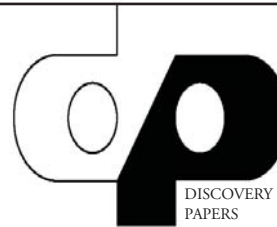


# WHAT GOOD IS FAITH?

*SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP*



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Jeremiah 31:31-34  
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Paul Taylor

In the 2006 movie entitled *16 Blocks*, an aging, burnt-out cop named Jack Mosley is asked to escort a prisoner, Eddie, from the police station jail to a courthouse hearing. Along the way, Jack discovers that Eddie will be testifying as a witness against one of Jack's colleagues. What Jack doesn't know is that hit men have been hired to kill Eddie before he can testify. Nobody expects Jack to be any problem because in the past he has shared in their corruption: taking bribes and looking the other way. But this time Jack makes a different decision. So he and Eddie are on the run from the bad cops. The movie explores the issue of whether, once you're in the habit of doing wrong, you can turn around and do right, and in one scene, Eddie tells Jack that people can change. Jack replies, "Days change. Seasons Change. Not people."

Can people really change? It is a question we hear often. Is it possible for me to change? Can I really lose weight? Can I get better grades? Can I do better at my job? Can my spouse ever change? Can my relationship with my kids ever get better?

A lot of people come to church wanting to change, to become better, to kick old habits of selfishness or anxiety. A lot of people come to God wanting Him to change them. And He does change us. But sometimes people get frustrated when they don't change enough, or when nothing seems to be different after years of following Jesus, or when it seems that people who don't believe in Christ seem to be getting along better than people who do believe. And it leads us to the question of whether faith in Christ really does anything.

Is this whole faith thing really worthwhile? What does it get us anyway? Some of you might be skeptics who are curious about this Jesus but want to know whether believing in Him really will do anything. Some of you might have known Jesus a long time, but you're getting restless, wondering why your life doesn't look the way you thought it was supposed to look. Some of you might be new to faith and finding it harder than you thought. Today we're asking the question, "What good is faith?" What does believing in Jesus do anyway? How does it make things any different?

We're in the middle of a series on Jeremiah. And we've been asking tough questions throughout the series and seeing how Jeremiah has some unique answers to our questions. Jeremiah was preaching to the Israelites living in Jerusalem while their city was under siege by the Babylonians. Jeremiah tells them that it is God's will for their city to be destroyed because they have disobeyed God. He also tells them about the hope of restoration, but it's

a long way off in the future. And so you might imagine these people asking themselves, "What good is this God anyway?" If He really is going to let our city be destroyed and send us into exile, what good is believing in Him? And even if He does restore us, we've blown it once; it's pretty likely we'll blow it again. Maybe "being God's people" isn't what it's cracked up to be.

To answer this question, Jeremiah tells them a little more about what God is planning for them. He gives them a taste of where faith in God will eventually lead them. That passage is found in Jeremiah 31, verses 31-34. These words come right in the middle of a section of this book that most scholars call the Book of Consolation—three chapters of hopeful promises to God's people. We've already looked at some passages in this section, but what we're looking at today is the featured highlight of the Book of Consolation.

So let's read these verses and see what it is that God is promising for His people who believe in Him. Let's see what good faith is supposed to be for them. Jeremiah 31:31-34:

<sup>31</sup> **"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.**  
<sup>32</sup> **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," declares the LORD.** <sup>33</sup> **"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.**  
<sup>34</sup> **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."**

We need something new

So Jeremiah tells God's people about a new covenant. Like all ancient Near East cultures, the Israelites were familiar with the idea of a covenant. It was as common as a contract is to us today. It was an agreement between two people or two parties that defined the terms of their relationship. There were all sorts of covenants: political, business, marital, social. And God's people were particularly familiar with the idea of a covenant because it is what God used to define His relationship with His people.

That's how he started things out: by making a covenant with a man who was to be called Abraham.

