God Declares a New Covenant

Summary and Goal
The Israelites had a sin problem resulting in a vicious cycle they couldn’t self-correct. The old covenant provided an external law system that allowed a righteous God to be in relationship with His unrighteous people. But the people’s sin remained a hindrance to their faithfulness and worship. Something needed to change. In this session, we will look at Jeremiah 31:31-40, which foretells of a new covenant and projects a future in which God’s righteous judgment against sinners is satisfied by His sovereign work of redemption through Jesus. Now we live by faith in Jesus for our redemption and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey God’s commands and live on mission for Him.

Session Outline
1. The new covenant is written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-33).
2. The new covenant brings about knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34a).
3. The new covenant provides lasting forgiveness (Jer. 31:34b-40).

Session in a Sentence
The new covenant describes a time when God’s people would truly know, love, and obey Him.

Christ Connection
Despite having God’s law, God’s people were still unable to obey Him because of the sinfulness of their hearts. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied about a coming day when God would write His law on His people’s hearts and provide lasting forgiveness of sin. This prophecy points to God’s provision of Jesus. Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness, and through the Holy Spirit, God enables us to obey His commands.

Missional Application
Because we have been given new hearts that love God, we yield to the Holy Spirit as He empowers us to obey God’s commands and live on mission for Him.
Group Time

Introduction

EXPLAIN: Use the paragraph in the DDG (p. 94) to comment about the usefulness and limitations of laws.

Laws are not new to us. Systems of laws have been utilized for millennia. In the United States, laws help guide and maintain our court system with the hope of “justice for all” being implemented effectively. But from the start of this nation, laws have been used to justify the unjustifiable. For example, the institution of slavery found a home in the land of the free. And when slaves were freed by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Jim Crow laws were implemented by states and localities to institutionalize racism and segregation. These laws have since been deemed unconstitutional, but the effects of racism and segregation still linger. Laws can serve a good purpose, but in the hands of sinners, laws will always fail us, both for justice and for righteousness.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some rules or laws that fail to reflect the ideals of the people who implement them? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SAY: God’s law in the Old Testament revealed His perfect will for sinners to love God and love others. It even made provision for the times His people failed to live up to His expectations. But for all their effort, God’s chosen people failed and eventually rejected the old covenant. Something new was needed. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God revealed a new covenant that would accomplish the redemption of sinners once and for all.

SUMMARIZE: In this session, we will look at Jeremiah 31:31-40, which foretells of a new covenant and projects a future in which God’s righteous judgment against sinners is satisfied by His sovereign work of redemption through Jesus. Now we live by faith in Jesus for our redemption and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey God’s commands and live on mission for Him.

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For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: The new covenant is written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-33).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Jeremiah 31:31-33 (DDG p. 95).

31 “Look, the days are coming”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 32 This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt—my covenant that they broke even though I am their master”—the Lord’s declaration. 33 “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the Lord’s declaration. “I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

PACK ITEM 11: NEW COVENANT NEEDED: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 95), the poster, and the leader content below to establish the need for a new covenant, acknowledging that the problem was with sin in the human heart rather than the old covenant itself.

In this passage in the Old Testament, Jeremiah spoke of spiritual renewal of the Israelites’ minds and hearts and of God remembering their sins no more—of a new covenant. God promised to cleanse His people, to do good to them, and to cause them to prosper. But why a new covenant? The problem in this relationship was not with God or with the old covenant He had made—it was in the hearts of the people. They could not reciprocate God’s love despite God’s faithfulness to them. Because of the sin of the people, the old covenant was broken and a new one was needed.

Why a new covenant? Because of sin.

• Sin entered the world when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, and God cut them off from full access to His presence. Ever since, the results of humanity’s sinful nature have been dreadful.

