

I have two passages this morning. Let me set it up with some background. The Israelites were consistently unable to obey God for very long. If you read the book of Judges you've seen the cycle. God saves his people, they determine to obey him, they do well for a while, but then they fall back into sin, God then responds by letting their enemies harm them to slap them awake, they finally cry out to God in their suffering, God hears and saves them, and the process starts over.

Eventually God, in jealous wrath, ordained an exile for his covenant people in the 8th century BC at the hands of the Assyrians, and for the rest of them in the 6th century BC by means of the Babylonians. God scattered his faithless disobedient people away from the promised land because of their stiff-necked rebelliousness – their hard-hearted disobedience. So the problem with the Old Covenant wasn't God. His laws were righteous. His ways were glorious. He was a perfect Husband and Father and Warrior and Shepherd and King and Provider and Healer to his people. He was utterly faithful. The problem was *them*. Their *nature*. Their *hearts*. **And that's the same problem every other human on the planet has by nature.**

So God thought up a New Covenant where that problem would be solved. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed it as follows:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ³¹ "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers 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 house 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 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." [This is the Word of the Lord!]

The new covenant is better than the old covenant for LOTS of reasons, but this text indicates several.

1. **No more spiritual adultery.** Verse **32** says the new covenant will be better because they broke the old one, though God was a perfectly faithful husband. This is drawing the marriage metaphor to say that the Israelites followed other gods, but in the new covenant, they will be faithful to Yahweh alone. The Scriptures of the New Testament convey this metaphor by calling the church of Jesus, the Bride. The new covenant is better because *God's people broke the old covenant, but they'll keep the new one.*
2. **Law internal, not external (v33).** The Law of God is the will of God. The new covenant is superior to the old in that what was previously expressed on a tablet of stone or a scroll will somehow be implanted into the heart of each of His people. The inclination to obey comes from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. The will to obey comes from a place of *desire* rather than simply from a legal or moral *ought*. The Old Covenant was great because it gave light to the path, the New Covenant is better because it also gives fuel to the engine. The New Covenant changes motives and desires. In the OT you *ought* to. In the NT you *want to* and you *can* because God does something to radically change the human condition.
3. **All of the covenant people know the Lord.** The whole covenant people – from the “least to the greatest” (v.34) will be intimate with God, knowing Him and doing His will from the heart.
4. **Forgiveness** of sin (v34). God won't remember their sins against them. It doesn't say, “You'll be sinless so I won't need to forgive.” It isn't perfectionism. But it is very hopeful indeed because mercy is promised so that there is room to grow.

To me the staggering and awesome thing is that *God is promising the people's faithfulness*. My best reading of this passage is this: “I'm going to change you → so that you obey me → so that nothing will ever separate us.”

Ezekiel 36:24-29 ²⁴ "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of

stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ I will save you from all your uncleanness. [This is the Word of the Lord!]

I see maybe 8 things God promises his people here...follow along in your Bibles and mark them if you like...

1. Gather them from the exile to the promised land (v24)
2. Cleanse them from impurities and idols (v25)
3. New heart and new spirit (v26)
4. Remove stony unresponsive rebellious heart; put in a sensitive, responsive yielding – willing- heart. (26)
5. Put His Spirit in them and cause them (“make them”) to follow his decrees and keep his laws. (v27)
6. Then they’ll get and keep the land promised to Abe, Isa, Jac... (v28)
7. You will be my people, I will be your God. (v28)
8. Save them from all their uncleanness (v29)

If you’re saying, “Tim, this looks like it’s just for Jewish people,” I know. It is. But *I’m Jewish by faith in Jesus, and will be a true son of Abraham by faith for eternity!* All the covenant promises of God are “Yes” and “Amen,” to *anybody* who is grafted into God’s covenant people by faith in Yeshua Hamashiach – Jesus, the Messiah! (2 Corinthians 1:20, Romans 11:11-25).

Look at **verses 25**. God will somehow get rid of the people’s idols. How does He intend to do that? **Verse 26**: God will create a new heart; put a new spirit in them. He’ll take out the unresponsive, bored, annoyed, fault-finding, rebellious, proud, cold, and stony heart and put in a heart of “flesh” – not meaning sinful nature, but meaning a heart that is *sensitive, responsive, yielding, and willingly cooperative* toward God. Don’t you *want* that!? If you have that already in some measure – don’t you want more of that? Don’t you want that for others?

