

Jeremiah 31:31-40 The promised new covenant

Introduction

‘I promise I will...’ How often have you spoken these words? Too many times to recall over each year of our lives since we gained a reasonable vocabulary in our native language as a child! Making promises is a part of everyday living for each human being. However, the challenge is not in the making of promises but the keeping of them. How seriously do we intend to keep the promises we make? Going back not that many decades in the United Kingdom, amongst respectable people, to give your word was to keep it. In the early nineteenth century Baptist lay-pastor and businessman David McLaren (from Glasgow, father of Alexander McLaren, Minister of Union Chapel, Manchester) advised a friend to make a particular business investment on the grounds that it was a good investment. Circumstances beyond his control ensured that his advice was ill-advised and his friend lost a significant amount of money. Now McLaren had done nothing wrong and as far as I am aware his friend made no such claim against him. However, this Christian man from Glasgow felt that he had given his word that the investment would succeed and felt honour-bound to seek to obtain at least a proportion of the sum lost by his friend to assist him in recovering his fortunes. As a result he took a post in new colony of South Australia and worked away from his family for some years until he had earned the sum he wished to donate to his friend. David McLaren was convinced that he had spoken and in order for his word to be trusted in future he had to do what he did to assist his friend. I found it a challenge reflecting on how seriously this Baptist lay-pastor viewed his words of advice to friends. Yet if our word is to be our bond how much more seriously God takes the promises He has made. There are many references to this point in the Bible. Joshua 23:14 is an excellent example, from a speech of the aged Israelite leader before he died. *Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.* This truth is the bedrock on which Jeremiah 31 and the promise of the New Covenant is based. God keeps His side of the bargain. You can always rely on Him.

1. The background to the new covenant promises

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is not a promise that can be wrenched out of its context. It must be seen in the light of its Jewish Israelite heritage. In his youth Jeremiah was called to a ministry of both destruction and rebuilding. Jeremiah 1:9-10 makes this clear: *Then the Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘I have put My words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’* The nation had turned its back on God and there were inevitably consequences that must follow. A sinful people that failed to heed the warning of the prophets would be sent into exile to learn the lessons from its failure to honour God. This teaching was made clear by Moses. After outlining the blessings that would flow from godly living, Moses then made clear references to the punishments that would inevitably follow on any rejection of God’s laws for their lives. Deuteronomy 28: 58, 62-64a states: *If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the Lord your God ...⁶² You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the Lord your God. ⁶³ Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please Him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess. ⁶⁴ Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other.* However, this was not to be the sad ending to the story.

Deuteronomy 30:1-6 provides the good news and the clear hope for the future. *When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations,* ² *and **when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today,*** ³ *then the Lord your God **will restore** your fortunes and **have compassion on you** and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you.* ⁴ *Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back.* ⁵ ***He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.*** Here is the principle of the promise. God will keep His promises / covenants with Israel. If they are out of fellowship with Him then exile comes; if in exile they turn back to Him then they regain access to and control over the land God gave to Abraham and his descendants for ever. Genesis 17:6-8 states: ⁶ *I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.* ⁷ *I will establish My covenant **as an everlasting covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* ⁸ *The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as **an everlasting possession** to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.* This covenant is not only corporate and concerning the land of Israel, but also personal and spiritual. Deuteronomy 30:6 records these important prophetic words: ⁶ *The Lord your God **will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*** At the time of writing this was very much a future tense scenario. It was pointing forward to an extension of the covenant as they had known it, but not at the expense of all the previous aspects which God had also highlighted as their heritage. Ezekiel, the pastor to the exiles in Babylon from c.590sBC, also looked forward to this future time of restoration to the land and inner spiritual transformation at the same time. In Ezekiel 36:24-28 he prophesied these words, so consistent with the messages of Jeremiah in the years leading up to the exile and the even earlier words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30. Ezekiel declared: *“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 *Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be My people, and I will be your God.* God’s plans are never cobbled together at the last minute, like some of ours might be at times! He knows exactly what He wants to do and carries it out at just the right time in history for the ultimate good of His people and His own glory.

Already in Jeremiah’s day there were people who had been forcibly sent into exile in Babylon by the superpower of the day. Had God finished with them? Were they too bad to play any future part in His purposes? Listen to these words from Jeremiah’s message to a group of exiles from Jeremiah 24:4-8: *Then the word of the Lord came to me:* ⁵ *‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians.* ⁶ *My eyes will watch over them for their good, and **I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them.*** ⁷ ***I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord. They will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with all their heart.*** Restoration to the land after a significant number of them have turned back to God in faith and with repentance from their sins. There is a clear pattern here of God’s activity in the lives of His covenant people Israel, the ‘children of Abraham’. The same picture is seen in the better known words of Jeremiah 29, in another message to the exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah 29:11-14 states: *For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* ¹² *Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me,*

