

Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 31

Content & Intent

Broader Unit: Jeremiah 31 sits within the “Book of Consolation” (Jeremiah 30–33), a sustained prophetic unit that interrupts the prevailing tone of judgment running through chapters 1–29. Within this broader unit, chapters 30–31 form the poetic and theological heart — the announcement of restoration and covenant renewal. Chapter 30 opens the promise (Jacob’s trouble will end; the LORD will save); chapter 31 develops and climaxes it, arriving at the New Covenant oracle that is the theological summit not only of this unit but of the entire book. Chapters 32–33 then ground the promise in concrete, historical sign-acts (Jeremiah’s land purchase) and expanded covenant declarations. Chapter 31 is not a free-floating piece — it is the keystone of the entire consolation section — but it also makes a sufficiently complete claim on its own to be analyzed as its primary unit.

This Text — Content: Jeremiah 31 opens with a reaffirmation of covenant relationship (“I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” v.1) and unfolds through a series of prophetic oracles and poems. Verses 2–6 address the northern tribes (Ephraim/Israel) with images of restored pilgrimage and harvest. Verses 7–14 expand the picture to a worldwide ingathering — scattered Israel brought home from the ends of the earth, mourning turned to dancing, scarcity turned to abundance. Verses 15–22 pivot through Rachel’s weeping (v.15) to a word of comfort for Ephraim (vv.18–20) and a summons to the wandering daughter of Israel to return (vv.21–22). Verses 23–30 address Judah, promising rebuilt cities, restored agriculture, and a new principle of individual accountability (“everyone shall die for his own iniquity,” v.30) that will replace the old proverb of sour grapes. Then, at verses 31–34, the chapter reaches its irreducible center: the New Covenant oracle — distinct from the Sinai covenant, written on the heart rather than stone, grounded in forgiveness rather than ongoing performance, and secured by the LORD’s own sovereign declaration. The chapter closes (vv.35–40) with a double “Thus says the LORD” — the cosmic order of creation (sun, moon, stars) standing as surety for the permanence of Israel’s future, and a vision of rebuilt, permanently consecrated Jerusalem.

This Text — Intent: God is seeking to accomplish a radical reorientation of hope in the reader. The audience is exilic or pre-exilic Israel — a people for whom covenant failure has produced not merely political catastrophe but theological despair. The implicit question the chapter answers is: *Can there be a future with God when the old arrangement has broken down so completely?* God’s intent is not simply to comfort (“things will get better”) but to restructure the entire basis of the relationship — to announce that the problem of the broken covenant will not be patched but replaced; that the deficiency was not in the people’s circumstances but in the nature of the arrangement itself; and that what is coming is a covenant that cannot be broken because it will be written where no external law can be resisted — on the heart itself, backed by a complete and final forgiveness. God

is seeking to move the reader from despair grounded in covenant failure to a hope grounded in a new covenant that God himself will sustain.

Subject Sentence: The LORD announces a New Covenant — written on hearts, secured by full forgiveness, and guaranteed by His own faithfulness.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people out of despair rooted in their own covenant failure and into a new, indestructible hope — because He is not patching the old arrangement but replacing it with a covenant He Himself will maintain, backed by the complete forgiveness of every sin.

Interpretive Evaluation

The scope of “Israel and Judah” (vv.31, 33): A significant interpretive divergence concerns whether the New Covenant oracle is addressed exclusively to ethnic Israel and Judah (the dispensational reading) or whether it encompasses all the covenant people of God — including Gentile believers grafted in through Christ (the Reformed reading). Dispensational interpreters, particularly in the classic Scofield-Ryrie tradition, argue that the covenant is explicitly made “with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” and that its direct fulfillment remains future and national. The New Testament application (Hebrews 8, Luke 22) is, on this reading, a partial or typological anticipation rather than the fulfillment itself.

The Reformed reading — corroborated by the explicit citation in Hebrews 8:8–12 and the institution of the Lord’s Supper in Luke 22:20 — insists that the New Covenant has been inaugurated in Christ’s blood and that its provisions (indwelling Spirit, forgiveness, knowing the LORD) are presently experienced by all who are in Christ. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 identifies himself and his colleagues as “ministers of a new covenant,” using Jeremiah’s language without restriction to ethnic Israel. Galatians 3:29 grounds Gentile inclusion in Abrahamic covenant inheritance, of which the New Covenant is the climactic expression. The Reformed verdict: the New Covenant is fulfilled in Christ and experienced now by all who belong to Him, including Gentiles — while not denying that the promises carry Israel-shaped contours that will be fully displayed eschatologically (Romans 11:25–27). The dispensational reading isolates the text from its own New Testament hermeneutical key.

