

“Covenant Theology” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah

Based on commentary by John Calvin
Edited by Wabash Bible Ministries

The prophecy of Jeremiah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Jeremiah also helps us to understand the relationship between the old and new covenants and between old covenant Israel and the new covenant Church.

The Prophet Jeremiah predicts the kingdom of Christ: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD” (Jer. 31:31-32). This passage is quoted by the Apostles in the New Testament as being remarkable and worthy of notice (Rom. 11:27; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:16).¹

That the new covenant is *new* refers only to the outward form, not the substance or doctrine. The Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains. God has so spoken from the beginning that He has not changed, no not a syllable, with regard to the substance of the doctrine. For He has included in the Law the rule of a perfect life and has also shown what is the way of salvation; by types and figures the Law led the people to Christ, so that the remission of sin was there clearly made manifest.²

The new covenant is the fulfillment of the old. God made a new covenant, when He accomplished through His Son whatever had been shadowed forth under the Law. For the sacrifices could not of themselves pacify God, as it is well known, and whatever the Law taught respecting expiation [i.e., the removal of sin] was of itself useless and of no importance. The new covenant then was made when Christ appeared with water and blood and really fulfilled what God had exhibited under types, so that the faithful might have some taste of salvation. But the coming of Christ would not have been sufficient, had not regeneration by the Holy Spirit been added.³

The outward mode of teaching was also new, as it is evident to all; for when we compare the Law with the Gospel, we find that God speaks to us now openly, as it were face to face, and not under a veil, as Paul teaches us, when speaking of Moses, who put on a veil when he went forth to address the people in God’s name (2 Cor. 3:13). It is not so, says Paul, under the Gospel, but the veil is removed, and God in the face of Christ presents Himself to be seen by us.⁴

What was the purpose of the OT animal sacrifices?

Jeremiah seems to have condemned sacrifices too much; for we know they were designed for certain purposes: they were intended to promote penitence; for when an

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. IV, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 125. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New King James version.

² Vol. IV, 127.

³ Vol. IV, 127.

⁴ Vol. IV, 127-128.

animal was killed at the altar, all were reminded that they were guilty of death, which the animals underwent instead of men. Hence God did thereby represent to the Jews, as in a mirror, the dreadful judgment they deserved; and the sacrifices were also living images of Christ; they were sure pledges of that expiation [removal of sin] through which men are reconciled to God. (cf. Jer. 7:21-24)⁵

We are told that sacrifices were not only of no account before God, but that they were filthy things which He abominated; that is, when the things signified were separated from the signs. This then is the reason why Jeremiah here entirely rejects sacrifices: he complains that God's worship was violated and profaned; and it was so, because the Jews presented to God mere shadows instead of realities.⁶

Jeremiah tells us, "But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33).

What, then, is meant when God denies here that the Law was written on the heart before the coming of Christ? The Prophet speaks of the Law in itself, as apart from the Gospel, for the Law then is dead and destitute of the Spirit of regeneration.⁷

God says, "I will put My Law in their minds." By these words Jeremiah confirms what we have said—that the newness of the *new* covenant was not so as to the substance but as to the form only; for God does not say here, "I will give you another Law," but *I will write My Law*, that is, the same Law, which had formerly been delivered to the Fathers. He then does not promise anything different as to the essence of the doctrine, but He makes the difference to be in the form only. In other words, the teaching of the new covenant is the same as the old; only the form is different.⁸

Jeremiah continues, "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

Here is mentioned another difference between the old and the new covenant: God, who had obscurely manifested Himself under the Law, would send forth a fuller light, so that the knowledge of Him would be commonly enjoyed. But He hyperbolically [with exaggeration] extols this favor, when He says that no one would have need of a teacher or instructor, as every one would himself have sufficient knowledge. We therefore consider that the object of the Prophet is mainly to show that so great would be the light of the Gospel that it would be clearly evident that God under it deals more bountifully with His people because its truth shines forth as the sun at noon-day. The same thing Isaiah promises when he says that all would become the disciples of God (Isa. 54:13). This was indeed the case also under the Law, though God gave then but a small taste of heavenly doctrine; but at the coming of Christ He unfolded the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, so that under the Gospel there is the perfection of what had been begun; for we know that the ancient people were like children, and hence God kept them in the

⁵ Vol. I, 391.