So if we're going to understand this new covenant, we have to understand something about the old covenant. The old covenant that we're talking about here is the one that God established through Moses at Mt. Sinai immediately after He rescued them from slavery in Egypt a little over 800 years before Jeremiah writes these words. It starts in Exodus 19 when God meets with Moses at Mt. Sinai, continues in the rest of Exodus and Leviticus, and then is summarized in Deuteronomy.

And this covenant spells out the terms of the relationship between God and His people. If you do this, I'll do that. It tells the people what God will do for them, and it tells the people what they are supposed to do for God. After Moses goes into all of the detail about what the people's part of the covenant is, there is this great conclusion at the end of Deuteronomy 26. It's a pretty good summary of the old covenant for our purposes. Deuteronomy 26:17-18:

<sup>17</sup> You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, and that you will obey him. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.

So the people are supposed to obey God, to follow His law. And what do they get out of it? They get a God. A really good God. The covenant begins with their declaration that YHWH is their God. Not any of the competing Gods, but YHWH. And YHWH begins by declaring that they are His people. That's the heart of the covenant. This covenant is essentially a marriage between two people. Israel says, "You are the only God for me," and God says, "You are the only people for me." But by the time we get to Jeremiah, this marriage is a shambles. YHWH hasn't been the only God for them. The old covenant was broken by years of disobedience.

I have a very distinct memory of walking into a store that sold all kinds of memorabilia with my mother. I was probably 8 years old or so. And I remember a sign on the shelves that said, "You break it, you buy it." No messing around here. And the whole time I was in the store, the woman who ran the store was watching me because I was a little kid. And sure enough, a few minutes into the store, I picked something up. It was some kind of a toy with a string that you pulled and something went pop. So, I pulled the string. And it broke. And the woman was really mad. She made my mom pay for it and we left the store. I'm sure it wasn't as big a deal as I remember—the thing probably only cost a few dollars. I remember trying to explain to the woman that I didn't really break it, but she wouldn't listen to me. You broke it, you bought it. That was it.

And that's where the people of Jerusalem found themselves. They had broken the covenant. Way back in Deuteronomy 27-28, God had told them about some

consequences if they broke the covenant. He had told them that He would take away their land and send them away, that foreign nations would enslave them once again. So here it was. You break it, you buy it. They broke it; they were about to buy it. Jerusalem must be destroyed. Israel must go into exile.

But He doesn't leave it there. Instead of just making them pay for the covenant they broke, He gives them another chance. He replaces the broken covenant with a new one. When we stop to think about our own lives, we realize that this is what we need. We have broken our relationship with God in so many ways that the only way that faith will make any difference in our lives is if it gives us something new. We need something new to move forward. Just like the Israelites, we need a second chance. And a third chance. And a hundredth chance.

Of course, He didn't have to do this. That wasn't part of the original agreement. It would have been fair for Him to make them pay and be done with it. He had kept His part of the agreement. He says that He was a husband to them. He was faithful to His bride. She slept around. She cheated on Him. In other places, God accuses His bride of committing adultery under every tree on every hill in Israel. God's bride turned out to be a filthy, cheating whore.

But God takes her back. He offers her a new covenant. Wow. This is mercy. This is love. And when we realize the depth of that, it shakes us up. It's hard to do though. We're so used to the idea that God loves us, that it can be hard to realize that He doesn't *have* to love us. He didn't *have* to offer a new covenant. That's why the marriage example is so helpful. How many men do you know who would take back a wife who had cheated on him repeatedly. Now, you might actually know some—I do. But they are only able to do so because they are inspired by God and empowered to do that by His Spirit. But think about the pain and anger and violation of having your wife cheat on you, and then taking her back, offering her a new marriage covenant, falling on your knees and proposing to this woman who has become a whore. That's the picture here.

So God offers us a new chance. The old deal didn't work. We've all become whores, trading God for cheap fantasies, for money, expensive homes, success in Silicon Valley, physical thrills, whatever it is for you. We need something new. And that's what God offers.

## We need to be changed

But there is still a problem. If God's people have already failed the old covenant, how are they going to do any better with a new one? Won't they just make the same mistakes again? But the passage goes on to explain how this covenant is going to be different from the last one. God says that this time He is going to write the law on our hearts.