• The Israelites were caught in a wicked cycle of sin: short-term repentance followed by a return to their false gods. God, true to His character, was faithful again and again to Israel (Jer. 3:12–4:2). He had upheld His end of the covenant (Josh. 21:45; 1 Kings 8:56) while His people had continued in their evil cycle of sin. So God, again faithful to His character, disciplined them in their rebellion. God sent the Northern Kingdom of Israel into judgment for their disobedience, and soon He would do the same to the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

• Because of sin, humanity was not capable of obeying the old covenant regulations. We needed a new way, a better way, that depended not on what we could do but rather on what God would do for us in Christ.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways God had demonstrated His faithfulness to the Israelites? (He brought them out of slavery in Egypt; He kept His covenant with Abraham to give his descendants the promised land; He gave them His law; He graciously protected them from external threats; He sent His prophets to confront them in their sin so they would repent)

SAY: In our Western culture, we believe all of our problems can be solved if we work harder, study more, stay up later, and rise earlier. But the relationship problem between God and humanity can't be fixed by more or harder work. Instead, God promised to bring about the necessary change in people's inner nature, which would make them capable of obedience.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 95) to emphasize the grace of God in this new covenant.

God promised a change in His people that would make them capable of a deep, rich, abiding love with the Creator of their souls. God would set His law within them and write it on their hearts, minds, and wills. The old covenant was written on stone (Ex. 31:18; 34:28-29; Deut. 4:13; 5:22) and scroll (Ex. 24:7). The new covenant would be written on the tender flesh of a new heart. There can be no loving obedience of the sovereign God apart from His grace-filled, transforming work on the heart.

- A covenant simply means a formal, solemn, and binding agreement. But biblical covenants are not agreements between equals; instead, biblical covenants are based in grace. The covenant between God and His people was established so that the stronger party, God, might rain down grace on the weaker party, humanity. Simply put: God loved His people so much that He was bonding Himself to them although they could do nothing in return. This is grace.

- Lest we think we have anything to do with this gift of grace, God declares otherwise (see His three “I will” statements in verse 33). And these promises were not just for the people of Israel. The Old Testament proclaimed a future for God’s people, a future not realized in Jeremiah’s day. These promises are for all of God’s people, for all those who hear the Lord’s declaration and believe.

Illustration: Can you imagine children trying to obey a parent they don’t love? It’s hard enough for children to obey a parent they do love! Children can be told certain directions repeatedly, but until a deep love abides in their hearts, rote rules do nothing for a real relationship (John 14:15).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

Why is God’s grace necessary for us to have a relationship with Him? (our sin has made us enemies of God who hate and resist His love and commands; we rightly deserve God’s just punishment for sin, which is eternity in hell; in our sin, we cannot know God and His goodness apart from His grace to communicate that to us through His Word about Christ)
Point 2: The new covenant brings about knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34a).

READ Jeremiah 31:34a (DDG p. 96).

34a No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them”—this is the LORD’s declaration.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 96) to present Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant, whereby God’s presence is available to all.

During the time of the Mosaic covenant, the Israelites had a system to meet with God, but access to God’s presence was not available to all of His chosen people, only to the priests and the high priests. The high priest served as the mediator between God and the people so the people could know about God. The priesthood based on the old covenant, however, was filled with priests who could not remain in office because they died on account of their own sin. But God sent a new covenant priest—Jesus, a sinless Man who would die for the sins of others and rise again to everlasting life.

• According to Hebrews 9:6-7, the priests could enter the first room of the temple repeatedly, but the high priest alone could enter the second room, the holy of holies, and only once a year. He would enter the second room with blood to offer for himself and for the sins of the people.

• Jesus, the new High Priest, offered a sacrifice once and for all, and now He is seated at the right hand of the Father interceding on behalf of His people (Rom. 8:34). Jesus Christ was sent so that all might know Him. The holy God longed to dwell with His people beyond the holy of holies, but they needed to be a holy people. Thus, when Jesus Christ, our ultimate High Priest, died—cleansing from sin those who believe in Him and making them into a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9)—the temple veil separating the first and second rooms of the temple was ripped in two (Matt. 27:50-51). Immediate access to God became available to all, for He does not dwell in temples made by human hands (Acts 7:48-50). He was finished with that temple and its religious system. By His death, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant whereby the Lord can be known by all (see Luke 22:20).
EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 96) to explain what it would mean to “know” the Lord in the new covenant—“experience intimately”—and how this is accomplished through the blood of Jesus.

