

# A Better Promise

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[ 0 : 00 ] Heavenly Father, we pray that as we come to your living and holy word this morning, that you would grow our knowledge and love of you.

Supremely, Father, we want to pray as we think about Christmas that we would come and adore the Lord Jesus. We pray these things in his most precious name. Amen.

As we start, I want to ask the question, why do people celebrate Christmas? And I'll start off by telling you why we do that, I think why most people do that back where I come from in the United Kingdom.

So three big reasons, presents, food and family. Certainly why I celebrated Christmas growing up as a non-Christian in the United Kingdom.

I look back on my childhood, I think of the care my mother put into filling these Christmas stockings with lots of little gifts, carefully chosen gifts.

[ 1 : 06 ] I think of a sort of annual trip to a huge toy store to look at presents. Even though England isn't the food lover's paradise of Malaysia, Christmas food is something certainly that I look forward to every year.

Sweet snacks, roast turkey. As I said, I think back to my childhood. I think of one particular Christmas where all my uncles and aunts, my cousins, my grandmother, we were all together. And for us, I think that happened once in my life, that we were all of us in one place at one time. That's a particularly happy memory.

Since moving to Singapore and marrying a Singaporean lady, I've tried to keep various sort of Christmas traditions alive. So my wife and I, we argue. We don't argue.

We have constructive disagreements over giving the children too many presents. You see, when I grew up, we got lots and lots of presents. So that's what I want to give to my children, whether it's my wife, Chinese background.

[ 2 : 19 ] It's unpaus, isn't it? It's not presents. So we find about how much goes on there. Every year I'm out searching for the best possible buys for Christmas snacks and food.

This year I went on a diet in November in preparation for chocolates and mince pies and everything else. We tried to organise a family meal with my wife's parents and her brother's families.

That's happened a number of times, but sadly this year, because of a sort of family conflict between my wife's parents and their eldest son, no family dinner this year.

What does all that have to do with what the Bible says about why we should celebrate Christmas? After all, what I've just described to you, isn't it, is the Ung Moor CNY. Red packets swap for presents. Well, as I've thought about it, it struck me that at the heart of the passage we're looking at today is family.

[ 3 : 30 ] A not biological family. Being in God's family. In a relationship with him. And that is such great news because the world we live in is full of signs that humanity's relationship with God is broken.

A couple of examples we know all too well. On a big scale. Russia, Ukraine, Israel, Gaza.

On a small scale. Fractured families. Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor, preaching at the sort of closing stages of the Second World War.

He spoke of the happy times in the world as like tiny islands in an ocean of blood and tears. He said the history of the world is a story of war deeply marked with the hoof prints of the apocalyptic horsemen.

[ 4 : 45 ] It is the story of humanity without a father. So it seems. The birth of Jesus, that first Christmas, was about God giving a weary world a gift to fix this broken world.

And that's what we'll see as we think about how Christ gave the gift of the new covenant, the better promise. Jesus' gift of the new covenant.

It is all about God restoring us to relationship with himself. To see just how incredible that is, we're going to turn to those verses we read from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah.

Blood and tears, a story of war. Well, that is the context of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah lived at the time when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar.

He was the king of Babylon 600 years before Jesus. He invaded Israel. He waged war. He destroyed the capital with its great temple. He took prisoners away from their homelands to distant lands.

[6:11] And into that terrible situation, into that darkness, Jeremiah spoke a word of hope. Words of hope that looked forward to the new covenant, the better promise that Jesus would inaugurate.

To help us understand why that is such good news, we need to think first about the old covenant and the broken relationship.

This is our first point. The old covenant and the broken relationship. So, if you're looking at Jeremiah there, Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 and 32.

The days are coming, declares the Lord, but I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 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. Here we'll think about three things. The great rescue, the great marriage, the great unfaithfulness.

[7:19] So first, the great rescue. The new covenant is not like the covenant God made with the Israelites back in the days of the Exodus from Egypt.

