

Jeremiah 31:31-37
THE TIME HAS COME
1. For Repentance
2. For Peace

Dear friends in Christ,

When I was a kid, I loved baseball, and I'd practice all I could. One of my favorite ways to practice was to hit the ball of the tee in our backyard. Now, there's a problem with that of course, because you have to have some way of retrieving the ball. And since I couldn't force my little brothers to do it for me, I devised a plan. There was a wall on the side of our house that worked perfectly, so that when I hit the ball off my tee it would come bouncing right back to me. The problem was that where my tee was set up was right next to our kitchen window. Now, my mom was ok with this, as long as I used the whiffle ball and the plastic bat. But what's the fun in that. I wanted use my metal bat, like I did in games. So when my mom wasn't looking, I busted out my aluminum slugger. I must not have accounted for the longer bat, because the follow through of my swing went crashing through the kitchen window. My mom came running into the kitchen and saw me through the broken glass, holding my metal bat. Then she said two of the most horrible sentences that any 9-year old boy can hear, "Go to your room" and "just wait till your father gets home." And I deserved punishment. I had been warned by my mom, and I deliberately disobeyed her.

I don't know if the Israelites of the Old Testament liked baseball, but I do know that they were disobedient children. This nation was God's own special people that he had led out of slavery in Egypt. On their way to the Promised Land, they stopped at Mount Sinai and God made a covenant, or a lifelong contract, with them. For their side of the covenant, God gave them a whole book of laws to keep, and at the center of these laws were the Ten Commandments. For God's side of the covenant, he said, in the book of Exodus, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Ex. 19:5)." Then the people responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said."

Famous last words. For nearly 1000 years the Israelite's were a unfaithful nation, and now in Jeremiah's time, they had once again turned to false gods. The Israelites couldn't even make it past the first commandment, so God sent the prophet Jeremiah to warn them to repent. But unlike in years past they would not repent. So Jeremiah told them what God would do if they did not repent, let them be captured by their enemies and carried off into exile. But they still wouldn't repent. After warning them several more times, God's patience had run out and God's disobedient children were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

If I was sitting in the pews right now like you, I might be thinking to myself, "Hold on. I know what's coming next. The preacher is going to tell me that we are like the Israelites, because we disobey God in so many ways, etc. I know that's true, but c'mon, there's a big difference between the Israelites and me. Sure, I may sin sometimes, but I do not worship idols. The Israelites had other gods, that's a big difference." And that's partly true. I can't see any of you sneaking home after church to bow down before a golden statue of some kind. But if we look at what an idol really is, an exaltation of something earthly above our God, I think we have to honestly say that we have more things in common with the Israelites than we'd like to admit.

You see, we all fall into idolatry. It can be something we own: the vacation home, the dream car, the perfect kitchen, kid's is it your Wii, or the newest iPod? Often times, it's something we don't own: We might not have all the toys that others have, so our idol becomes desiring to get them. Or maybe it's not a big expensive thing, how about television or the internet. Many of us have our favorite shows or sports teams to watch on TV that we can't miss for anything or we can spend hours upon hours surfing the web. Or maybe it's not something quite as material, success... in your business or profession, in school, in sports.

None of these things, possessions, success, entertainment, are wrong in and of themselves, just as there was nothing wrong with me playing baseball in my backyard. I sinned because I made playing with my metal bat more important to me than obeying what my mom said. God has blessed many of us with many material blessings, but he doesn't want us to be a materialist, making possessions or entertainment the object of our desire. God wants us to work hard in our profession, or at school and blesses us with success, but he doesn't want us to be workaholics, working for our own glory. God wants our number one priority to be him and everything we do to be done to his glory.

Maybe in your mind right now, your thinking, "This seminary student knows what he's talking about, because that's exactly what people need to here. Too many people are so focused on things other than church. You know, I work overtime to put my kids through school and save for retirement and I still manage to give over 10 percent to church. On top of that, I am really involved in church work, so I don't even have time for that other stuff." When we praise our own works and worship our own godliness, we are bowing down before an even more dangerous idol, the idol of sinful pride. Perhaps those Israelites aren't looking quite as different from us after all.