“I will be their God, and they shall be my people” — relational versus legal framework: Wesleyan/Arminian interpreters sometimes read the New Covenant’s emphasis on inward transformation (“I will put my law within them,” v.33) as grounding the possibility of entire sanctification — a complete inward renewal that eliminates the sinful nature. This reading presses the contrast with the old covenant in a direction the text does not fully support.

The contrast Jeremiah draws is between externally imposed law (which Israel could — and did — break) and internally inscribed law (which will characterize the covenant community under the New arrangement). The text does not promise the eradication of the fallen nature in this age; it promises a community in which the knowledge of God and conformity to His will is no longer dependent solely on external instruction, because the Spirit writes the law inwardly. The Reformed reading acknowledges genuine inward transformation (definitive sanctification) and ongoing progressive sanctification without claiming the complete eradication of indwelling sin in this age — a claim the broader biblical witness does not support.

Rachel’s weeping (v.15) — Matthew 2:18: Matthew’s citation of verse 15 in connection with Herod’s slaughter of the infants raises the question of whether this is typological use, allegorical use, or straightforward prophecy. The Reformed hermeneutic best accounts for Matthew’s use as *typological-fulfillment*: Rachel’s weeping for her exiled children finds its deepest and darkest instantiation in the massacre accompanying the Messiah’s birth — and the comfort that follows (vv.16–17) anticipates the resurrection-shaped hope that the Messiah’s survival and ultimate victory will bring. This is not allegory; it is the pattern of exile-and-return, mourning-and-comfort, reaching its climax in Christ.

“I will forgive their iniquity” (v.34) — the ground of the New Covenant: Roman Catholic interpretation tends to read New Covenant forgiveness as mediated sacramentally and progressively, with the covenant community’s ongoing participation in the sacramental system as the mechanism of that forgiveness. The Reformed reading insists that Jeremiah 31:34 announces a *completed and decisive* forgiveness — “I will remember their sin no more” is the language of judicial declaration, not ongoing process. Hebrews 10:14–18 explicitly cites this verse as accomplished in Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, concluding: “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.” The text’s logic is eschatological and final, not liturgically incremental.

The “sour grapes” principle (v.29–30): The shift to individual accountability in verses 29–30 is sometimes read as a proto-liberal affirmation of individual autonomy against corporate theology. This misreads both the context and the contrast. Jeremiah is not dismantling corporate solidarity — the entire chapter is addressed to a covenant people. He is addressing a specific theological evasion: the tendency of a guilty generation to blame its suffering entirely on its ancestors (“the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”). The New Covenant age will be marked by clearer moral seriousness — each person’s standing before God will not be explained away by generational scapegoating. This prepares for the New Covenant’s internal transformation: when the law is written on the heart, individual moral accountability is both heightened and personally appropriated.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 30:6** — “The LORD your God will circumcise your heart...” — Moses anticipates the New Covenant transformation before Israel even enters the land; the New Covenant fulfills what Deuteronomy promised about inward renewal.
- **Ezekiel 36:25–27** — “I will give you a new heart and a new spirit... I will put my Spirit within you” — the closest Old Testament parallel to Jeremiah 31:33; confirms the New Covenant as Spirit-mediated inner transformation, not mere external reform.
- **Hebrews 8:6–13** — Quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34 in full and declares it fulfilled in Christ’s high-priestly ministry; the single longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament, functioning as the hermeneutical key to this chapter’s New Covenant oracle.
- **Luke 22:20** — “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” — Jesus explicitly inaugurates Jeremiah’s New Covenant at the Last Supper; the blood of the covenant (Exodus 24) is now Christ’s own blood, the basis of the forgiveness announced in verse 34.
- **2 Corinthians 3:3–6** — Paul identifies the New Covenant community as those on whose hearts (“tablets of human hearts”) the Spirit writes; ministers of the New Covenant are those who mediate the Spirit’s inscribing work — directly translating Jeremiah 31’s imagery into present ecclesial reality.

