

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(January 3, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Against the Flow**

(studies in Jeremiah)

### **New Covenant Living**

(Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22; 2 Corinthians 3)

Study #11

#### **Introduction: Lowering the bar...**

For about fourteen years, our church held an annual summer basketball camp (The Double Bar Basketball Camp) for kids entering 3<sup>rd</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> grades. It was always a great week of fun, sweat, learning, sweat, loving, sweat, basketball, sweat, devotionals - and, yes, sweat.

\*After taking a summer off in 2009, we just may have a basketball camp or sports camp of some kind this summer...

When the camp started in the mid '90's, we decided to invite children who were only entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, despite the fact that such children are notoriously small. You know the type. They are only "so" high. Can't jump very high. Don't run very fast.

You also know basketball rules and regulations. The basketball rules stipulate that free throws are to be taken from a distance of fifteen feet from the hoop. The goal height is set at ten feet.

Now, we were running a basketball camp. We wanted the kids to learn basketball skills. We taught, drilled, and played games.

But there was a problem and the problem was apparent from the beginning.

The children entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade were, almost without exception, unable to shoot free throws from fifteen feet and they couldn't throw the ball up to the ten foot rims. Nor could they deal with the regulation sized-basketballs.

It was weird.

We coached them. We taught them. We trained them. We exhorted and scolded and shamed them. We tried everything we could think of - and they still couldn't deal with the well-established rules of the game.

Now I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with the game. I've always loved basketball. Ten foot baskets make sense and so do regulation-sized basketballs.

But after watching the youngest children fail again and again and again, we came to the conclusion that we would have to either consign them to a very frustrating week or lower the bar.

Well, we lowered the bar.<sup>1</sup> We accommodated to their weakness. We allowed them to compete under a different set of rules - eight foot goals; shorter free throws; smaller basketballs.

We resourced them in ways that made it possible for them to win.

Now, every illustration breaks down. And this one does, too. But what we are going to see this morning is that God did much the same thing for His people that we did at Basketball Camp for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

After centuries and centuries of failure to live according to the rules and regulations He had put in place (all good rules, by the way), He "lowered the bar," making it possible for His people to lead lives that were pleasing to Him.

The prophet Jeremiah looks forward to the day when the bar will be lowered for God's people in chapter 31.

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<sup>1</sup> I hope you'll forgive me for playing fast and loose with the facts for the purpose an illustration, but we actually lowered the bar before the camp began, knowing the limitations of young children...

## Review

Beginning back in October we started taking time on Sunday mornings to explore the life and times of Jeremiah.

What a man he was and what a life he lived!

I have come to love Jeremiah - and I hope you have, too. He was a towering figure who trusted and obeyed God - even when doing so created tremendous challenges.

He was called to be a prophet while he was still a teenager - and he never balked from declaring what the Lord told him to say. Even when he was fearful that it would cost him his life, he still obeyed.

In the time that we have been exploring Jeremiah we have watched him rail against injustice - and we have watched him suffer for his faithfulness. He was slandered, put in stocks, thrown into prisons, and dropped into mud-filled cisterns.

We have listened to his courageous preaching - and to his brutally honest prayers.

And he has called the people of God - then and now - to hope in God, to love the big, broad world God has made, and to become people who live out our deepest convictions with integrity.

Over the few short weeks of our glimpses into Jeremiah's life we have heard him call us to love the Lord, to find fulfillment in God, and to repent deeply of sinful ways.

Jeremiah lived in extremely tumultuous times. During his lifetime his beloved nation was, in turn, a vassal state of Assyria, then Egypt, then Babylon. Things were always in upheaval in Israel while Jeremiah was alive - and the one consistent fact of life in Israel from 620-586 BC was faithful Jeremiah, always standing for God.

There is so much more to Jeremiah than what we have seen. More prophecies. More life stories. More calls to holiness. Stories of deliverance and stories of judgment.

We could spend months - even years! - studying this man and his book.

And as I have watched Jeremiah's willingness to go "against the flow" I've been challenged to do the same. There is such a temptation to settle for "status quo" and to swim with the current. But that is something Jeremiah never did.

By his very life he calls each of us to aim for the fullest life imaginable: a life spent in service to Almighty God.

What a vision for the first Sunday of 2010. A life of transcendent purpose, investing all our energies and resources into God's Kingdom, pedal to the metal for God!

That was Jeremiah. That, too, can be me and it can be you.

Now, sandwiched near the middle of His book is a section we refer to as "The Book of Consolation."

### **Hope in Times of Despair (Jeremiah 30-33)**

#### **The Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-33)**

##### *The delight of bringing consolation*

These are four chapters devoted to consoling the people of Jerusalem with a great hope for the future.