and I will listen to you. ¹³ **You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.** ¹⁴ **I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.'** Turning to God and truly acknowledging Him, together with repentance from sin, would mean for them a regaining of the land of Israel, after in that case around seventy years of exile (Jeremiah 29:10). In applying this point to the modern era, how do we view the regaining of the land of Israel (or actually a part of it) in 1948? Was this a fulfilment of this covenant, described in Genesis 17 as 'everlasting'? Is there any evidence to back up this possibility as some Christians have claimed? From the fourth to the eighteenth century AD there was the terrible blight of anti-Semitic persecution of the Jewish people, not only by evil states but often aided and abetted by professing Christians. It is profoundly sad and deeply disturbing that such racism should be found within the ranks of the Christian Church. Graham Keith, a Scottish historian and member of the Free Church of Scotland, entitled his modern history of the Jewish people: *Hated without a Cause History of Anti-Semitism* (IVP, 1997). There were honourable exceptions such as Oliver Cromwell and some of the Puritan Ministers who had a more biblical view of the Jewish people, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule. However, in the eighteenth century onwards after many centuries of hardly any Jews taking an interest in following Jesus as their Messiah and Lord something remarkable began. Christians began to take the biblical texts seriously that spoke about a return to the Lord by the Jewish people and in turn by the end of the nineteenth century nearly a hundred Christian agencies were working in Jewish communities around the world. This had played a significant part in the fact that by 1900 there were approximately 250,000 Jews who has acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour [Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity: From the First to the Twentieth Century*, 2009, p. 154]. A further step was taken in 1882 under the influence of Joseph Rabinowitz who encouraged Jewish believers in Jesus to be open about both their Jewish heritage, together with their faith in Jesus, rather than hiding the former as many had done. This had not been witnessed since the first century AD. [Calvin L. Smith (ed.), *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*, 2013, pp. 244-245]. Although the Jewish figures that led the campaign to regain the ancestral homeland in Israel in nineteenth century Europe were secular Zionists, there were many leading Evangelical Christians who had noted the biblical pattern concerning the Jews and their land and who articulated this biblical understanding. They included Robert Murray McCheyne, St Peter's Free Church Dundee, and the circle of outstanding Presbyterian Ministers associated with him, including the Bonar brothers Andrew and Horatio; Charles Spurgeon, the most influential Baptist leader in that century; Anglican supporters included Charles Simeon, William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury and Bishop J.C. Ryle. It was a roll-call of distinguished Evangelical Ministers and lay-leaders of that era. (In more recent years this view has been articulated, for example, by many well-known theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walter Kaiser and Charles Cranfield, author of the ICC commentary on Romans and former N.T. Professor at Durham University.) I believe they were correct to identify this biblical pattern and the formation of the modern State of Israel against all the odds in the next century vindicated their stance.

Why is this the case? They and some other Christians believe that when God makes promises, especially ones described as *everlasting* ones that He actually meant what He said and intended to keep them! In the Bible the words *everlasting covenant* were used with reference to God's covenant with Noah and every living creature that never again would the whole earth be flooded (Genesis 9:16); His covenant with Israel (Exodus 31:16 with reference to keeping a weekly Sabbath; and regular worship services Leviticus 24:8; I Chronicles 16:17 & Psalm 105:10, a repeat of covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;

Isaiah 24:5 the seriousness of violating *the everlasting covenant*; His covenant with David and the Davidic line (II Samuel 23:5, Isaiah 55:3); and the New Covenant (Jeremiah 32:40; 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26 ²⁶ *I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them for ever*) [David G. Peterson, *Transformed by God*, 2012, p. 24]. With so many repetitions of these promises by God it is not difficult to see a pattern of commitments over the longer term for His people Israel. In such a context the promised new covenant is proclaimed by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, with Jeremiah 31 being the most well-known proclamation of this message.

2. The significant features of the new covenant revelation

(a) **A transformed heart** (Jeremiah 31:31-33) *'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. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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 that I will make with the people 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.* These words are not new in biblical revelation, as earlier revelation quoted in this message made plain. What is new is the immanence of its implementation. The older Mosaic covenant was written on the tablets of stone and obedience to God's commandments was measured by outward observance of the Ten Commandments by word and deed. Then there was a conditional 'if' clause recorded in Exodus 19:5: *Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession.* Now this clause has been removed for the new covenant. Read Jeremiah 31:33 and notice that the new covenant is instituted by God as an unconditional agreement in which we are both enabled and obliged to honour God in the priorities we choose and the way of life we live. The sin of God's people was *engraved...on the tablets of their hearts* (Jeremiah 17:1), but God's purposes will not be frustrated for ever. In Jeremiah 32:37-41 God declares: *I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in My furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. ³⁸ They will be My people, and I will be their God. ³⁹ I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear Me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. ⁴⁰ I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from Me. ⁴¹ I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all My heart and soul.* If God is so committed to this work then it surely must happen.

