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Introduction

We have seen the way in which the New Covenant, new birth, entrance into the kingdom of God, and the coming of the Spirit are different expressions used to describe what is essentially the same event; full initiation into Christ; the process whereby a man or woman becomes 'joined in Spirit' with Christ himself to create a new man which can be described as 'I in you and you in me'.

It is time to look at the way the Scriptures explain the means whereby this miracle of the Spirit takes place. To do so we shall have to revisit some of those ancient prophecies and see how they are interpreted in the New Testament.

Curing the Incurable

The Promise of the New Covenant

We are indebted to Jeremiah for this first use of the term 'New Covenant'.

The book of Jeremiah is a series of prophecies given over quite a period of time but we can identify common themes and threads. Our starting point for this series of Bible meditations has been;

▼ Jer 31:31-33

Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith Jehovah.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith Jehovah: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31–33 ASV)

There is much more than this but this will remind us of our starting point. We can make two broad points about these three verses.

1. They make it clear that the New Covenant is different to the Old Covenant, and

2. secondly they contain God's promise to internalise his mind and will in those who entered into that New Covenant.

The way that Jeremiah describes it is in terms of 'heart and mind'. We will not try to define these terms precisely at this point but just make the comment that these terms have to do with the 'innermost' aspect of humanity. To get to the 'heart' of the matter is to get to the very centre of the issue.

This predicted New Covenant is going to get to the heart of the matter. God is going to put his revealed will into the inner man. He will write it plainly in the inner consciousness of men and women and the consequence of this will be that God will be the God of this New Covenant people, and this New Covenant people will belong exclusively to God.

The Heart

This is not the first time that Jeremiah speaks of things written on the heart and his early use will give us some pointers as to what he is saying. For this we need to turn to one of the most used Old Testament texts in older evangelical preaching;

▼ Jer 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 ASV)

Generations of Sunday School children have committed this verse to 'heart', but what does it mean?

The original Hebrew declares, "the heart is crooked above all things and incurable, who can know it?"

The phrase points to a depth of crookedness in the heart that is far beyond human comprehension and which is incurable. What is this disease and how do you treat something that is incurable?

Indelible Sin

At the beginning of this same chapter Jeremiah describes the behaviour of the 'house of Judah'. Let's remind ourselves that at this point the 'house of Israel' had been taken into captivity by Assyria and the 'house of Judah' was about to suffer the same fate in Babylon.

Jeremiah describes the heart condition of the southern kingdom and declares;

The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; With the point of a diamond it is engraved On the tablet of their heart, Jer 17:1 NKJV.

The pen of iron, of course, is a chisel. Judah's sin was carved indelibly into its innermost being. Judah's sin something that lay, superficially on the surface, was not something that could be treated cosmetically with a coat of paint. Their sin had become permanently etched into their inner man. We can see why later Jeremiah declares that their condition is incurable.

The law of God had been carved into tablets of stone on Sinai; his will permanently expressed and unalterable. Now Jeremiah says the nation's disposition is carved into their hearts; permanently expressed.

So how shall we diagnose Judah's condition and identify the disease? This 17th chapter of Jeremiah describes the condition graphically

▼ Jeremiah 17:1–2

The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, *and* with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the tablet of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars; whilst their children remember their altars and their Asherim by the green trees upon the high hills. (Jeremiah 17:1–2 ASV)

The words describe a proneness to idolatry that was relentless.

Their sin is spiritual promiscuity; they constantly seek for other gods, they are insatiable. They have become addicted to false gods and false religion and at the heart of all idolatry is a refusal to surrender to the true God.

The Bible is a down-to-earth book in many ways and Jeremiah's language is certainly down to earth and downright earthy at times. He had described symptoms of this disease earlier;

▼ Jer 2:24

For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bonds; and thou saidst, I will not serve; for upon every high hill and under every green tree thou didst bow thyself, playing the harlot. Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate branches of a foreign vine unto me? For though thou wash thee with lye, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord Jehovah. How canst thou say, I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baalim? see thy way in the valley, know what thou hast done: *thou art* a swift dromedary traversing her ways; a wild ass used to the wilderness, that snuffeth up the wind in her desire; in her occasion who can turn her away? all they that seek her will not weary themselves; in her month they shall find her.
(Jeremiah 2:20–24 ASV)

The nation was like a female donkey 'in heat'; there was no stopping her. Now Jeremiah says the condition is etched upon the nation's heart and it is incurable.

It is against this background of a nation's nature that Jeremiah gives the amazing promise of a New Covenant. A New Covenant in which God will etch his will into the hearts and minds of a people who will, thereby, become God's people and he, their God.