That covenant was made when, our text says, God took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. It's a very understated way of talking about what the Lord did.

The Exodus was the great Old Testament rescue. In the New Testament we have the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the Old Testament it is the Exodus from Egypt.

The Exodus, it was the great display of God's incredible might. Egypt, the superpower of the day. Israel, slaves under Egypt. And God, the one true God, came and wiped the floor with Egypt.

He demonstrated his superiority to all the gods of Egypt. In not just one, but ten devastating plagues. The Lord, as I'm sure you know, turned water to blood.

[8:28] Sent frogs, gnats, flies. Egyptian livestock died. There were boils, hail, locusts. Egypt went dark, pitch black. For three whole days.

Then the Passover. The death of all the Egyptian firstborn. From the greatest to the least. Finally, as Israel left Egypt. With Pharaoh pursuing them with his army.

The Lord leads them through the Red Sea. And then swallows up Pharaoh's army. In the mighty waters. From that day forward. There has never been.

An equivalent display of divine power. Never. That is how God brought them out of Egypt. And that was the back story.

To the covenant God made with Israel. I should explain. A covenant. It's an agreement that formalizes a relationship. Most common example.

[9:33] In the ancient world, as well as today. The marriage covenant. In a marriage relationship. Two people formalize. Their relationship.

Two become one. A new family relationship. And that's what was happening. As God and Israel. Entered into covenant. At the Exodus.

Here in our verses. God describes the covenant he made with Israel. As a marriage. The Exodus was how God, as it were. Sought to woo his wife.

If you're married here today. If you're a married woman here today. I wonder how your husband sought to win your heart. Maybe you think about your friendship circles.

And how you've seen people try to convince one another. That there'll be a good marriage partner. Maybe you've seen persistent faithful acts of service.

[10:33] Or extravagant gifts. Or undying. Or undying. Expressions of undying devotion. God showed his love for Israel in this.

He showed how far he'd go for his bride. He showed what a good husband he would make. As he displayed his unrivaled faithfulness and power.

And more than that. This is the ultimate rags to riches story. The almighty creator pursuing a slave.

It's the stuff of Hollywood. A Cinderella story. Often people picture God as a strict discipline master. Distant. Aloof. Not the God of the Bible. God is a God who wants a relationship. An intimate relationship of love.

[ 11 : 32 ] With his people. He wants us to see him as the faithful. Husband. That's how the story started.

But next the great betrayal. If they had the Hollywood beginning. What happened next was anything but happily ever after.

Despite all God's love. Despite everything he'd done for Israel. And everything he continued to do. They broke the covenant.

They broke the marriage covenant. Though God was their husband. They were unfaithful to him. Keep a finger in Jeremiah 31.

And turn back with me to Jeremiah 3. It'll also be on the screen. I think. Hello. I think. Thank you.

[ 12 : 32 ] Jeremiah 3. So keep a finger in Jeremiah 31. Turn back to Jeremiah 3. Listen to how God describes what they'd done. Back in Jeremiah 3.

Verse 1. If a man divorces his wife. And she leaves him and marries another. Should he return to her again?

Would not the lamb be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers. Would you now return to me?

Declares the Lord. Look up to the barren heights. And see. Is there any place. Where you have not been ravished?

By the roadside. You sat waiting for lovers. Sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land. With your prostitution and wickedness.

[ 13 : 34 ] Therefore the showers have been withheld. And no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute.

You refuse to blush with shame. Again so far from the distant God that many people imagine.

Can you hear the pain? The outrage? The outrage. I've spent so much time on the old covenant. And that broken relationship.

Why? Because we'll only understand how good the new covenant is when we understand what happened with the old. world. I think often we look at Israel in the old testament and we think how stupid.

How unimaginable. How could anybody do that? And at one level that's right. It was appalling. Everything we just saw in Jeremiah 3. Yet on the other hand.

