

## **The All-Encompassing Embrace**

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Rev. Daein Park

Now we're racing towards the end of Lent. Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent, and next week is the final Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday. What has your meditation and reflection on the Lord been this Lent? In our church, we've been focusing our Lenten season on studying and reflecting on Jesus' final words on the cross. Through this process, we're exploring the human side of Jesus: his physical pain, his love for his family, and the slow fading of his life.

It's never easy to confront the suffering and vulnerability of our beloved Jesus, or to replay the scenes in our minds. Some of us might even avoid visually depicted crucifixions, such as in movies, because it's deeply painful to witness. The immense suffering Jesus endured is undeniably difficult to contemplate. After all, it's never pleasant to think of someone we love in such pain.

However, there's a reason we focus more on Jesus' final acts during Lent. They reveal the incredible wisdom and power of God. God demonstrates divine strength through our very human weakness, and reveals the riches of God's grace in the face of our frailty.

Today we stand before the Word of God once again, which calls us to reflect upon the all-encompassing embrace of our loving God. As we continue our journey towards Easter, a season of reflection and renewal, and also observe Disability Awareness Sunday, we delve into the scriptures from Jeremiah and Hebrews to explore how God's love transcends all boundaries and includes everyone, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

To understand Jeremiah 31:31-34, it's helpful to examine God's special covenant with Israel. While not the only nation God interacted with, Israel was chosen for a unique relationship. However, in verse 31, God says, "I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." Why does God mention a new covenant here? Because the covenant established in the past has sadly been broken. As God speaks of the new covenant, the Lord reminds them

of the past covenant, which had been established when the Lord took Israel's ancestors by divine hand and led them out of the land of Egypt. But the Israelites failed to keep that promise—they failed to live as God's people.

God emphasizes the broken covenant using the metaphor of a broken marriage. God refers to the Divine Self as Israel's "husband." So, their disobedience was like "spiritual adultery." In the context of the time, abandoning one's husband was a serious offense. This imagery highlights the severity of Israel's actions. Whatever punishment God meted out to the Israelites, they had no grounds on which to stand; they were now standing before God as the least of these.

Nevertheless, God offers to make a new covenant with them. This clearly shows that our Lord has infinite love and grace for God's people. This new covenant was not a repetition of the Mosaic Law; This new covenant extends God's forgiveness and salvation beyond just bloodline Israel, a concept they may have misunderstood. God proclaims a larger, universal vision of salvation for humanity. The Lord declares, "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" (v. 34a).

These words convey a profound truth: God's covenant is not limited by human frailty or imperfection. It is a covenant of grace, written not on tablets of stone but on the hearts of all people. It embraces everyone, from the least to the greatest, regardless of their nationality, race, gender, health, wealth, abilities, or disabilities. There is no discrimination or separation in God's salvation.

To express divine perfect, boundless love, God sent us the Son, Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus atoned for the sins of all humankind, shedding his precious blood to save us. Through him, God's promise, "for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more" (v. 34b), was fulfilled. Through the New Covenant, God is declaring his ultimate love for all people.

What a comforting statement. My wife and I pray with Gaon every day and tell him about the gift of Jesus and the love of God. We don't know how much this young boy with a disability will understand, but I do believe that God's plan of salvation is far beyond human understanding or logic. And that is the joyful news of God's new covenant and the love and grace of our Lord in it that today's passage brings us.

The vastness of God's plan of salvation is also evident in today's New Testament lesson from Hebrews. This passage focuses on Jesus Christ, our High Priest, the one who intercedes on our behalf with God. Even more interesting, within these verses, there's a significant detail – a reference to Melchizedek, a mysterious figure who appears earlier in the book of Genesis.

The key detail here is that Melchizedek wasn't a priest by inheritance, but by God's direct appointment. Notably, he wasn't even descended from Abraham, yet he blessed Abraham as a priest. This emphasizes God's selection based on faith and dedication, rather than background or circumstances such as lineage. This sets the stage for Jesus, who came not from a traditional priestly line but directly from God's Divine Self.

Moreover, Jesus Christ, our High Priest, deeply empathizes with our human condition, including our weaknesses, struggles, and limitations. He understands what it means to endure pain, experience trials, and cry out to God for help. The more we contemplate Jesus' suffering, the more we realize that he had opportunities to avoid or at least lessen his suffering on the cross, but he chose to endure it for our sake.

Why? Perhaps Jesus wanted to fully experience our frailty, to know the depths of human limitation, to understand the groans and cries of our suffering. Jesus, the Son of God, a man of immense power who performed amazing signs and wonders, was reduced to a state of profound human limitation on the cross. His body, once vibrant, was pierced and broken. Even when he was resurrected, he still bore the stigmata that must have imposed daily limitations. The Son of God, who had been bestowed with all the power in the world by God, became a person with a disability. The Lord who said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40), became like the least of these.

And because of his perfect obedience and sacrificial love, he became the source of eternal salvation for all people, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Jesus didn't just die for the healthy and strong; he died for the sick, the weak, and the ostracized. He died for those who felt furthest from God's grace.

Through his perfect obedience, even in the face of immense suffering, Jesus fulfilled the new covenant. He became the bridge between humanity and God. In doing so, he paved the way for all people to experience God's forgiveness and salvation. This is the true meaning of inclusion in the eyes of God. No matter the challenges we face in this life, God's unwavering love for us remains constant. Seek the Lord from where you are and as you are.

As we approach Easter, let us remember the profound message embedded in these scriptures. God's love is not limited by our shortcomings or imperfections. Through the new covenant established by Jesus' sacrifice, God embraces all of us – regardless of our abilities or disabilities.

We are called to reflect this all-encompassing embrace in our own lives. Consider the people around you – those who may feel ostracized or marginalized. Perhaps it's someone with a disability, someone struggling with their faith, or someone simply going through a tough time. How can you extend God's love to them this week? Maybe it's a kind word, a listening ear, or a helping hand. Remember, Jesus himself became one of the least of these. Let's follow his example and show God's love to everyone we encounter.

This Lenten season, as we contemplate Jesus' suffering and reflect on the vastness of God's plan, let us also celebrate the hope offered by the new covenant. Through Jesus' sacrifice, forgiveness is available to all. No sin is too great, no brokenness is beyond repair. God's love truly knows no bounds.

As we move towards Easter, let us carry this message of inclusion and unconditional love with us. Let us embrace one another, just as God embraces us all. Amen.