I can tell you that it is much more delightful to bring a message of consolation and hope than it is to bring a message of judgment! It is for me, today, and it was for Jeremiah, too. (Next Sunday will be a challenge; a message about judgment and discipline. Very sobering, indeed.)

He often writes about how terribly difficult it was for him to speak the hard truth of judgment to the people of his day.<sup>2</sup>

And precisely because he brought the hard truth of judgment so often, consolation was desperately needed.

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<sup>2</sup> Check out 20:7-18.

*Why “consolation” was needed*

The overwhelmingly predominant theme of Jeremiah’s book is judgment. We have even coined a word - “jeremiad” - to refer to a message of lament because of judgment.

Message after message after message finds Jeremiah lambasting the Jews for their sinful ways and warning them of judgment if they do not repent.

*The end goal of judgment/discipline*

That said, we need to realize that when God deals with His people in judgment - and He does so today as much as He did in the past - judgment is NOT the last word. Judgment/discipline is purposeful and is intended to produce repentance, which will produce restoration.

God’s dealings with His children, ultimately, are never punitive. Discipline is always administered with tears. It is always with a redemptive purpose in mind.

In the days of Jeremiah, bringing His people to repentance and restoration was behind the judgment God had in mind. But He did have a very severe discipline in store for them.

He was going to allow the Babylonians to overwhelm and overthrow Jerusalem. The city would be destroyed. The people would be taken away to captivity.

For that reason The Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-33) was necessary as it is filled with glimpses of God’s eventual redemptive purposes.

**A Glorious Restoration (Jeremiah 30-31)**

Jeremiah predicts that following a period of captivity in another land (the land of Babylon), the Jews will again rejoice and worship in Palestine. He will bring them back home! (31:1-9)

God will pour out His mercy on His people. The Promised Land will again be populated and there will be prosperity. Yes, He will overthrow, but He will also build them back up again (31:10-30)

In this section, God declares His undying love for His people. He will make them holy. (31:35-40).

And in this long, four chapter section in which Jeremiah gives such wonderful news, we find the best of all possible news tucked away near the end of chapter 31. God is going to make a new covenant with His people!

The question that might come to mind when you hear about a New Covenant is, “*What was wrong with the Old Covenant?*”

Good question...

**Needed: a New Covenant! (Jeremiah 31:31-34)**

**The Problem with the Old Covenant (vv. 31-32)**

*God’s covenant-keeping loyalty to His people*

Covenants Israel knew and loved

Covenants are like treaties where each party agrees to certain conditions. And through the ages, God has always related to His people on the basis of “covenant.”

Over the two hundred and thirty years of our own nation’s history, we have entered into covenants that bind us to behave in certain ways with other countries.

When a man and a woman marry, they enter into a binding, covenant relationship with each other, promising to love and respect, to leave and to cleave, to remain faithful, and to have and to hold “*till death does them part.*”

Today, we are familiar with covenants.

Sometimes, the covenants God makes with people are “uni-lateral” covenants. That is, He will fulfill them - period. No matter what people do, He will abide by the covenant.

For instance:

- God made a unilateral covenant with mankind after Noah’s flood that He would never destroy the earth again by flood.
- He made another unilateral covenant with Abraham that He would multiply his descendants and give them the land of Palestine as an inheritance.
- He made another unilateral promise to David that one of His descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever.

But these unilateral covenants are not the covenant that is in view when Jeremiah says that God is going to replace the Old Covenant with a New Covenant.

*[31] “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah [32] not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt ...*

The covenant Jeremiah is talking about is the Mosaic Covenant, the covenant of Law. Unlike the other covenants I have mentioned, the Mosaic Covenant is a bi-lateral covenant.

Under the Mosaic Covenant, God made certain wonderful promises to bless Israel. But these promises would be fulfilled IF AND ONLY IF Israel fulfilled her side of the covenant. And if Israel did not obey her side of the covenant stipulations, curses and judgments and disciplines would come.<sup>3</sup>

The Old Covenant began with Moses and continued through the rest of the Old Testament. The Jews lived under this administration from Exodus to Malachi - and beyond. During this era, “Law” reigned supreme. It was the way things were done.

It is THIS covenant that Jeremiah says God is going to replace with a New Covenant. And the changes that will be ushered in under this New Covenant are nothing short of revolutionary.

#### God’s grace to Israel under the Old Covenant

As Jeremiah prepares to describe the New Covenant, he reminds us of the great grace God showed Israel under the Old Covenant.

The Lord recalls how He [32]...*took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt* - and you and I could list dozens of other deliverances and rescues God performed for His people.

