Hope PCA Sermon, January 4, 2026
"Covenants Old and New" (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
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This morning we're in the last of this little short series on the covenants of God, and the contrast this morning between what the Bible calls the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. And we find the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31. If you're able, again, as we honor God's Word, let's stand as we come before it this morning.

Jeremiah 31, verses 31 to 34. This is God's Word through his prophet to his people, and that includes us here gathered today.

> ***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*.* ***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."*

The promise of God through his prophet to us: that the grass withers, the flower falls, but this word of the Lord, like all the rest, endures forever. Please be seated. Let me pray as we come to the Word.

God, our Father, as always, we ask your blessing upon your Word, that the promise you've made, that when it goes out, it will not return to you empty, would be fulfilled even here this morning. Bless your Word. May it accomplish all that you have purposed for it. Help us to understand it. Help us to understand what it means for us and to apply it in our lives. We thank you and praise you again in Jesus' name. Amen.

January, the new year. January is named after the Roman god Janus. Janus was the Roman god of transitions, of beginnings and endings (or maybe endings and beginnings). He was invoked, we're told, at the beginning of almost any Roman ritual. He was the god who ends war and brings peace, or sometimes the opposite. He's depicted in Roman art, in Roman culture, coins, statues, mosaics, as having two faces. And at first that might sound a little bit strange. The Romans didn't mean "two-faced" as we use that phrase today — someone who can't make up their mind or someone who can't be trusted because they'll present them to you one way at one time and a completely different way at another time. Janus has two faces because one looks back to the past, and the other looks forward to what is to come, the future. Again, transition — what went before, what comes after. So in Roman thinking, it was very appropriate to name the first month of the year after this god that they idolized.

Here this morning, we come to this last little sermon in this little series on the covenants. We've talked about the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, the three primary covenants given to us in Scripture. We've talked about how the Covenant of Grace consists of many administrations, or we might even call them sub-

covenants, each one revealing a little bit more of God's plan of salvation. First in a promised offspring, in a Messiah to come, but also in our text here this morning, in a new covenant, that he brings with him. That Covenant of Grace includes the covenant through Moses. That covenant is very, very heavy on law. We saw that going through Deuteronomy. You can't miss it. And while other administrations of the Covenant of Grace focus on God's promises given to his people, that Mosaic Covenant tends to focus on the law that God gave to Israel to govern their life, for them to obey.

Now in making that distinction, we can't ignore the fact that the covenants of promise were not without their own obligations. For example, God says to Abraham in Genesis 17 verse 1, "Walk before me and be blameless". But those obligations typically come after God's promise has been given and after that promise has been believed in. In Abraham's case, reckoned as righteousness.

We talked about how in the Mosaic Covenant we have this treaty between God and Israel, God the great king, and Israel his servant, his vassal. The relationship is different than the other covenants in that Israel is to obey. They're to obey God's law, to receive the blessings that God promises in that covenant for obedience.

So we have covenants of promise where the promise comes first, obedience comes later — a fruit or evidence of faith in the promise. And in the Mosaic covenant we have obedience first, and then blessing promised as the fruit of obedience. Now that ought to, I think, raise a very natural question in our minds: why would God give such a covenant to his people if everything else that he gives points to promises and encourages faith in those promises?

I'll say something briefly now that I hope we'll get into more detail in as we go through the book of Hebrews. But at least part of the reason (and an important part of the reason) God gave that covenant to Israel was to teach them. And by extension to teach all people. through Israel's example, that blessing truly cannot be obtained through obedience, because we all sin. We're incapable of obeying God's law. We're certainly incapable of obeying it perfectly, which is the condition of blessing. And that's a simple but very important lesson. No one can do what's necessary to be in a right relationship with God. God has to do it for us. And that's what the promises point to. What he is going to do for his people. His plan to do just that.

A key part of this is this text that we have before us and this promise that God gives through the prophet Jeremiah. It's the only place in the Old Testament that speaks of a new covenant to come. I will say that I think the changes that come with Messiah can be seen in the promises of Messiah, but there's no specific mention of the New Covenant except here in Jeremiah.

So we talk about the passing of the year, the old that goes, the new that comes, the transition. What's true of the passing of the year is true of the old Mosaic Covenant and its relationship to the New Covenant. The old passes away. Something new comes along that is better. The new and the better arrives. So I guess it's appropriate here at the beginning of a new year, the transition from one year to another, to talk about transitions. I actually did intend to start Hebrews today, a new series in a new year. But there you go, a man makes his plans but the LORD directs his steps.

