

DETOUR TO THE PROPHETS: JEREMIAH

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

Jeremiah 31:33

“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 within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

FAITH STORY:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

FAITH FOCUS:

In this message from God, Jeremiah gives us one of the high points of Old Testament salvation history. In the midst of the Babylonian siege and destruction of Jerusalem, the people needed hope and here they received it. Because of their sin the old covenant (Sinai) was broken. But the LORD offered a new covenant. This covenant was radically different in that now the people were able to obey God's law through a God-given internalized provision; the law was written on their hearts. Everyone, not just a chosen few, could experience God directly. And forgiveness was the cornerstone.

SESSION GOAL:

To help the students accept the incredible, unfailing love of God and the new law that God can put into their hearts.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will have:

- Write a marriage contract with God
- Brainstorm the meaning of the word pun found in the scripture passage
- List the similarities and differences between the old covenant and the new covenant
- Look up other verses in the Bible to help them understand Jeremiah 31:31-34.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 big pieces of paper and felt markers (Focus, Option #1)
- 3 paper and pens for writing
- 4 copies of “Obey My voice” from Hymnal Worship Book page 163
- 5 Wedding props (Respond, Option #2)

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (8–10 minutes)

Option #1: Greet the students as they come together for your meeting. After they have all assembled, ask them to join one of these three groups: “I’ve been jilted by a boyfriend/ girlfriend group,” “I’ve had someone break a promise to me” group or the “I’ve had people stop trusting me for no reason” group. In each of these groups, they are to write down on a big piece of paper all their feelings about the topic of their group. In other words, how did it feel to be jilted, not trusted or have someone break their promise to you? Give them 5 minutes to make their lists.

Option #2: After the students have all arrived and you have asked how their week has been, give them paper and ask them to write out the main points they would be sure to include in a marriage contract. Examples may be

- my spouse has to be faithful
- my spouse can’t lie to me
- my spouse must trust me
- we have to share the money equally
- we have to share household and parenting chores equally
- my spouse must keep promises

Gather the group together and have them share some of the important things they would write up into their marriage contract.

CONNECT: (5–6 minutes)

Option #1: Gather the groups back together and review the lists. What were the common emotions surrounding the topics? Now ask these questions:

- *Does God ever get jilted? Can you think of a Bible story where God got jilted?*
- *Did anyone ever break a promise to God? Can you think of a Bible story where that happened?*
- *Do people stop trusting God for no apparent reason? Is there a Bible story that illustrates this happening?*

Say: “You know how you felt when people broke your heart, let you down or just stopped trusting in you. God has felt those same things. How do you suppose God responded when those things happened in Bible times?”

Option #2: Ask them to do the same activity, only now they are pretending to be God as God writes out a contract for Christians. What would this list look like? After 4 minutes, call them back as one big group and compare these lists. **Say:** “Isn’t it interesting how the lists are similar? Have you ever thought about your relationship to God as being like a marriage relationship? It’s a metaphor, of course; there are some major differences. But this is the main metaphor that Jeremiah uses to explain to the people of Israel and Judah how they should respect and live for God.”

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (23–25 minutes)

Ask a student to read aloud Jeremiah 31:31-34. If you used Option #1, take the time now to explain that Jeremiah used the metaphor (symbolic comparison) of a marriage to describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel and Judah. Then break them up into smaller groups with the following assignments:

Group 1: Find all the “new” things that God is going to do in these verses. What does it mean that now the law is written within them and written on their hearts?

Group 2: Look up Deuteronomy 26:5-10 for a short version of story of the Exodus and the covenant they made with God. (Be ready yourself, if needed, to explain how God rescued all the slaves out of terrible oppression in Egypt; the story is found in Exodus 1-15).

Group 3: Look up Exodus 20:1-17. Search for the motivation for the 10 Commandments. (It’s found in verse 2).

Group 4: Look up Ezekiel 36:24-28. Make a list of the similarities and the differences between this passage and Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Group 5: Look up all the different places in Jeremiah that use the phrase (or a similar phrase) “I will be your God and they (you) shall be my people.” (Jer. 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:1, 31:33, 32:38). A Bible concordance is handy for this exercise.

Group 6: The word “husband” in this passage is the word “Baal” in Hebrew, the same word that is used to mean master and also the word used to describe the “Baal” gods. Brainstorm on what it might mean when God uses this word pun, husband/Baal.

Gather the smaller groups back together and have each group report on their findings. Here’s a summary of what they should have found and what you can use to help clarify the passage.

Group 1: The new things are covenant, law within them (and talk about what that might mean), new relationships (I will be their God and they shall be my people), and a new way of knowing God. One of the new things is that the law has been internalized; they know God and what God wants from inside of them, instead of just what is written on stone.

Group 2: This group should be able to briefly explain that God rescued the slaves from Egypt with a mighty hand and brought them into a wonderful land flowing with milk and honey. Because of God’s grace and out of gratitude, they made a covenant with God (10 Commandments) which they broke repeatedly.

Group 3: The motivation for following the Ten Commandments (for them and for us) is gratitude for God’s rescue. God acted in love toward the people before they deserved it. (See Romans 5:8 for the New Testament version of this concept).