It is breathtaking in its audacity and its implications. This is nothing less than the promise of a new nature. Is it possible that the lust for other gods could be replaced by a lust for the true God? (The word 'lust', by the way, is used of strong passions in the Scriptures, passions both good and bad.)

When Paul wrote of certain Old Testament accounts he said that the things that had occurred were written for our admonition, a cautionary reminder.

▼ 1Corinthians 10:11

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1Corinthians 10:11 NKJV)

The events were true in themselves but they were recorded for a continuing purpose. The description of the house of Judah is not recorded because they were unique in their spiritual promiscuity but because they serve as a template for us all. The house of Judah is not exceptional; it is a description of the heart of every man and woman who is not as yet enjoying the blessings of the New Covenant.

Prone to wander?

In the 18th century an unhappy preacher, Robert Robinson, wrote a hymn that begins 'Come thou fount of every blessing' and has a stanza that says;

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

The hymn has some fine sentiments but, perhaps, some sub-Christian elements too.

In his honesty he describes his heart in terms that Jeremiah would happily have used to describe the house of Judah,

“prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love”?

It sounds like Jeremiah's donkey, sniffing up the wind in search of a mate

But, wait, listen to his prayer...

Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Is this 'proneness to wander' and incurable state or can God do something about our condition now on earth, or must we wait for the courts above? Is this salvation a present possibility or must we await a heavenly fulfilment.

When I call these elements 'sub-Christian' I am not saying that Robinson was 'sub-Christian' but only that his experience of "proneness to wander" or "proneness to leave the God I love" expectation is 'sub-Christian'. Wandering heart and proneness to turn our back on God are not to be regarded as the norm of Christian experience.

The hymn expresses the feelings of many who call themselves Christians. It has not yet arrived at the great before and after statements of the New Testament. It missing the assurance of the 'but now' with which Peter speaks;

▼ 1Pet 2:23-3:1

who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1Pet 2:23-3:1 NKJV.

Peter identifies our instinctive spiritual promiscuity, the lust for other things. Blessings without the Blessor, but puts it into the past tense...

- **you were** like sheep going astray, (you used to be)
- **but** have **now** returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls

These wonderful verses have an incurable spiritual sickness in view, but in Peter's declaration that is a historic sickness not a current. And it was Christ's death, his stripes, which provided the cure. By his stripes we ARE healed.

Jeremiah to Ezekiel (Jer c606 BC, Ezek c587 BC)

If Jeremiah is bold, Ezekiel is more so. Ezekiel does not use the term 'New Covenant' but it is plain that he has the same promises in mind when he issued his prophecies in Babylon itself. And Ezekiel does not use the language of God carving his own will into the hearts of men and women. Ezekiel's language is even more radical. He has the same themes of restoration but his expression is even more breathtaking;

▼ Ezek 36:25-28

And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep mine ordinances, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:25–28 ASV)

He is addressing the same condition of spiritual promiscuity concludes at the same point as Jeremiah in declaring that 'you shall be my people, and I will be your God'.

Ezekiel, however, uses the language of replacement, and very specifically too.

The old heart will be removed and a new heart put in its place. Ezekiel declares that God's purpose is to both cleanse and to renew. The centre of his prophecy is that God will give them a 'new heart and a new spirit'. Jeremiah's incurable condition has a remedy, a transplant. Of course, this was long before the possibility of physical heart transplants but the language is very precise.

The old 'stone heart', the one on which Jeremiah said the nation's nature was written, is to be removed and replaced by a 'heart of flesh'. Here the ideas of intractable stone and responsive flesh are contrasted.

The prophecy is remarkable for its clarity of the process by which God would achieve his purposes. Not only would a new heart be given but the old heart would be taken away. He would give a new heart and put a new spirit at the innermost point, but more... His own Spirit would take up residence in the renewed nature.

The replacement of the old 'heart and spirit' with a new 'heart and spirit' is a wonderful promise but in itself there is not necessarily a greater security in it. If other things were not added even a cleansed temple might well revert to its old state. As we have seen earlier. The physical temple of Christ's day was cleansed twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of his earthly ministry. In the space of three years the 'cleansed' temple had reverted to its original state of defilement.

Reformation alone has no power to maintain itself. There had been several reformations in the history of God's people, but the nation states quickly reverted to

their old ways. If the replacement were the end of the matter the human race might well find itself in a similar state, or even worse...

▼ Matthew 12:43–45

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes, he finds *it* empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation.” (Matthew 12:43–45 NKJV)

But the promise is not only of taking away, and replacing but of God himself taking up residence in the cleansed temple, but we will pause here and, God willing, continue this theme next time we meet together on ‘Biblebase’s Broken Bread’ and the next study in our series on “the better covenant - revisited’.