

Holy Thursday
Jeremiah 31:31–34

The new covenant makes a new you.

- 1) The Old Covenant was lacking for a lacking people.
- 2) The New Covenant makes the weak strong.

*³¹Yes, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.*

*³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers,
when I took them by the hand
and led them out of the land of Egypt.*

*They broke that covenant of mine,
although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.*

*³³But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days,
declares the LORD.*

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

*I will be their God,
and they will be my people.*

*³⁴No longer will each one teach his neighbor,
or each one teach 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 guilt,
and I will remember their sins no more.*

How much do you love the gospel? It’s one of those questions that’s hard to answer but can be helpful as you reflect on life. You look at Jesus and what he’s done, and you ask yourself how meaningful it is to you. How has it changed your life? Tonight, we are going spend time comparing the old covenant, the covenant of the law, to the new covenant of the gospel. And we are going to see how this new covenant finds us in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Right away in our text tonight, Jeremiah writes that God was planning a new covenant or a new deal with his people. This would not be like their fathers’ covenant with God. But with all this covenant talk, what was the old covenant? Well, it was the deal God made with his people at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19-24. It was based on the law, not just the Ten Commandments, but all the ceremonial worship and diet laws and all the civil societal laws. And what was the deal? If they kept these laws, then they would be his treasured possession.

Easy enough, right? Keep God’s rules and God will take care of you. But open up any part of the Old Testament, and you’ll see that this was not all that easy. Jeremiah points it out. God says, “It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.” Again and again, Israel

was an unfaithful wife. Because they were not faithful to God, their actions broke the covenant. They ceased to be God's treasured possession. We see this as God allowed them to face brutal military defeats. We see it as God allowed their enemies to drive them out of Jerusalem and all of Israel. Even Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple because of Israel's unfaithfulness to God's old covenant in his time.

The old covenant could not save because it demands something that sinful humans cannot produce: perfection. Unfortunately, the old covenant is still the guiding force of many today. Many people live with this theology that God will love them if they collect enough merit badges for the Lord, if they do enough good works to make God happy. Maybe you've never completely fallen into this trap, but one of the biggest temptations we face in life is to backslide into the old covenant. Why? It tickles our sinful heart's desire to have control. We like being the masters of our own destiny. And our culture tells us that if we have anything handed to us and don't earn it ourselves, we are lazy and weak. There is a lot of danger in living by the old covenant. It focuses us more on our actions and less on God's grace. It convinces us when we sin that all we need to do is try harder, all the while deep down we're racked with the guilt of knowing we can never live up to God's standard of perfection.

All this is not to say that the old covenant was bad. God was not dangling this impossible feat in front of people to tease and depress them. The old deal served a purpose. It showed people their sin. An honest person, looking at all God's commands, must have admitted to themselves at some point that they could not fulfill God's demands. But that showed them something even more important: the need for a Savior. Sinners need someone to step in and purify them before God, and that exactly what the old covenant showed. And as people in the Old Testament lived under that old covenant, they saw God's promised Messiah off in the distance, prepared to free them from sin and make them into everything they once hoped the law would.

God was hurt deeply by his people's inability to keep his law. He was hurt because of all the times they cheated on him and took for granted all the good he had done for them. Punishment came because of their sin. But the punishment was never permanent. The snakes in the wilderness bit and killed many Israelites, but God sent the bronze snake to stop the dying. Israel was carried off into captivity, but eventually God changed the heart of the pagan king to fund their return and rebuilding of David's city.

Because the people could not keep God's commands, here in Jeremiah 31, God speaks specifically, using that term, "new covenant." But what makes the new covenant different than the old? The new covenant would not be a two-sided agreement. And that's great because man fails to live up to God's expectations at every turn. Instead, the one-sided promise God gives in the new covenant is forgiveness with no strings attached. Because the new covenant would be one-sided, the focus would not be on the law. The focus would be on Christ keeping the law in our place. So, you could say that while the old covenant served a purpose, namely, to show people their failure before God and their need for something more, the new covenant simply points to Jesus and says, "There. It's all done. Look at the life of Jesus, lived perfectly in your place. Look at the death of Jesus, that one sacrifice where he took on your sin to give you his perfection." The new covenant gives peace because it doesn't ask for anything in return. In it, God gives and gives and gives, and not once does he tell you it's time to pay up. Not once does he look at one of your sins and say, "Well, this one I can't forgive."

