

# Reformation Day

[Home](#) [Up](#)

October 31, 2001

## Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, gracious Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit upon your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in your Word, protect and comfort them in all temptations, defend them against all their enemies, and bestow on the Church your saving peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Jeremiah 31:31-34

{31} The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. {32} It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. {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. {34} No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

*31. I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah:* The 'old' covenant was the covenant which Yahweh had made with their ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt.

*32. It will not be like the covenant I made...when I took them...out of the land of Egypt:* The new covenant will be different from the covenant at Sinai. That covenant was a bilateral covenant in which the people promised to keep Yahweh's covenant stipulations, the law, and Yahweh promised to be their God and to protect them.

*I was their husband:* The word for husband is *baal*. There had been large-scale apostasy to the various Canaanite "Baals." But Yahweh was their true *baal*, husband.

*my covenant which they broke:* When the people rejected Yahweh for the Baals of Canaan, they broke the covenant that they had entered into with Yahweh. Only the Mosaic covenant can be broken by human action. The Abrahamic covenant is unilateral and is not dependent on the behavior of the people.

*33. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts:* "Yahweh's law will be written in the interior intentionality of the people.... it is the corporate will and intention of the people that is at stake.... The difficulty with the old covenant, then, is that it was written exteriorly and allowed for insincere obedience...or for outright rebellion on the part of the people. Yahweh's new action will bring about a new situation wherein the people will obey freely and gladly, and rebellion will be a thing of the past." [1]

*I will be their God, and they shall be my people:* Like the promise in Exodus 19:5-6, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation", this is the constituting formula of the covenant, and describes the relationship that will exist between Yahweh and the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

34. *they shall all know me*: The phrase means to know, to understand, to faithfully fulfill Yahweh's will. Directed toward the law it means to willingly and gladly obey it. Directed toward God's desire for peace and harmony among his people it means renouncing the drive for superiority over one's neighbors.

*I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more*: The past will be forgiven and forgotten; God and his people will be united in a new covenant relationship. It is a reversal of Yahweh's attitude of intransigent rejection articulated in Jeremiah 14:7-22.

There are a number of similarities between this passage and Jeremiah 11:1-17: "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (31:31, 11:10, 17); "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (31:33, 11:4 (in reverse order)); "the covenant that I made with their ancestors" (31:32, 11:10); "out of the land of Egypt" (31:32, 11:4); "husband (*baal*)" (32:32), "Baal" (11:17). With the exception of the first and the last these are phrases that are associated with the Sinai covenant. What is interesting is the change in Yahweh's intention from chapter 11, where he says, "I am going to bring disaster upon them that they cannot escape, though they cry out to me, I will not listen to them," and chapter 32, where he declares, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." In chapter 11 the covenant that Yahweh made with "your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" is the standard by which Israel and Judah are judged and found wanting. In chapter 31 it is a new covenant not "like the covenant I made with their ancestors." Between these two passages we move from retribution to reconciliation, from disaster to deliverance, from the covenant "I made" to the covenant "I will make."

"The passage [31:31-34] must have been shocking in Jrm's day and thereafter; after all, the passage implies that Yahweh will draw up a fresh contract without the defects of the old, implying in turn that he could improve on the old one, that he had learned something from the failure of the old (compare the theological implication of 'What did your fathers find wrong with me?' 2:5). Is the affirmation of Deutero-Isaiah, 'The word of our God will stand forever' (Isa 40:8), intended as a reassurance against these implications? On the other hand, the idea had been prepared for by Hosea's word about a fresh covenant to be given by Yahweh (Hos 2:20), and it is likewise true that the crisis of the fall of Jerusalem and exile was so severe that the word 'new' figures largely in the hopeful words of the prophets of the exile ('Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!' Ezek 18:31; compare Ezek 11:19; Ezek 36:26; 'behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare,' Isa 42:9)." [2]