So here we talk about another aspect of the covenants of God. But it is also a transition — Old Covenant to New. And Jeremiah's prophecy here prepares us for what will be a major theme and a major point, a very important point, that the book of Hebrews makes. And that is that

the Old Covenant had to go away. It couldn't last. It couldn't endure. The New Covenant had to come. Because the New Covenant is a better covenant, as we read from 2 Corinthians earlier. It is an eternal covenant. That makes it better just by nature. It's a better covenant because in it, Jesus, the promised Messiah, the offspring, is fully revealed to us and for us, and for our salvation from the wrath to come, the judgment. So this is not an option, or a plan B, or a plan C, or something like that. This is essential. It had to happen, and it had to happen the way God planned it to happen, or God would not be God.

So what I want to do this morning is talk about the background of this promise in Jeremiah, what he is actually promising in this prophecy, the LORD God, And then how it fits with the Covenant of Grace and prepares us for the book of Hebrews.

So what's the background of this? Well, it's the Old Covenant. The promise of a new covenant, as I said earlier, implies an old covenant. So what is the Old Covenant that the New Covenant is an improvement on?

And our initial temptation might be to think, well, it's the whole Old Testament. The term "Old Testament" is not really such a great name for the Hebrew books of the Bible, because it can imply just that: that they are part of, all of them, part of the Old Covenant, therefore inferior and not valuable for Christians today. And there are some Christians, sadly, who think exactly that, or tend to think that way about the Old Testament. They rarely study it, they rarely seek to learn from it. That's for the Jews, that's not for Christians.

But the Old Testament as a whole is not the Old Covenant. And we know this in part because the Old Testament has the covenant promises of the Covenant of Grace to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to David, about the Messiah to come.

The Covenant of Grace is not the Old Covenant because the Covenant of Grace is in force even now, powerfully realized in the administration of the New Covenant that has come, as we see the promises fulfilled in the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ, who is the promised, again, the promised offspring. And we know the Old Testament is not the Old Covenant because of the kind of language that Hebrews uses, as we'll see when we get there. Hebrews focuses on the law that's given through this covenant with Moses.

Read earlier from 2 Corinthians 3, Paul affirming himself and his companions as ministers of this New Covenant. A few verses after the reading that we had this morning, we have some other additional helpful and very specific language. Paul writes about Moses and his fellow Jewish people in verses 14 to 16. Here's what he says, those who are under the old covenant. Says "their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted. Because only through Christ is it taken away". Yes, to this day, Paul writes, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Paul's making a connection between the law given through Moses and this Old Covenant. They read it whenever Moses is read, he says.

So the Old Covenant is the covenant made through Moses. We've done a long study of that as we went through the book of Deuteronomy. Again, what Hebrews emphasizes is the law that's found there and what it requires, especially the ceremonial law. It's worth remembering that we talked about three kinds of law in the Old Testament: the civil law, the ceremonial law, the moral law. The civil entity that the LORD covenanted with through Moses, the people of Israel, no longer exists as a nation. There are moral principles in that civil law that are helpful for us

today, but the law itself does not apply. The ceremonial law is no longer enforced because it's been filled – the types and shadows that are present in that ceremonial law are fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The moral law always remains enforced because it is a reflection of God's own moral character, his holiness and perfection.

So again, the Old Covenant refers specifically to the Mosaic Covenant and to the laws of that Old Covenant, especially the ones that are no longer in force. That's a short way of putting it. As we get into Hebrews, hold on to your hats, because he's going to have a lot to say about the Mosaic Law.

That Old Covenant was in the form of a treaty. We talked about this as we went through Deuteronomy — a suzerainty treaty, the great king being God who covenanted with the Hebrew people to be his people, to serve him according to the laws and statutes and terms of the Old Covenant. And if they kept that covenant, he would bless them, he'd watch over them, he'd protect them, he'd keep them safe, defeat their enemies, But if they broke the terms of the covenant, they would be cursed, up to and included being exiled from the very land that God was giving them in Canaan, the very land that he'd promised to their fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So what happened? You know the story, right? We know what happened. First, the northern kingdom of Israel. The nation was split after King Solomon. That northern kingdom never had a good king. Not one good king who followed after the LORD God. They were fairly quickly scattered by the Assyrians. Ultimately, sometime later, the southern kingdom of Judah (who did have some good kings, but many bad ones as well) was sent into exile in Babylon — the ultimate curse: removal from the land of promise, for breaking God's covenant.

