many chances to be the people you created us to be. You sent your beloved Son to redeem us, your Holy Spirit to empower us, and the Scriptures to guide us. Write your covenant on our hearts, and fill us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 31:29–34; John 1:17

31:29 In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

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, 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.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

1:17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

A NEW COVENANT

Jeremiah 31 begins with a promise of restoration. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the majority of the people, along with their animals, were deported to Babylon, leaving the land depleted and depopulated. The promise was that God would not

only repopulate Israel and Judah but also, by divine action, reunite the divided countries (31:2–14). Not since the death of Solomon (c. 922 BCE) had there been a united kingdom.

Verses 1–26 focus on God’s continued love and faithfulness to the people despite their past choices to break the covenant relationship. The text abounds with glorious images:

- all shall return, even those marginalized in the society (v. 8);
- there will be singing, dancing, and great joy (vv. 4, 12–13);
- redeemed and forgiven, the repentant people will find a safe haven and a secure future (vv. 5, 11–12, 17–20, 24–25).

This is the context for Jeremiah’s words concerning the new covenant, a passage that has been called his most important teaching. This is where the prophet’s religious thought reached its climax. One might add that the text serves as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Hebrews 8:8–12 quotes this new covenant in full; 1 Corinthians 11:25, quoting Jesus from Luke 22:20, refers to the words of institution from the Lord’s Supper: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” Read in this context, Jeremiah 31:31–34 can be considered a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Unlike the old covenant expressed in the Ten Commandments and written on tablets of stone, the new covenant would place the law within the person, written on each heart. For the Hebrews, the heart was associated with *understanding* as well as *emotions*. Thus, the internalization of God’s law would help the people see the purpose behind God’s instructions, thereby making them more willing to abide by them—which, in turn, would lead to peace and wholeness.

As Jeremiah describes it, the *law* was not new, only the covenant *about* the law was new. The newness came as a result of new power, guidance, and motivation to keep the law that the people had already received. As a result, some biblical interpreters suggest that the term *renewed covenant* might be more fitting than *new covenant*. Either way, the unconditional agreement that God made was, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (31:33b). For Christians, the fulfillment of this promise is seen in the relationship we have to God through Jesus Christ, in whom we see and celebrate the “grace and truth” (John 1:17) of God made complete.



Do you prefer new or renewed covenant? Why?

WRITTEN ON THE HEART

What can we see as elements of continuity between the old and new covenants? Like the old, the new covenant is still between God and God's people. Both covenants were initiated by God, not by humankind, and were centered in both a divine act of redemption and the revelation of God's will. Both covenants have the common goal of establishing a close, personal relationship with God.

Of course, there are dissimilar elements of the covenants. The internal nature of the new covenant means less dependency on a human mediator, like Moses. For Christians, the new covenant gives a much clearer revelation of God; to see and know Jesus is to see and know God.

Take a moment to reflect on what message this text conveyed to Jeremiah's hearers. They knew that God promised to make them prosper and that they would be responsible for their own sins instead of blaming other people or circumstances for the consequences they received. They may have been able to grasp the idea that the Mosaic covenant would be reinterpreted by a new covenant. However, the idea that the new covenant would be written on their hearts and that God would forgive sin and remember it no more—well, that probably caused people to wonder how such a thing could happen.

We share many of the same concerns that Jeremiah's listeners held. Consider our tendency to shift blame. Corporations, agencies, institutions, individuals, and even the church find that passing the buck can occur up and down the ladder. An executive can accuse a secretary of being inept; the secretary, in turn, can fault the executive for giving unclear instructions. A losing coach can accuse the players of being lazy or untalented; they can retaliate by saying that the coach taught bad tactics. A preacher may blame the congregation for its apathy, while the parishioners may fault the preacher for lack of leadership. Jeremiah would remind individuals in 2025 that we need to be accountable for our own actions.

The message of this text steps into the present as God says, in essence, "Accept responsibility for what you do: be accountable for your actions." Then God continues, "Live out the law that I have written on your hearts, for I choose to be in a covenantal relationship with you." God, through the prophet Jeremiah, spoke words of encouragement to Israel when the world around them looked bleak. Today, with the challenges we face in 2025,

Jeremiah's message of hope remains one that we need to hear. Thanks be to God!

 What does it mean to you to have God's covenant written on your heart? What difference do you feel this makes?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The note of optimism and hope came bursting forth from Jeremiah after a forty-year ministry of disappointments and frustrations. The prophet clearly understood that religion involved a personal knowledge of God. However, his teaching of this truth to others had fallen on closed ears and had resulted in apathy and fruitlessness. The negative role of the weeping prophet and Jeremiah's message of judgment and destruction have been replaced by a joyous note of expectation and promise. Beyond the moral and spiritual tragedy of his own time, Jeremiah could see a *new* day.

This kind of optimistic clarity can be hard to achieve. At one time or another, most of us feel anxious or confused about the future. We face a barrage of ideas and concerns that shape our lives as we move through this challenging century. In a broad realm, there is global warming, worldwide political unrest, and even the renewed potential threat of nuclear attack. Closer to home, as I write this, there is seemingly stagnant inflation, an increase in school shootings, and a torrent of hate speech and attacks. It's easy to see only bleak challenges around us.

It is no surprise that the uncertainty we feel about the future sometimes overwhelms us. We tell ourselves that what we are living through is different—no other generation has had to deal with everything we do. We are tempted to give up in the face of such overwhelming problems. We tell ourselves that our involvement, our action, our vote will not make a difference one way or the other.

However, the prophet's word still echoes down through the years to tell us we must be involved. We must hold fast to all that we believe, although the changing structures in society threaten our way of life. We must maintain hope that God remains in charge, working for the good of all. If we lose sight of this hope, we lose all motivation to keep working in and for the faith.

One document from our Presbyterian heritage, "A Declaration of Faith," puts it this way:

We know our efforts cannot bring in God's kingdom.
But hope plunges us into the struggle
for victories over evil that are possible now
in the world, the church, and our individual lives.
Hope gives us courage and energy
to contend against all opposition,
however invincible it may seem,
for the new world and the new humanity
that are surely coming.

Jesus is Lord!
He has been Lord from the beginning.
He will be Lord at the end.¹

 This week's lesson encourages staying connected to God, maintaining hope for the future, and continuing to work in and for the faith. What helps you achieve these goals?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. "I am your God and you are my people" is known as the covenant formula. A covenant is an agreement between two parties. As the superior party, God determines the conditions of the agreement, taking responsibility for the people's response. God will empower the people to uphold their end of the agreement.
 2. Jeremiah 31:29–34 reflects Deuteronomistic theology with priority given to the covenant with God (Deut. 5:2–3), the heart nature of the covenantal relationship (Deut. 4:29; compare Jer. 29:13), and faithful human response characterized by love and commitment to God and God's covenant (see Deut. 6:4–9).
 3. Some students of the Bible translate "new covenant" as "renewed covenant." The covenant is always the same, linking the heart-based relationship with God and a heart-based obedience to God's word. It is necessarily renewed when sinful humanity breaks covenant with God, as seen in both Old and New Testaments.
 4. Sin leads to God's judgment, which includes grace and the means to restoration and renewal (Rom. 8:3–4). God makes the first move toward reconciling with the covenant people.
1. "A Declaration of Faith," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 26, bit.ly/TPWDDecofFaith.