## **Psalm 46**

{1} God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. {2} Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; {3} though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah {4} There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. {5} God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. {6} The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. {7} The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah {8} Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. {9} He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. {10} "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." {11} The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Psalm 46 is the basis for Martin Luther's hymn *Ein Feste Burg*, "A Mighty Fortress," written around 1528. "He did not write it to express his own feelings, but to interpret and apply the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm to the church of his own time and its struggles." [3]

The Psalm describes the presence and constancy of God in the midst of danger and uncertainty. The refrain in verses 7 and 11 (and probably also in verse 3) [4] points to the

fact "that the helpful presence of Yahweh forms that fortress which is untouchable and invincible even in the great catastrophes of nature and history.... Here the community will be able to learn that not 'the church' is the indestructible fortress on earth but only the church in which God himself is present. And through this presence of God and rule of God a new understanding of life in the world of nations and of wars will be opened up." [5]

### **Romans 3:19-28**

{19} Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. {20} For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. {21} But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, {22} the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, {23} since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; {24} they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, {25} whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; {26} it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. {27} Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. {28} For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

19-20: The law applies to those "under the law," that is, the Jews, and to "the whole world." The law enables us to know what sin is, but no one will be justified in God's sight by obedience to the law. "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (verse 23).

19. *Now we know*: We may understand this as a subtle reference to the serpent's assertion that the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, would make one wise, "knowing" good and evil. All we learned by disobedience is that we are under the law and accountable to God.

21. *the righteousness of God*: "It is God's bounteous and powerful uprightness whereby he acquits his sinful people in a just judgment." [6]

*the law and the prophets*: This is the New Testament phrase for what we call the Old Testament; it is a general reference to the record of Yahweh's words and deeds with his people.

24. *they are now justified by his grace as a gift*: They are "made 'upright' gratuitously through God's powerful declaration of acquittal. Human beings thus achieve the status of uprightness before God's tribunal.... Now human beings find that this status is not achieved by something within their own power or measured by their own merits. It comes to humanity through an unmerited dispensation of God himself.... The sinful human being is not only 'declared upright,' but is 'made upright' (as in 5:19), for the sinner's condition has changed." [7]

28. *apart from works prescribed by the law*: Though justification comes apart from the law, it does not follow that we are excused from the performance of the law. Our motivation has changed. We do not keep the law to achieve righteousness. We keep the law because God had declared us righteous and the righteous do keep the law.

### **John 8:31-36**

{31} Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; {32} and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." {33} They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" {34} Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. {35} The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. {36} So if the Son makes you free, you will be free

indeed.

31. *If you continue in my word*: Jesus proclaims freedom based on continuing in his word. In keeping with the other lessons for the day, Jesus' word must be understood on one hand as a word written in the heart, and on the other, as the word of the atonement of Christ received by faith.

33. *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone*: The people Jesus is speaking to call on their Abrahamic descent to assert their freedom.

34-35: Jesus identifies the people, not with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but with the descendants Abraham tried to gain because he was impatient with God; namely, Eliezer (Genesis 15:2), Ishmael, the son of the slave girl Hagar (Genesis 16:3-11), and, perhaps, the sons of his concubine, Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4). They are not the true descendants of Abraham; they are slavish persons and they have no place in the household of God. The allusions are not easy to work with in a social environment which seeks to avoid giving offense to those of different ethnic or religious background from ourselves. We will need to find other examples or metaphors to express the issue Jesus is speaking about, that is, those who rely of themselves or their own honor to secure a place in God's kingdom will discover, to their horror, that they have no place in the kingdom. Only those who have been made free by the Son will enter the kingdom.

36. *if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*: The Son of the father can make slave-children free by sharing his heritage with them.

## Reflection

The first lesson needs to be understood within its context in Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 31:23-30 Yahweh promises to reverse the fortunes of the exiles and restore them to their land. Further, "In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge" (verses 29-30). Jeremiah 31:31-34 continues by declaring Yahweh's intention of making a *new* covenant with Israel and Judah, one not based on an external law, but on Yahweh's law written in their hearts, that is, Yahweh's law as an integral part of the peoples' nature. No one will teach or be taught to know Yahweh, because everyone will know him.

