

Late, on a Sunday afternoon, May 22, 2011 a catastrophic, multiple vortex, EF-5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri. This was the city where I had lived and gone to school for four years. It was the city that for the last several years had been the frequent go-to for date nights, movies, restaurants, and shopping trips. It was the home of family and friends.

Driving through Joplin afterward was a heart wrenching experience. Places where we had been many times, and in some cases only a day before the tornado struck were nothing more than twisted metal and piles of rubble. Two ton vehicles were tossed about like nothing more than a handful of Legos. Entire city blocks were simply gone.

If you've been around long enough, you know the feeling– the moment the wrecking ball first strikes the place where you went to school for several years. Walking through the ashes of a family home you brush aside some charred cinder with your foot to see if the bit of color you see underneath houses some special memory worth saving. I know a lifelong Cardinals fan who bought a couple seats from old Busch stadium just to salvage a piece of his childhood memories.

Imagine what it was like for the Jeremiah to walk through the rubble-strewn streets of Jerusalem, the holy city, the city of God, the city he'd devoted his life to trying to save. Jerusalem was the city he'd warned again and again. For years, he'd been God's mouthpiece to Jerusalem. He tallied her injustices. He chronicled her rebellion. He called her to repentance. Again and again Jerusalem ignored his warnings.

Jeremiah prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would do God's bidding. Babylon would come. Babylon would conquer. God's judgement against Judah's many sins would be poured out. How did God's people respond? They threw him into the nearest cistern leaving him to starve. The bad news can't be true, if we can't hear it anymore, right?

But Babylon did come. Babylon did conquer, and now Jerusalem lay in ruins. Her fortress wall knocked down. The beautiful temple of Solomon torn brick from brick, all of its holy furnishings hauled off as trophies to some temple in Babylon.

Jeremiah didn't walk through the rubble gloating. He didn't say, "I told you so. You should have listened." Instead, he cried. Just like Jesus, he wept over Jerusalem. His worst nightmares now a ruined reality beneath his feet. He would be forever known as the weeping prophet. Jeremiah pours out his grief in the book of Lamentations. Lam. 3:43-45 says:

*You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples
All our enemies open their mouths against us;
Panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction;
My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.*

But there was something else that lay in ruins, something not trampled underfoot by Babylonian soldiers, but by the righteous foot of God. This wreckage didn't fill Jeremiah with

tears. Instead, it gave him hope. I'm talking about God's covenant with Israel through Moses. The Old Covenant law had proven time and time again that it was insufficient to make Israel holy. No matter that God has chosen Israel, that God had protected Israel, that God had provided for Israel and had called her to be a special people, Israel had repeatedly proven she was unable to live up to the task. Israel had worn the covenant as a badge of honor, thinking it proved she was better than everyone else, but all it proved was she was just as bad.

The failure wasn't God's; it was humanity's. It wasn't the law that wasn't perfect; it was the people. God's people loved the law, but they were incapable of following it. An imperfect people can never keep a perfect law. The problem with the Mosaic covenant was that it could only show us what righteousness requires, but it could do nothing to help us reach that goal.

Mark Moore writes in Core 52, "They kept sinning, kept sacrificing, and kept suffering for their rebellion. They needed a better law and deeper relationship with God." So, what was the value in the Law? Why did God ever give the 10 Commandments and the Law if it wouldn't work?

The purpose of the Law was that it showed us just how sinful we are. In the court of heaven, it is exhibit A of how incapable we are of achieving the holiness of God. It proves our desperate need for the love, grace, and mercy of God.

The apostle Paul writes about this in Romans 7, "*It was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, 'You must not covet.'*" (NLT)"

Most people like to think they're pretty good. We compare ourselves to others in a way that puts us in a good light. That driver who whizzed past me; He's a lunatic. The granny holding me up is a moving roadblock, but my driving is perfect. The guy who spends less than me is a tightwad, and the guys who buys nicer things is so irresponsible with his money, but again I'm just right.

However, the law is like the state trooper with the speed on his radar gun. While I'm ranting, "Did you see that other guy? He looked like he was qualifying for the Indy 500." Meanwhile the officer says, "Sir, you were doing 22 over the limit. There's no denying it. Guilty as charged, but that radar gun can't appear before the judge and pay my fine. The radar gun does nothing to help me drive better. It simply exposes how I drive.

The old covenant does nothing about my sin. It can't pay the penalty for my sin. It doesn't help me actually be a better person. I need something more. You need something more. Jeremiah knew we all needed something more.

This brings us to our Core verse this morning. In Jeremiah 31, the prophet wipes away his tears, and he sees reason for rejoicing, reason for hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel. He says God will gather His people back in and rebuild them. He promises to turn their sadness and mourning into joy and dancing. It is a prophecy of renewal and restoration.

How will this happen? What will it take for this to take place? It will take nothing less than a new covenant. In one of the bright, glittering jewels of Old Testament Scripture we read this in Jeremiah 31 beginning in verse 31:

31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

And then in our core verses for this week, God tells us what this new covenant entails,

33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

All of these things that had happened from the invasion of Babylon, to the destruction of the temple, to the exile of God's people was only wiping the slate clean so that God could put something better in its place. God is announcing through Jeremiah a new and improved covenant— a covenant that is superior to the Law of Moses in every way.

And Jeremiah is not alone in his hope for a new covenant. He is joined by other Old Testament prophets. For instance, Ezekiel says in Ezekiel 36:26-27,

"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

That new covenant is exactly what God accomplished by sending his Son Jesus to pay the price for our sins and defeat the power of sin and death. This is why we are Christians who follow Jesus, instead of Jews who try to follow Moses.

