

REGENERATION: A NEW COVENANT BLESSING

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I. INTRODUCTION

The New Covenant relates to the doctrine of regeneration, that is, the new birth. But before this relationship can be clearly considered, it is necessary to deal with a problem that has arisen with regard to this Covenant.

II. DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE NEW COVENANT

For a long time, the New Covenant has been a problem in dispensational theology. The problem seems to be centered in the statement of Jer 31:31, where the Lord is speaking:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...

From this statement the conclusion has been drawn that the New Covenant is *exclusively* an arrangement between God and the nation of Israel. Many Dispensationalists have feared that to say otherwise would threaten the collapse of any meaningful difference between Israel and the Church.

Yet at the same time, the NT appears to treat NT believers as objects of the New Covenant arrangements. A number of pivotal passages show this.

For example, the expression *new covenant* appears in all three Gospel accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper: Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; and Luke 22:20. Luke, for example, reports:

Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

This statement of Jesus is repeated by the apostle Paul in his discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:25. Furthermore, Paul describes himself as a minister of the New Covenant in 2 Cor 3:5,6 when he says,

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also has made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.

Finally there is the book of Hebrews. The author of that book—whoever he was, Barnabas, I think—makes the New Covenant a centerpiece in discussing the high priestly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact he actually quotes the passage from Jer 31:31-34 in Heb 8:8-12. He treats the New Covenant as fully applicable to his Christian readers.

Even if the first readers of Hebrews were Jewish believers, which seem highly likely, they were nevertheless members of the Christian Church. Therefore, their Jewishness cannot be the reason the writer applies the New Covenant promises to them. In the Christian Church the Jew/Gentile distinction vanishes. Paul teaches us that in Gal 3:28, when he writes:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So the writer of Hebrews cannot be talking about blessings that belong *only* to Jewish members of the Christian Church.

The problem of the New Covenant has been felt so strongly by some dispensational teachers that they have even postulated that there are *two new covenants*. One of these is to be made with Israel in the end times, while the other is with the Church. But this is so clearly a counsel of desperation that it must be decisively rejected. The NT offers zero support for the theory of two new covenants.

The solution to this problem is extremely simple. The New Covenant is indeed to be made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, just as Jeremiah says. And the meaning of this is that the entirety of Israel and Judah will someday receive eternal salvation. This is plainly stated in the prophecy itself, which says:

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying "Know the Lord," for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

This is quite clear. Someday there will be no unconverted Israelite.

Let us also remember in this connection the words of the Apostle Paul in Rom 11:25-27. They are relevant here even if the word *salvation* is not defined as *salvation from hell*. I quote:

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Here, Paul’s quotation from the OT comes mainly from Isa 59:20-21a, which includes the words *this is My covenant with them*. But the final words of the quotation, *when I take away their sins*, are not found in this passage in Isaiah. They are apparently a reference to the New Covenant prophecy in Jeremiah 31. Thus they are Paul’s interpretation of the reference in Isaiah to *My covenant*. The future of Israel (that Paul describes in Romans 11) is predicated on the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise found in Jeremiah.

(Parenthetically, let me add in passing how I understand Rom 11:26. I think Paul is referring to deliverance from God’s eschatological wrath by means of “the Deliverer” [Jesus Christ] who turns away “ungodliness from Jacob.” When He comes again His people will all be believers in Him. By His coming and personal presence with them He will teach them practical holiness. In other words, His kingship and ministry to them “will turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” He will lead them in the paths of righteousness. But this is all based ultimately on the New Covenant.)

Leaving that complication aside, however, the bottom line is extremely simple. The New Covenant will someday be in force with the entire nation of Israel. But this is not the same as saying it will be in force *only* with them. Every person who has ever been eternally saved, regardless of racial origin, has been saved under the promises of the New Covenant. That is, they have been saved on the basis of *the blood of the New Covenant* that Christ shed for them. They have become the beneficiaries of God’s New Covenant, just as will *all* Israel in a coming day.

We celebrate our participation in the New Covenant every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper.

There is no real problem here. To say that every individual finds eternal salvation under the New Covenant is one thing. To say that the destiny of every individual who is saved is exactly the same as every other individual who is saved, is quite another. The New Covenant does *not* say this.

The New Covenant should be viewed as God's universal covenant of salvation. God enters into that Covenant with each individual at the moment He believes in Jesus.