This should remind us of a few things. First, it should remind us that God was the one that originally wrote the law in the old covenant, and that law was written on stone

tablets. Israel carried those stone tables around the desert for 40 years, and then those tablets got kept in the holiest place they could possibly construct.

We might also remember a passage from Jeremiah 17 that we looked at in the spring. God told Israel that they had sin inscribed on their hearts with a diamond-tipped stylus. The hearts of God's people are pictured as hard, stony, and resistant to Him. But instead of the law being written on this stone, the people have sin written on their hearts, scratched into it. Our hard hearts constantly lead us to turn away from God.

But now this image completes the picture. At first, the law was written on stone tablets. But our hearts became hard and stony and sin became engraved in them. So now God tries something new. The external law written on stone tablets didn't do what it was meant to do. So God goes deeper. He takes our hearts of stone, hearts that love to turn away from Him, and He changes what is written on them. In fact, He changes their very nature. He softens our hearts. When Ezekiel promises something similar, he says that God will give his people hearts of flesh. And then on those soft hearts he writes His law. And we see that that is the only way forward. The only way that faith in a new covenant is going to help us is if that new covenant changes us. It's not just the system that is broken. It's us. We need to be changed.

So God changes our hearts. He gives us a new ability to live in relationship with Him. Paul describes it later in his letter to the Romans, once he is able to reflect back and see the role that Jesus would play in the enactment of this new covenant. Romans 8:3 says, "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." And Romans 8:9 says, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."

What the law couldn't do, God does in the new covenant. Do people really change? Can an old corrupt cop who has always looked the other way do the right thing? Can a street criminal start over and live a new life? Can an addict kick the habit and rebuild his life? Can a control freak really start to trust and rest in someone else's decisions? Can someone who is always wondering what people think of her reorient herself toward God as her loving Father? Can an arrogant religious perfectionist soften and embrace his own brokenness? Do people change?

Most of you know that I have three young children. One of the things we've been working on lately is saying "thank-you," especially when we sit down to eat a meal together. Instead of pointing out every part of the meal that you don't like, say "thank you" for the meal as a whole, and especially for the parts that you do like. We're hoping that, by teaching this behavior and encouraging it and even rewarding it, it will become a habit for our children, that saying "thank you" will become a natural response for them. But we realize that, while we can help them build better habits, we can't change their hearts. We can teach

them to say "thank you," but we can't make them thankful. That's a heart issue, and it's way outside our control.

But that's where God steps in. He can change our hearts. I know what it feels like to have a hard heart. I know my own heart is hard in some areas. I'm reminded of it daily by my sin. But I also know the miracle of God softening me. I know something of Him guiding me from within. And this is what I want. I think it's what most of us want. We all have parts of our lives that we are ashamed of, things we desperately wish weren't true of us. We want to be changed. We want new hearts fashioned from the character of God. We want faith to change us radically, from the inside.

## We need reconciliation

So this passage says that there is change, but there's much more. Too often, when we talk about the new covenant, we focus entirely on the fact that God will change us. Partly it's because that is an amazing truth. Partly it's because we are so focused on ourselves as individuals. Partly it's because we live in a self-improvement culture. But when we read this passage, we realize that it's not written just to individuals, it's written to a community. This new covenant isn't just about me and God. It's about us and God. And that's a big difference.

In verse 31, we learn that the covenant is going to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Remember that these words are being spoken by Jeremiah in Jerusalem to the Southern tribes of the nation: the house of Judah. You may also remember that these guys thought they were the "real" Israel. They had the Davidic king. They had Solomon's temple. When the Assyrians wiped out the northern tribes, that made the people in Jerusalem convinced that they were right and their brothers were wrong.

But then God promises a new covenant that brings them back together. He even lists Israel first. If you're part of the Southern tribes, this doesn't necessarily make you all that happy. You'd be just as pleased if God really did forget all about those northern tribes. That's why by the time we get to the New Testament, Samaritans are complete outcasts. They are the descendants of the northern tribes.