I want to share with you real quick this morning 6 ways in which the new covenant is better than the old covenant. These are the things to which Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Joel were looking forward.

I. In the New Covenant the Spirit of God fights for us instead of fighting against us

First, in the New Covenant the Spirit of God fights for us instead of fighting against us. In Genesis 6:3 God says, *"My Spirit will not contend with humans forever."* Throughout the Old Testament the Spirit of God was continually fighting against a wicked and rebellious humanity. In the New Covenant, though, God's Spirit is no longer the spiritual traffic cop looking to bust us for breaking the rules. Instead, God has placed His Spirit to dwell within us. The temple is no

longer a place where we go to be made right with God. No, we are the temple because God has made us right. It's like the Spirit of God has gone from being our chief prosecutor to becoming our defense attorney. This brings us to number two.

II. The New Covenant works from the inside out. The old Covenant worked from the Outside In

The New Covenant works from the inside out whereas the Old Covenant worked from the outside in. The Old Covenant supplied a list of rules. You shall not do these things. You shall do these things. And if you didn't comply with those rules, there were certain penalties built in. However, the Old Covenant did nothing to help you follow those rules.

In the New Covenant, the standards of right and wrong haven't changed, but the way we meet those standards has been completely transformed. God places His Spirit inside us to change our hearts. God transforms us from the inside out to deal with our desires and want tos.

III. The New Covenant Makes us Righteous

This brings us right to the next point. The New Covenant Makes us Righteous. The Old Covenant calls us to be righteous, but it doesn't do anything to make us righteous. The transforming power of faith in Jesus actually gives us a right standing before God. When God sees you, He doesn't see all your unrighteousness. What He sees is the righteousness of Jesus. It makes us righteous.

The Old Covenant could only continue to expose, convict, and condemn, but the New Covenant gives us the power to live a new life in Jesus.

IV. The New Covenant Gets Rid of the Middle Man.

Four– the New Covenant Gets Rid of the Middle Man. Imagine this– Everyone one of us has to raise sheep and goats and rams in our backyard so that we have something to bring to church whenever we want to approach God. Once a year, we have to offer a sacrifice to pay for all the sins you committed that year. But that's not enough. You want to worship God, you bring a burnt offering. You wanted to tell God "Thank You." You make another offering. You accidentally injure your neighbor, you have to bring an offering. And on and on it goes.

Even with all those offerings, you are still not allowed to approach God yourself. Imagine every time you came to the church building you could only enter the parking lot. You were never allowed inside the building. Only the board members were allowed in the building, and only I as the preacher was allowed in the main auditorium. Only I could approach God on your behalf.

In the New Covenant though, you don't have to go through a special person, at a special place, at a special time. You have direct access to God, anytime, anywhere. Jesus threw that door wide open and He gave He gave you the key.

Listen to these verses that speak to the direct access you have to the throne of heaven.

- Hebrews 4:16 *“Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*
- Eph. 2:18 *“Through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.”*
- James 4:8 *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”*
- Hebrews 10:19 *“We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.”*
- Matthew 6:6 *“When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”*

V. Everyone is a Minister

Another pro of the New Covenant is that everyone is a minister. This directly stems from the last point, that the New Covenant gets rid of the middle man. Under the old covenant the priests only came from the tribe of Levi, and even then only certain families within the tribe could become priests. High priests, for instance, were descendants of Aaron.

To serve God and serve others under the New Covenant you don't have to come from the right family. You don't have to be born in the right place. You don't have to have a certain skin color. You don't have to go to a certain school. In Christ, everyone is empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve and minister. Everyone and anyone can be the conduit through which God works.

As a Christian, the door is open for you to preach, to teach, to lead, to guide, to mentor, to be an example, to serve, to support, and to change lives. In the church, every member is a minister. Every believer is spiritually gifted by God to speak or to serve in the body of Christ in some way.

VI. The Penalty for Sin is Paid

The last reason that the new covenant is superior to the old that I'm going to share this morning is this— The Penalty for Sin is Paid. Under the Old Covenant you had to pay for your own sin again and again, year after year, but with the new covenant the penalty for every sin you will ever commit has already been paid. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, and the love of Jesus and the grace of God makes that forgiveness freely available. All you have to do is ask.

1 John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.”*

In the old covenant you had to live the life God requires to be right with God. In the new covenant, you are made right with God, so that you can live the life He requires.

The only thing more boring than reading insurance policies is reading IRS instructions. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to know the details of your insurance policy, because if you don't

know the benefits, you won't know to use them. You may end up paying for something the policy covers.

Sadly, many believers are ignorant of the many benefits they enjoy under the new covenant. As a result, the enemy takes advantage of them and they end up paying for something the policy covers. They are plagued by guilt, when the policy says, *"I will remember their sins no more."* They feel alienated from God and his people when the policy clearly states, *"I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* They burden themselves with manmade rules, while the policy says, *"I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts."*

If you are a follower of Jesus, you need to know the benefits of belonging to Jesus. Don't carry what He has carried. Don't shut off what he has opened up. Don't pay for what he has paid.

If you're sitting in your car here this morning, but you are not a follower of Jesus, then that can change before you drive out of here. The thing about this new covenant, is it isn't available to only a select few. It's available to anyone and everyone who is willing to follow. It can be yours and all it takes is to trust Jesus as the Master of your life and the Savior of your soul.

How can I do that? We're under lockdown. We're stuck in our cars. How am I supposed to respond?