Aim: To demonstrate that the New Covenant announced in Jeremiah 31 is not Israel’s future hope alone but the present foundation of every believer’s standing before God — a covenant that cannot fail because God Himself maintains it, grounded in a forgiveness so complete that He remembers the sin no more.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Covenant declaration: “I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people”	Programmatic statement for the entire chapter; echoes Sinai covenant formula
2–3	The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; the LORD loved Israel with everlasting love	“Everlasting love” (’ahavat ’olam) — covenant love declared as permanent; foundational affirmation
4–6	Virgin Israel will be rebuilt; she will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; watchmen will call people to	Northern kingdom (Israel/Ephraim) addressed first; restoration of worship and agriculture

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Zion	
7–9	Call to sing; the LORD will gather the scattered remnant from the ends of the earth — blind, lame, mothers with child — weeping and praying, led by streams of water	“Firstborn” (v.9) applied to Ephraim; the weak and marginalized are specifically included in the ingathering
10–14	Proclamation to the nations: the LORD who scattered will gather; Israel redeemed and ransomed; mourning turned to joy; priests and people alike satisfied with abundance	“Ransom” and “redeem” — two distinct Hebrew terms (padah and ga’al); together they emphasize the costliness and completeness of God’s saving act
15	Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be comforted because they are no more	Voice of inconsolable grief; Rachel as mother of Joseph/Ephraim; cited in Matthew 2:18
16–17	Do not weep — your work will be rewarded; they will return from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future	Comfort directly answers grief; the exile is not permanent
18–20	Ephraim confesses: “You disciplined me, and I was disciplined... bring me back, let me come back.” The LORD: “Is Ephraim my dear son?... My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him.”	Most intimate expression of divine pathos in the chapter; the LORD’s “heart” (me’eh — literally “bowels/inward parts”) yearns — language of parental love overwhelming grief
21–22	Summons to the “virgin Israel” to return; set up road markers; the LORD is creating a new thing: a woman encircles a man (neqevah tesovev gaver)	Most obscure verse in the chapter; “new thing” signals the New Covenant movement; multiple interpretations of the woman/man image (see Pitfalls)
23–26	In restored Judah, the blessing formula will return;	Transition from north (Israel) to south (Judah); specificity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	farmers and flocks will dwell together; the LORD will refresh the weary soul	of place names (Jerusalem, Judah, hill country)
27–28	The LORD will sow the house of Israel and Judah with people and animals; as He watched over to pluck up and break down, He will watch over to build and plant	Reversal of the negative commission of Jeremiah 1:10; the same sovereign intentionality that judged will now restore
29–30	The proverb of sour grapes (children bearing parents' punishment) will no longer be used; each will die for his own iniquity	Individual moral accountability clarified; addressed to a generation tempted to blame exile entirely on ancestors
31–34	The New Covenant Oracle: A new covenant distinct from the Sinai covenant, written on hearts not stone, all knowing the LORD personally, all forgiven completely — “I will remember their sin no more”	Theological summit of the chapter and the Book of Consolation; the longest Old Testament passage quoted in the NT (Hebrews 8)
35–36	The LORD who orders sun, moon, and stars declares: only if this fixed order departs will Israel cease to be a nation before Him	Creation order as the surety of covenant permanence; the LORD's faithfulness is as reliable as the cosmos He sustains
37	Only if the heavens can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out will the LORD reject all Israel's offspring	Conditions of impossibility ground the unconditional nature of the promise
38–40	Jerusalem will be rebuilt for the LORD — named towers, gates, corners, and the Valley of the Son of Hinnom — “It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore forever”	Concrete geographical specificity; the sacred character of the rebuilt city is permanent

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Restored People: Covenant Relationship Declared and Northern Israel Recalled
2	7–14	The Worldwide Ingathering: Scattered, Weak, and Mourning Israel Brought Home with Joy
3	15–22	Rachel’s Grief and Ephraim’s Return: Inconsolable Weeping Answered by Divine Yearning
4	23–30	Judah Restored and Individual Accountability Clarified: The Proverb of Sour Grapes Retired
5	31–34	The New Covenant Oracle: Written on Hearts, Grounded in Complete Forgiveness
6	35–40	Creation-Guaranteed Permanence and the Holy City Rebuilt Forever

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Stop measuring your standing before God by your performance of the old arrangement. The New Covenant is not an improved version of the Sinai covenant — it operates on an entirely different basis. The Sinai covenant demanded obedience as the condition of blessing; Israel's failure demonstrated that the problem was not insufficient effort but a heart incapable of sustained obedience. The New Covenant solves the problem at the root: the law is written on the heart by the Spirit, not imposed from outside. If you are measuring your current standing before God primarily by your consistency in devotion, your success in avoiding sin, or your spiritual performance over the past week, you are living functionally under the old covenant. The New Covenant's promise is not "keep trying harder"; it is "the LORD has already secured what the old arrangement required and could never deliver."

