

# A New Covenant

There's a passage in Jeremiah's prophecy that seems to stand between the Old and New Testaments. Written some 600 years before the birth of Jesus, it describes the stark difference between the old covenant made by the LORD with his people and what was to follow all those years later. It was so accurate that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews quoted it, underlining the dramatic difference between the new covenant through the Lord Jesus Christ and that old covenant which God had made with the people of Israel just after they had left their captivity of more than four centuries in Egypt.

(What's a covenant? Basically, it's a binding agreement between two people or sets of people, very much like a contract, where each party has responsibilities to the other one. It can turn up in modern property law, with 'restrictive covenants' limiting actions that you can take on your own property which might affect other people such as neighbours. A person's 'last will and testament' is also a form of covenant.)

Moses had led the people out of Egypt more than 600 years before Jeremiah's prophecy, and they counted that time as the birth of their nation. It was the time when the Living God had declared to them:

*"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then **you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.** These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. (**Exodus 19:5-8**)*

From being an extended family of about 70 people, in 400 years they had multiplied to more than 600,000 men age 20+,<sup>1</sup> but had become a race of slaves in Egypt, without any real national identity. Now they had escaped slavery and God had told them that he had 'adopted' them as his own chosen people. No wonder they saw this as the foundation of their nation, although the LORD had actually started with Abraham many years earlier. (See **Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-27**)

The Jewish people held this understanding of their special status in covenant relationship with the LORD through the following centuries but, 600 years later, Jeremiah brings this startling prediction:—

*"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "**I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbour and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,**" declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (**Jeremiah 31:31-34** and see **Hebrews 8:8-12**).*

This is different! The covenant which we glimpsed in **Exodus 19** is followed by chapter after chapter of specific instructions, ways in which they WOULD be teaching 'each man his neighbour and each man his brother', further amplified by the detailed instructions in the book of **Leviticus** and elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> **Numbers 1:45-46**. And that was just the number of adult males! So, **many** more in total.

The big difference is that the new covenant is **internal**, something real going on between the Lord and his people on a personal level, not a set of rules and expectations 'over there', somehow distant and rather impersonal.

So, I want to ask you a question: When do you think that this new covenant came into action? Our Bibles are divided into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the word 'testament' is actually an old word for 'covenant'.<sup>1</sup> So did the new covenant come into effect from Matthew chapter 1?

No? So, how about when Jesus started to preach and teach about the Kingdom of God? Was that when it started?

Was it when his disciples started following him? Had Jeremiah's prophecy been fulfilled then? No sign of it! No-one seems to have been aware of personal forgiveness nor of 'knowing the Lord'. Philip would hardly have asked Jesus "Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us" and Jesus' reply to Thomas shows that they did NOT know God on a personal level: "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also" (**John 14:3-12**).

So did the new covenant come into effect when Jesus shared the Passover cup with his disciples and said "This is my blood of the covenant" – ?<sup>2</sup> Or actually at the moment that he died on the cross?

The truth is that none of these moments was the time when the disciples began to experience the reality of Jeremiah's prophecy. Not even when Jesus was raised from the dead! They were still asking him whether he was going to 'restore the kingdom to Israel' – i.e. kick out the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God there in Jerusalem!<sup>3</sup> And after his ascension, they obediently waited 10 days in Jerusalem for 'the promise of the Father' – whatever that was going to be – but seem to have done very little except appoint Matthias to replace Judas.

In all those years they had followed Jesus, they had seen him perform miracles and they had listened to his teaching. Apart from those hints to Philip, he had never told them about 'knowing the Lord' and – perhaps surprisingly – had said nothing about the fact that they would receive forgiveness through the shedding of his blood. The two essential parts of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Through those years, they had called him 'Rabbi' – 'Teacher', in much the same way that any Jew might recognise a religious teacher whom they were following. Of course, he was very different from the others. He spoke about inner realities and not external appearances, he was radical and sharply critical of religious hypocrisy, and he spoke of the coming 'kingdom of the heavens' in which God would reign on the earth. They joined his 'team' and expected to be part of that kingdom, perhaps part of his government!<sup>4</sup>

But they were still following, as it were, at a distance. Trying to understand, trying to keep up, but never fully understanding why Jesus was there at all. Even when Peter has just expressed the wonderful revelation that he has received, that Jesus really IS the Messiah, God's Anointed One, the Son of the living God, within a very short while he is trying to persuade Jesus not to go ahead with his planned death and resurrection (**Matthew 16:13-23**). Yes, it was always planned, but the Twelve never seem to have 'got it', do they?

We can't blame them at all. Would we have done any better? We might have been able to understand some of Jesus' parables and teaching, but would we have realised that God was doing something completely new here – even newer than we could dare to think? The Messiah

<sup>1</sup> We don't find the word 'testament' in our modern translations, though it was used frequently in the 'Authorised' (King James) version. It is now translated as 'covenant'.