In the new covenant, everyone will “know” the Lord (Jer. 31:34a). This does not mean that Sunday morning sermons and Bible studies throughout the week are irrelevant. Instead, the word “know” means “experience intimately.” Fellowship with God requires peace with God because God cannot abide sin. The old covenant priest needed the blood of an animal to cover his sins. We must be covered by the blood of Jesus to “know” and experience Him. Every believer in Christ “knows” the Lord and has experienced His salvation and assurance of forgiveness of sin.

- The Hebrew term for “know” in this verse reveals the intimate personal knowledge between two persons who are committed wholly to one another in a relationship (see Gen. 4:1; lit. “Adam knew his wife”). The result is not just knowledge of the law but knowledge of the Lord. This leads to a relationship, which was the impossible goal of the old covenant because of the sin of the people.

Illustration: In the new covenant era, the apostle Peter had a vision while on a rooftop, and a complex one at that. He saw heaven opened up and what looked like a large sheet coming down. On it were all four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds, and a voice told him to kill the animals and eat them. Peter exclaimed that he could never do that because it directly violated the Jewish food laws (Acts 10:9-16). But God was teaching Peter a lesson—that he must no longer call any person impure or unclean based on ethnicity. Due to the vision, Peter understood that God doesn’t show favoritism; He doesn’t exclude any nation or ethnicity from the offer of salvation (10:28,34). Simply stated, Peter said, “In every nation the person who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him. He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all” (10:35-36). All may know God intimately and personally. All may have access to Him through the blood of His very precious Son, Jesus Christ.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What should we understand about God based on His covenant promise to make Himself known to all people? (He does not show favoritism; He is gracious to all who believe in His Son; He desires all people to be saved; He has a plan for people to hear the gospel of His Son; God is personal and He wants to know and be known by His people)
Point 3: The new covenant provides lasting forgiveness (Jer. 31:34b-40).

READ Jeremiah 31:34b-40 (DDG p. 97).

34b “For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin.
35 “This is what the LORD says: The one who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar—the LORD of Armies is his name; 36 If this fixed order departs from before me—this is the LORD’s declaration—only then will Israel’s descendants cease to be a nation before me forever. 37 This is what the LORD says: Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below explored, will I reject all of Israel’s descendants because of all they have done—this is the LORD’s declaration. 38 “Look, the days are coming”—the LORD’s declaration—“when the city from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate will be rebuilt for the LORD. 39 A measuring line will once again stretch out straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn toward Goah. 40 The whole valley—the corpses, the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Kidron Valley to the corner of the Horse Gate to the east—will be holy to the LORD. It will never be uprooted or demolished again.”

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 97) to explain what it means for an all-knowing God to not remember our sin.

God is omniscient, “all-knowing.” So how can God be all-knowing and never again remember our sin? God can choose not to remember, that is, to bring, something against us. Instead of punishing us as we deserve for our sins, God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12) by placing them on Christ to be punished in our place. Christ has freed us from sin and death and reconciled us to God.

• Imagine standing on a mountaintop. You look east toward the sunrise; then you look west, where the sun will set, and you realize that the reaches of east and west never meet. Scripture is clear that God forgives and forgets our sins (see Isa. 43:25; Heb. 10:17). God’s love is so deep that even though He knows Christians will still sin, He is still faithful to forgive when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9).

Illustration: An elephant in India can stand nearly ten feet tall and weigh up to five tons when fully grown. When trained, its owner may put it to work hauling great boulders and uprooting full-grown trees. But when evening comes, the elephant is kept from wandering by a piece of rope tying one of its hind legs to a small tree. Obviously the adult elephant could easily snap the piece of rope. So what makes it stay? An elephant’s training starts when it is young and a lot less strong. The elephant is shackled with a large iron chain, and for days, the baby kicks and pulls against the chain. Eventually, the young elephant stops trying to pull away. Then slowly, the owner weakens the strength of the chain until only a small piece of rope is needed. The elephant is so conditioned by its environment that it remains in place without pulling on the restraint.
Illustration (continued): Jesus hasn’t just weakened our chain to sin to that of a piece of rope—He has removed it completely. Due to our human nature, we may live as though a piece of rope is bound around our ankle. But we have a new environment in the freedom of being fully loved and accepted by God, not because of anything we have done on our own but because of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. His obedience for our sake led Him to the cross. The gift of freedom didn’t come without a cost, and the cost was paid by the sinless Son in radical obedience to the Father.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 97).

