

A new covenant

PREPARING

SCRIPTURE TEXT

Jeremiah 31:31–40

SUPPLIES

- Bibles
- Gather 'Round CD, CD player
- Candle, matches (see Gather 'round, Connect to the story)
- Crepe paper streamers cut into sections, markers (see Gather 'round)
- "God box" (see Gather 'round, Ending and sending)
- Paper cut into strips and hearts, pens (see Connect to the story, Ending and sending)
- Tape or stapler (see Connect to the story)
- Paper plate (see Connect to the story)
- Supplies for Responding options

Opening to God

Restoring God, thank you for inviting us into covenant with you. Write your word in my heart. May my love for you be evident in all areas of my life. Amen.

Bible story summary

Jeremiah prophesies that the day is coming when God will make a new covenant with the people of Judah and Israel. The people broke the old covenant, but God will now put the law within them and write this new covenant on their hearts. From the least to the greatest, everyone shall know God. The city of Jerusalem shall be rebuilt for the Lord, its territory will be expanded, and it will not be overthrown.

To do

- Read the scripture to become familiar with the story (see Hear the Bible story).
- Prepare three paper strips and two paper hearts for each person (see Connect to the story, Ending and sending).
- Gather supplies for Responding options. Preheat an oven for "Heart messages." Arrange extra supervision for this activity, if necessary.

Faith focus

In the new covenant we will know God in our hearts.

Jeremiah 31:31–40

By Derek Suderman

Hope for the exiles

Jeremiah 31 presents hope for the future. After earlier warnings of impending disaster, Jeremiah repeatedly uses the phrase “the days are coming.” This shifts the focus from exile to restoration. The shift is beautifully summarized in 31:28: “And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.”

“Cutting” a new covenant

Here the Lord promises a new covenant. While in English you “make” a covenant, in Hebrew you “cut” one. This reflects the processes involved in covenant ceremonies, which included the sacrifice of animals (see Genesis 15:7–21). The new covenant is to be sealed in an extraordinary way: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (verse 33).

Up till now only one thing has been written “with the finger of God”: the first stone tablets of the law, broken by Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:18). The explicit contrast with the Sinai covenant reinforces the sense that this covenant will include an unprecedented sense of immediacy.

Knowing with the heart

Also unlike the Sinai covenant, this law will be written “on their hearts.” While today we tend to identify the heart with Valentine’s Day or love, in the Old Testament feelings were associated with the innards, bowels, or womb—real “gut reactions.” The heart, though, played a different role.

When Solomon prayed for wisdom to govern Israel, he asked, in the King James translation, for “an understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:9). This reflects the ancient understanding that the heart is the place where thinking happens. The New Revised Standard Version accommodates our understanding by rendering this phrase as “an understanding mind.”

How does this help us understand the passage at hand? Consider what is *not* said as well as what *is* said. The new situation Jeremiah describes does not reject or

abolish the law but rather makes it more accessible. The law, which represented the divine will for God’s people, will be internalized, meaning “in here” rather than “out there.”

Verse 34 heighten this sense of intimacy between covenant partners even further by stating that teaching will no longer be necessary “for they shall all know me.” “Knowing” God reflects a profound sense of intimacy, as the verb is also used for sexual relations.

This passage in Jeremiah witnesses to an extremely generous God. While in Psalm 89 the psalmist accuses God of breaking the covenant with David, here Jeremiah describes God bending over backward to provide a new covenant after the people broke the former one. God will write the law on hearts/minds, so that the people will know God and be in tune with the divine will. What a remarkable vision of intimacy and obedience!

Law and grace

This sheds light on aspects of the New Testament as well. We Christians sometimes pit law against grace, often drawing on Paul’s “justification by faith” to suggest that law is opposed to and overcome by grace. This passage does not indicate such a shift. Indeed, Paul himself appears flabbergasted that people could use God’s abundant grace as an excuse to lead unethical lives. He writes in Romans 6:1–2: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

The Ten Commandments and other legal passages in the Bible begin with: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). It is hard to imagine a more powerful example of grace than freeing the Israelites from slavery. Here grace is not the opposite of law but its basis.

In effect, if you want to continue living under the authority of the gracious, liberating God revealed in Exodus, here are rules to live by. As participants in the new covenant through Jesus, we do well to ask ourselves what the common claim to have “Jesus in my heart” really means.

HEARING AND SHARING

TEACHING TIP

Be sure you know your church's safe spaces policy because one of the Responding options has a small group of youth going to a different area of the building. You may need to ask for additional adult helpers so there is appropriate supervision.

Gather 'round

1. Welcome everyone. Light a candle to represent God's presence.

2. Invite the youth to think of a highlight from the week. Give each person a piece of crepe paper streamer, and have youth write a word or phrase about this event on their streamer.

3. Invite all to share a highlight from the week with the group.

TEACHING TIP

As much as possible, participate in activities with the youth. If you volunteer to share or participate in an activity first, youth will feel more at ease. Also, opportunities for conversation will naturally arise.

4. Have youth put their pieces of streamer into the "God box" (started in session 2).

5. Pray, "Thank you, God, for your blessings and for each person gathered today. We ask to continue to grow in relationship with you and enjoy this time together. Amen."