And look at **verse 27!** God puts his Spirit in them and *inspires* or *compels them* to be faithful to himself! The NIV is weak on this point. The NIV softens the meaning, rendering it in English as “move you to follow my decrees,” which is not as strong as it should be. The Hebrew word here means to cause a thing to happen. Verse 27 should read, “And I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to follow my decrees and cause you to be careful to keep my laws.”

This is absolutely stunning to me. There is, I sadly confess, a deficiency that I feel at work *within me*. I sin. In my thoughts and desires if not always in my actions. In these verses, I hear God saying that the Gospel – the New Covenant - provides a solution *for me*. Forgiveness for the *guilt* of my sin, AND strength to overcome the *power* of my sin. This is amazing! This is what Jesus accomplished on the cross *for sinners*, now by the Spirit being applied to sinners, and *within sinners*.

The hymn *Rock of Ages* puts it this way, “Let the water and the blood – from Thy wounded side which flowed – be for sin the double-cure – save from wrath and make me pure.” Christ forgives the guilt of my sin, *and* frees me from slavery to my sin so that I actually love God from the inside out. A double-cure.

I can hear somebody saying, “So it’s supposedly on autopilot? Then why am I so bombarded with temptation, and why does it seem like I – I – Me _ I do all the striving, and still I’m far from perfect! I’m defeated!” I can appreciate that. I’ve felt defeated after giving my best effort. And I don’t have easy answers to why people get stuck where they do. I’ll sit with you in confusion. I’ve got my own areas of stuck-ness. You probably do as well. So no, it’s not easy, and it’s not auto-pilot. God isn’t calling on us to just lay back and watch the show. We are called to *war against our sin*. Strenuously!

But I want you to understand how God’s grace relates to your striving. You and are called to work hard in the Kingdom of God. But not in order to become saved. Because we are saved! And not striving in the old way, for an external law, but *striving by faith*. *Faith strives* to rest in the finished work of Christ *for me*, and then to yield moment by moment to the Holy Spirit rather than the old flesh. And sometimes walking by faith *feels* like work precisely because saving faith is highly active! Don’t believe me? Ask the apostle Paul!

1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

So what God does in the New Covenant is different from the Old Covenant in a number of ways, but for our purposes today we'll try to summarize all these points from Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 down to this one phrase: *in the New Covenant God creates a new heart - a new nature - within his people so that they are enabled by His Spirit to love and follow Him from the inside out.*

New Desires? If that's true, then where would you look to see if that has happened or not? I would look at my decisions. But I wouldn't stop there. Christianity isn't ONLY about my decisions. Seemingly good decisions can be made with insincere motives. What really matters is the heart, right? And *how do we evaluate the heart?*

If I'm attempting to see if conversion has really happened, I would look at my **motives and desires**. Jeremiah and Ezekiel say that in the New Covenant – God puts his law internal – God creates a new and willing heart which is empowered by His very Spirit to love and obey Him. That means *new desires* should be present if I'm a New Covenant believer. Sin should be burdensome *because it offends God*. Grieving the Spirit is now possible, so nobody should be as miserable as a sinning Christian. Christ should look radically attractive. The Gospel should strike me as deeply needed and deeply wonderful. These are all experiential ways that the heart that is no longer cold, hard, stony – but soft, tender, responsive living tissue – is oriented.

“Are ALL of my desires new?” No. Sadly. “Are ALL of my old desires entirely gone?” No. Sadly. But the really important question is, “*Are new desires present?* Do I long for Christ? Does sin cause me grief? Do I hunger for spiritual growth? Does pleasing the Lord seem appealing rather than burdensome? Does the death of Jesus *for me* strike me as full of wonder and beauty – or is it still blank and strange and irrelevant? Is He captivating or boring to me?”

These are all questions designed to evaluate desires. And desires are infinitely important **if** what God does when he saves sinners through Christ is to create a new nature within us that wasn't there before.

God doesn't deal merely with actions. His commands deal with the state of your heart.

