

Written on the Heart

In the movie "Frisco Kid," Gene Wilder plays a young Jewish rabbi who comes to America in the late 19th century to take a congregation in San Francisco. He lands in New York with a few clothes, some money to get him across the country, and the Torah (which we know as the first five books of the Old Testament.)

Almost as soon as his feet touch American soil he's mugged. They take everything except the Torah.

With no money with which to pay passage across the country, he starts off walking. Well, nothing in his background or training has prepared him for the American frontier; so, within a couple of days he's worn out and hungry. In one scene he tries to catch a prairie chicken with his bare hands. It is a scene that pretty much sums up his readiness for the lot that has befallen him.

Just when it seems the bumbling young rabbi is destined for an untimely demise, he stumbles upon the camp of a small-time bank robber, played by Harrison Ford. Ford becomes the unwilling savior of the young rabbi, who sticks like glue through the remainder of the movie. He feeds him, protects him during a barroom brawl, and when all his resources run out, he robs a bank to continue to support the two of them. Wilder returns the bank loot, but in the process, gives away their position, and a posse starts after them.

They're riding as hard as they can to stay ahead of the posse, when suddenly the rabbi stops and gets off his horse and starts walking. Turns out it's Friday at sunset—the beginning of Sabbath—and the rabbi refuses to ride on the Sabbath. With Harrison Ford trying every means of persuasion imaginable, the two manage to elude the posse all through the Sabbath, and finally make good their escape.

From time to time during the movie the rabbi runs across the men who mugged him in New York. He always confronts them; they always beat him up; and Harrison Ford always has to rescue him.

Finally, they reach the west coast, and are preparing to part company, when the hooligans from New York show up again, and there is a confrontation. Harrison Ford is shot, but manages to shoot one of the thugs, as well. The remaining goon is about to finish off Harrison Ford, and Gene Wilder picks up the gun of the fallen crook and aims it at him. Just then the hoodlum tosses the Torah into the campfire, and the rabbi is faced with a tremendous moral decision: does he rescue the Torah, for which he has dedicated his life, or does he save a friend by shooting another human. He hesitates, then shoots and saves Ford's life, and pulls what's left of the Torah out of the fire.

The two part company, Ford heading south, and Wilder heading for San Francisco, where he places the remains of the Torah on the doorstep of the

Jewish house of worship, and turns to leave. Members of the Jewish community catch him and try to persuade him to stay, but he protests that he is no longer worthy to be their rabbi, because he has not kept the law—he has killed a man.

“More condemning than that,” he says, “I almost chose the Torah—a piece of paper—over the life of a man.”

A question: “Was he keeping the law? Or was the law keeping him?”

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 (NRSV) *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. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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.*

God says this new covenant will be different from the one established at Sinai. But the difference is neither in the content of the covenant, nor in the one who initiates it. The difference will be in the people of whom God says, “I will be their God and they will be my people!” And here is the difference:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” Paul quotes this verse in his letter to the church in Rome. It may be the most extraordinary text in the Old Testament concerning covenant. It is, in effect, a “promissory covenant” made possible, not by any act of repentance or conversion on the part of Israel, but by the unilateral action of God: “*I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*”

The old covenant, which was written on stone, had become a weapon of control used to keep the rabble in line. By the time of Jeremiah there were those who had led Israel into bondage as oppressive as the Egyptian slavery of their ancestors or the Babylonian exile they were currently experiencing. The bondage was to legalism. They took a covenant, and made it into moral determinism—moral absolutism. *That’s what will be different!*

And here’s how it will be different (verse 34): “*...they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD...*”

The word used here is not the kind of knowledge in which we memorize mathematical theorems and formulas. That’s “head knowledge.” Nothing wrong with it; in fact, it’s essential to life. But the text indicates another kind of knowledge, and its sense is captured by the phrase, “I will write it on their hearts”.

Now, I hope this sounds familiar, because I’ve made this point before: in the Hebrew mind the heart was the center of the will, the intellect and the emotions. In this verse, the verb, “to know” indicates an intimate awareness obtained by

direct sight or experience—to know in the same way we know music, or the colors in a sunset, or the taste of an orange.

Because, once you know something by experience, it's yours. An old song plays on the radio, and you're back in your college dormitory room. A trace of perfume and you can almost hear the taffeta swishing at your high school prom.

We can describe God theologically; we can quote verse after verse of scripture; but the Psalmist calls us to "*Taste and see that the Lord is good*" (PSALM 34:8) God says through Jeremiah, "I will write it on their hearts."

No longer will the law be an end in itself—no longer will it be something external and objective—some standard of moral absolutism; instead, the new covenant will be written on the heart!

I can't help thinking about last week's sermon: Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus was saying the old way—the way Nicodemus was assuming—had proven inadequate; therefore, you must be "born anew"—"born from above!"

The old covenant also was "from above." But God's people smashed it beyond repair. But, God will not cancel his revelation of himself in the old covenant, because that revelation remains valid; indeed, God will fulfill every promise: God will dot every "i" and cross every "t".

The hand of God that wrote on the tablets of stone, will now touch the human heart, and (verse 34): "*...they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD...*"

The old covenant is now in shambles, in the new covenant God's will and humanity's will are "at one." And, notice what happens when you put these two words together: "at one" becomes "atone". This is Alexander Campbell's understanding of atonement. It is "being at one with God." It is "at one-ment."

The new covenant will not be some objective list of rules to obey; rather, it will be that connection—that "at-onement" between God and God's people. The Covenant written on their hearts finally makes clear what it means to be God's people.

And the new covenant is personified completely in Jesus of Nazareth: revealed and validated through his sacrificial love, extended in his call, "follow me," and completed when we answer the call to follow him and to become more and more like him. And in that new covenant—that new relationship—God's law no longer prescribes what we must do; rather, it describes who we are. PRAYER SLIDE