He recounts how He [32]... *was a husband to them* - yes, and He was a patient, loving, protective, providing husband.

There were times when the people of God responded to His grace and goodness with faithfulness, with what the Bible calls “covenant-loyalty.”

#### *Revival of interest in the Old Covenant*

#### Times of faithfulness

There was a season of faithfulness during the days of Joshua when the Jews obeyed the Lord. Then, when David was king, the nation followed the Lord. Whenever a godly ruler was on the throne, the people would respond by walking in the way the covenant directed.

#### Josiah’s reforms

In fact, in the early days of Jeremiah’s ministry, people were very interested in following the Covenant because of the leadership provided by King Josiah.

When he discovered the lost “Book of the Covenant” (2 Chronicles 34:30), its commands became the template for overthrowing idolatry and for re-establishing right worship, holiness, and justice in the land.

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<sup>3</sup> The book of Deuteronomy is filled with lists of covenant blessings if Israel obeyed and covenant curses for disobedience.

HOWEVER, without question, the most prominent behavior of the people of God throughout their long history was disobedience. Rebellion against God, disobedience to His commands, and sin defines the story of Israel.

#### *Death of interest in the Old Covenant*

When recounting how the people responded to His grace and goodness, Jeremiah includes one comment relative to the covenant. The New Covenant will not be [32]...*like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant WHICH THEY BROKE...*

**“WHICH THEY BROKE.”** Yep. Over and over and over again.

#### Disloyalty after Josiah died

They broke the covenant immediately after Josiah died. It turns out that the reforms of Josiah were never more than skin-deep.

Upon Josiah’s death the Jews promptly rebelled against God and abandoned the covenant.

And truth be told, the people of God, generally speaking, **“BROKE”** the covenant.

#### Israel - generally unfaithful...

Just a minute ago, we had to think hard to come up with eras of Jewish history when they obeyed the Lord. A generation here. The reign of a good king there.

But those were just isolated decades of obedience interspersed in a long run of century after century of disobedience.

From the establishment of the covenant forward, Israel chronically and persistently failed to live up to what the covenant required of them.

The Old Covenant was a good and gracious covenant God had made with His people. It was well laid out, fair, and clear. There were rewards for obedience; judgment and discipline for breaking it.

But there was a problem with the Old Covenant. And it wasn’t that there was a flaw in the Covenant itself. The problem with the Old Covenant was the inability of the people to keep it!

What had become abundantly clear over nine hundred years was that not only DID Israel not obey, she COULD not obey.

Jeremiah put it this way:

**[13:23] *Can the Ethiopian change his skin  
Or the leopard his spots?  
Then you also can do good  
Who are accustomed to doing evil.***

Israel was as unable to keep the rules of the Old Covenant as most 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are unable to handle a regulation sized basketball and shoot a fifteen foot free throw to a ten foot goal!

So -

- Despite the fact that God was the Lord, and
- Despite the fact that God was Israel’s Lord, and
- Despite the fact that God had delivered them over and over and over again, and
- Despite the fact that God had led them by the hand from Egypt...

Israel STILL did not keep the covenant.

To the casual observer it would have been pretty obvious that what Israel needed was a NEW COVENANT.

It may be difficult for us to wrap our heads around how HUGE it was when Jeremiah predicted that God was going to inaugurate a New Covenant with His people. The Old Covenant had been in place for almost a thousand years. For a Jew, it would have been tough to imagine anything more radical.

Think about how radical it was when the founding fathers of our nation settled in for a long summer of drafting a constitution for a new nation at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

*“OK. We’re starting over. The old relationship with Great Britain is done. The Articles of Federation we’ve been operating under for the last decade are woefully inadequate. Let’s decide how we are going to be governed.”*

That’s radical! Jeremiah’s New Covenant was way more radical than that. In what ways?

Well, first, as opposed to the Old Covenant, which was externally focused and concerned primarily with behavior, the New Covenant would emphasize heart change.

### **The New Covenant’s Glory (vv. 33-34)**

#### *Internal change*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,”<sup>4</sup> declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”***

Of course, the Old Covenant was not strictly external. After all, the tenth commandment says that we are not to covet.<sup>5</sup> And “coveting” is something internal. But by and large, the Mosaic Law was about rules and regulations and measuring up.

BUT, recipients of the New Covenant are not just commanded to take action and to obey rules and regs. They are equipped to take that action by the gift of an internal, heart change.

The promise is that something in the heart of God’s child will change when the New Covenant is in effect. There won’t just be a set of laws written on tablets of stone telling people what to do.

Internal, intrinsic motivation will rule the day under the New Covenant and a change in the inner nature will make the New Covenant believer capable of obedience.