Christ as Reconciliation: Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ’s death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed.

Essential Doctrine “Christ as Reconciliation”: Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ’s death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 97) to establish that God forgives us and frees us from sin so that we can pursue His mission for ourselves and the world.

God untethered us from the bondage of sin so that we could be in a right relationship with Him. Furthermore, He grants us the privilege of participating in His grand design of calling others to Himself (Matt. 28:18-20). In the power of His Holy Spirit, God uses us to change the world for Him so that all the world will be holy to the Lord as people hear the gospel and believe. We find our motivation for this mission in the reality of God’s forgiveness and His unending faithfulness to His people (Jer. 31:35-37).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

**How does God’s Word empower us for the gospel mission?** (the Scriptures makes us wise for salvation; God’s Word tells us about Jesus, revealing to us the power of God in His gospel; the Holy Spirit uses the Word to convict us of sin for our freedom and to spur us on to good works in the name of Christ; God’s Word helps us to understand the reality of our physical world and the spiritual realm; it communicates to us the sure hope of the future God has in store for His people)
My Mission

EXPLAIN: Sometimes we get used to a story. Imagine a mom at bedtime reading her son the same story over and over again. The son finishes brushing his teeth and bounds into his room, “Read it again, Mama!” Before she knows it, the pages are well worn, the binding falling apart, and she’s memorized the words. She remembers when she first heard the story and how moved she was; now it has become nothing more than routine. Her eyes glaze over as the pages turn and her voice is less passionate in the reading. In the same way, we can become all too familiar with the radical story of the gospel. But God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to fulfill what Jeremiah was proclaiming—a new covenant brought only by Jesus’ blood. This is a story we must never get over. May we retell the story over and over again with passion and conviction, and may we be faithful in prayer to allow the gift of Jesus’ blood and the new covenant to revive our souls.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 98), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have been given new hearts that love God, we yield to the Holy Spirit as He empowers us to obey God’s commands and live on mission for Him.

- How will you respond to the new covenant promise of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus?
- What can your group do to live together sacrificially in light of the new covenant?
- How will you point someone to Jesus for the knowledge of God and forgiveness of sins?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are the covenant-making God. While we are constantly unfaithful to Your covenant commands, You are forever faithful to Your covenant promises. Thank You for the grace that You extended to us in the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated with His death and resurrection. Empower us with new-covenant obedience by the Holy Spirit as we seek to live on mission for You. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 99-101), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 102) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 99-101) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 102) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 99-101) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 5 as a part of point 3 in the session: As sure as the sun rises and sets, the survival of God’s people is as certain as the laws of nature that God has ordained; this is not by their doing but a free gift handed to them.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- Day 1: “The greatest love story of all has been written by God, and His faithfulness is without end.”
- Day 2: “God gives us boundaries out of love, and because He knows what is best for human flourishing, He will correct us when we’ve veered off the path.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 102) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to remind one another of their new-covenant identity rooted in God’s promises and which expresses itself in obedience.
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: The new covenant is written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-33).

“This is the only reference to a new covenant in the OT. The short passage which develops from the simple announcement in this verse is one of the most important in the book of Jeremiah. Indeed it represents one of the deepest insights in the whole OT. It was taken up in later centuries by two different groups. The sectarians of Qumran understood themselves to be the men of the New Covenant. But the New Covenant for them was nothing more than the Mosaic Covenant with strong legalistic tendencies. The other group was the Christians, who saw the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s words in the emergence of the Christian church, which was comprised of those who confessed Jesus as Lord (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:15; Heb. 8:8–9:28). In the text as it has reached us, the new covenant would be made with Israel and Judah, that is, with the whole people of Israel.”

