

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:27–40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage carries the heaviest doctrinal weight in the entire study, and the teacher should prepare to give it the fullest care. The central truth is the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34: a covenant unlike the old one the people broke, with God's law written on the heart, with all His people knowing Him, and with sins forgiven and remembered no more. The teacher must establish, clearly and repeatedly, that this new covenant is fulfilled in Christ and is in force now in His church. The book of Hebrews settles the matter by quoting this very passage: in announcing a new covenant God makes the first one obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), and by Christ's single, once-for-all offering He perfects His people and remembers their sins no more (Hebrews 10:14–18). The new covenant was sealed in the blood of Jesus (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15) and is entered now through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).

The teacher must guard this passage with great vigilance against the dispensational error. The new covenant is not deferred to a future millennium, and it is emphatically not a future arrangement for the political nation of Israel involving a rebuilt temple and renewed animal sacrifices. Such a reading would deny the once-for-all, finished sacrifice of Christ, which Hebrews declares has ended all further offering for sin (Hebrews 10:1–18). The promises are fulfilled in Christ and His church, the true and spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8); the kingdom arrived with Jesus and was established at Pentecost, and Christ reigns now (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). The teacher should draw out the three great features of the new covenant: its interiority (the law written on the heart), the universal knowledge of God among its members (the priesthood of all who know the Lord, with direct access through our one mediator), and the full and final forgiveness of sins in Christ.

Beyond the doctrine, the lesson aims at the formation of the student. The new covenant is not merely a doctrine to be understood but a reality to be lived. The teacher's goal is that students would examine whether God's law is truly being written on their hearts, whether they know the Lord personally and not merely secondhand, and whether they are resting in the full forgiveness Christ has secured. Above all, students should leave knowing that they live under the very covenant Jeremiah foresaw, sealed in the blood of Jesus, and should yield more fully to the Lord who is writing His law within them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 31:27–30. God promises a day when “everyone shall die for his own iniquity” and the proverb about the fathers’ sour grapes setting the children’s teeth on edge will no longer be used (31:29–30). What does this teach about personal responsibility for sin, and how does it correct the idea that we are born guilty of someone else’s sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open with the promise of verses 27–30, which prepare the ground for the new covenant. God promises to sow and rebuild (31:27–28), and then declares that a day is coming when the old proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” will no longer be used. Instead, “everyone shall die for his own iniquity” (31:30).

Teach the principle of personal responsibility clearly. The people had been using the proverb to complain that they were suffering for their ancestors’ sins, as if guilt were simply inherited. God corrects this. Each person is accountable for his own sin. This is the same truth Ezekiel states plainly: “The soul who sins shall die... the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father” (Ezekiel 18:20).

Guard against the doctrine of inherited guilt. Scripture does not teach that we are born already guilty of Adam’s sin, condemned before we have done anything. We become guilty when we ourselves sin. We do inherit a world broken by sin and bodies that will die, and we all do in fact sin (Romans 3:23), but the guilt is ours when we choose it, not a condemnation we carry from birth. This passage and Ezekiel 18 are key texts on this point.

Show how this sets up the new covenant. Precisely because each person is responsible for his own sin, each person needs his own sin forgiven and his own heart changed. The new covenant will answer this individually: the law written on each heart, each one knowing the Lord, each one’s sin forgiven. Personal responsibility and personal salvation belong together.

Land it honestly. The good news of personal responsibility is also sobering: no one can hide behind family, culture, or circumstance. But it is the doorway to grace, because the God who holds each of us accountable also offers each of us a new heart and full forgiveness in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal responsibility for sin; each one dies for his own iniquity (31:30; Ezekiel 18:20).
- The correction of inherited guilt; we become guilty when we ourselves sin, not at birth.
- The reality that all do in fact sin (Romans 3:23) without teaching that we are born condemned.
- How personal responsibility prepares the way for personal salvation in the new covenant.
- The danger of hiding behind family, culture, or circumstance to avoid accountability.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that each person dies for his own iniquity rather than another’s?