We saw that language explicitly in Hosea 6. "Like Adam," God says, "they have transgressed, they have broken the covenant (Hosea 6–7). And throughout the Old Testament, the people of God, the Jewish people, are portrayed, especially by the prophets, as being an unfaithful wife chasing after other gods. They're portrayed as those who have broken covenant with the LORD God.

Earlier in Jeremiah itself (chapter 11 verse 10), the LORD God speaks through Jeremiah and says about the people of Israel, "they have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers".

Psalm 78 is an interesting psalm that contrasts the goodness of God with the unfaithfulness of Israel. Verse 10 of that psalm: "They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. Verse 37: "Their heart was not steadfast toward him. They were not faithful to his covenant". This is the judgment of God on the people of Israel.

So what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 is not new. He's just reiterating what the LORD God himself has said over and over again about Israel's unfaithfulness despite the LORD God's goodness to them. So indeed, their hearts are hard. A veil is over their eyes and even over their hearts. They do not understand that a key part of God's message to them through Moses is that law-keeping cannot maintain a right relationship with the LORD God. And it couldn't be, because no one is able to do so. So maintaining that relationship had to be in another way.

And we get hints and clues of that in the Old Testament as well. The Old Testament saints (we'll read about those saints when we get to Hebrews 11), they understood that the right relationship with God came through admitting their sins, repenting of them, seeking God's forgiveness, trusting in his promises, having faith in him, even through the shadow of types, that there's something coming that's better. And God's going to do a great work of salvation for his people when that something, when that Someone comes.

So Jeremiah gives us the promise of the New Covenant. The Old Covenant's been broken, a new one is needed. And so Jeremiah gives us God's promise. Verse 31, I think, is very, very clear: the days are coming, declares the LORD (the LORD himself), when he will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. There you have it, there it is. It's going to happen. Good news, great news.

Do the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant seem strenuous to you as we went through Deuteronomy? They probably should. Who can live up to this? Who can do what God's law is calling people to do? Think of how much of a burden it must have been for the people of Israel who had to live it — day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, generation after generation. And even those faithful among the Jewish people must also in some way have felt the weight of the law upon them. Thankfully for them their faith turned to God and not in their own ability to keep that law.

So here's this promise of God of a new covenant that is a tremendously gracious promise he's giving to his people. Verse 32 makes it clear that this new covenant is not going to be like the Old Covenant. We're not going to replay the same tune. We're not going to repeat the same thing. What do we call foolishness? Doing the same thing and expecting a different result. God is not a fool. He's going to do something different. And that's what he says in verse 32: this will be a covenant not like the old one. The old one that he made with their fathers was the one that he made on the day when he brought them out of Egypt. This is the covenant given at Mount Sinai, reaffirmed by Moses in Deuteronomy on the eastern shores of the River Jordan. This is the covenant Israel broke despite the LORD God being their husband. And here's another reference even to Israel's unfaithfulness in that regard: "My covenant that they broke, although I was their husband, declares the LORD. I loved them, I cared for them, and still they rebelled against me".

But if Israel broke the covenant once, won't they do it again? Well, not with this New Covenant that is coming. God's people had a heart problem. There's a veil over their hearts, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians. Moses, even in the Old Law and the Old Covenant, called upon them to circumcise their hearts. It's there in Deuteronomy 10 verse 16, and chapter 30 verse 6: their hearts were hard. Even through Jeremiah, he makes a final call in chapter 4 verses 1 to 4, calling upon the people, "Repent, even now repent, and turn to me". "Circumcise your hearts," God says through Jeremiah, but they can't. And even worse, they won't. So the new covenant, as we see it in verse 33, God promises in this New Covenant that the LORD himself will write his law within them, will write it on the hearts of his people. So that it's not just words carved on stone, or letters written on papyrus or parchment of some kind, but the very words of God written on their hearts, with the result that they will truly know God and truly be his people.

This isn't a legal relationship like the suzerainty treaty. This is a personal, intimate relationship between God and His people. And the effects are profound. First, for their own knowledge of and understanding of God. Each of them in this New Covenant, each of them will

know the LORD God. And this will be true from the least of them to the greatest of his people. They will each know the LORD God.

But even more than that, God will do something that the law itself could not do, that the sacrifices of bulls and goats could not accomplish. Here is good news: "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more". That is a promise. That is good news. And that is consistent with the Covenant of Grace that has been revealed in various stages throughout Israel's history. It's consistent with God's plan of salvation, decreed in His eternal Covenant of Redemption.