[ 14 : 39 ] We need to realise the significance of all the advantages Israel had. They had every external advantage. The God given law.

That miraculous rescue. In the Singapore press recently there was an article reporting on a study that had been done. To show that children from wealthier backgrounds.

And with more educated parents. They did significantly better in exams. Surprise. Surprise. Well Israel is the.

Sorry. Israel had the best start imaginable. You can't get a better start. And they blew it. They consistently blew it.

Generation after generation. I imagine that Singapore headline. Or the Singapore headline reading. All the children from those wealthiest families. Most educated families.

[ 15 : 36 ] They failed the primary school leaving exam. None passed. How would the other children have gone on? But if those ones had failed.

No point even looking. Obviously. They'd have failed too. The history of Israel teaches us. How bad the plight of humanity is.

Give one group of people. The best chance imaginable. All the external help they could ask for. If they fail.

The rest definitely won't make it. Brothers and sisters. Israel shows us what humanity is like. By nature.

We all have a broken relationship with God. All of humanity by nature. Betrays God. Do you realize.

[ 16 : 39 ] That is what we are like. By nature. That's true. Whether you're here. And you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. And whether you've been a Christian for a year.

Or 20 years. Or 50 years. It's true. Whether you're. Whether you're a pastor. Or not. By nature. You and I. Would betray.

God. Do you believe that? It's only when we grasp.

The extent of the bad news. That we can comprehend. Just how glorious it is. That the new. That Jesus Christ. Gives the new covenant.

At Christmas. This brings us to our second point. The new covenant. And the restored relationship. Verses 33 to 34. Listen to those words.

[17:42] From the Lord again. This is the covenant. 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. No longer will they teach their neighbor. Or say to one another. Know the Lord. Because they will all know me. From the least to the greatest. Declares the Lord. Jeremiah promised.

The days were coming. When God would make a new covenant. That better promise. And not be like the covenant God made. After the great exodus rescue.

Which the people broke. In the new covenant. God promises three things. In those verses. To write the law. His law on their hearts. He promises.

I will be their God. And they will be my people. And third. He promises. All his people will know him. So first there. Verse 33. God promises to write his law.

[18:40] On people's hearts. You see the problem with the old covenant. Was it worked externally. It was outside. Miracles. The law. All outside. And that helps us to see.

As the 19th century bishop. J.C. Ryle put it. The heart of the problem. Is the problem. Of the human heart.

The heart of the problem. Is the problem. Of the human heart. God acting through external things. Will. Not. Help.

If there is to be any hope. God must act. And not externally. But. Internally. He must act on the human heart. He must write his law. Not on the tablets of stone. But on the tablets of flesh.

In the modern age. We have the illustration. Don't we? Heart surgery. Pastor Ryan told me. That a number of people. In this congregation. You're involved. You work.

[19:44] At Sarawak General Hospital. Well. If you will. Imagine with me. We go off. Together. To Sarawak General Hospital. Go along.

And speak to a friendly doctor. And ask about. Watching heart surgery. I explain. You've been reading the Bible. And you'd like to see a picture. Of what God has promised to do.

In Jeremiah 31. Probably unlikely. They'll let you in. But if they did. You'd see the patient opened up. And the doctor go to work.

On the human heart. To heal what's wrong. As a result of the surgery. The patient. Would be able to do things. They'd never been able to do before. They hadn't been able to do for ages. Life expectancy.

Extended. As you watch. What you'll see. Is the patient does nothing. They're asleep. It's the doctor who acts.

[20:40] On the unconscious body. To bring healing. Then the patient wakes up. And the change. Has happened. Well here. In Jeremiah 31. God promises.

To perform. Heart surgery. To write his law. On his people's hearts. By his Holy Spirit. So that we love. Him. And his word. God must do this.

We do nothing. He does everything. The only thing. You and I contribute. Is the need. To be saved. Because of God's action.