6. Explain the following game: You will say a word or phrase, and people will blurt out whatever word first comes to mind. Say the following words, pausing between each one:

- School
- Sports
- Sunday
- Church
- Worship
- Jesus
- Commandments
- Law

7. Say that this game reveals what it means to know something in our hearts. Often our initial response, or gut reaction, is what we believe most deeply. The scripture for today says that God will write the new covenant on people's hearts. Writing something "on our hearts" means to know something deeply and internally. We are asked to know God so well that our natural response is to respond to God's word and desires for us.

8. Extinguish the candle.

Hear the Bible story

Ask for three volunteers to read sections of this text. Spilt up the passage as follows:

- Reader 1: Jeremiah 31:31–34 (a new covenant)
- Reader 2: Jeremiah 31:35–37 (God's constancy)
- Reader 3: Jeremiah 31:38–40 (restoration)

Reflect on the story

Be sure to pause between the prompts to give time for silent consideration. You may choose to have youth respond verbally to the first question and then consider the others individually.

- Why would God remind the people of their exodus from Egypt?
- Why did God choose to make a new covenant?
- What does it mean for God to put the law within us?
- I wonder what God is writing on my heart.

TEACHING TIP

The Christian life is not about rules but about faithfully responding to God. This can be an important reminder for youth. At this stage, life seems to be filled with rules. And youth are often testing limits and rebelling. Encourage them to see the Bible as a way to draw closer to God rather than as a rule book.

Connect to the story

1. In Psalm 89 (session 2), the psalmist questioned God and nearly accused God of breaking the covenant. Today's scripture contained words from God, words of hope that pointed to a future beyond exile toward the restoration of all that had been lost.

God was going to extremes to create a new covenant after the people broke the old one. This had never been done before. God was doing something entirely new and different. Even so, the law was not ignored or forgotten because the law of God was now internalized: written by God upon the people's very hearts.

TEACHING TIP

One of today's Responding options, "Promises, promises," gives youth the opportunity to further explore the idea of covenant promises.

2. Distribute a pen, three or four strips of paper, and a small paper heart shape to each youth. Ask them to think of a person they know really well, such as a school friend or family member.

Youth should think about how the relationship with this person was built. On each strip of paper, have them write one way they got to know the person they have in mind.

3. Have youth read one of their strips of paper. After each person has spoken, he or she will form the strip into a circle and tape or staple the ends together.

After everyone has shared, have youth attach their own strips together to form a paper chain. Each youth will be forming his or her own chain. Then youth will write their names on the paper heart and attach it to one end of their paper chain.

4. Have youth attach the final link in their chains to a common paper plate. Set the worship candle on the plate and place it in the middle of the group.

Say that just as they spent time with people to get to know them, they learn about God by spending time with God. Invite youth to silently consider how they build their relationship with God. What does it mean for God's law to be within them, written on their hearts? What can they do to know God better?

5. Pray, "God, you want to know us. Thank you that you have a message to write on our hearts. May we be open to the Spirit's leading. Amen."

Faith focus

In the new covenant we will know God in our hearts.

RESPONDING

Explain the options you are offering youth today. Encourage them to try an activity that may be different from their typical choice.

SUPPLIES

- Sugar cookie dough (refrigerated)
- Rolling pin
- Heart-shaped cookie cutter
- Cookie sheet
- Bibles
- Icing pen
- Cookies to decorate (optional)

Heart messages.

Using refrigerated cookie dough, youth will cut out heart-shaped cookies and bake them. With an icing pen, they will write a simple phrase or word on the cookies to share with the group. Youth should read the scripture passage (Jeremiah 31:31–40) and choose words while the cookies bake. Some possibilities are: “Know God,” “Forgiven,” or “Never again.”

Option: Bring cookies already baked for youth to decorate.



SUPPLIES

- White and colored paper
- Markers, colored pencils
- Glue
- Scissors
- Bibles
- Craft supplies: glitter, stickers

About God and me.

Youth will create a scrapbook page featuring their relationship with God. They may draw pictures or write a short journal entry. Personally significant scripture texts would be great additions to the page.



SUPPLIES

- Gather 'Round CD
- CD player
- Red modeling clay

In my heart.

As a way of building relationship with God, youth will listen to “Cámbiame, Señor” (Change My Heart, O God), track 18 on the Gather 'Round CD. Youth will fashion a heart shape out of modeling clay and hold it in their hands while they listen to the song.



Promises, promises.

The covenant was a promise between God and God’s people. The Israelites repeatedly broke their part of the covenant. Youth will discuss what keeping a promise means to them. They may share times a significant promise was kept and times a promise was broken. What do they see as options when a friend keeps on breaking promises?



ENDING AND SENDING

1. Invite the youth to gather.

2. Give each youth a paper heart. Have them write a significant word or phrase from this session and place their paper heart into the “God box.”

3. Sing together “Obey My Voice,” track 20 on the Gather 'Round CD.

4. Offer these words of blessing to the youth:

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 (Jeremiah 31:33b).

5. End with a sending prayer, praying, “God, thank you for speaking to our hearts. We want to be your people—in word and in deed—at home, at school, and everywhere we go. Amen.”

Faith focus

In the new covenant we will know God in our hearts.

PONDERING AND PRAYING

Remember your own experience of first covenanting with God. Know that each session is an opportunity for youth to claim their faith and apply it to their lives.

God, you have written your word in my heart. Thank you for the opportunity to journey with these youth as they grow in relationship with you. Guide us all in more deeply understanding what it means to know you in our hearts. Amen.