The new covenant announced in Jeremiah 31:31 finds fulfillment in Paul's assertion in the second lesson that "now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." As the new covenant is based on Yahweh's law written in the heart, not on tables of stone, so Paul sees justification and righteousness grounded in the atonement of Jesus Christ received in faith. In both God's people are received, not because they have obeyed an external law, but because of the change of nature accomplished by the sovereign act of God.

In the Gospel Jesus proclaims freedom based on continuing in his word. In keeping with the other lessons for the day, Jesus' word must be understood on one hand as a word written in the heart, and on the other, as the word of the atonement of Christ received by faith. There is no freedom for those who commit sin. But if the Son declares a slave to be free, then the slave is truly free.

We pray for those things we cannot acquire by our own energy and effort, or for those things which it would be dangerous to our spiritual health to acquire for ourselves, or to acknowledge our dependence on God's grace to provide for our needs. Steadfastness in the Word, comfort in temptation, defense against enemies and peace are gifts from an almighty God through Christ. They are not ours by right, but by grace. They are not accompanied by bragging rights over other Christians but are rather a

confession of our weakness.

The celebration of the Festival of the Reformation is not an ecclesiastical Homecoming. Nor should it be an opportunity to celebrate the glories of our ecclesiastical heritage and tradition. Our boasting has been excluded by the law of faith. The lessons remind us that our freedom, our salvation, our identity does not find its source in the things of this world, not even in the law and covenant once given by God, but rather in the sacrifice of Christ and the gift of faith. It is the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, not the old covenant of law that is the basis for our relationship with God in Christ. The church militant must always be in the process of reformation for it is always, in itself, in need of forgiveness, faith and new life.

### **Hymns [8]**

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

228/9 --E--A Mighty Fortress

742s --D--Tree of Life

750s--D--O Holy Spirit, Living

510 --I--O God of Youth

704s --P--Psalm 46: God

367 --II--Christ Is Made (819s)

736v --G--By Gracious

765v --G--Jesu, Jesu (803s)

24--G--Come, O Precious(v. 1)

747v/819s,755v,756v/748s,750v

### **Prayers of the People [9]**

P or A: Depending on grace, let us place before the Triune God our needs and those of all people saying, "Hear us, O God," and responding, "Continue your task of reformation."

A: O God of Jacob, our stronghold, your people are gathered here hoping in your mercy. We give you thanks for the law of faith and that we come to you in Jesus Christ. Reform your people continually, teaching us more about what it means to be justified by God's grace as a gift. Hear us, O God. Continue your task of reformation.

A: We pray for the communion of churches gathered in the Lutheran World Federation. We are a part of this communion and ask that you guide its work within the community of Christ. Bless our General Secretary, the Rev. Ishmael Nook and Pastor Arthur Lititz, the North American Regional Expression Officer of LWF in their task of informing and motivating our common tasks. Hear us, O God. Continue your task of reformation.

A: Hasten the day when not only the house of Israel may have your law within them, written on their hearts, but all peoples. When you are known by all, forgive our iniquity and do not remember our sin. Hear us, O God. Continue your task of reformation.

A: We pray for war to cease, especially those fueled by religious and ethnic divisions. Smash the weaponry of those who plot violence and take away the terror of their victims. Hear us, O God. Continue your task of reformation.

A: We pray for the sick and for those who care for them. Give nurses and doctors, health care workers, administrators, and politicians vision and compassion as they seek to meet the needs of others. We pray for those now in particular need of health and healing: \_\_\_\_\_. Hear us, O God. Continue your task of reformation.

P: We give you thanks for the work of reformers in church and society. We are no longer slaves, but free because of their courage to proclaim this word. We commend all ongoing reform and the needs of your people into your strong and eternal arms, through Jesus Christ, our righteousness and our salvation. Amen

## Notes

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[1] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 198.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 197.

[3] George MacDonald, "The Hymns," *Luther's Works* (edited by Ulrich S. Leupold). Vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965. P. 283.

[4] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 459.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 464.

[6] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 344.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 347.

[8] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rclc0001.txt>

[9] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter\\_c.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_c.txt)