On the heart. The relationship. It's restored. So God declares. End of verse 33. I will be their God. And they will be my people. The books. They tell me. That is the language of marriage.

Of two parties. Possessing one another. I think the words. Of the song of songs. My lover is mine. And I am his. The relationship.

[21:42] That was destroyed. Because of betrayal. Will be restored. Because of the faithful. Action. Of God. God will be the husband. To his people.

His people. The bride. This is. The words. Of Revelation. 21. The church. Prepared as a bride. Beautifully dressed. For her husband.

I am going to drop down. And. They will be his people. And God himself. Will be with them. And be their God. He will wipe away. Every tear. From their eyes.

God will restore the relationship. A relationship. So tender. God himself. Will personally. Wipe away. Every tear.

Finally. Verse 34. Every single one of God's people. Will know God. And from the least. To the greatest. They will all know him. The point isn't.

[ 22 : 43 ] That there won't be teachers anymore. Jeremiah himself. Looks forward. To God providing good teachers. In 3 verse 15. There'll be teachers. Our passage doesn't contradict that.

No. The text doesn't say. There'll no longer be shepherds. So. No longer will shepherds teach them. It says. No longer will they teach their neighbor.

Up to this point in Jeremiah. All the talk of neighbors. Is of lying. And treachery. And enslavement. And perversion. So. Again on the screen. Jeremiah 9.

And verse 4. Beware of your friends. That's that neighbor word. Don't trust anyone of your clan. For every one of them.

Is a deceiver. Every friend. A slanderer. Friend deceives friend. And no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongues.

[ 23 : 43 ] To lie. They weary themselves. With sinning. You live in the midst of deception. In their deceit. They refuse to acknowledge me.

Declares the Lord. So Jeremiah's day. All the people were deceivers. Slanderers. No one spoke the truth. They didn't know God. But with the new covenant.

There'd be no need. To say to a neighbor. Know the Lord. Because all God's people would know him. Says God. In the Bible.

Knowing somebody. It's not about information. I love reading biographies. So recently I read a book. About Zwingli. The church reformer. I read a book also about Thomas Hardy. The novelist. As a result of reading those books. I know things. About those people. But what Jeremiah is talking about. Is so much more.

[ 24 : 40 ] In the Bible. Knowing someone. Again. It's the language of intimate relationship. The Bible can speak of a husband. Knowing his wife. I can tell you lots of information.

About my wife. To turn. But what matters in our relationship. Is not that I could pass a quiz. About her. What matters is that I know her.

That I have. A living. Healthy. Relationship. With her. That's what God promises. To give. In the new covenant. That is the better promise.

What have we seen? God will write his law. On the hearts of his people. By the Holy Spirit. He'll establish. An intimate relationship. With his people. He will be the husband. To his people.

God will make it such. That his people will know him. They'll have a relationship. Of love. With him. And because God writes. His law. On people's hearts.

[ 25 : 39 ] It will be. Forever. Now the next chapter. Of Jeremiah. Will speak. Of the new covenant. So Jeremiah 32. And verse 40. As an everlasting. Covenant.

That is the gift. Of the new covenant. The better promise. And because God has written. His law. On hearts. By the spirit. This time. The bride. Will remain faithful.

The fairy tale wedding. Will have. The happily ever after. Ending. What's the significance. For us. Of what we've seen. The old covenant. Teaches. The most privileged people. Couldn't sustain.

A relationship. With God. Israel. Despite all. Of her advantages. Was the unfaithful. The unfaithful. Spouse. That's what all.

[ 26 : 34 ] Of humanity. Does. After the fall. Nothing external. Can cause people. To love God. As they should. So God promises. An internal solution.

He will fix. Rebellious. And unfaithful. Human hearts. He will so work. On human hearts. By his holy spirit. That we'll love him. That we'll love him.

And his word. So we can be in an intimate relationship with God. That will last forever. Now if you're a Christian. That is what God has done for you.

Done for us. Undeserving. And unfaithful people. We didn't do it. God did it. More than that. Our only hope.