“Yahweh declares that in the days to come, he will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Both nations went into exile because they broke the Sinai covenant. But Yahweh will make a new covenant with his people that will be rather different from the old … The new covenant will have some continuity with the Sinai covenant. Yahweh will initiate it, and his people will love him and follow his law and ways. But the new covenant will be unconditional—Yahweh himself will enable his people to obey—and nothing will break the covenant, not even disobedience.”

“At the Last Supper Jesus describes the cup as a representation of the ‘new covenant in my blood’ (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Two other Gospel writers record the phrase ‘blood of the covenant’ (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), which reflects the initial covenant ceremony at Sinai (Ex. 24).”

Point 2: The new covenant brings about knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34a).

“Teaching God’s law to one another was an obligation in order to pass the knowledge of God from generation to generation (Deut. 6:1-9; 11:18-21). With the advent of the ‘new covenant’ inscribed internally on minds and hearts, teaching about God would become obsolete since all would know the Lord, a reversal of the conditions that resulted in punishment and exile (Jer. 9:4-6).”

“Once the merely external law is a thing of the past, no longer will one teach his neighbor or brother, saying ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know me. Teaching will also be a thing of the past. From the least to the greatest of them indicates all people no matter their social class (‘great’ to the ‘poor,’ cp. 5:4-5) or age (‘youngest’ to the ‘oldest,’ cp. 6:13).”
“To know God’ in an intimate and corporate way is not just a future promise. There is an ‘already’ to this experience in the Christian life through the agency of God’s Spirit just as there is the exciting anticipation of things ‘not yet’ realized and only intimated.”

“There will be no need for a faithful remnant within the covenant people to teach the unfaithful majority to know God, for all covenant partners will know him. This covenant will include only those who know him, and he will remember their sin no more.”

**Point 3: The new covenant provides lasting forgiveness (Jer. 31:34b-40).**

“The covenant’s permanence is grounded in the fixed order of the cosmos, for the One who brought the cosmos into being also brought Israel as a nation into being and has bound Himself to her by this new spiritual covenant, which will endure eternally.”

“The new covenant requires a new Jerusalem, and so the next few verses deal with the reconstruction of specific parts of the city of Jerusalem. The Lord says that it will be rebuilt for me, a way of saying that the city will again live up to its calling as a city consecrated to the Lord (31:38). The various names that are mentioned refer to parts of the city that would have been well known to Jeremiah’s hearers. The use of a measuring line indicates that the city is going to grow larger and will need new buildings (31:39). Even such contaminated places as the valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown (the valley of Ben Hinnom—see 7:31-32; 19:2,6; 32:35) will be restored and dedicated to the Lord, who will reign there in absolute security (31:40).”

“It was in such ‘fields’ of the Kidron Valley that King Josiah had Hilkiah the high priest burn the objects of idolatry purged from the temple (2 Kings 23:4). Thus the point of verse 40 is that the defilement caused by Judah’s sins (2:7,23; 7:30-34; 19:13; 32:34-35) would be reversed forever and that consequently the city would never again fall under the Lord’s curse of destruction (17:25; 33:17-22).”

**References**

8. J. Andrew Dearman, Jeremiah and Lamentations, in *The NIV Application Commentary* [Wordsearch].

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The prophetic books of the Old Testament can be confusing, both to the newcomer to the Bible and the longtime reader. Where do these prophets fit in the overall narrative of Israel and Judah? What messages did they communicate? What was God doing in and through their work? The benefit of this volume of The Gospel Project is that it gives you a glimpse of the prophets right at the point their message was going forth to God’s people. We can ask questions of God with Habakkuk, look forward to the coming Suffering Servant with Isaiah, stand amazed at the stunning picture of relentless love in Hosea, and learn something of God’s extravagant love with Jonah.

As you work through the sessions in this volume, keep an eye on all the different ways God reveals Himself and communicates His messages of judgment and grace. Fall to your knees in awe, and then stand up and boldly proclaim the love of this great God, who inspired the prophets to deliver His word.