

Reformation—C
Jeremiah 31:31-34
God's New Deal for the Sinful Man

As the United States went through the Great Depression in the 1930's, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt came up with a plan called the New Deal. It was advertised as being a new deal "for the common man." It was a plan to get America out of the Great Depression—a plan to restore America back to health. The name for the plan seemed pretty natural. I don't know exactly what the "old deal" had been (although I'm guessing Herbert Hoover had not run for office on a platform of stock market crashes and crushing unemployment), but it was pretty obvious that it wasn't good enough. In fact, it was pretty obvious that it had left America in some poor health. Therefore FDR came up with a new one.

In our reading for this morning God gives us a new deal. He says: "*The time is coming when I will make a new covenant* (that is, a new deal, or a new promise) *with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*" (31).

We ask ourselves very naturally what the old deal (or, to use a word that we don't use very often, the old "covenant") was, and why God was changing that. In our text, Jeremiah talks about two covenants between God and his people. When Jeremiah refers to the old covenant, he is speaking, as he says here, about the covenant that God made with the Israelites' "*forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt*" (32). This covenant is the one God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai when he gave them his law; so it is often called the Sinaitic Covenant.

This Sinaitic covenant was a normal two-way covenant or deal where each party agrees to do something. In other words, it's like almost every deal with which we come into contact. You give us \$27,000, and we'll give you a brand new car. You clean your room, and I'll give you the freedom to go out and play with your friends. You give us 40 hours of work a week, and we'll give you a paycheck.

What was that covenant? God told the Israelites at Mount Sinai: "*If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exodus 19:5-6). Does that sound like a fair deal to you? God had given them life. They would in turn give their lives to their creator, who would then make them his treasured people. He would watch over them, he would protect them, he would defend them. In other words, he would continue to do as he had done a short time before, when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had just had a powerful demonstration of what it would mean if God were to keep his end of the deal.

So I ask you again—does that sound like a fair deal to you? I think so. In fact, it sounds like more than a fair deal, doesn't it? I mean, the Israelites needed God a whole lot more than God needed them. And they stood to benefit a whole lot more.

The old deal sounds pretty good to me—kind of like the "deal" a rich father might make with his son—"You show up at meetings of the company board on the first Tuesday of every month, serve as the recording secretary, and I'll pay you \$400,000 a year."

The Israelites apparently thought it sounded like a pretty good deal, too. They gladly accepted. We read: "*When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the Lord has said we will do.'*...Then he took the Book of

the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the Lord has said: we will obey' (Exodus 24:4,7). You'd have to be a fool not to take that deal.

And you'd have to be an even bigger fool to break that deal. And yet that's exactly what the Israelites did. God says: "*They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them*" (32). In fact, we might say that they broke it before the ink was even dry.

While Moses is still up on Mount Sinai, receiving the written law—the one to which the Israelites had agreed just days before, we read that the people decided to build a golden calf. "*The next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry*" (Exodus 32:6). Barely 40 days after they had agreed to this deal, this covenant with God, Moses comes down from Mount Sinai to find them breaking the Sixth Commandment by committing sexual sins, and shattering the First Commandment by worshipping a golden calf!

The problem with the old deal was not that it was flawed. No, the old deal was perfect—as in fact God's laws are perfect. The problem came because the Israelites were flawed, because they were sinful, because they didn't follow through on their end of the deal.

God has offered us a similar deal. We read in the gospel of Luke: "*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'*" In other words, he wanted to know what kind of a deal he could make with God. God's part would be to give the man eternal life. The man now wanted to know what his part would have to be. "*'What is written in the Law?'*" he replied. "*How do you read it?'*" He answered: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself.*" "*'You have answered correctly,'*" Jesus replied. "*Do this and you will live*" (Luke 10:25-28). Again, it sounds like a pretty good deal, doesn't it? Eternal life in exchange for a life of love here on earth. That's the deal God offered us. We'd have to be a fool to turn that down—to say: "No thanks on the eternal life, because I've got some selfishness and spitefulness that I really need to accomplish." The sheer stupidity in such a reply would be shocking.

And yet there we have been with the Israelites, "*indulging in revelry*" through sinful entertainment and activities, and worshiping our golden calf of money, career, free time, self, or whatever other false god we might come up with. How incredibly shortsighted of us! How unbelievably foolish!