- How does this passage correct the idea that we are born already guilty of someone else's sin?
- Why does personal responsibility for sin prepare the way for personal salvation?

Question 2

Student Question:

God insists that each person "shall die for his own iniquity" (31:30). Where are you tempted to blame your sin on your upbringing, your circumstances, or others, rather than taking honest, personal responsibility before God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses personal responsibility into the conscience. The proverb about the fathers' sour grapes is alive and well today, dressed in modern clothes: I am this way because of my parents, my past, my circumstances, my wounds.

Acknowledge the real grain of truth. Our histories do shape us, and some have suffered genuine harm that deserves compassion, not dismissal. But shaping is not the same as excusing. God still says, "everyone shall die for his own iniquity." My sin is mine.

Help students distinguish explanation from excuse. Understanding why I am tempted in a certain way can be helpful; using it to avoid responsibility before God is deadly. The new covenant offers not a better excuse but a new heart.

Move to honesty. Ask each person to name one place where they have been blaming their sin on someone or something outside themselves, and to bring it before God as their own, where grace can actually meet it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The modern forms of the "sour grapes" proverb that shift blame outward.
- The difference between explaining our struggles and excusing our sin.
- Compassion for genuine harm without surrendering personal accountability.
- Owning our sin as the doorway to grace.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to blame your sin on your past or circumstances?
- What is the difference between explaining a struggle and excusing a sin?
- What sin do you need to own as your own before God this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 31:31–32. God announces “a new covenant... not like the covenant that I made with their fathers... my covenant that they broke.” What does it reveal about both human weakness and God’s grace that He responds to a broken covenant not by abandoning His people but by promising a better one?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 31–32 announce the new covenant and name what was wrong with the old. “I will make a new covenant... not like the covenant that I made with their fathers... my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” The fatal flaw of the old covenant was not in God. He was a faithful husband. The flaw was in the people, who could not keep it.

Teach the weakness of the old covenant honestly. The law was holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), but it had no power to change the heart. It could command righteousness, but it could not produce it. It could expose sin, but it could not remove it. It was a covenant written on stone, external to the sinner, and so the sinner kept breaking it.

Show the grace in God’s response. When the people broke covenant, God did not walk away. He promised a better one. This is the heart of grace: human unfaithfulness met not with abandonment but with a deeper, stronger pledge. The story of redemption is God’s relentless love responding to our covenant-breaking.

Point ahead to the structure of the whole passage. The new covenant will fix exactly what the old could not: it will write the law within (dealing with the heart), give all a knowledge of God (dealing with distance), and forgive sins remembered no more (dealing with guilt). Each promise targets a specific failure of the old arrangement.

Land it on grace. The very existence of a new covenant is gospel. God looked at a people who could not keep their promises and promised to do for them what they could not do for themselves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fatal weakness of the old covenant: not in God, but in a people who broke it (31:32).
- The law as holy and good but powerless to change the heart (Romans 7:12).
- Grace as God’s response to covenant-breaking: a better covenant, not abandonment.
- How the new covenant is structured to remedy exactly what the old could not.
- The very existence of a new covenant as gospel.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did the old covenant fail, and where did the weakness lie?
- What does God’s response to a broken covenant reveal about His grace?
- How does the new covenant remedy the specific failures of the old?

Question 4

Student Question:

The old covenant failed not because God was unfaithful but because the people “broke” it (31:32). Where have you experienced the limits of trying to be righteous by external rule-keeping in your own strength, and what does that teach you about your need for grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question lets students feel the weakness of the old covenant in their own experience. Anyone who has tried hard to be good by sheer willpower has bumped into the same wall the old covenant exposed: external rules cannot change an internal heart.

Invite honest reflection. Many believers have tried to defeat a sin by rules and resolutions, only to find the rule powerless against the desire underneath. The law could say “do not covet,” but it could not make the heart content. That is the limit the new covenant overcomes.