⁶ Vol. I, 392.

⁷ Vol. IV, 131.

⁸ Vol. IV, 132.

rudiments of knowledge; now, as we are grown up, He favors us with a fuller doctrine, and He comes, as it were, nearer to us.⁹

Christ is the best interpreter of this passage, showing that God would cause the truth to shine forth more fully under the Gospel; and hence Christ is called by Malachi “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4:2), for the Prophet there implies that the Fathers indeed had some light but not such as we have. [cf. Luke 10:23]¹⁰

What are some of the other differences between the old and new covenants? Under the old covenant God promised salvation to His ancient people and also regenerated His chosen and illuminated them by His Spirit. However, this He did not do so freely and extensively as now.¹¹ Under the old covenant a daily sacrifice for sins was necessary, but Christ offered an once-and-for-all sacrifice for sins (cf. Heb. 10:11-12). If God remembered sins until He made a new covenant, it is no wonder that He then required daily sacrifice to propitiate Him [i.e., to appease His wrath and make Him benevolent]; but now under the New Testament He remembers them no more. With the new covenant, sacrifices cease, because there is now no need of satisfaction when sins are forgiven. We have been so expiated by the blood of Christ and so reconciled to God that confidence as to our salvation ought to give us an entire rest.¹²

What does Jeremiah teach us about the holy land and Bible prophecy?

How are we to interpret the Old Testament Prophets’ prophecies regarding the future of Jerusalem? Is Palestine or Israel in the Middle East still the holy land?

The Bible teaches that under the new covenant, the Church has become the holy land and will also come to be known as the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), the Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:26). After Christ was manifested, the heavenly Jerusalem became the object to be sought, for all the types and shadows then ceased. The references to an everlasting holy land look forward to Christ’s spiritual kingdom. The Church, which is the new Jerusalem, will be perpetual; even though God may permit it to be terribly shaken and tossed here and there, there will yet ever be some seed remaining, as long as the sun and the moon shall shine in the heavens and the order of nature shall continue. Though Satan and all the world daily threaten its ruin, yet the Lord will in a wonderful manner preserve the Church to the end so that it will never perish. (Jer. 31:38-40; 32:41)¹³

God planted in Canaan His own vine until Jerusalem was extended and had its limits in the farthest parts of the earth; and we are said to be grafted in Christ and planted when God adopts us into His Church; and hence that saying of Christ, “Every tree which My Father has not planted shall be rooted up” (Matt. 15:13). Let us then know that the Church was planted in Judea, for it remained to the time of Christ. And as Christ has pulled down the wall of partition, so that there is now no difference between Jews and Gentiles, God plants us now in the holy land, when He grafts us into the body of Christ.

⁹ Vol. IV, 134-135.

¹⁰ Vol. IV, 136.

¹¹ Vol. IV, 141.

¹² Vol. IV, 138.

¹³ Vol. IV, 152.

When we are grafted into Christ, we already in a manner possess eternal life and have become the citizens of heaven.¹⁴

Jeremiah 32:40 'And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.

The covenant of Christ is here set in opposition to the covenant of Moses, and the Gospel to the Law. It hence follows that the Law [i.e., the covenant of Moses] was a temporary covenant, for it had no stability, as it was that of the letter; but that the Gospel is a perpetual covenant, for it is inscribed on the heart. And for the same reason it is also called a new covenant, for the Law [i.e., the covenant of Moses] must have become obsolete, since the perpetuity of which the Prophet speaks has come in its place.¹⁵

Who fulfills the Davidic covenant (cf. Jer. 33:17-18)?

Amos, when he speaks of Christ's coming, makes this announcement, "There shall come at that time one who will repair the ruins of the tabernacle of David" (Amos 9:11). In short, whenever the Prophets declare that the kingdom of David would be perpetual, they do not promise that there would be a succession without interruption; but this ought to be referred to that perpetuity which was ultimately manifested in Christ alone. We have explained elsewhere that the time of return ought to be connected with the coming of Christ.¹⁶

¹⁴ Vol. IV, 222.

¹⁵ Vol. IV, 215.

¹⁶ Vol. IV, 259-260.