

The New Covenant
Sermon for Exaudi Sunday – Jeremiah 31:31-34



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, ³²not 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. ³³For 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. ³⁴And 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.”

We are now in the fifth year of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. I keep hearing this statement from politicians and military experts: “This war cannot be won militarily.” And so the question must be asked, if this is so, why does the war continue anyway? Why must so many people die needlessly? The same can be said about the end of World War II on May 8th. Long before the surrender, it was already clear how things would turn out. If the war had ended even a year earlier millions of people would have been saved. Why do people have to do things that aren’t good for *anyone*, themselves included? Why does the regime in Iran have to oppress its people so mercilessly even though it’s clear the people don’t want the regime?

When we get to the bottom of these questions, we keep coming back to the same problems: People simply cannot be dissuaded from the path once they have set out on it, even if it’s clearly wrong. Once a desire or a sin has taken hold, there is usually no turning back even when it is unreasonable to go forward. This can also be observed time and again in the stories of the Bible. There, one might ask the same question: “Why did the people of Israel rebel against God?” Did God oppress them? Did He exploit them or mistreat them in any way? No. All along, God had taken the people of Israel by the hand like a loving father and guided them through every danger. He freed them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the land flowing with milk and honey. Why, then, this rebellion against God? One might even ask the same question right at the beginning of creation. Adam and Eve had everything they needed. Why did they willfully act against God, even when they knew their act would bring only death?

Looking back, we can pass judgment on the Israelites, on Adam and Eve, and on many other people in the world, but it becomes difficult when we look into our own hearts and discover there the very same laws that are at work everywhere else. “Why on earth did I do that?” Do you know this despair and despondency too? Have you ever done something you bitterly regret? Something you still can’t understand to this day? What lies behind it is this ancient rebellion against God. When sin takes hold of us, we are hopelessly lost. We are drawn into its vortex and there is no salvation by our own strength. In Old Testament times, after such terrible periods, God repeatedly made a covenant with His people. He wanted to usher in a new beginning. When you make a contract or covenant, both partners must want it and sign it. In most contracts, both sides must promise something. In the case of the Old Testament, God’s people had to promise to keep the commandments and in return God would bless them. But such a contract can only work if both partners truly want it. If one of the two partners do not truly want it, difficulties arise time and

again. That was precisely the problem with the covenant between God and humanity in the Old Testament. People did not want to make a covenant with God. In fact, they didn't want Him to be God at all. They would rather be God themselves. That was the fundamental problem with Adam and Eve. Every time we are overcome by sin and do something we later regret, it is essentially the same problem: we want to dethrone God and be God ourselves instead.

Throughout human history, it became increasingly clear that such a covenant between God and His people could not work and never would. After the people had once again fallen into dire straits and turned away from God, God's Word came through Jeremiah: "Behold!" Whenever we hear this word in the Bible, we can be sure that something very important is about to happen. What God proclaimed this time was a completely new covenant. This covenant would no longer be like the many old covenants between people and God, which were broken time and again. God no longer wanted to make a covenant with an unreliable partner. No, what would be new is that God would make a covenant entirely on His own terms. From then on, God would no longer hope for a righteous partner. He Himself would be the righteous partner. God Himself would give a part of Himself and pour something of Himself into the hearts of the people.

Many years later, shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus took the cup and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood." Through Jesus, everything Jeremiah had spoken of was fulfilled. Jesus was, in the flesh, God's perfect will. Jesus was, in the flesh, God's new covenant. He lived exactly how God wanted. He fulfilled the covenant between God and humanity. And finally, He sealed this covenant through His death and resurrection. His blood was shed and thus became the new covenant between God and humanity. From then on, our relationship with God would always pass through this gate alone: Jesus' death and resurrection are the new covenant between God and His people. In Jesus, a different law is at work. There, I am not required to do God's will by my own strength, nor am I forced to surrender to God's omnipotence without any personal connection. Rather, in Jesus I recognize God's perfect will and realize that this will is good. God's will is good for me! Through the Holy Spirit, whom God has poured out into the heart of the people, God will indeed no longer be a stranger to humanity.

Jeremiah foresaw all of this and said: People will do the will of God of their own accord. In those days, it won't even be necessary to tell others, "Know the Lord!" because they will already recognize Him and know what is good for them.

Jesus Christ Himself is the foundation of the new covenant between God and His people. In every area of life, we only enter a relationship when we are sure it will be good. When a relationship is broken, it is all the more difficult to bring healing. What God gives us in Jesus is a new foundation!

Do you feel that your relationships with other people are broken? Then let Jesus lead the way. Do you feel that your past mistakes weigh you down and you feel unclean and unworthy of God? In Jesus there is a new creation. You don't need to look back on your old life. Do you feel you can't pray? Pray in Jesus' name. In everything we do or don't do, Jesus should always lead the way. Just as He has already gone before us in the resurrection, He should also go before us through all of life. When I stand before God one day, Jesus should lead the way there as well and be my firm hope. He is already there now, speaking on my behalf before God.

Amen.