

No, No, No **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Introduction

As many of you know, Karen and I had the privilege of touring Germany earlier this summer. On that trip we were able to spend three days in Wittenberg, home of the famous Castle Church where Martin Luther posted his 95 theses and thus set off the firestorm that became the Protestant Reformation. (The doors are actually made of bronze, so Luther probably posted his theses on the community bulletin board right next to the doors.)

While in Wittenberg we worshipped at the Parish Church of St. Marys. That church is considered the mother church of the Protestant Reformation because it was there the mass was first celebrated in the German language rather than Latin. The entire service was still offered in German the Sunday we worshipped there, except for one brief announcement where the pastor welcomed all the Americans who were in attendance that day.

Inasmuch as I don't speak German, I didn't understand a thing. Evidently the pastor gave a very entertaining sermon, based on the laughs within the congregation.

The experience gave me a new appreciation for the days prior to the Protestant Reformation. In those days no common person could understand what was said in the worship service. The entire liturgy was in Latin. The sermon was often in German, but the Bibles were all in Latin, no one could follow along.

Everything the Christians of that day knew about what was in the Bible, they heard from their parish priests. So the people had no way of knowing whether they getting the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Over time the teachings of the church had become slanted toward the political and personal preferences of those who were in authority. That needed to change.

Enter Martin Luther. Luther was not the first person to attempt a Reformation movement in the church. He was just the first to live to tell about it. Previous reformers, like John Hus and John Wycliffe, were martyred for their efforts. But Luther lived and succeeded, primarily because he was able to get the Word of God translated from Latin into German quickly. Somehow he managed to do the entire Bible in six months. It was an extraordinary accomplishment.

Once it was in the German language, the people began to read it. As they began to read the Bible for themselves, they found verses like these:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law... (Romans 3:20)

We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)

Those verses were contrary to what they heard proclaimed from their pulpits. The people knew in their hearts that there had to be more to the story than the deep guilt they felt for constantly falling short of God's expectations, and these verses told them what they had been taught was not true at all. They began to ask questions, and the resulting firestorm is what we now know as the Protestant Reformation.

Hang around Lutherans pastors long enough and you hear one of them refer to the difference between Law and Gospel. When you them explain what they mean, this is what they say:

- The Law is the part of the faith that makes you feel guilty. It is all about sin, and rules, and your failure to be good enough.
- The Gospel is where you learn that God has a different way, a way that frees you from all that guilt by bathing you in this thing called "grace." You learn that despite your failures, God loves you and makes it possible for you to live a life that pleases Him by putting your trust in Him.

This truth is the fulfillment of what Jeremiah told us in today's reading

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah." (Jeremiah 31:31)

The old covenant is the Law. This new covenant is the Gospel of faith and grace.

Jeremiah goes on to describe this new covenant, which can be capsulized in three "no" statements:

STATEMENT #1: NO EXCUSES

Verse 33 says:

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. (Jeremiah 31:33)

The Old Covenant – the Old Law – was written on tablets of stone. As you might recall, Moses went up onto Mt. Sinai and watched as the finger of God etched the Law into two tablets. When we think about that Old Covenant, we think of all we cannot do. "Thou shalt not!"

But the New Covenant – the covenant of faith and grace – is written in our hearts and in our minds. Deep within your soul God has placed a longing for things that are just and right. Down in that place, you know there is more to life than what the world offers. That's why your conscience begins to bother you when you stray away from the truth of Scripture.

My Mom used to tell us KIDS that God has placed into the heart of every person a sharp-edged triangle. She called that our conscience. Whenever we considered doing something wrong, the triangle would start to spin, and the sharp points of that triangle would cut us inside.

That hurt, she said, was because God had put within us the knowledge of right and wrong. So I didn't need a stone tablet to tell me something is wrong. The Holy Spirit working through my own conscience would take care of that!

And because God has placed that new covenant in our hearts and minds, there are no more excuses for not responding to the gospel. You can't say "I never saw those stone tablets, so I didn't know that was wrong." It's in your heart and mind.

That's what Paul meant when he told the religiously curious in Athens:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:30)

There are no more excuses.

#2: NO MYSTERY

There is also no more mystery. Verse 34 says:

No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," (Jeremiah 31:34a)

The ultimate fulfillment of this Scripture will happen when Jesus Christ returns. People might debate it now, but when Jesus returns, it will all be different.

At the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:10-11)

That's the goal of any sort of evangelistic effort we do – to help people know Jesus. We don't need to start a fire within them. The spark is already there. God wrote it in their hearts and minds. Our job is simply to walk with Jesus, and as His Spirit opens the door for us, help people to know who He is. Help them to understand there is real life and real freedom.

Yes, one day they will know. But they need to know now, so they can live in the fullness and freedom of that knowledge.

#3: NO MORE SIN

The best part of this reading in Jeremiah is verse 34 ...

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:34b)

Early in their marriage George made a major mistake. He confessed it to his wife, and she graciously forgave him. "Forgive and forget. That's my motto," she said. But over the subsequent years of their marriage, she would constantly remind him of that event. One day George had enough. He asked his wife "Why do you keep bringing that up? I thought your motto was 'forgive and forget.'" "It is," she responded. "But I don't want you ever to forget that I have forgiven and forgotten."

That's not how God operates. When we respond in faith to the new covenant within us, He remembers our sin no more. Never to be held against us again.

If you are still struggling with the memory of some past sin, hear these words. God remembers it no more.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

APPLICATION

No excuses. No mystery. No more.

There are two takeaways I want you to get from this message today.

1. The first goes back to that German Bible. The Reformation happened because the people read the Scriptures. They did not rely on what their pastors said in order to know what God said. You need to read. This world needs to read. Don't underestimate the importance of that one.
2. The second invites you to embrace this truth, and to spread it to everyone you meet.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-32, 36)

Let's pray ... Amen.