

Jeremiah 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 30. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it. These are the words that the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah. Thus says the Lord, We have heard a cry of panic, of terror, and no peace. Ask now and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale? Alas, that day is so great, there is none like it. It is a time of distress for Jacob, yet he shall be saved out of it. And it shall come to pass in that day, declares the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off your neck, and I will burst your bonds, and foreigners shall no more make a servant of him. But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. Then fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel. For behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, declares the Lord. I will make a full end of all the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished. For thus says the Lord, Your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous. There is none to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you. All your lovers have forgotten you, they care nothing for you. For I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe, because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant. Why do you cry out over your hurt? Your pain is incurable, because your guilt is great. Because your sins are flagrant, I have done these things to you.

Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity. Those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the Lord. Because they have called you an outcast. It is Zion, for whom no one cares. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings. The city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be. Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. I will multiply them, and they shall not be a few. I will make them honoured, and they shall not be small. Their children shall be as they were of old, and their congregation shall be established before me. And I will punish all who oppress them. Their prince shall be one of themselves. Their ruler shall come out from their midst. I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me. For who would dare of himself to approach me, declares the Lord. And you shall be my people, and I will be your guard. Behold the storm of the Lord. Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest. It will burst upon the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intentions of his mind. In the latter days you will understand this. In Jeremiah chapters 30 and 31, and the added material of chapters 32 and 33, we have what is variously called Jeremiah's book of restoration, his book of comfort, or his book of consolation. To the announcement of judgment upon Judah, it brings accompanying promissory words of hope and restoration. It reminds the Judahites of the faithfulness and the power of the Lord that can reverse their situation. There is hope for them yet, even in the far land of exile, if they will only turn to the Lord. Walter Brueggemann describes the primary task of the book of

Jeremiah as being that of speaking Israel into exile. But this only fulfills part of Jeremiah's vocation, as it is described in chapter 1. Beyond plucking up and tearing down, he also has the responsibility to build and to plant. These chapters, at the very heart of the book, represent that. In these chapters, Jeremiah is speaking words of promise and hope that Judah can cling on to, words that will lead them into the restoration on the other side of exile. Both Israel and Judah have now died, yet the Lord can raise them up to life again. It's important to consider that even with mass deportations, there were still many Jews living in the land, and even in Jerusalem. Jewish identity also continued very strongly in exile. This was one of the remarkable things that set apart the Jews from other nations, while other nations disappeared as they were subsumed into these great empires, and peoples vanished as they were deported. The Jews do not suffer that same fate. Although the northern kingdom of Israel disappears as a national body, the identity of the exiles of the southern kingdom continues, and is ultimately restored. One of the things that so offends Haman in the book of Esther is the fact that the Jews, though scattered, without a homeland, still have their own customs and distinct identity, an identity preserved even in foreign lands. On this front, we should bear in mind just how much holding fast to the word of the Lord would have enabled the Jews to retain that distinct identity in exile.

Those Jews that took on the customs of the surrounding peoples would just vanish into their multitudes. It would be the faithful who would retain their distinctiveness. Although there were still Jews living in the land, and even in Jerusalem during the period of exile, the loss of the land, control of Jerusalem, and the temple was a crippling blow to Jewish nationhood. The identity of a people is largely found in the leadership class that brings them together into a nation, with their own clear boundaries, agency, common life, and selfhood. The deportations to Babylon had stripped Judah of all of this.

Although Jewish individuals remained in the land and would have some level of life, they lacked a true common life as a people. These powerful chapters at the heart of the book of Jeremiah contain many great promises.

[6 : 37] These promises should not be reduced merely to predictions. There are various examples of promises in scripture that people fail to enter into true possession of. A promise calls for an answering faith, and is not merely an announcement of something that's going to come to pass, irrespective of people's faith.

For only a very brief period of Israel's history does it enter into full possession of the land of promise. In the end, the promise of the land is a briefly attained high watermark of the extent of Israel's possession.

For the vast majority of their history, they only control a smaller part of it, and even then they're divided into separate nations. The promises of restoration here hold out hope of a future that's more glorious than that which Israel actually attains.

However, one of the features that we see in the promises of scripture is the way that when the people fail to enter into full possession of them due to their lack of faith, the Lord can take upon himself the full realization of the future that he has held out to them.

There are promises of new covenant in these chapters that have an initial fulfillment in the years after the return from exile, but anticipate far greater fulfillment at some point in the future. The promises are not wasted or expended, but they look towards a greater horizon for their final realization.