The new covenant changes the way we live, doesn't it? No longer are we living for God in order to get something, like those under the old covenant. Now we are living for gratitude. And the difference is huge. Those living under the compulsion of the old covenant are constantly focused on doing the right thing for their own sakes. But those living under the new covenant are more focused on doing what's right for the sake of their Savior. This has an effect on how a person deals with sin. An old covenant man or woman carries a deep fear

when they sin, as if God will at any moment jump out of a closet and sock them in the face. But a new covenant person is not afraid of God, because they know he is their Heavenly Father who welcomes them to come to him as penitent sinners and they are assured the price Jesus paid was enough and was for them.

You have a sinful nature that wants to draw you back into old covenant thinking, to live by the law and not by the gospel of Jesus. But when your betraying heart pushes you back to work righteousness, do everything you can to silence it. Tell it, “Scripture plainly says that I am saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law. Therefore, my salvation is not found in me. It is found in Christ who is always for me.”

This new covenant is announced by God through Jeremiah, but those words “new covenant” are not used again throughout the Old Testament. The next time they are mentioned is in the Gospel for tonight, as Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper for his disciples. On the night before Jesus dies, he seals this new covenant, that one-sided deal between God and man, with this special meal. He gives them bread and says, “This is my body, which is given for you.” He gives them wine and says, “This cup is the new testament [new covenant] in my blood, which is being poured out for you.” This meal brings forgiveness. This meal gives the assurance that this new covenant is in effect and that it’s yours.

But are there times when you don’t value the Lord’s Supper? Do you ever just take it for granted, not thinking about it too much as you come up and get your bread and wine? I think it would be a fair question to ask, “If I confess my sins and the pastor tells me I’m forgiven at the beginning of the service, why do I need this?” And the answer would be, “Because you don’t always trust words.” God tells you that your forgiveness comes from Jesus and not from your own works, but I’ve had plenty of conversations, even with our own members, where people think God’s love for them is based on how hard they work to keep his commands. In moments of weakness, the thoughts even cross my own mind. And so, when God’s called servant in front of you tells you that your sins are completely and permanently forgiven, you might be tempted to not believe it. They’re just words anyway, and everybody lies sometimes.

So, what does God do? He invites you to come to his table and he does a miracle right before your eyes. He takes bread and wine and gives you your Lord’s body and blood. He takes a miserable sinner, who deserves death and hell, and instead promises them life and heaven. And he takes you, with all your doubt and skepticism that anything could ever be as free and amazing as God purports his grace to be, and he touches your hands and your tongue and your nose and your eyes and your ears with the certainty that his heart belongs to you, and that you no longer live under the two-sided old covenant, but under the one-sided, always God-for-us, new covenant, where Christ is our all-in-all only because we were first his.

In a few minutes, as we prepare to receive that sign of the new covenant, we’re going to spend a few minutes in personal mediation. We’ll think about our sins, those sins that drive us to fear and self-loathing. But we’ll also think about our Savior, who gives us his body and blood to tear those sins off of us and send them away forever. Tonight, when you receive this meal, and every time you receive it, don’t take it for granted. This is your forgiveness. This is your salvation. This is the new covenant in his blood for you. Amen.

Good Friday
Galatians 3:10-13
The Cursed Name of Jesus

- 1) Pierced by Our Sins
- 2) Cursed for Our Sins

¹⁰*In fact, those who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. For it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.”* ¹¹*Clearly no one is declared righteous before God by the law, because “The righteous will live by faith.”* ¹²*The law does not say “by faith.” Instead it says, “The one who does these things will live by them.”*

¹³*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. As it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”*

In the early 2000’s, there was a stir around the film *The Passion of the Christ*. In depicting the crucifixion of Jesus, that event we remember tonight, critics said the film came off as antisemitic. Though even the director said he was not trying to blame the Jews, many watched the movie and came to the conclusion that the Jews, Jesus’ very own people, were being cast as the villains. But who is the “bad guy” on Good Friday? Tonight, I want to spend some time talking about that, but even more importantly, I want to talk about why we celebrate such a violent and dark event.

Who killed Jesus? Over the last six weeks, we’ve followed Jesus to the cross. We’ve seen him threatened and betrayed by those who should have been his religious friends. We’ve seen him abandoned by his very disciples. And we’ve seen him mistreated by the Romans and Jewish ruling council. In fact, with all the confusion of Jesus’ multiple trials and the fractured leadership structure in Jerusalem under the Roman Empire, this question can be very difficult to answer.