The old deal God made with us was a perfect one—perfectly clear, perfectly fair. But we have been imperfect, we have been sinful. We have repeatedly said to God: "No thanks on the eternal life, because I've got some things in the next fleeting 5 minutes that are more important." "If the best you can come up with is some promise of future glory and some vague references to caring for me, I'm afraid that doesn't fit into my priority list right now."

And because we have responded in that way, the old covenant, the old deal which God made with us, serves only one purpose—it accuses us and condemns us. God says in Romans: "*Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather through the law, we become conscious of sin*" (3:20). Every time we look at that mirror of God's law, we see ourselves for what we are—sinners condemned to eternal suffering in hell.

And we have no good reason to expect a new deal. If that son refuses to show up on at the board meetings on the first Tuesday of each month, he should expect to find a pink slip in his mailbox. More than that, he should expect to find himself in effect disowned by his father for rejecting such a wonderful offer, for failing to meet such minimal requirements as his part of the agreement.

That's where our text picks up. God hasn't left us floundering in the sea of despair and on our way to hell as rebellious sinners who fail to keep the old covenant. "*The time is coming, declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah.'*" He goes on to say that it would be a covenant different from the one he made with Israel at Mt. Sinai. God says through Jeremiah: "*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*" (34).

Do you notice something different about this covenant? You see it in the words "*I will.*" God is the one who is doing all the acting in this covenant. It is a one-way covenant. The Israelites will do nothing, and God will do everything. God would do the acting, while his people would simply reap the blessings. God would do all the work, while his people would receive all the paychecks. God would send the seed of the women who would crush the serpent's head as he promised Adam and Eve. God would send Jesus to be mankind's substitute and to appease God's wrath, by keeping that old covenant perfectly in their place and by sacrificing Himself in their place to take the punishment they deserved for sinning, for breaking the old covenant.

God goes on to say that he'll give people Christ's work free of charge: "*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts*" (33). The word translated as "*law*" here is used in the broad sense, and would better be translated as "*teaching.*" The new covenant will not be a covenant of laws written on stone tablets. Rather, it will be God's gracious gospel teachings of love about the work of their Savior written on people's hearts. God himself will put his covenant of saving grace into people's hearts by creating faith in them through the work of the Holy Spirit through his Word and the sacrament of baptism. This covenant is again a one-sided covenant of pure grace, as God freely does this for people without their asking, without them being able to pay him for it, or doing anything to make themselves worthy of it.

What are the results of this new covenant? One is "*I will be their God and they will be my people*" (33). Through the hearing of this message, the Holy Spirit transforms people from rebels and enemies of God who don't keep his law and are en route to hell's prison into dearly loved children of God en route to be with him in heaven forever.

Another result: "*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*" (34). This isn't to say that Christians will not share God's Word with one another. But when you think about the old covenant, you have to think of Moses, don't you? Because God and the children of Israel rarely had any direct contact. If God had something to say, he spoke to Moses. Then Moses would in turn go and speak it to the people. No one except Moses really "knew" God in a fuller sense of the Word. There was kind of a stratification of the Israelites when it came to their relationship with and their knowledge of God. There was Moses on one level, and then everybody else beneath him—all depending on Moses to communicate with them and to bring God and his Word to them.

You and I don't have that, do we? Yes, there are strong Christians among us, and there are weaker Christians among us. But there are no levels of Christians among us when it comes to our relationship with God. God does not speak to me any more than he speaks to you—for he speaks to all of us through his clear Word, through his gospel. And through that gospel all of us—weak Christians and strong Christians alike "*know the Lord*" in the sense of having a peaceful relationship with him.

What a new covenant or deal this is for us! If we had the old covenant as our only chance to be in heaven, we might as well have packed our bags for hell's fire from the moment we were

born—not because there was something wrong with the old covenant, but because there was everything wrong/sinful with us. Therefore God in his great love gave us a new covenant where Jesus did all the work to save us and the Holy Spirit made it ours as a free gift by creating faith in our hearts.

There's some debate as to whether FDR's 'New deal for the common man' is responsible for pulling the US out of the Great Depression, but there's no debate as to the effectiveness of God's "new deal for the sinful man." It pulls us out of hell by giving us a Savior and his work free of charge.

Is it really that easy? Yes, it really is. Is there anything you can do? Not when it comes to the new covenant. It's all been done. The new deal is complete, signed in the blood of Christ on Calvary and sealed to us through our baptism, through our Savior's precious meal (the Lord's Supper), and through the unending promises found in his Holy Word. And that's a good deal! Amen.