

Branded by God: Sunday, October 29 (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

It's not like people in Jeremiah's day were asking God for a new covenant.

by [Stacey E. Simpson](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

"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." And so God declares he is writing himself into us, according to Jeremiah. In the evangelical tradition in which I grew up, we spoke of "letting Jesus into our hearts." He stood there patiently and knocked, waiting as long as it took, and when we were ready, we swung the door open and invited him in.

The God of Jeremiah will have none of that. This God has grown weary of people's inability to keep his law. No more will the covenant be written in stone, a covenant which was external and could be broken. Instead, God will write the covenant on his people's heart. In the Hebrew God does not refer to "hearts" but says "I will write it on their *heart*." The heart of the entire people will bear the covenant. This will be no privatized reformation of individual lives.

Not that people were asking for this new covenant. No one in Jeremiah's day was speaking sweetly of "letting God into" his heart. There is no hint of an invitation on the part of the people. As Walter Brueggemann points out, this covenant is given by God without reason or explanation. God wants the relationship with the people and resolves to have it. So God declares that he will write himself into the people.

Notice that although many of the surrounding passages are written as poetry, this text is written as plain prose. It is expressed not in high-flown language but as a down-to-earth matter-of-fact promise. It is going to happen—"The days are surely coming, says the Lord"—whether the people invite it or not. And though the image of God writing "my people" on the heart of the people is a compelling one, it also has a frightening aspect to it.

Think of a tattoo. Better yet, think of getting branded. Now that tattoos have gone mainstream, those who stay ahead of trends are getting branded. I met a guy who

did this. He said it “hurt like hell” for a very long time. Now it’s a scar and he is “branded for life.”

Tattoos and brands are more or less permanent. To get rid of a tattoo involves painful surgery that leaves a scar. A brand is itself a scar and can only be removed through costly laser surgery. Literature on tattoos and brands warns potential customers to be sure that they want the mark they are getting and to consider it permanent.

Whatever symbol a person chooses says something about him or her. That’s why tattoos and brands are chosen in the first place—as a mark of identity. An Olympian sports a set of Olympic rings. Lovers put each other’s names on their bodies. The occasional “on-fire” Christian gets an ichthus or a cross.

Pain, indelibility, identity. These are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn’t involve pain, it wouldn’t be indelible: marks that don’t hurt are the ones that wash off. If it were not indelible, what it revealed about a person’s identity wouldn’t be so critical. Tattoo your arm with “Roseanne” in your 20s, and you better still be married to her 30 years later.

Pain, indelibility and identity are also the hallmarks of God writing the covenant on the heart of the people. This is chiefly a consoling passage, but the pain of God inscribing himself into souls must not be romanticized. God is invading the heart. Yes, this will make them God’s people, but it will also mean a death of the self, and a radical transfer of allegiance from all systems and claims. This is not the people overcoming their sinful natures; this is God overcoming the people.

This is as permanent as any brand. Whereas laws written in stone can be broken and put aside, God’s covenant in hearts is more enduring. God’s hold on us cannot be erased without cutting out a part of ourselves.

The covenant brands us as “God’s people.” It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. We will live God’s law not because we are obliged to but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way. The capacity to be faithful and obedient will spring from the inside. The Hebrew word for “put” also means “give”—God will *give* the law to the people, and our hearts will recognize, accept and live up to the gift.

“The days are coming, says the Lord.” Clearly they aren’t here yet, or else we wouldn’t still need reformation. The problem is still and always the same—our faulty hearts. No outer structure is the solution, only God written on our beings. This is a vision not of individual piety, but of a community living in solidarity with its God.

The vision of Jeremiah 31:31-34 has an eschatological ring. Perhaps only in the eschaton will none of us need to be taught. Perhaps only then will we do intuitively what we have previously done out of duty. But what a glorious hope. Because God has written the capacity for love and faithfulness into us, the days are surely coming. In the meantime we hope and trust, and we expose our naked hearts to God.