

Will You Take Me Back?

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV)

³¹ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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," declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people 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 they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, '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."

What is a promise to you? Is it just something that you say? Is it something that you take very seriously? Are you a "my word is my bond kind of person," that when you say that you are going to do something, come hell or high water, you are going to do it?

That's a promise, but what's a covenant to you? Covenant is not exactly a commonplace word. It's like a promise, but stronger because not only does one or both parties agree to do something, but there are repercussions spelled out if the covenant is broken.

Although it may not be a word we actively use in our conversations today, covenant is a prominent feature of God's Word. The "old" covenant was made with the Israelites "when [God] took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt." (verse 32) Jeremiah some 800 years later repeats the covenant as many had done before him. The LORD declares: "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you." (Jeremiah 7:23) But, if the Israelites do not, God says, "Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant." (Jeremiah 11:3) The covenant made at the time of the Exodus was a two-sided agreement. Each party had a responsibility. You hold up your end, and I'll hold up my end. Don't hold up your end, and there will be consequences, in this case, curses.

Probably one of the closest things we have to a covenant today are marriage vows. A vow is a solemn promise that we make, something we obligate ourselves to doing. In our marriage rites, the groom is asked, "Will you be guided by the counsel and direction God has given in his Word and love your wife as Christ loved the Church? Will you be faithful to her, cherish her, support her, and help her in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live? If so, answer, 'I will.'" And the vows of the bride are very similar: "Will you be guided by the counsel and direction God has given in his Word and submit to your husband as the Church submits to Christ? Will you be faithful to him, cherish him, support him, and help him in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live? If so, answer, 'I will.'" Notice that these vows, these promises, are not premised on the other person doing something. The marriage covenant does not say, "I will love you and be faithful to you and cherish you and support you and help you in sickness and in health if you love me, cherish me, respect me, etc. first." We call this a one-sided covenant. In a marriage, you promise to give the other person your all without any stipulations.

Let's take the marriage analogy a little further. The LORD says through Jeremiah the prophet, "They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them." (verse 32) Imagine a husband who is always faithful to his wife, always puts her first, always is finding ways to show her how much he cherishes her, never once looks at another woman lustfully, always guiding her and himself in the way of the LORD, always taking care of her when she is sick and when she is healthy, always carefully listening to her and then acting in the best interest of them both. He is the perfect husband, doing everything God directs him to do. But his wife, his bride, cheats on him. And the adultery wasn't even a secret. She does this right in front of him, flaunting it as if it's no big deal. What a wicked wife! If any of us were counseling this husband, we would say, "Leave!" "Kick her out!" "Have nothing to do with her anymore!"

Israel was that wicked wife. It didn't take long for the Israelites to break God's covenant. Moses hadn't even come down from Mount Sinai with the words of covenant chiseled in stone before the Israelites had made a golden calf and worshiped that as their god instead of the LORD, the one who had actually rescued them from slavery, who had made them into a great nation, who had given them everything their bodies needed. And the Israelites continued to break that covenant time and time again, generation after generation, serving other gods, grumbling and complaining at God's providence. Eventually, after hundreds of years of patience, God's curses upon them were about to culminate with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in Jeremiah's lifetime. The people would be exiled from their promised land because they were unfaithful to God in spite of how faithful God was to them, though he was a husband to them.

How many promises have you broken to other people? How many, "I will be there" statements did you make only to forget or to never show up, whether intentionally or not? How many "I will do that" statements did you make that you never actually did? How many times did you give your all, your best, and yet your promise still wasn't kept, that you were unfaithful to your word?

How many promises have you broken with God? There are promises that we make with God. Sometimes we make these promises when we are in dire situations, when we are praying, and we “cut a deal,” so to speak, with God. God, if you do this for me, then I will give up this thing or that thing. Sometimes it’s just a promise from us saying, “God, I will not do this again. It’s a sin. I know it’s wrong. I’m giving this up. I’m done with this.” Yet, then you did it again. You consciously sinned against God. You knew it was wrong. You promised not to do it again, but you did. We are no better than the Israelites. We are just as unfaithful. We are the wicked wife.

Should God take us back with how unfaithful we have been to him? We are the offending party. We wronged him; he never wronged us. He was faithful; we were unfaithful. He kept his promises; we did not – whether in marriage, to other people, or to God. In any relationship here on earth, we would be advising that the faithful husband move on from the unfaithful wife, that God should not take us back.

Even with all this unfaithfulness, with all the promises broken, God does not leave us. He doesn’t make us beg him to take us back. But God also doesn’t ignore what has happened. No, he does the unexpected and makes a new vow, a new covenant: “This is the covenant I will make with the people 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. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘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.” (verses 33-34) It’s a one-sided covenant, just like a marriage vow. There are no stipulations on what the other party (we) do. He makes the decision to be our God, to make us his people. He makes the decision to write his Word on our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit through his Word so that we all know him, from the least to the greatest. He chooses to forgive our wickedness. He chooses to remember our sins no more.

This is amazing! God puts the whole covenant on himself. It’s all things that he will do regardless of what we do. And so the LORD returns Israel and Judah back to their land. The temple gets rebuilt. Yes, they suffered the curses that were promised under the covenant that the LORD had made with the Israelites at the time of the Exodus. But that covenant is done because it was broken. God maintains this new, one-sided covenant with his people, which is actually an older covenant than the one that was made during the Exodus. This is the covenant that was made with Adam and Eve immediately after they brought the first sin into the world, a promise of a son to crush the head of the serpent (Satan). This is the covenant that the LORD made with Noah after the flood, to continue to care and provide for all people regardless of the fact that humanity is evil and wicked. This is the covenant that the LORD made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the forefathers of the people of Israel, that all nations would be blessed through them and their offspring. This is a covenant all about what God does, how he puts it on himself to forgive our wickedness and remember our sins no more, a covenant that was kept with Jesus’s coming. By his Word, people came to believe that Jesus is the one who forgives our sins. It is his life and his death that crushed Satan. His perfect life substituted for all people makes him a blessing to all nations.

We are also benefactors of this new covenant. God brought us into this covenant when he washed us with water combined with his Word, his promises. In baptism, God washed away all our wickedness for our whole lives and made us his people, his family. In his Supper, he gives us the new covenant to partake in as we eat and drink the bread and the wine, Jesus’ body and blood given and shed for you and me for the forgiveness of sins. In this Supper, he forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more because of his sacrifice.

If you have ever been the one who has broken marriage vows, if you have been the one to let your eyes wander, the one who was unfaithful, then you know the repercussions. You know what it is to lose the trust of someone you vowed to love, cherish, be faithful to in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live. You have known that feeling of walking on eggshells as you try to prove that you can be trusted again, but at the same time know that there is always suspicion. You have wondered if you will ever truly be forgiven, if your relationship will ever truly be reconciled and restored. Not so with God. Your relationship with God is all about what he will do. He says, “You are my people.” He says, “I will put my Word in your mind and heart.” He says, “I forgive your wickedness.” He says, “I remember your sins no more.”

And so we walk confidently in our relationship with God. He is faithful to his covenant with us. He will not bring up our past sins. He will not cast a suspicious look our way or interrogate us to determine if we love him enough. He has chosen to forgive and forget our wickedness. That’s why we make our promises to love him, to walk in his ways, to follow his will. We do this not because we are trying to earn back his trust. No, we do this because we are choosing to imitate his love for us, to love him back as a thank you. Because of his new covenant with us, we are confident of where we stand with him. God has taken us back. He will remain faithful to us because of his new covenant with us that culminated with Jesus, a covenant of forgiving our wickedness and remembering our sins no more. Amen.