Distinguish law-keeping in our own strength from grace-empowered obedience. The point is not that obedience does not matter; it matters greatly. The point is that obedience must flow from a changed heart, which only grace can give, not from gritted-teeth effort alone.

Move toward grace. Ask each person to name a place where their own rule-keeping has failed, and to bring that very area to Christ, asking Him to write His law on their heart there, rather than relying on willpower.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The limits of external rule-keeping in our own strength.
- The difference between willpower obedience and grace-changed desire.
- Obedience matters, but must flow from a changed heart.
- Bringing our points of failure to Christ for inward change.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you hit the wall of trying to be good by willpower alone?
- What does that failure teach you about your need for grace?
- What area would you ask Christ to write His law upon from the inside?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 31:33. The heart of the new covenant is, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” What is the great difference between a law written on stone tablets outside us

and a law written within on the heart, and how does this interior transformation come about in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 33 is the beating heart of the new covenant: “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.” The great difference is location. The old law stood outside the sinner on tablets of stone; the new law is written inside, on the heart, by the Spirit of God.

Teach the meaning of interiority. A law on stone can command but cannot empower; it stands over against us as a demand. A law written on the heart becomes our own desire; we obey not merely because we must but because we want to. The new covenant does not lower the standard of God’s law; it relocates it, from the tablet to the heart, and gives the power to love it.

Show how this comes about in Christ. The same promise appears in Ezekiel: “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Paul says believers are a letter “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3). The Spirit, given to those who are baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38), writes the law within.

Tie it to entering the covenant. We do not write the law on our own hearts; God does. But we enter the new covenant through God’s appointed means: hearing the gospel, believing, repenting, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). There we receive the Spirit who begins the inward writing, a work that continues as we walk with Him.

Land it on transformation. The goal of the gospel is not merely forgiven sinners but transformed hearts, people in whom God’s law has become God’s desire. This is the deep newness of the new covenant, and it is ours in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The law written within, on the heart, versus on tablets of stone (31:33).
- Interiority: obedience flowing from desire, not merely external demand.
- The Spirit as the one who writes the law within (Ezekiel 36:26–27; 2 Corinthians 3:3).
- Entering the new covenant through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).
- The goal of the gospel as transformed hearts, not merely forgiven records.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the great difference between a law on stone and a law on the heart?
- How does the Spirit write God’s law within those who are in Christ?
- How does the new covenant change obedience from mere duty into desire?

Question 6

Student Question:

God's aim in the new covenant is a law written on the heart, not merely external compliance (31:33). What would it look like for obedience to flow from desire and love rather than mere duty in your daily walk with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes the law-on-the-heart promise into the texture of daily obedience. There is a vast difference between obeying God because we have to and obeying because we want to, between duty endured and desire delighted in.

Help students locate where they are on this spectrum. Some commands we keep gladly, almost without thinking, because God has written them on our hearts. Others we keep grudgingly, from the outside, wishing we did not have to. Both reveal the state of the heart.

Encourage them not to fake the desire but to seek it. We cannot manufacture delight in God's will by sheer effort. But we can bring our reluctant hearts to God, asking Him to write His law there, to give us new desires through His Spirit and His word.

Move to a concrete area. Ask each person to name one command they currently obey only from duty, and to ask the Lord to make it a delight, to write that part of His law on their heart this season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between obedience as duty and obedience as desire.
- The heart revealed by what we obey gladly versus grudgingly.
- Seeking, not faking, delight in God's will.
- Bringing reluctant hearts to God for inward renewal.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of God's commands do you obey gladly, and which only grudgingly?
- What would it look like for a grudging obedience to become a glad one?
- What command would you ask God to write more deeply on your heart?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 31:34a. Under the new covenant, "they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." What does it mean that every member of the new covenant knows the Lord

personally, and how does this point to the priesthood of all believers and direct access to God through Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 34a unveils another mark of the new covenant: “They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Under the old covenant, the knowledge of God was mediated through priests, prophets, and a special class; ordinary people depended on others to draw near. Under the new covenant, every member knows the Lord personally.