Group 4: The similarities are forgiveness of sin (cleansing you from idols), a new heart (write it on their hearts), writing it on their hearts is similar to receiving a heart of flesh rather than stone, God’s Spirit will make them obey (no one will have to teach you) and you shall be my people and I will be your God. Differences are obvious.

Group 5: There are several places where this phrase is found in Jeremiah. It means a special covenant between God and the people. As the teacher, you should tell them that this is also the phrase used in wedding ceremonies in Jeremiah's culture. This covenant phrase is very similar to what two people getting married would say to each other. Ask the students what they think that might mean for God and his people.

Group 6: The Hebrew word "Baal" means husband or master and it is also used for the gods of ancient worship. Those who worshipped Baal worshipped idols and not God. So it's very interesting that God says that he will be their "Baal"/husband. God is so much better than any idol and instead of a ruthless master, God is like a loving husband. This word pun also reminded the people that when they turned to idols, it was like a wife leaving her husband for another man.

Summarize with these points:

- The people absolutely broke God's heart. Like an unfaithful wife, they ran around with other husbands, their idols. God felt just like a jilted lover, like the husband whose wife left him for another man.
- God had every right to walk away from the original covenant (agreement between God and the people). They were unfaithful, they broke their promises, and they no longer trusted in God anymore.
- But God chose to love the people with a new covenant instead (they had to have a new covenant because the old one was obviously so broken it was void).
- The difference between the old covenant and the new one is that now the law is written on their hearts, not on stone tablets. This means that now it's easier to both understand what God wants and to do what God wants from an inner motivation. This is what it means to "know God."
- There is no difference any longer between the "least of them to the greatest." All can know God in this new internalized way.

Even though the people basically asked for a "divorce" from God, God wanted them back. God wanted to give them a new beginning. God was willing to "remember their sin no more."

APPLY: (9–11 minutes)

Ask these questions:

- How does this apply to us today? (If this question is too broad, or they don't respond to this question, continue on with the following questions)
- Have you ever considered that you could break God's heart like an unfaithful spouse?
- What "idols" do we worship and put our trust in instead of God? How is that like spiritual prostitution?
- When you think about God's laws, are they like words written on stone that you have to obey or are they living words written in your heart? How does the Holy Spirit figure into all of this?
- What does it mean to really "know" God?

Now give out paper and ask them to write out marriage vows that they might make if they were “marrying” God. What promises would God make that would help insure there wouldn’t be a divorce? What promises would they make?

RESPOND: (9–12 minutes)

Option #1: Sitting in a circle, go around and have each person say one new thing they learned from this lesson. Then, go around the circle again and have each person say what he or she senses God calling him or her to (to do something differently or to be something different). Pass out copies of the hymn, “Obey my voice,” found in the *Hymnal Worship Book*, page 163, as your prayer of response.

Option #2: Have a wedding ceremony between God and your group. Ask for a student volunteer who will be the officiating minister (possibly someone who is not ready to make any commitment to God but who would like to participate). Have students who want to say vows to God find a partner who would act as the voice of God for their friend. Prepare an area—a pulpit—where these vows can be spoken. Perhaps for every student, you can stand in as the witness. If you want to be creative, you may have a “wedding cake,” or use some sort of a ring that symbolizes one’s commitment to God. However, don’t let the wedding part trivialize the seriousness of the commitments your students are making.

Close with a prayer of blessing for each student.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah from 627-585 BCE. Jeremiah lived through the reign of five southern kingdom kings as they struggled with the threat of takeover from superpower Babylon. Jeremiah critiqued them all, calling these kings to the radical notion that God wanted them to submit to the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar. This seemed like treason and hence Jeremiah faced much persecution for this and other prophecies. Other prophets told more favorable prophecies and spoke with the same authority (Thus says the LORD), so the people didn’t know who to believe. No wonder Jeremiah is known today as the weeping prophet.

But this prophetic word was different than most; it was full of hope. God promised a new covenant. The old covenant, initiated by God with the rescue of the slaves from Egypt, was broken. But instead of giving up on the people of Israel and Judah, God came up with a new plan.

The new covenant was similar to the old one in that:

- In both, God takes the initiative.
- Both are based on God’s law (the same law).
- Both have the same goal, that of an intimate relationship (I will be their God and they shall be my people.)

The new covenant was different as well:

- Now people can obey the law through internalized motivation. The law will be written upon their hearts.
- Everyone will experience God in a direct and unmediated way.

- Forgiveness is the cornerstone of the covenant. While there was also forgiveness in the old covenant, this covenant stresses it in a bigger way.

The phrase "I will be your God and you shall be my people" was a phrase borrowed from the typical Hebrew marriage ceremony. The marriage metaphor continued in the use of the word "husband" in verse 32. This word is "Baal" in Hebrew, which means husband, master and was also the word used for the pagan gods or the Baals. In one sense, then, God was saying, "Even though I was their Baal," making a play on words for idol worship. So to break covenant was similar to the terrible crime of being unfaithful in marriage. Most of the prophets, including Jeremiah, did compare idolatry to being unfaithful to a spouse. So God was like a jilted lover, forsaken by the very people he rescued from Egypt. And even in the midst of this rejection, God offered a new covenant.