Under its terms, Israelites can be saved and remain Israelites, or as in the present age, they can become members of the Christian Church. The same is true of Gentiles as well, of course. The distinctions between Israel and the Church are simply not addressed in the New Covenant. Much less are these distinctions denied by this Covenant. Everyone is eternally saved in the same way. What happens beyond that depends on God's purpose for them, which is by no means a plain vanilla conformity.

In a future day, as Jeremiah predicts, God will enter into this New Covenant with the entire nation, both Israel and Judah.

III. NEW BIRTH UNDER THE NEW COVENANT

When we read Jeremiah's prophecy about the New Covenant, our first impression might be that it does not mention new birth. But this would be incorrect. There are two features of the New Covenant as spoken through Jeremiah that show clearly that regeneration is being discussed. I will take the last one first.

A. KNOWING GOD

In his New Covenant prophecy, Jeremiah speaks as follows:

No more shall every man teach His neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

What does it mean to "know the Lord"? Jesus gives us the answer to this in John 17:1-3. In His prayer to the Father Jesus says:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may also glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know

You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

As this statement shows, eternal life is nothing less than the knowledge of God. But eternal life itself is the result of new birth.

It follows, therefore, that when Jeremiah's prophecy predicts that all Israelites will someday "know the Lord," he is predicting that someday every Israelite will be born again. The whole nation will have been regenerated because the whole nation will have believed in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

Yes, new birth is definitely included in the New Covenant.

B. GOD'S LAW IN THE HEART

The second feature of the New Covenant that anticipates new birth is found in these words from Jeremiah:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Clearly here we have a work of God that He does through new birth. The law of God—His will—becomes part of the regenerate person's innermost being. Paul gives testimony to the truth of this in his own personal experience. As described in Rom 7:19-25, Paul tells us of his struggle with the presence of sin in his physical body. In the process of telling us, he writes:

For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members [vv 22-23].

A half verse later he writes:

So then with my mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin [v 24b].

It is completely clear in these verses that the apostle Paul is under the terms of the New Covenant. Just as God had promised in Jeremiah's prophecy, God had written His law on Paul's mind and heart. With his mind he served that law and in his heart he delighted in it. Only a recalcitrant physical body prevented him from doing it consistently.

In fact, this happy inner servitude to God's law is precisely what the apostle John speaks of in 1 John 3:9 saying:

Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His [that is, God's] seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

This much-discussed text simply means that the regenerate person, as such, cannot sin.

Since God's law is written in his heart, his regenerate self never produces sin. Sin, as Paul teaches us in Romans 7, is the work of the sinful flesh as it operates in and through our yet-to-be transformed physical bodies.

It is the inner man that is transformed at new birth, not the outward man. That outward change can happen gradually as we walk with God, and the process will be completed when we meet the Lord in the air and receive our glorified bodies.

IV. CONCLUSION: NEW BIRTH IN THE OT

Even before the New Covenant was established through the death of Christ, its benefits were applied to believers in anticipation of the sacrificial work of Christ. God's righteousness in doing so was vindicated by the cross of Christ as we learn from Rom 3:25.

Thus New Covenant language appears early in the book of 1 Samuel. In 1 Sam 1:12, we are told this:

Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they *did not know* the Lord.

And in 1 Sam 3:7 we read:

Now Samuel *did not yet know* the Lord, nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him.

In the light of the New Covenant, these statements simply mean that Eli's sons were unregenerate and that Samuel was unregenerate until the night that God appeared to him. On that night, however, Samuel was not only born again, he was given the gift of prophecy. Thereafter the word of the Lord was revealed to him.

Perhaps the clearest case of regeneration in the whole OT is the case of King Saul. After his first interview with Samuel, as he departs, Samuel tells him (in 1 Sam 10:5-6):

And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying. Then the

Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and *be turned into another man*.

A few verses later we read (1 Sam 10:9):

So it was, when he had turned his back to Samuel, that God gave him *another heart*; and all those signs came to pass that day.

So Saul was born again and this was a benefit of the New Covenant that Jesus would establish by His death on the cross. In the days of Samuel and Saul, people in Israel needed to know the Lord. Indeed they had enough knowledge, apparently, to encourage this experience in their unregenerate brothers and neighbors. According to Jeremiah, Jewish people used to say to their fellow Jews, "Know the Lord." Thus the terminology of the New Covenant was part of Israel's earliest history. But when the New Covenant prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled, it will be wonderfully true that,

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

That day will probably be here much sooner than we expect.