Your only hope. My only hope. Is that God continues. To work by his spirit. If God withdrew his spirit. We'd be lost.

[ 27 : 29 ] I would be lost. Prone to wander. Lord I feel it. Prone to leave. The God I love. Our only hope. Is the ongoing. Ministry.



Brothers and sisters, when you are conscious of your sin, remember the living God says to you, I remember your sins no more.

And repent with joy in your heart. If you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, if you will believe in Jesus, today you can be assured God will say the same words to you.

Amen. We can be confident of this because of Jesus Christ.

In 2011, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom said these words in her Christmas message.

God sent into the world a unique person, neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a saviour with the power to forgive.

[ 34 : 44 ] Jesus is the saviour with the power to forgive. How can he forgive? How can you and I be certain he will forgive us? God's forgiveness is free, but it's not cheap.

It cost Jesus his life. The great 5th century African Christian thinker, Augustine, spoke of Christmas like this.

The word of the Father, by whom all time was created, was made flesh and was born in time for us. The maker of man became man, that he, the ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast, that he, the bread, might be hungry, that he, the fountain, might thirst, that he, the light, might sleep, that he, the way, might be wearied by the journey, that he, the truth, might be accused by false witnesses, that he, the judge of the living and the dead, might be brought to trial, that he, the foundation, might be suspended upon a cross, that he, the life, would die.

We started the surface, didn't we, with totally God and totally man. Jesus, who is fully God, totally God, humbled himself and became a man that first Christmas.

[ 36 : 19 ] And that divine condescension, at the first step on a journey, planned beforehand, to lead all the way to the cross. The maker begotten of the Virgin Mary, that he, the life, would die.

He died taking the punishment that you and I deserve. He bore the wrath of God in our place, in the place of his people. And so that future time that Jeremiah looked forward to, becomes a present reality.

I will forgive their sins, becomes, because of Jesus, I have forgiven your sins. As we end, this is how the Christ of Christmas gives the new covenant, the better promise.

When that costly forgiveness was accomplished, the new covenant could be inaugurated. Jesus came to deal with the punishment our sins deserve, the record of wrongs could be torn up, forgiven, forgotten.

only then could the new covenant begin, and the law be written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The creator was born that first Christmas, that he would take his dying breath, so that the breath of life will be breathed out into us.

[ 38 : 12 ] The maker became man, that on the cross he would give up his spirit, so that his spirit would be poured out upon us.

despite everything humanity, everything we have done wrong, at that first Christmas God so loved the world he gave his only son.

Our relationship with God was broken, we were his enemies, but God acted in Jesus that we might be forgiven, and the new covenant, the better promise would come.

God the Father sent his son to restore our relationship with himself. God the Son died on the cross that we would be forgiven and the spirit poured out.

God the Holy Spirit has written his law upon our hearts and he will sustain us forever into the new creation. That first Christmas God the Holy Trinity acted that our relationship with him would be restored, sustained, and would end happily ever after.

[ 39 : 36 ] Brothers and sisters, let's praise the one true and living God for his incredible gift at Christmas. Let's pray together. Dear Heavenly Father, as we think about the world, as we think about the brokenness of the world, of all the signs of humanity's broken relationship with you, and when we see that large in the world, as we see that small in our families and people around us, Heavenly Father, that we praise you that you don't leave us where our sins, leave us in our sins, but you act to restore our relationship with you.

We praise you for these great promises, these better promises given to Jeremiah hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. We praise you that when Jesus came, he gave the fulfillment of those promises.

We praise you that because of his death, taking the punishment that we deserve, your spirit was poured out, that your law was written on our hearts, that you are our God and we are your people,

that we, all your people, know you.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this incredible gift. And we praise you that you bring us into your family, that we praise you that you keep us in your family by the power of your spirit and will sustain us forever.

And we praise you for these things in the name of your Son, our Saviour. Amen.