2. (Affections/Worship) — Let the image of God's yearning for Ephraim reshape how you understand His posture toward you in your failure. Verses 18–20 contain one of the most extraordinarily tender passages in all of Scripture. Ephraim has been disciplined, has gone astray, has been like an untrained calf — and God's response is not cold justice but parental anguish. "My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him." The Hebrew word for "heart" here is *me'eh* — the gut, the inward parts, the place where emotion is physically felt. This is God's bowels-deep yearning for a prodigal people. If you have come to view God primarily as the administrator of your moral record — watching, evaluating, disappointed — this text demands a different picture. He is not waiting to see if you will finally perform well enough. He is the father whose heart is already turning toward you before you finish your returning speech.

3. (Mind/Belief) — Distinguish between the New Covenant's present reality and its eschatological completeness, and live in both truths simultaneously. The New Covenant was inaugurated at the cross and is now in force. The forgiveness of verse 34 is accomplished — "I will remember their sin no more" — not future. The Spirit's inscribing work on hearts (v.33) is already underway in every believer. And yet the full and final display of what the New Covenant promises — the complete ingathering of all God's people, the wholly renewed Jerusalem, the unbroken knowledge of the LORD across the whole community — awaits the consummation. Living faithfully in the New Covenant means inhabiting both the "already" (you are forgiven, you are indwelt, you are God's people now) and the "not yet" (this world is not yet what the chapter pictures, and the ache of Rachel's weeping is still real). Collapsing either pole — claiming too much now or deferring everything to the future — distorts the New Covenant's own shape.

4. (Will/Behavior) — Stop using inherited patterns of sin as the explanation that exempts you from repentance. The proverb of the sour grapes (vv.29–30) addressed a real theological evasion: using the sins of a previous generation to explain why the present generation is suffering, without taking personal responsibility. The New Covenant era brings heightened individual accountability. This passage does not deny that family systems, generational patterns, cultural sins, and inherited wounds are real — it denies

that they are sufficient explanation for your own ongoing choices. You were shaped by what came before you; you are not determined by it. Under the New Covenant, the Spirit enables genuine personal response to the God who writes His law on your heart. Identify specifically where you have used family history, circumstance, or inherited dysfunction as a reason not to repent — and repent of that too.

5. (Affections/Worship) — Let the permanence of the New Covenant be the ground of your confidence, not the volatility of your spiritual state. The chapter closes with creation-order guarantees (vv.35–37): only if the sun fails to give light will the LORD reject His people. The permanence of the covenant does not rest on your consistency — it rests on the same faithfulness by which God upholds the cosmos. On the days when your faith feels thin, your devotion scattered, your sense of God’s presence remote — the New Covenant has not shifted. The LORD’s commitment to His people is structurally equivalent to His commitment to the sun and stars. Worship is therefore not the expression of spiritual feeling on a good day; it is the response to a covenant commitment as fixed as the created order. Let this reorder where you anchor your confidence.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Jeremiah 31 is the supreme Old Testament witness to God’s intention to solve the problem of human covenant failure not by demanding better human performance but by transforming the human heart and securing the covenant from His own side. The New Covenant oracle (vv.31–34) reveals that God’s response to Israel’s centuries-long failure under Sinai is not anger alone but sovereign creativity: He will make a new arrangement in which the deficiency — the human heart’s inability to keep the law — is addressed by the law being written internally. This passage teaches that God’s covenant purposes are not thwarted by human unfaithfulness; they are ultimately fulfilled by divine initiative that goes beneath external obligation to the root of the problem. The declaration “I will remember their sin no more” is not divine amnesia but a judicial act — the complete cancellation of the record that stood against the covenant people — and it reveals that the ground of any restored relationship with God is not improved human behavior but completed divine forgiveness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Jeremiah 31 is one of the most important texts for the Reformed understanding of grace as monergistic and of the covenant of grace as ultimately indestructible. The New Covenant oracle demonstrates with Old Testament clarity that the covenant of grace does not merely offer what human beings may or may not appropriate — God accomplishes the very conditions He demands. He requires a heart that knows Him and keeps His law; He also writes that law on the heart. He requires that sin be dealt with completely; He also provides the forgiveness that does so. This is the