But the Israelites, now sitting in captivity, repented once again and God had mercy on them once again. Jeremiah, still in Jerusalem under house arrest, sent a message from the LORD to the Israelites in Babylonia that after 70 years they would return to the Promised Land. But in that message there was also a far greater promise, the promise of a new covenant. This is what Jeremiah wrote:

³¹ "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them."

I'm sure some of the Israelites were wondering: How can God make a new covenant? He can't just

throw the old covenant aside, because God doesn't go back on his lifelong contract. The only way that God could make a new covenant was if the old covenant was fulfilled. And the time was coming when someone keep the old covenant perfectly and suffer death deserved by those who broke it.

Dear Christian friends, that time has come! Jesus Christ came into the world to fulfill the old covenant and establish a new covenant, not just for the Israelites, but for the whole world. You see, all people, by nature, are under a covenant, God's moral law. The Ten Commandments are good summary of all God expects of man, and if you keep every commandment of God perfectly, then you will have eternal life. If not, eternal death. Simple as that. And as we have seen, we can't even make past the first commandment either. But Jesus Christ came to live the perfect life that we could not and died on the cross to pay the punishment that we deserved. And he has established this new covenant with you and me and all believe in Him as their Savior, and what an amazing covenant it is. This new covenant is an entirely new relationship with God. And notice who does all the work in this relationship:

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Think of all the different relationships in your life: employer and employee, teacher and student, husband and wife, and many others. What do you they all have in common? They all are a two-way street. There is give and take. But our relationship with God is totally different. God has made a new covenant with us, a one-sided contract. In this covenant, he not only gives all the blessings, but he also does all the work. He is the one who lived the life that we could not. He is the one who died the death that we deserved. And he is the one who creates faith in our hearts. But God doesn't stop there, he also says “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”

What does that mean, putting his law in our minds and writing it on our hearts? Think of it like this. Before we were Christians all the law made us think was: What do I have to do? And you see it in other religions. Every other religion in the world is striving to answer the question: What do I have to *do* to get right with God? But under the new covenant, God has given us a new attitude, a new man. In our new relationship with God, our attitude changes from, “What do I have to do?” to “What can I do?” What can you and I do to thank our God who has given us everything?

But yet, despite of all of the gifts that God has given us, we still sin don't we? We already talked about one way that we sin, when we exalt earthly things and even ourselves above God. And you and I know that we sin in so many other ways. And that knowledge can burden us and plague our consciences. But thanks be to God, that there is still one more blessing he gives us in the new covenant: The gift of peace.

I'd like to try an experiment if that's ok. I'd like you to chose which of these two words describe you better: saint or sinner. You don't have to raise your hand, but think about it in your mind. Which did you decide describes you better. If you answered, “sinner,” then God has these words to say to you, “I will remember your sins no more.”

God wants you to answer “saint” to that question, every time. Not because you are a saint because of what you have done, but because of Jesus' perfect life and innocent death. Through faith, God has declared you as his righteous saint. He has remembered your sin no more. And this knowledge is the gift of peace.

I think we don't talk about peace that often, because we're afraid it might lead to complacency, the attitude that since I am already forgiven, what I do doesn't matter. And complacency is dangerous because that attitude often leads to unbelief. But as you listen to these words of peace spoken to the spiritual descendants of Israel, the children of the new covenant, you and me, how can we have any other attitude than thanking and praising the LORD for what he has done:

³⁵ This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar... ³⁶ “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight... will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.” ³⁷ This is what the LORD says: “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done...”

Twenty-five hundred years after these words were written, God's promises still stand. The sun still shines in the day, the moon and stars still shine at night, the waves still roar in the ocean. And despite all of NASA's amazing technology, the infinity of the universe has never been measured and never will. And despite what you have seen in the movies, no one has ever journeyed to the center of the earth. And despite all of the sins that we commit, and the guilt that we may feel, our God will never reject us for all we have done!

My dad came in and found me lying in my bed with my head buried in my pillow. I was feeling a lot of sorrow and guilt for what I had done. But my dad didn't scold me or punish me, but took me in his arms and told me, “Tim, I know what you did and I know you are sorry, and I forgive you. No matter what you do, I will always love you and I will always forgive you.” Dear friends in Christ, we have an even surer promise from our heavenly Father. We are children of the new covenant. And no matter what you do, God will always love you and will always forgive you, for Jesus' sake. He has remembered your sin, no more. Go now, and live in that peace! Amen.