

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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New Comes from God

Jeremiah 31:27-40

"The days are coming." How's that for an attention-grabbing declaration? That's the way today's text from Jeremiah begins. Something to wake you up and stir your interest. It's a good example of how words have power. The power to alert you. The power to convert you. The power to change you. The power to motivate you. The power to move you. The power to make you.

Actually, by putting it this way, I've just been using one of the most powerful words in the English language—"You." Researchers tell us that few things light us up like seeing our own names in print or on the screen. This helps explain why your name appears in so many of the messages that you receive, particularly emails. Along with the word "You," Gregory Ciotti has identified four other major "power words" that can have a significant influence on your decision making processes: "Free" (We love free stuff); "Because" (We're more likely to respond when there's a compelling reason); "Instantly" (We want things yesterday). And last but certainly not least, the word "New." Novelty does a wonderful job of activating certain centers in the brain.¹ And not just the mind, but key locations in the heart as well.

No one understands the behavior-shaping power of these types of words better than advertisers, copywriters, and others involved in marketing. That's especially the case with novelty. Discoveries in neuroscience confirm that the appeal of "new" is hard-wired into our brains. In other words, we have circuitry in our heads that seeks novelty, as in new products, or sometimes just old products that have been repackaged in new ways.

The relationship between the old and the new is often hard to figure out. Even after you've gotten people's attention with statements like, "The time is coming," you still have to lay out the difference between the way things have been and the way things will be. You still have to describe how things will be different once the old has gone and the new has arrived. "'The time is coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a *new* (emphasis mine) covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers. . . .'" (vv. 31-32). This is the only reference in the entire Old Testament to a new covenant, though there's certainly plenty of other language and imagery, especially in the prophetic writings, about newness.

Of course newness also means change, which often isn't one of our favorite words. But according to our text, there's something about God's covenant relationship with his people that needs to change. What is it? Is it primarily a change on God's side of the relationship? Was there a design flaw in his previous covenant with the people? Does God now need to go back and rethink the way that he engages with Israel? No, the problem is primarily on the people's side of the relationship. The old covenant broke down because God's people fell in love with other gods and failed to live justly with one another. They turned away from the one who had rescued them and had made them his own. So now, when God's people look around, they see how their infidelity has damaged their bond with God. The

city walls have been torn down and the Temple destroyed. Individuals and families have been torn away from their homes and dragged away to a foreign land.

But the good news is that God will not allow his people's past unfaithfulness to destroy his relationship with them. Out of the old will come the new. It's not as if God is a fickle and unpredictable deity who tries one covenant, and that doesn't work, so he rolls out covenant II, and if that's not popular, he'll go back and try the old covenant again. No, God's character hasn't changed. He still loves his people. He still cares about them. He still looks on them with compassion and mercy. He still wants them to live in a relationship of trust and mutuality. What has been true is still true. As we hear the Lord saying to his people earlier in this chapter, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness" (31:3). Because God's love for his people is everlasting, that makes it both old and new. Old, in that the love of God has brought them this far. New, in that the love of God will get them to where they need to be, back into restored relationship with him.

But how is this going to happen? Clearly, the new can't be created solely from the people's side of the relationship. True, they'll have a part to play through their response to God's mercy and favor. But if the relationship between God and his people is going to be fixed, and become what God intends it to be, the fixing will have to come mainly from God's side of the situation. God, not the people, is the one saying, "The days are coming." God, not the people, is the one talking about what he's going to do and what he's going to make. So this is a declaration about what God's unmerited favor, not our effort, can accomplish. It's an announcement of renewal, of revival, that only God's grace can create.

According to God, this is what will put the "new" in new covenant: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (v. 33). Now this doesn't mean that God will simply embed his commandments and teachings in his people's memory, so that they can retrieve them as occasion calls for it and attempt to put them into practice, sort of like retrieving data from a hard drive. No, what God intends is much deeper than that. God wants to get his will, his teaching, his Spirit, into the very guts of his people. He wants his character and purpose to be enfleshed and embodied in our lives, individually and together. In short, God wants to get more of his heart into our hearts.

I once saw a picture drawn by a seven-year-old who was depicting the belief that God lives inside everything. He drew a picture of a doctor with a pair of scissors, standing over a patient in surgery. There was a bright light shining out from a huge incision that reached from the patient's chest to his waist. This young artist summarized his picture this way: "God lives inside every living thing. So my doctor has seen God when he cuts people open."²

It's true that God wants his faithfulness and righteousness to be on display. But the main way that happens is by how we as his people live in right relationship with God and with one another. And that involves a deep, intimate knowledge of God and a heart oriented to his will. Getting that kind of heart requires an act of God. Earlier Jeremiah had said, "Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars" (17:1). In other words, the old heart is engraved with an evil inclination to resist God and his will. But the good news is that the human heart is rewriteable. God's forgiveness can erase the heart's old content, so that new stuff can be inscribed on it, and we can become obedient and responsive to God's love, not just because God says so but because we actually desire to do the will of God, and are given the power to do so.

According to Jeremiah, this new heart, a heart in sync with the will of God, isn't supposed to belong to just a select few. God wants all his people to have his law in their hearts. "No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother saying, '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.'" (v. 34).

After the supper, says Luke, Jesus "took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you' (22:20). One of the reasons we come to this table is because we believe that in Jesus Christ, God kept his promise to make us his people and to get his will into our guts. The covenant that we remember here at the Lord's Table is both old and new. Old in that the God who saved his people Israel is the same God who saved us and brought us into the life of his people through Christ's death and resurrection. New in that God is still working on renovating our hearts and reshaping our desires, so that we more fully and faithfully embody his righteousness.

The Lord's Supper is a place where we remember that though our love for God often falters and fails, his love does not. The old is still true: "I have loved you with an everlasting love." But only as we come back to the old and claim it anew do we truly experience renewal. And that's part of what the Lord's Supper is, a meal of renewal. A renewed heart. A renewed mind. A renewed love for God. A renewed devotion to Christ. A renewed commitment to his church. A renewed desire to have your own will be in sync with his will, and your ways more aligned with his ways.

¹ Gregory Ciotti, "The 5 Most Persuasive Words in the English Language." Copyblogger website. December 6, 2012. Accessed August 31, 2016 <<http://www.copyblogger.com/persuasive-copywriting-words/>>.

² At <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/13-pictures-showing-the-adorable-ways-kids-describe-god_us_5625244be4b02f6a900d2331>.