Teach the priesthood of all believers. In Christ, every believer has direct access to God; there is no longer a special priestly caste standing between the people and God. Peter calls the whole church “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9), and we draw near through our one mediator, Christ (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:16). Every Christian, from the least to the greatest, knows God for himself.

Clarify what this does not mean. It does not mean there are no teachers or that all are equally mature; the church has elders, preachers, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). It means that no believer is shut out from personal knowledge of God, depending wholly on a human mediator. Each one has the Spirit and the Scriptures and direct access through Christ.

Distinguish knowing about God from knowing God. The promise is personal, relational knowledge, not merely accurate information. To know the Lord under the new covenant is to be in living fellowship with Him, to walk with Him, to have access to Him as Father through the Son.

Land it on privilege and responsibility. What prophets and kings longed for is ours: every believer may know God personally. That privilege is also a call, to actually know Him, not to settle for secondhand religion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All members of the new covenant knowing the Lord personally (31:34a).
- The priesthood of all believers and direct access through our one mediator, Christ (1 Peter 2:9; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:16).
- The continued place of teachers and elders without a mediating priestly caste (Ephesians 4:11).
- Knowing God personally versus merely knowing about Him.
- The privilege and responsibility of personal knowledge of God.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that every believer, from least to greatest, knows the Lord?
- How does the new covenant give direct access to God through Christ?
- What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God?

Question 8

Student Question:

God promises that all His people, from the least to the greatest, will know Him personally (31:34). Is your knowledge of God a living, personal relationship, or mostly secondhand information about Him, and what would deepen it into true knowing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses the promise that all shall know the Lord into the student's own relationship with God. It is possible to be religiously informed and personally distant, to know much about God secondhand while rarely knowing Him firsthand.

Help students examine honestly. Is my knowledge of God mostly inherited, borrowed from sermons, books, and family, or is it my own, drawn from time with Him in His word and prayer? The new covenant promises personal knowledge, but we can neglect what we have been given.

Encourage the means of knowing. We come to know God personally through His word, where He reveals Himself, and through prayer, where we speak with Him, and through obedient walking, where we experience His faithfulness. Knowledge of God grows in relationship, like any deep knowing of a person.

Move to a concrete step. Ask each person where their knowledge of God has become secondhand, and one practice, a habit of Scripture, a deeper prayer, an act of obedience, that would turn information into living knowledge this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Secondhand, inherited religion versus firsthand knowledge of God.
- The privilege of personal knowledge offered in the new covenant, easily neglected.
- The means of knowing God: His word, prayer, and obedient walking.
- Turning information about God into living relationship with God.

Discussion Prompts

- Is your knowledge of God mostly firsthand or secondhand right now?
- Where has your relationship with God become more information than communion?
- What practice would deepen your personal knowledge of God this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 31:34b–40. The climax of the new covenant is, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Hebrews quotes this very passage and declares that the first

covenant is now “obsolete” and that by Christ’s single offering our sins are remembered no more (Hebrews 8:6–13; 10:14–18). How does the new covenant, established by the blood of Christ and in force now in His church, fulfill this promise of full and final forgiveness, and why does this mean it cannot be a future arrangement with a rebuilt temple and renewed animal sacrifices?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block of the entire study, and the teacher should give it room to breathe. The climax of the new covenant is verse 34b: “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Everything else, the law on the heart, the knowledge of God, rests on this foundation of full and final forgiveness. The reason the new covenant can write the law within and give all a knowledge of God is that it first deals decisively with sin.