Here in this new covenant, we truly and finally find the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 17 verse 7: "I will be God to you and to your offspring". "You're Abraham's offspring," according to Paul in Galatians, those who have faith in Christ and trust in him. Peter affirms this same idea in his very first sermon in Acts 2 verse 39 (we often use this to talk about baptism, but think about it in relation to the covenant, the New Covenant): "This promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself".

This is a far-reaching covenant. Indeed, here, the whole world is blessed through Abraham's offspring. Peter knows this promise, and he affirms it right there in that very first sermon on the day of Pentecost. And part of this promise, at least implied, is that while they each themselves will know the Lord God, because of this, the Old Covenant intermediaries, Moses himself, the priests, the prophets, they won't be needed anymore. They're done, they're gone. The sacrifices, not needed anymore. Because of the intimacy, the closeness of their relationship with God, it makes these things unnecessary.

They will each "know" the LORD God and that word, as we've talked about many times, carries the idea of intimacy with it. They will know the LORD their God. This is the Covenant of Grace and we see it fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Jeremiah, of course, frames it as a promise that is coming, a promise that is being given as Judah is taken into exile. They're giving hope to the people of Israel.

But when will it happen? When will these things be? When will the promised Messiah come? When will we know the Lord so intimately? When will our iniquities be forgiven and our sins remembered no more? Peter gives us a hint of this kind of questioning, almost angst-like wondering, when this will happen. His first letter (1 Peter 1 verses 10 and 11) he says (concerning this salvation that he's just written about): "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories". They knew something was coming. Who is it? When will it happen? Like Paul, Peter gets it. We'll see this Lord willing in Hebrews. The author of Hebrews gets it.

This New Covenant and its promises are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ — the Son of God, the Son of Eve, the Son of Abraham, the Son of David. He's the promised prophet greater than Moses, about whom Moses tells the people, "You shall listen to him and what he tells you". Listen to him. Who else says that? He's the suffering servant of Isaiah. He's the Lord's righteous one who will come. He's the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He's the mediator, the prophet, the priest, the sacrifice, the king of this new and better covenant. He's the beloved Son in whom the father is well pleased.

Here's where that idea is repeated. The LORD God himself, as Jesus is transfigured on the mountain, the voice speaks and said, "Behold my Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him". Listen to him. Hebrews is gonna say something very similar: "In these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son". That's where we begin.

Jesus himself affirms that he's the fulfillment of these promises in that last meal with his disciples before his death and crucifixion. The cup of wine that they drink together is the New Covenant in His blood. Jesus was going to his death. He knew it. He went to it purposely. It was a terrible thing for him to face. Because it wasn't just a death, but a sacrifice — taking upon himself all the sins of all his people, the countless multitude of the redeemed, all of their sins, taking upon himself as if they were his, and then paying the penalty for those sins in his own death. And in his death, his people's sins are completely paid for, completely dealt with once and for all. No more sacrifice is needed because the penalty's gone. It's done. It's been paid for.

The early church father Irenaeus speaks of this New Covenant as "a covenant of freedom versus a covenant of bondage". All who repent of their sin and believe in Jesus have their sins completely paid for, completely forgiven, and are set free, and Scripture says, "Those whom the Son sets free are free indeed". Here we have the promise of Jeremiah 31–34: "I will forgive their iniquity". And more: "I will remember it no longer". Gone. It's reflected in the beautiful language of Psalm 103 verses 10 through 12: "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love to those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west". What's gone before, what's coming ahead. Eternally, unmeasurable. "As far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our transgressions from us".

To New Year. How about let's start the New Year right. Celebrate the New Year right. For those who have indeed embraced Jesus Christ by grace through faith, let us remember and believe the promises of God given to us and the New Covenant he has brought through Jesus Christ our Savior, brought it to you and to me. And if you have not, now is the time to repent and receive the promises, the blessings of knowing God and have your sins completely forgiven. And by grace, we'll keep that celebration going as we go through the book of Hebrews. It is a book of celebration. It's a book of joy and wonder. It's a glorious part of God's Word. And to borrow from it, let me offer this as a concluding thought: In this new year, "let us lift drooping hands, and strengthen weak knees," that we may with confidence draw near to the throne of grace. Amen.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we do thank you for the marvelous grace that you've shown to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior. May we never forget it. May our hearts be full of gratitude for it. Teach us, O Lord, to live before you as your people — in love for you and for what you've done for us, in love for our neighbor — in light of the glorious eternal promises of the new and better covenant. Bless us as we come to study it more fully in the book that you gave to us in your Word. We thank you and praise you, as always, in the name of Christ our Savior. Amen.