I remember being amazed as a freshman at Stanford how quickly I was taught to boo anything having to do with UC Berkeley. And that is just a petty school rivalry. Our loyalties and prejudices run deep. God says that this new covenant will bring the two houses of Israel back together. But if that is going to happen, we really do need a miracle. If I'm going to get along with them, I need to be reconciled to my enemy. There are broken relationships that need to be fixed. To live together, we need reconciliation.

And this is what the new covenant accomplishes. It brings together the house of Israel and the house of Judah under one new house of Israel. The people of God are one people again. And although the passage doesn't go this far, this idea of reconciliation and bringing back

in the splintered tribes of Israel prepares the way for the kingdom of God to be opened up to include Gentiles. This is an inclusive kingdom. Everyone is welcome. There is no room for those who would say, "I'm part of the real people of God; those other people aren't welcome here." God will always surprise us with who He invites to be part of His kingdom.

One of the most remarkable things about this new people of God is that it is an egalitarian community. God says, "No longer will a man teach his neighbor to know God because they will all know me." This is a huge shift. As part of the old covenant, God established a group of people who would stand between God and His people and represent one to the other. But now He says that, with the new covenant, that won't be necessary. Paul explains why in 1 Timothy 2:5: "There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." We are an egalitarian community with equal access to God.

Have you ever heard of two factions, filled with rivalry and competition, brought together into one egalitarian community? It doesn't really happen. Think about history. Groups split. They divide. Factions are created as time goes on. Institutions develop power structures and distinctions and roles. Those things accumulate with time; they don't dissipate naturally. But here you see these happening in reverse. Factions coming together. Power being relinquished. A new kind of kingdom being formed. This is the kingdom of God, and it's what we need—not just to live well before God, but to live well *together*, one family with a loving Father. This new covenant creates that. It brings reconciliation.

## We need forgiveness

But how does God do all this? How do you take people like that and make them into a community? How do you create reconciliation? How do you change someone who has done so much wrong in their past? How do you move forward when there has been so much hurt?

One word: forgiveness. The end of this passage makes it clear that the foundation for all of this is forgiveness. Without forgiveness there can be nothing new. Without forgiveness between people there can be no real community. You may have heard that communication is the key to any healthy relationship. But that's not really true. The key to any relationship, whether it is a marriage or a parent-child relationship or a real, deep friendship, is forgiveness. If you're going to go deep with anyone, you're going to have to forgive. And that's why there aren't that many deep relationships in our world. Forgiveness is hard. But we need it. If faith is going to change anything, it has to start with forgiveness. We need forgiveness.

That's where Jesus comes into the picture as far as the new covenant is concerned. The new covenant is built on forgiveness, God says He won't even remember the sins of His people anymore. How does an all-knowing God forget anything? Well, He's all powerful too, so maybe

He's powerful enough to make Himself forget something. That's a bit of a mystery, but the point is that He forgives. And the way that God forgives people whose hearts are naturally turned away from Him is through the sacrifice of His son. Jesus' death and resurrection provide forgiveness along with justice, release along with redemption. That is what makes the new covenant possible.

Now, in church we talk about forgiveness a lot. So you probably expect to hear about forgiveness, and all of us are a little bit desensitized to the idea of forgiveness. But the truth is that forgiveness is scandalous, and forgiveness is difficult. I'd be willing to bet that every one of us here has relationships in our lives where we find it incredibly difficult to forgive the other person. Most of us probably have people in our life who we're working on forgiving. It's hard to forgive.

There is a new TV series on NBC called "Community." It's about a group of misfits at a local community college. One of the primary characters is a fast-talking ex-lawyer who has ulterior romantic motivations for being a part of this group. But at one point, he gives a speech to the group in the midst of some internal relational conflict. He affirms each member of the group and then concludes by having them turn to each other and say the simple words, "I forgive you." He then tells them that they are no longer strangers, they are no longer a study group, but they are now a community. And the wisdom of this statement amazes me, the awareness that forgiveness between individuals is an essential component for establishing community. That idea comes straight from this passage.