<sup>2</sup> **Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24**

<sup>3</sup> **Acts 1:6**. See also **Luke 19:11**

<sup>4</sup> Well, at least James and John thought they might! See **Mark 10:35-37**.

was not just about to usher in the reign of God on the earth (not yet, anyway!), because he had a more vital and pressing mission – establishing a new covenant with those who would become his chosen people, those (now from **every** nation) who would be ‘his own possession among the nations’ and ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’. (See **1 Peter 2:9**)

Why didn’t the Eleven understand? What was needed for the promised new covenant to come into action? Jesus himself summed up the coming turning point in one simple sentence: “**He abides with you and will be in you**” (**John 14:17**). This is the difference between the old covenant and the new one. The ‘Law and the Prophets’ had always been ‘over there’, a set of **external** rules to be followed, and the disciples had tried to ‘follow’ Jesus in much the same way. But now he was telling them what was going to happen soon. It would all be **very** different. He had been with them and the Holy Spirit was going to be in them, and he says very clearly that “*In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*” The uncertainty, the ‘distance’, the puzzlement that they had experienced over the last 3 years – they were all going to disappear. When? When the Holy Spirit started to be resident in them. See **John 14:16-26** for much fuller information, plus **John 16:12-15**.

It is too easy to be distracted by the drama of the Day of Pentecost: the sound of a rushing mighty wind, the tongues of fire and the speaking in other languages, even the vast numbers who responded to Peter’s message, but what else happened on that day? This may sound wrong, but I think that it was on that day that the disciples stopped trying to ‘follow Jesus’. Let me explain what I mean . . .

Up until then, he had been their Teacher, their Master, who taught them many things and I am sure that they tried to understand and follow as best they could but, as we have seen even briefly, they really hadn’t grasped what it was all about. When the Holy Spirit arrived, that all changed. Jesus wasn’t ‘over there’ any more; the Holy Spirit was living inside them and poured out upon them, changing their lives from the inside and giving them insight and understanding which they had never experienced before. They had been mystified when he had said to them “*I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you . . .*” How could it possibly be ‘to their advantage’?

Now they were discovering it for themselves! At last, the new covenant had come into effect! They no longer needed anyone (not even Jesus himself) to tell them ‘know the Lord’. As he had said “*In that day you will know . . .*” – and now they did! And forgiveness? Suddenly Peter **knows** the answer for himself and does not hesitate to pass it on: “*Repent, and each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit . . .*” (**Acts 2:38**)

The Lord Jesus had told them “*I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.*” (**John 16:12-13**). Now, it was happening!

As we read through the rest of **Acts**, I don’t see the disciples telling anyone that they needed to ‘follow Jesus’. I don’t even see them passing on his teaching! That seems quite surprising perhaps, until you realise that what they **were** passing on was not what Jesus taught, but **who he is** and **what he has done**. They were not calling people to obey his teaching but to respond to him in faith, trusting in the effectiveness of his death, resurrection and glorification.

At that point, none of what we now call ‘the gospels’ had been written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but all the Twelve – and many of the other believers – would have at least some memories of Jesus’ teaching, so why didn’t they share it? Perhaps they did, but we have no record of it.

In fact, the scholars tell us that none of the 4 'gospels' were written until AD 70 or later, with John's account most likely being written in about AD 90 or even later, when he was an old man and **after** he had been released from his imprisonment on Patmos and **after** he had written the book of **Revelation**, maybe after his letters, too. The tradition is that when he returned to Ephesus after his exile, the believers there persuaded him to write his own account of Jesus' life, to go alongside the other accounts which had been written a few years earlier.

Paul had completed his journeys, written all his letters and probably already died a martyr's death by the time **any** of the four accounts had been written, so (for example) many believers will have only read that Jesus said *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it"* **after** they had read what Paul said about being included in the death of Jesus in his letters to the churches in Rome, Galatia, Philippi and Colossae ! Yes, of course they will have really treasured the records of Jesus' life and teaching when they received them, but they will have read them in the light of their own experience of new life **in** Christ. We can come to them in exactly the same way and derive enormous benefit.

I am always interested in Luke and his diligent research (**Luke 1:1-4** and **Acts 1:1**). He was not one of the Twelve and probably never saw Jesus, but he delved deep into the memories of those who **were** there and recorded some significant aspects of Jesus' life and teaching that Matthew, Mark and John miss out. He has some important passages about what it would mean to be a disciple of Jesus (See **Luke 12 & 14** for some examples), and I wonder how much of his research he shared with Paul as they often travelled together. And yet Paul makes no reference to these teachings of Jesus! He actually only quotes the words of Jesus once (**Acts 20:35**), and those words are not found anywhere in the 'gospels'!

Even when we read the letters by James, Peter and John who, unlike Paul, had actually been around during Jesus' ministry, we don't find them repeating what he taught nor instructing their readers to 'follow Jesus'. Peter refers to spiritual rebirth (**1 Peter 1:3**), an echo perhaps of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in **John 3**, and John speaks about 'abiding in him' (**1 John 2:6**), probably a reference to what Jesus said in **John 15**, but their letters are instruction about how to live the new life which their readers are experiencing through their trust in Jesus, not how to 'follow' him as Peter and John had done for three years or more.

So, I should like to ask you another question: Are you trying to 'follow Jesus', wanting to be a disciple and trying to follow all his teaching as best you can, or are you learning to live **in** him? Paul expressed the difference very clearly in **Romans 7:6** : *"But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that **we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.**"*

Jeremiah's prophecy still stands:

*"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbour and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for **they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,**" declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."*

Dave Taylor    August 2026