Did the Romans kill Christ? I think you could certainly make the case for that. Only Pilot had the authority to carry out execution, and ultimately, he’s the one who washed his hands of the problem and sentenced Jesus to death. The cross was also a Roman tool for torture and execution. It was Roman soldiers who nailed him to that cross and removed his body when he died.

So, there you have it. It was the evil Romans who killed Jesus. It was that group of Gentiles who bear all the blame for extinguishing the life of that great teacher. And since there are no more Romans around, I guess we don’t have anyone to blame. But it’s not so simple, is it?

How about the Jews? Their leaders plotted against Jesus. Many times, we hear they were lurking in the shadows, looking to lay hands on Jesus and silence his teaching. When they could not control him, their only option was to stop him. When the arresting party came to take Jesus into custody, it was made up of both Roman soldiers and Jewish temple guards. Jesus was put on trial by the Jewish chief priests, the same group that advocated for Pilot to kill him then threatened Pilot when he was apprehensive. They stirred up the people to call on the Romans to “free Barabas.” And when Jesus was sentenced, the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem all cried out: “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

Though accusals of antisemitism may be thrown around, we cannot escape the fact that Jesus’ own people had a hand in his death. For thousands of years, these were the people God had entrusted with his teachings and promises. They had served as a light to the Gentile nations, pointing them to the true God in Israel and the blessed hope his people had that he would one day send the Messiah, the Chosen One who would rescue the sinful world from destruction and death. But when the time came for that Messiah to do his work of saving,

these people, once the people of God, rejected that Savior. And not only did they reject him. They killed him as a blasphemer. Again, none of the Jews who chanted “crucify” are around today. So, we still don’t really have anyone to blame, at least no one who has been alive in the last 2000-ish years.

This all seems unsatisfying. Whenever there is a screwup, whenever something goes awry, we look for who to blame. We want to get to the bottom of the high-profile plane crashes that have happened over the last year. We want to find a scapegoat, a person with a face, to point to when grocery prices go up. We want to find who’s at fault when evil comes, so let’s do the same here. But let’s make sure we’re casting blame where blame is deserved.

Christ was certainly killed at the hands of the Romans and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. That’s an undeniable fact. But it doesn’t explain why God in the flesh was there in Jerusalem to be killed. He knew he was going to die, long before this. And yet, he trudges on toward Jerusalem. Why? Is he some fool? Is he a glutton for punishment? No. He’s not a madman. In fact, he’s come for a very clearly defined purpose. He’s come to be the Messiah. He’s come to give his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. In essence, Jesus was born to die. This was part of God’s plan set in motion in the Garden of Eden, after Adam’s fall.

So, does that mean God’s to blame? This was all his plan for the beginning, wasn’t it? What an evil thing to sacrifice your one and only Son for a bunch of enemies! But you know that God is not the villain of the story. He’s the hero. So, who is the villain? Wouldn’t it have to be the one whose foolishness and disregard for God put God into this position of sacrifice? Absolutely!

Who killed Jesus? The answer is simple. Me. You. Sinners. We don’t just mourn at the cross tonight because Jesus’ breath is ripped from his body. We mourn because we’re the killers. The hands that drove the nails were not Roman hands or Jewish hands. They were your hands and my hands. All those sins you try to minimize, all those things you do that you don’t think matter to God, smother the life of Jesus. And all the while, you sing the song, “Jesus loves me this I know.” And that much is clear. But do you love Jesus? And if you do, why do you continue to spike nails into his feet?

Jesus was cursed on the cross. He was separated from God. Can you imagine what it’s like to have God abandon you? I know you think you can. You imagine the worst moments of your life, when your heart shouted out to God, “Where are you? Why have you left me alone?” But in those moments, God was not missing. Whether you trusted that he was with you or not, his hand of grace was upon you. He was working all things, even the most tragic and unimaginable things, for your good. But at the cross, Jesus was under the curse of separation from God. And he felt it: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What punishment does hell have to offer us worse than an existence without the hand of God! And that is what Jesus went through. Of course, he went through it because he took the punishment of our sins upon himself.

Tonight is not all about us punishing ourselves for the sins we’ve placed on Jesus. We could all go home and beat ourselves bloody like misguided Christians of the past. But while we certainly need to remember that no sin goes unpunished and that punishment was placed on Jesus, our takeaway should not be to wallow in our sins. Because those sins have been taken away. Jesus came, not to wear the crown as the ultimate victim, but to bear the curse of those under the curse of sin. It was his love that drove him to take our place under the wrath of God. Though he had kept all God’s commands, a feat that seems beyond impossible, he did it to fulfill God’s demands in our place.