Forgiveness is powerful. And it's everywhere. People want to be forgiven. They want to put their past behind them. Shame and guilt cripple us, they drag us down. Forgiveness does something new. Real, honest, transparent forgiveness. This is something that changes the world. This changes people's hearts. This is powerful stuff.

## We need God

So what does all this mean? We've seen that we need something new, we've talked about how need to be changed, we see our need for reconciliation, and we've noticed that the foundation for all of this is our need for forgiveness. But what is this new covenant all about? Why do we want it? What do we really get out of it? Well, our passage explains that we get the same thing that the old covenant was supposed to give. There's this beautiful phrase that rings like a refrain throughout Scripture, from Leviticus to Deuteronomy to 2 Samuel to Ezekiel to Jeremiah to Zechariah to 2 Corinthians to Revelation. It's a summary of what we looked at in Deuteronomy 26, the result of the new covenant. This is the relationship that is promised. God says literally at the end of verse 33, "I will be God to them and they will be to me a people." "I will be their God and they will be my people.

And so we see that this whole new covenant has a purpose. It's not really about being changed. If our goal

is personal transformation, then we're stopping short. It's not really about getting something new. It's not really about reconciliation. And it's not really about getting forgiveness. All of those things are important, but none of them are central. The new covenant is about one thing. It's about the same thing that life has been about since the creation of the first man and woman in a Middle Eastern garden. It's about the same thing that religious people all over the world are searching after. It's about the thing that Jesus Christ uniquely made possible. It's about being in a relationship with the God who created the universe. It's about knowing God and being known. It's about loving God and being loved. It's about YHWH being our God and us being His people. We need a lot of things, but most of all we need God.

Do you recognize that everything you want, all your desires, all of your ambition and drive and fears and disappointments, are about your need for God? We need God. We want to be connected with Him. But we're broken and we've blown it. We want to be with Him, but it's so hard.

One of our interns this summer commented about how easy it is to talk about God, to talk about knowing God, to think about God, to talk to others about thinking about God, and then all of a sudden to realize that it's been a long time since you've actually talked *to* God. And that is so true. God often uses that realization to draw us back to relating to Him. It's so easy to do all this religious stuff as a way to avoid actually having to relate to God. Then we realize that and we approach Him, and we find out that He is our God and we are His people. This is the promise that has always been at the heart of being God's people.

And it is a promise that is always new to us, even though we are reading Jeremiah's words 2600 years later, and after the arrival of the man who fulfilled this promise. However, Jesus established the new covenant, but He didn't complete it. This promise is still waiting to be ultimately fulfilled. At the end of the story, when Jesus returns and completes His final work of redemption, we finally realize the central promise of this new covenant. Revelation 21:3 says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'"

They will be his people. And God Himself will be their God. At the end of the age, it's finally made real. We finally get to experience this promise as the entirety of our existence. Jesus will complete it; we will be God's people, and He will be our God. What faith does *now* is make that real to us in small ways until it will be real to us in a huge way. Faith allows us to experience God's presence now. And it gives us the hope to anticipate that presence fully

when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom.

## What Good Is Faith?

So for now, we live in relationship with God. We exist as God's people, we live under the new covenant, but we're also waiting for the end. And as we live in this state, we are changed. What I love about the movie *16 Blocks* is that you do see someone change. And you see how two men who each need to change are inspired by their relationship with each other and how that forms them, not because they learned something new or figured out a better way to be, but because their friendship is really the point. The life change is simply a consequence.

And that's the way it is with God. We are formed out of our relationship with Him. We are changed through prayer and confession and ranting against Him and receiving His love. We are able to reconcile with each other when we recognize Him as Father to all of us. And everything is made possible because He has forgiven us.

So does faith change anything? Yes, in fact, faith changes everything. Faith offers us something new. Faith changes us. Faith creates a new family. Faith allows us to be forgiven and to forgive. And finally, but most importantly, faith gives us God. Faith brings us into this new promise. What good is faith? Faith gives us a good God. Faith makes God our God. And faith makes us His people.