Establish the New Testament fulfillment with care, for this is where the whole study comes to its center. The book of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34 in full and draws the conclusion plainly. Because God speaks of a new covenant, “he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13). And quoting our very verse, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more,” Hebrews concludes, “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Hebrews 10:17–18). The new covenant is not future; it is here, established in Christ.

Show how this forgiveness was secured. The new covenant was sealed in the blood of Jesus. On the night before He died He took the cup and said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). He is “the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 9:15), and by His single offering “he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14). The forgiveness Jeremiah foresaw flows from the cross, and it is full, final, and ours in Christ. We enter this covenant and receive this forgiveness through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).

Now apply the guard with full force, for this is the gravest doctrinal danger in the study. Because the new covenant is already in force and its sacrifice already offered once for all, it cannot be a future arrangement for a political nation involving a rebuilt temple and renewed animal sacrifices. Hebrews insists that Christ’s one sacrifice has ended all further offering for sin; to restore the old sacrificial system would deny the finished work of Christ and treat as repeatable what He accomplished once for all (Hebrews 10:1–18). The promises are fulfilled in Christ and His church, the true and spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8). The kingdom arrived with Jesus and was established at Pentecost; Christ reigns now (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). There is no future temple with bleeding sacrifices in God’s plan; there is the cross, sufficient for all time.

Land it on assurance and worship. To live under the new covenant is to have your sins remembered no more by the God against whom you sinned. This is not a hope deferred to a coming age; it is the present possession of every believer in Christ. The God who promised through Jeremiah, “I will remember their sin no more,” has done it, in the blood of His Son. Let

the lesson end in gratitude for so great a salvation, secured by Christ, the mediator of the new covenant we live in now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Full and final forgiveness as the foundation of the new covenant: “I will remember their sin no more” (31:34b).
- Hebrews’ declaration that the new covenant makes the first obsolete and ends all further offering for sin (Hebrews 8:6–13; 10:14–18).
- The new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ, the mediator, and in force now (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15).
- Entering the new covenant through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).
- The grave error of a future earthly arrangement with a rebuilt temple and animal sacrifices, which would deny Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1–18).
- Fulfillment in Christ and His church, the true and spiritual Israel, with the kingdom present now (Galatians 6:16; Daniel 2:44; Colossians 1:13).
- Present assurance: the believer’s sins are remembered no more, now, in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is full and final forgiveness the foundation that makes the rest of the new covenant possible?
- How does Hebrews show that the new covenant is in force now and the old is obsolete?
- Why would a future rebuilt temple with animal sacrifices deny the finished work of Christ?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole passage, from personal responsibility for sin, to the law written on the heart, to all knowing the Lord, to sins remembered no more. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus, the mediator of this new covenant, is writing His law on your heart and forming His likeness in you this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question moves the student from study to surrender. Look back across the whole passage: personal responsibility for sin, the law written on the heart, all knowing the Lord, sins remembered no more. Each promise is a feature of the covenant the student lives in, and each is an invitation to be formed.

Resist letting this stay abstract. Press for one specific way the Lord Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, is at work: a sin to own and surrender, a command being written from duty into

desire, a knowledge of God deepening from secondhand to firsthand, a forgiveness to rest in rather than doubt.

Tie it explicitly to Christ. We do not climb into the new covenant by our effort; we are brought in by His blood and kept in by His Spirit, who writes the law on our hearts. Formation is the ongoing work of the One who forgave us, walking with us as He makes us like Himself.

Invite each person to name their “one thing” aloud or on paper, and to carry it into the week as a matter of prayer and grateful obedience, living consciously as a member of the new covenant in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from knowledge of the new covenant to life in it (James 1:22).
- Christ as the mediator of the new covenant who writes His law on our hearts.
- Resting in full forgiveness while yielding to ongoing transformation.
- Living consciously and gratefully as a member of the new covenant now.

Discussion Prompts

- Which feature of the new covenant is the Lord pressing on you most?
- Where is Christ writing His law on your heart, turning duty into desire?
- How does living as a member of the new covenant change the way you walk this week?