Negative Commands – “Don't” (Just Tick them off as quick as you can)

- Covetousness: (Exodus 20:17)
- Jealousy: (among the Body, Romans 13:13)
- Put away...Bitterness, Rage, Anger, every form of malice (Eph 4:31)
- Lust “Not even a hint of sexual immorality” (Eph 5:3),
- Greed - (Mat 23:25-26 NIV)
- Hatred (Gal 5:20)
- Selfish Ambition (Gal 5:20)
- ^{NRS} 1 Peter 2:11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

Positive Commands “Do” (Tick them off quick)

- Love – ^{NIV} 1 Peter 4:8 Above all, love each other **deeply...** – **ἐκτενῆς** (ekteines) – earnestly, intensely, eagerly, fervently, zealously.
- Peace
- Patience
- Zeal
- Hope – has a felt aspect.
- Compassion
- Faith – Has a felt aspect. Trusting. Resting in. Banking on.

- Joy – (179 hits on just “joy,“)

Let me give a bitter example of joy as an intensely positive feeling that we can experience while suffering. My little sister gave birth to Olive Hope Polinder prematurely, and she went to glory after months of struggle, months of her parents caring for her, grieving over her, surrendering her to God, and forming a profound bond of love with her.

At **Olive’s funeral** the pastor proclaimed – heralded the truth - that Christ will one day return and give the command and the northern Indiana soil will shake and give up little baby Olive’s glorified, resurrected, perfected new body. I can tell you my grief was overwhelming sitting behind Lynette and Rusty. But my joy was adamant. My joy was militant. My joy was in fists. In rebellion against death, and scoffing at the death of death, my joy in Christ was the match for the intensity of the grief I felt on behalf of Lynette and Rusty. No matter how deep the grave, *Christ is deeper still*.

The combination of sorrow in trouble and loss, and joy in the Gospel – that combination was so palpable and intense – what can you do but sob? But it’s *not mere sorrow*. This is my whole point here: It’s sorrow *mixed with joy* – real happiness – in the truth of the Gospel of Christ. Both. Both contradictory feelings in one heart at the same time. One based on how it is NOW, and the other based on the promise of how it WILL BE. Both realistic and factual, yet intensely emotional.

Steve and Bobbie – I pray you know this mixture of sadness with the Joy of the Gospel – I pray that your grief over losing Annie would be mixed with the fist shaking aggression of joyful faith in the Gospel...and I pray that your Spirit-baptized hearts would rebel against this dark cloud of death that covers the whole of humanity, and that in your worship to God you would joyfully proclaim the glorious Gospel, in the midst of the pain, “Christ is deeper still.” Day is coming! The death of death is at hand! The Redeemer lives, and all the dead in Christ shall never die! I wish you *this* joy.

Conclusion

Christian conversion is supernatural, and radical. Biblical Christianity is miraculous. It changes hearts. Changes lives. It’s the best news that ever was! Real Christianity is closer to walking on water than it is to walking uphill. We get new life, not new year’s resolutions! We get new hearts, not dead hearts that act polite and share. We get the indwelling Holy Spirit for power over sin’s slavery, not the futility of trying to kill sin on our own strength. We get authentic intimacy with the Holy Trinity! And that’s actually the best part and the goal of the whole shooting match.

Cannon, I fear that some of you who are truly born again, but who have tender and doubting consciences may feel discomfort over these recent sermons. I fear for how the devil may use these words of mine to bring accusations. But I fear even more the possibility that some of us present here may not have saving faith. And so with that in mind, I really want the assurance of any false converts to be shaken to the core, so that they come to *truly believe* and be saved. There’s *Life* in Jesus. And, I pray that some immature or sinning believers might be shaken as well, so that they would come to a place of safety and health and strength and purity and deep, warranted security in Christ. He’s not just Savior and Lord, He’s also the Highest Treasure in existence.

In the New Covenant God creates new hearts within each of his people so that they are enabled by His Spirit to love God and follow Him from the inside out.

To that end, let’s **pray** that God would **do this amazing thing** among us. After all, it’s his idea. It’s His promise. It’s His Gospel. New hearts. New desires. New power. The Gospel is power! It’s the power of God to save everyone who believes! No matter how deep the grave, Christ is deeper still!