And there is more to the New Covenant.

#### *Knowledge of God*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord...[34] “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them”***

Teachers are good and necessary, both under the Old Covenant and under the New Covenant. Teachers help us understand God and His ways.

BUT, under the New Covenant, each individual relates to God personally, with no mediator.

This is huge! Under the Old Covenant, there was a system of Priests and High Priests and Levites who all stood between the common, everyday believer and God.

No more! When the New Covenant comes, there will be no intermediary necessary.<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah says that in that day, each believer will know God, personally.

And one more fact about life under the New Covenant. There will be forgiveness of sins.

#### *Forgiveness of sins*

***[33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord... [34]... “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”***

Under the Old Covenant, forgiveness was available through sacrifices and offerings. But these sacrifices had to be repeated regularly for each infraction of covenant law.

<sup>4</sup> Speaks of an unspecified time in the future. Fulfillment is certain, although there is no certainty as to the time of the prophecies’ fulfillment.

<sup>5</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:6; 10:12; 11:18; 30:6, 14.

<sup>6</sup> See Joel 2:28-29, which looks forward to a day when all people will have the same rights of access to God as did the prophets. Joel is looking forward to the time of the New Covenant.

To speak of forgiveness was to speak of a temporary thing. The Old Covenant believers were forgiven - until the next sin.

BUT, under the New Covenant, forgiveness will be a full and complete gift, given once and for all.

What a tremendous set of promises!

We can only imagine how eagerly the Jews of Jeremiah's day would have listened to his prediction of a New Covenant.

After all of the failures, God was finally going to set up a covenant relationship with them where their sin problem would be eradicated, they would enjoy a personal, unmediated relationship with God, and they would be given the internal resources to obey God. Wow!

When will this happen? When will the bar get lowered?

Not in Jeremiah's lifetime. Nor in the next generation or the next or the next. In fact, the next time we read about a "New Covenant" in the Bible is 600 years past Jeremiah.

The One who speaks of it is Jesus.

### You - and the New Covenant

#### **Inaugurated by Jesus**

The scene is the Last Supper. He has gathered His disciples together for one final meal before His trials, sufferings, and death.

As they are all reclined around a low table, Jesus begins to speak.

*[Luke 22:15]... "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; [16] for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." [17] And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; [18] for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes." [19] And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."*

*[20] And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the NEW COVENANT in My blood."<sup>7</sup>*

And, yes, this is the New Covenant Jeremiah was talking about! So, what is true for all Christians is that:

- *Our hearts have TRULY changed!*

Changes have come to us in the most fundamental areas.

Our eternal destinies have changed. We were spiritually dead, now we are alive. We were at enmity with God, now we are His children. We were cold to the things of God, now our hearts are stirred to obey.

It's not just a cold hard slab of stone littered with commands and prohibitions. No. God's Spirit has touched our hearts so that there is internal motivation to obey.

- *EACH of us relates personally to God!*

And, for each believer in Jesus there is no need to come to pastor, priest or elder to get to God. We are each invited to **"draw near to God"** (James 4:8) - something unheard of for the ordinary believer under the Old Covenant. Drawing near was something that only the High Priest was allowed to do!

But in Jesus, every one of us is invited to draw near.

- *Our sins are ALL forgiven!*

We are not forgiven just for the sin we commit when we offer a sacrifice. That's the way it used to be, but no more, not under Jesus' New Covenant.

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<sup>7</sup> The New Covenant is also mentioned and its theme developed in 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:16-17.

Imagine that I borrowed money from you. Not that I'm advocating borrowing money, Dave Ramsey. But, for the purposes of an illustration, imagine that I have borrowed \$10,000 from you on a ten year note at 10% interest owed per year.

Now imagine that every year after taking the loan from you, on December 31<sup>st</sup> I repaid you \$1,000. I do this for ten years, and on December 31<sup>st</sup> of the tenth year I give you my tenth \$1,000 payment and tell you, *"Whew, I sure am glad that the loan is repaid! Now I don't owe you any more money."*

You would say, *"No so fast. All you've done is paid interest. You still owe the principal of \$10,000."* Sadly for me, you would be exactly right.

The Old Covenant sacrifices were only interest payments looking forward to the final payment of the principal. And Jesus paid the entire debt when He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

### **Conclusion:**

At the Double Bar Basketball Camp, the bar was lowered so that 3<sup>rd</sup> graders could win.

And God has now put in place a New Covenant with a lowered bar so that we can have victory in our walk with God.

The cost of lowering that bar for us was the raising of the bar on which Jesus was crucified. The New Covenant was ushered in by His broken body and shed blood.