grammar of grace: God both commands and enables, both demands and supplies. Reformed theology's insistence that regeneration precedes and produces faith finds its prophetic anticipation here — the inner writing of the law is what makes genuine covenant faithfulness possible, not the other way around. The New Covenant's fulfillment in Christ (Hebrews 8, Luke 22) demonstrates that what Jeremiah announced was always pointing to a work only Christ could accomplish: the once-for-all sacrifice that makes possible the final and complete declaration, "I will remember their sin no more."

Main Takeaway

Your standing before God does not rest on your ability to maintain the covenant — it rests on a covenant God has maintained for you, written into you by His own Spirit, backed by a forgiveness so complete that He has declared the record gone. You are not living under an arrangement that your sin can finally exhaust. The New Covenant cannot break because God is the one holding it together. Stop trying to earn what has already been given, and stop despairing as though your failure is the final word — because God's "I will remember their sin no more" is.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the New Covenant oracle (vv.31–34) as the whole chapter and ignoring the surrounding material.** The New Covenant oracle is the theological summit, but it arrives after six chapters' worth of buildup — the images of Rachel weeping, Ephraim's return, the yearning heart of God, the sour grapes proverb. Preaching only vv.31–34 strips the New Covenant of its pastoral and emotional weight. The oracle's force depends on the entire movement of the chapter establishing the depth of Israel's failure, the reality of their grief, and the tenderness of God's response before the covenant announcement lands.
- **Reducing the chapter to a promise of future national restoration for ethnic Israel, with no present application for the church.** This is the dispensational pitfall — seeing the New Covenant as future and Israel-exclusive and thereby missing Hebrews 8's explicit statement that the New Covenant has been inaugurated and is "better" than the old. The congregation in the pew lives under the New Covenant already. The temptation to make the entire chapter about Israel's future robs the text of its present, pastoral force.
- **Moralizing vv.29–30 into a therapeutic "take personal responsibility" message divorced from the New Covenant context.** The shift to individual accountability in vv.29–30 is genuine, but it functions within the New Covenant argument: the reason each person will bear his own iniquity is that the New Covenant brings a clarity and internalization of God's law that makes moral accountability personally real. It is

not a self-help principle about owning your choices — it is preparation for the Spirit's inscribing work.

- **Mishandling the “woman encircles a man” image of verse 22.** This is genuinely one of the most obscure verses in the entire book. Proposed readings include: the reversal of gender roles as a sign of the new age; the virgin Israel (previously helpless) now encompassing and protecting; even a messianic reading of the woman bearing the Messiah. Preachers should acknowledge the obscurity honestly, lean on the “new thing” framing that surrounds it, and resist the temptation to build a major interpretive or theological claim on a verse the best scholars cannot fully resolve.
- **Preaching divine yearning (vv. 18–20) as primarily emotional comfort without its theological weight.** The image of God's heart yearning for Ephraim is pastorally rich — but its force is that this yearning is *covenant-shaped* love, not generic divine sentimentality. God's “yearning” here is the response of a faithful covenant party whose prodigal covenant partner is returning. Preaching it as merely “God loves you and misses you” strips it of its covenant and redemptive-historical context and risks reducing it to therapeutic warmism.
- **Claiming that the New Covenant promise of “they shall all know me” (v.34) eliminates the need for Christian education, discipleship, or preaching.** Some read “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” as making teaching redundant in the New Covenant era. The very verse that says this begins with “no longer shall each one teach his neighbor” — which does not abolish teaching but relativizes dependence on external transmission as the *sole* basis of covenant knowledge. The Spirit's inscribing work makes the knowledge of God genuinely personal and not merely handed down; it does not make the preached word or the teaching ministry of the church obsolete. Paul's entire apostolic ministry is precisely “New Covenant ministry” (2 Corinthians 3:6) — the two are not in tension.