[7 : 51] This chapter and the chapters that it introduces begin with an instruction to write things in a book. At a number of points in the book of Jeremiah, we have indications of how the book came into existence as a larger body of material, the ways that different parts of it were formed, letters written to exiles and other figures, books written for specific purposes on specific occasions.

Another example of this can be seen in chapter 36 from a much earlier period in the ministry of Jeremiah when he was instructed to write things in a book during the reign of Jehoiakim.

In this book, Jeremiah records words that would orient the Judahite exiles through their experience of exile, enabling them to retain their distinct identity as the people of God in preparation for being restored to the land on the other side.

Without such words of hope, it would have been so easy for them to assimilate to the paganism that surrounded them. In the book of Daniel, chapter 9, we have an example of a Judahite exile who was drawing comfort from the prophecy of Jeremiah while far away in a foreign land.

Before we get to the statements of promise and hope, we have a description of panic and terror. Such distress comes upon the people of the Lord. Their strongest men start to behave like women in labor.

[9 : 04] Those who would be looked to as the strength of the community are behaving like women during the pangs of childbirth, unable to face the terror that is befalling the nation. Yet in the context of this chapter, this arresting image sets us up for a surprising reversal.

It is a time of distress for Jacob, yet he shall be saved out of it. This distress and this panic and terror will not be the end for Judah. There is new life on the other side.

The exact shape of this new life is described in the verses that follow. The yoke of the foreign nation will be broken from them. Jeremiah had predicted the yoke of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, would come upon the nation of Judah and the other nations.

When the false prophet Hananiah had disputed this and claimed that it would be soon broken, the Lord had judged him and declared that the yoke would now be an iron one. However, the yoke would not remain forever.

And now Jeremiah announces that it will be broken. The yoke will be removed, their bonds will be burst, and they will serve foreigners no more. The alternative to serving foreign nations is not autonomy, but serving the Lord.

[10 : 09] In the Exodus, they were delivered from the service of Pharaoh to serve the Lord. And now once more, in this greater deliverance, they're going to be delivered in order to serve the Lord and David their king.

The restoration of Judah is going to come with the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. This is a promise that we encounter elsewhere in the prophets. For instance, in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 23 to 24.

At this point in history, it might seem that Babylon is an unassailable power, a power that simply will not be overcome.

On the other hand, the continuing life and identity of the Judahites has never seemed more precarious. Yet, as Brueggemann observes, in the light of the Lord's purpose, the situation is reversed.

It is actually Babylon's position that is precarious. Babylon will suffer a full end, but Judah will be restored. They will be disciplined and punished for their sins, but there is return on the other side.

[11 : 16] The language of turn and returning, and other variations of that verb, are prominent at many points in the book of Jeremiah, not least in these chapters in the book of Consolation. The situation of Judah is bleak indeed.

The Lord uses medical metaphors to describe it. A wound that cannot be healed. A disease that cannot be cured. Their plight is also rendered in forensic metaphors. There's no one to uphold their cause.

No legal advocate to intercede for them. All those to which they once looked, the nations that they once looked to as their allies, the gods that they once worshipped, are unable to help them now.

They don't even care for them. Most devastating of all, the Lord has taken the position of an enemy relative to them. On account of their sin, he has turned against them. Crying out over such a situation is futile.

There's no hope. They brought this disaster upon themselves, and it comes from the hand of the Lord, and no one can stay it. Nevertheless, once again, this has set things up for a great reversal.

[12 : 15] By the lex talionis, the law of retribution, God is going to avenge those who caused them their harm. He's going to devour those who devoured them. He is going to send into captivity those who sent them into captivity.

He's going to plunder those who plundered them. And he's going to prey upon those who preyed upon them. And having done that, he's going to attend to Judah's hopeless wound. The wound that was beyond healing, he is going to heal.

All the people who once ridiculed Zion and dismissed her will be amazed as they see the Lord once more take her to himself. It is one thing to tear down and destroy a world.

It is quite another, having done so, to restore it again. And the Lord promises to do just this in the case of Judah. The destroyed city will be rebuilt. The palace and the temple shall be restored.

Songs once silent shall be heard again. A people once devoured and scattered will multiply and thrive. Children shall play in the streets. They will have a ruler of their own.

[13 : 12] And most of all, the Lord will take them to himself, claiming them as his own people. The covenant formula, and you shall be my people and I will be your God, is at the very heart of all of this.

The fellowship with God, once broken, will be restored. The breached covenant will be repaired. And the people will once more be blessed and enjoy the presence of the Lord in their midst. This all sets us up for the promise of the new covenant in the chapter that follows.

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