Friends, we do spend a lot of time trying to point the finger of sin at other people or make excuses and play the blame game when we fall short of what we know we should be. For those times, we need to remember that it was our mouths that shouted “crucify” and our hands that drove the spikes through God’s hands and feet. But

we also need to be careful that we don't overcompensate to the other extreme, where we're so focused on all the things we did to put Jesus there that we miss the words Jesus speaks to us while he's up on the tree. He bore the curse of sin so that we no longer need to. Because the message of tonight is not: "your sins killed Jesus and now you need to atone for them." The message is: "Jesus has atoned for all your sins, taking on the curse of death and hell so that you never have to."

The beauty of Good Friday is that the cross is like the dump. We get to bring everything in us that's broken and disgusting and vile and just leave it there. And God does not have a sign posted nearby listing all the things he will not take from you. He'll take your used oil of bitterness. He'll take the lithium batteries of betrayal. He'll take the old tires of perversion. He'll even take the asbestos-filled tiles of doubt and faithlessness. Come one! Come all! Bring your sinful selves to the cross. Watch as the one pierced by your sins is cursed for your sins, so that you would live, not as a slave under the impossible law, but by faith Christ! Amen.

Easter Sunday **1 Corinthians 15:51-57** **Victory Over Death**

- 1) Death has been swallowed up once.
- 2) Death will be swallowed up again.

⁵¹Look, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴But once this perishable body has put on imperishability, and this mortal body has put on immortality, then what is written will be fulfilled:

Death is swallowed up in victory.

⁵⁵Death, where is your sting?

Grave, where is your victory?^c

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Do you ever notice how obituaries have a certain tone and formula to them? For many, they begin by saying that after so many years of life, this person lost their long-fought battle against that disease. And when I read those words, I'm reminded that death is undefeated. And death is that stark reminder that sin has so affected everything in life. But today we see the death of death. Today we witness death undone.

All four Gospel writers tell of the events of Easter morning, and Luke's Gospel gives us only a sliver of the full story. But at first glance the four accounts seem contradictory and confusing. Yet, we know, because this is God's word, that all these things happened. But in what order? Answers in Genesis, a Christian group focused on defending the historicity of the Bible, came up with an explanation that works all the accounts together to make sense of the seeming contradictions. The events may not have happened in this order, but this is at least one of the possibilities of how all these events fit together.

The women wake up Sunday morning and head off to the tomb. They are going to finish the burial preparations for Jesus' body that they had to pause at sundown on Friday night because of the Sabbath. At some point during that trek, God sends an earthquake and an angel to move the heavy stone from the entrance of the

tomb and knock out the Roman soldiers guarding it. As the women arrive, the stone has been rolled away. Mary Magdelene is distraught by this news. The tomb should have been sealed. What had happened to her Lord's body? Off she runs, to find Peter and John and tell them that they have a problem: the tomb is empty. It's at this point that it seems like there are two independent timelines for a while.

The other women must not be as panicked as Mary Magdelene. They enter the tomb, see two angels there, and are told, "He is not here, but has been raised!" Then the angels send them to the disciples to report what's happened. Back to the city they go to tell the disciples this report from God's angels. But on the way, Jesus appears to these worried and excited women. He greets them, they are able to touch him, then he encourages them to continue on their way to the disciples.

But Mary Magdelene seems to be separated from the group. Quite possibly, when she leaves, she goes to find Peter and John. It appears they are not with the other apostles. These two men rush to the tomb and find it empty, just as Mary Magdelene told them. John sees burial cloths left behind and folded up, and he believes that this is not some grave robbery. Jesus must be alive.

Mary Magdelene must have returned with Peter and John to the tomb, because they leave, but she is still there. The angels appear to her, asking her why she is weeping. She tells them that Jesus' body has been moved, but she doesn't know where to. She turns around, and there is a gardener. He asks her why she is weeping and who she's looking for. And she tells him. But then he calls her name, and she recognizes him. She too is sent to tell the disciples what she's seen.

There are a lot of moving pieces on Easter morning, but regardless of how the different puzzle pieces fit together, God shows multiple people in multiple ways that Jesus is alive. The account of Easter, with all its complications, is a simple account. Death to life. Mourning to rejoicing.