(b) **A new experience of God** (Jeremiah 31:34a)³⁴ *No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord.* The people of Jeremiah's day were acting as if they did not know God by the sinful choices they prioritised (see Jeremiah 8:22-9:6 and 22:13-17) There was no intention by God to abolish the work of the Shepherds of God's flock in Israel or do away with the work of the prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This is made abundantly plain. For example, Jeremiah 3:14-15 states: *'Return, faithless people,' declares the Lord, 'for I am your husband. I will choose you – one from a town and two from a clan – and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵ Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding* (Jeremiah 23:3-4 makes the same point). What is new is the personal devotional life of the people of God under the new covenant. Their acts of worship around God's Word and through prayer, for example, can be personal between them and God, in addition to acts of collective worship with the wider family of God in the local community. Under the new covenant a believer will not want to rely exclusively on the preached word in church on Sundays or rely exclusively on Sunday School teachers and youth leaders to educate their

children in the things of God. Family prayer times or a parent reading a Bible passage and prayer with a child ideally each day is also strongly commended in the new covenant era. No longer do we need an ordained priest to pray for us, instead each and every one of us can come directly to God's throne in prayer at any time in the name of the Lord Jesus our great God and Saviour. Here in Jeremiah 31:31, 33 the prophecy describes exiles of both northern and southern kingdoms returning to the land of Israel. (also in Jeremiah 23:6; 31:27; 50:4-5). Sadly in the returns under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah the returnees were almost exclusively from the southern kingdom of Judea. Yet is it possible that the greater diversity of returnees to Israel of people of Jewish heritage from around the world since 1948 might be a fulfilment of this prophecy, especially as a growing (albeit small) proportion acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and Saviour?

(c) **A new relationship with God** (Jeremiah 31:34b) *'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'* The Levitical sacrificial system provided the methods by which particular acts of sin could be atoned for, but here a more definitive resolution of their sinfulness was required. The exiles in Babylon knew they had sinned and their wickedness was being punished. Did God have a way of comprehensively dealing with their sins? Yes! Isaiah 52:13-53:12 speaks of the Servant of the Lord, whom we know from the New Testament is Jesus was God's definitive answer to this need. Isaiah 53:10-12 states: *Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. ¹¹After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge My righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.* The implications of the sacrifice of Jesus were explained so clearly in the book of Hebrews, but even in the Old Testament there is a clear indication of the once-for-all-time sufficient sacrifice for sin which he would offer in our place.

(d) **A renewed commitment from God** (Jeremiah 31:35-40) Nothing can break the bond of God with His people Israel. (i) It is as permanent as the orderliness of the universe (Jeremiah 31:35-36) ³⁵ *This is what the Lord says, He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord Almighty is His name: ³⁶'Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the Lord, 'will Israel ever cease being a nation before Me.'* The incredible fixed order of the creation would go before God breaks this promise. (ii) Only after all the mysteries of the Universe are unravelled will God consider breaking this promise (Jeremiah 31:37) ³⁷ *This is what the Lord says: 'Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the Lord.* If this was an incredible assurance then it is even more so now when we have a tiny glimpse of the vast expanse of space and know that humanity is unlikely ever to know too much about most of it with vast millennia of years investigating it! (iii) The day will come when the city of Jerusalem is rebuilt and goes at least as far as the Kidron Valley ³⁸ *'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when this city will be rebuilt for Me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. ³⁹The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. ⁴⁰The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the Lord. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished.'* The city's boundaries have never been as hotly contested but equally its growth and permanence have never been as secure as today. It looks like the commitment from God is still in place! But the new covenant is not just for Israel, it includes the nations as well.

(e) **A new covenant that includes ‘the nations’** (Jeremiah 12:14-17; 16:19-21) Genesis 12:3 (and repeated in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; Jeremiah 4:1-2: *‘If you, Israel, will return, then return to me,’ declares the Lord. ‘If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray,² and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, “As surely as the Lord lives,” then the nations will invoke blessings by Him and in Him they will boast.*’ (i) **The condition of blessing for the nations** In Jeremiah 12:14-17 there are clear instructions of the condition for the inclusion of the nations in the blessing of God with the Jewish people. *This is what the Lord says: ‘As for all My wicked neighbours who seize the inheritance I gave to My people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands and I will uproot the people of Judah from among them.’¹⁵ But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to their own inheritance and their own country.¹⁶ And if they learn well the ways of My people and swear by My name, saying, “As surely as the Lord lives” – even as they once taught My people to swear by Baal – then they will be established among My people.¹⁷ But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot and destroy it,’ declares the Lord.* Sadly there are Christians who deny the legitimacy of a return to the land of Israel for Jewish people. This passage speaks to such people. (ii) **Jeremiah’s vision of future unity of Jews and Gentiles in worshipping the God of Israel** Jeremiah 16:19-21 states: *Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress, to You the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, ‘Our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good.’²⁰ Do people make their own gods? Yes, but they are not gods!’²¹ Therefore I will teach them – this time I will teach them My power and might. Then they will know that My name is the Lord.* In the New Testament era after the Church began on the Day of Pentecost this vision became a reality. Jesus had reminded a Samaritan woman that salvation came from the Jews but that through the Holy Spirit’s work it would bring Jew and Gentile together in One body united in Him. In John 4:22-24 Jesus stated: *You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.²⁴ God is spirit, and His worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.’* The night before His crucifixion Jesus met in an upper room with His closest followers and spoke these words recorded in Luke 22:19-20: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’²⁰ In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.* The promised new covenant was inaugurated in Jesus. Hallelujah! God always keeps His word, Amen.