But back to the obituaries. The obituaries throughout time all read the same. Even in Genesis 5, we get the genealogy of Adam to Noah, and their obituaries are like an echo. He lived for so many years, had so many kids, and "then he died." Again and again, "then he died." And the obituary for Jesus mimics the rest: "Then he died." But that morning, the writing of one obituary broke from the rest: "He is not here, but has been raised!" Oh, what unbelievably good news! In fact, it was so unbelievably good that we see a boatload of doubt. The dead do not rise. They stay dead. For thousands of years, the grave has been the end of every story.

But Christ did rise, just as he said he would. He sacrificed his life on the cross for the sins of the world. Then, he powerfully took it back up again on this glorious Easter day. Death could not hold Jesus in. Its dominion over his life was overthrown.

And Jesus' resurrection is not just some half rising. It's not like an "always in our hearts and memories" sort of existence. Jesus' physically rose, body and soul. The tomb is open and empty because this event happened. In the brutal pain of mourning over death, we often say things that find no basis in Scripture. Our aunt who died is an angel now. Our dad's looking down on us from heaven. We say them, not because God tells us they are true, but because we want them to be true. But this is truth: Christ rose. He is not in the tomb rotting away. He is alive. Don't hold to fantasies. Don't hold to hopes based only on your wishes. Hold to God's pronouncement. Because it comes with a promise that's so profound.

"Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" This is the question the angel asks the women. It seems like such an obvious question. "Because we watched him die three days ago," we want to say. "Because we saw the gashes in his side and walked with the body as they took it to the tomb." But what a wonderful question too! If he is alive, then they are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. And if he is not found in this place, then he must be alive. And after the angel tells the women that Jesus told them this would happen, they

begin to remember those conversations and understand what Jesus was talking about. The death-beater is alive! The Lord lives!

One obituary is changed: “Then he died. Then he rose from death.” But how about the rest? You’ve probably been to many funerals. You’ve stood in front of the casket and held the hand of your loved one whose life was lost. And unless the coroner really messed up, you’ve never seen any of those people come back to life. Sure, Christ is risen. And we rejoice that our Lord has defeated death himself. But we don’t experience an Easter moment for grandma, at least we haven’t yet.

But listen to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. He speaks of change: “Look, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” God’s promise is that your Easter will come. All will be changed at this trumpet call of God. These perishable bodies, which we see are wearing away with every year of life, will be raised imperishable. No more limps or pains or self-loathing when you look in the mirror and don’t like everything you see. And that mortal body, which lives under the fear of death each and every day, will be made immortal. No more funerals or accidents or anxieties that you are running out of time. This is the promise God makes.

But how can this be? Certainly, imperishability and immortality are for those who keep God’s commands perfectly. Jesus says, “do this and you will live,” or phrases like it, many times in his ministry. Eternal life, and resurrection with it, is meant for the perfect. But unfortunately, you and I are not perfect. Far from it. And your husband or wife who passed wasn’t perfect either. Sinners, every one of us. And we can go back to Genesis 5 to see the outcome for sinners. They live for so many years, maybe have some kids, then they die.

Death stings. It stings for all of us, not just in the process of dying, but watching it happen to loved ones. And death stings even worse because we know that it’s our sins that bring it upon ourselves. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin in the law.” But what removes the sting of death? Why can Paul so confidently say that we will be changed and immortalized, even when we don’t see it happen yet? Listen to the last verse: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

We know that at the empty tomb, Jesus broke death. But his victory over death was not just for himself. It was for us, those people whose sins took him to the cross, on which he buried those sins. Because of Jesus, God no longer sees your sins. They are in the ground and they are going to stay in the ground. But in Christ, you will not. You have victory over the grave through Jesus. You will not taste the sting of death nor the permanence of the grave. Since Jesus rose, you will rise too.

Because of that one obituary change, all obituaries change. Like Jesus, our obituaries in eternity will not say, “then he died.” They’ll say, “Then he died. Then he rose from death.” And because Christ won the war against sin and death, those words “lost the battle” against cancer or MS or heart disease will be scratched off the page. Because death is not a loss. Instead, it is the greatest gain. Perfect. Imperishable. Immortal. You will be changed and remade, perfect like your Savior Jesus. This is your destiny that Christ died and rose for. Trust it.

Easter is the greatest funeral, and every funeral of a Christian is another Easter. While the sadness of separation and loss fills our hearts at the death of a loved one, a greater emotion buoys our spirits. We have joy in knowing that one day the casket in front of us will be empty and the urn unfilled. Our own graves will lie open and unmanned. Resurrection and immortality call all of us. Your God was dead but is alive again. And because he lives, so will you. Amen.