

# Jeremiah 31

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In my preaching and teaching, I often emphasize the importance of obedience. I think it's right that I should do so. After all, Paul writes in the second chapter of Titus that the message of the grace of God is that we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age. Any preacher who doesn't make a practice of proclaiming those things isn't declaring the whole counsel of God.

However, we must recognize that obedience only makes sense against the backdrop of God's mercy, love, and grace. Our obedience by itself cannot save us. On our own, all of us are already doomed by the sins we have already committed. Without God's help, obedience would be like trying to win a football game late in the fourth quarter when you're already down 55-7. Why bother trying? Just run out the clock.

However, God's grace transforms the landscape of our spiritual lives. No matter what we have done to ruin ourselves, while life remains, it is never too late for grace. We are never beyond God's power to redeem. In illustration of this, let's look this morning at a bright chapter in a gloomy book: Jeremiah 31.

## God's Grace Today

Jeremiah leads off the discussion of this chapter with an exploration of God's grace today. As Jeremiah presents it, it stems from **HIS EVERLASTING LOVE**. Let's look together at Jeremiah 31:1-6. In order to appreciate this, we need to consider it in its historical context. Remember, Jeremiah is writing this in the last days of the kingdom of Judah. The king of Judah is wicked, the people of Judah are wicked, and God is punishing them for it. Indeed, Jeremiah may have received this prophecy during the last siege of Jerusalem, a siege that Jeremiah had already predicted would end in disaster and exile for God's people.

And yet, to these evil people who were reaping what they had sown, God says that they will not be utterly destroyed. Indeed, someday their descendants will return to the land. Why? Certainly not because of their strength or goodness, but because God had loved them with an everlasting love.

In many ways, this fairly obscure verse states the theme of the entire Bible. God has loved not only Israel, but all of mankind, with this same everlasting love. This is true of each of us personally. Let's each of us think back to the darkest, most shameful thing we've ever done. God was revolted by our sin, but even when we were in the middle of it, He still loved us with an everlasting love. Think of the most evil, contemptible, despicable person you've ever known. God loves him or her every day with an everlasting love. Sure, all of us can reject that love finally and forever, but it's still there. In this world, people do all kinds of horrible things, but God's love brightens our existence like sunlight breaking through clouds.

The point for us is plain. Just as God was always there for Judah, even when they had turned away from Him, God will always be there for us. No matter what we have done, we can always come back to Him. Even when our lives aren't going well, when some kind of earthly trouble has overtaken us, God is with us in the middle of that too. We are not reliable, but God's faithfulness is as everlasting as His love.

In the particular case of Judah, God's everlasting love was responsible for **THE EXILES RETURNING**. Look at Jeremiah 31:7-9. This too is something that we need to appreciate in its own setting. Most of us are very familiar with the story of Judah's return from the Babylonian Captivity. Because we know how things turn out, we don't appreciate the significance of Judah being carried into bondage.

However, once we see things through the eyes of Jeremiah or Zedekiah, all this starts becoming much more impressive. If you'll recall, the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem for a year and a half before they finally took the city. The Jews had nothing left but Jerusalem, no dependable allies, and no real hope. In that situation, why hold out until the end? Why not give in to the inevitable?

The answer lies in what the Jews knew the Babylonians would do to them. Certainly, Zedekiah and his high officials knew they were doomed, but the people followed Zedekiah to the bitter end because they anticipated that the fall of Jerusalem would mean their extinction as a people. Once a conquering nation carried off a defeated nation into captivity, that was the end of the vanquished. They lost their identity among the other slave races of the victorious empire. None of the other nations the Babylonians defeated still have any presence today. They've all been erased because that's what the Babylonians did.

God says, though, that it's not going to happen to Judah. Against all probability, they're going to come back. Despite their wickedness, God was going to restore them to the land.

So too for us. God's mercy is not limited to the "good people" who have been going to church all their lives and don't appear to need much help. It's for the alcoholic, the drug addict, the pedophile, the prostitute, and the adulterer. Too often, we look at the sinners in our lives, or maybe even at ourselves, and we say, "There's no way." That's not seeing through God's eyes, because nothing is impossible with Him.

Jeremiah continues to reveal that God acts in this way because of His desire to be **THE REDEEMER**. He points this out in Jeremiah 31:10-14. What stands out to me about this text is not merely that God is redeeming Israel from bondage. He's declaring the coming redemption beforehand so that everybody throughout all the nations will know that He is God and has delivered His people.

This is particularly interesting in light of what the Scripture says about God's purpose in our redemption. In Ephesians 1, Paul notes that God delivers us eternally so that throughout eternity, His chosen people will be to the praise of His glory. In heaven, all of us will be living monuments to God.

As humans, we understand that monuments should in some way reflect the attributes of those being honored. When my family and I went to Grant Park last month and saw the statue of General Grant, it didn't present him in his bathrobe reading the newspaper. Instead, the statue presents him in uniform on horseback because he is being remembered as a general. General-ness is the essence of who he is.

In the same way, as God's monuments, we reflect the essence of who God is. God is powerful, yes, God is holy, yes, but His very nature is love. What better, then, for Him to be honored forever by the presence of those who received His mercy? That's how God ought to be known.

### God's Grace Tomorrow

Jeremiah also looks at the way that God's grace will be manifested tomorrow. Because of this, God's people should consider the future with **HOPE**. We see a touching anecdote about this in Jeremiah 31:15-17. As part of the captivity, mothers were going to be separated from their children. This is certainly one of the great evils of slavery. Back in the bad old days in this country, abolitionists cried out against the horrors of families being broken up at the auction block. What an awful thing to contemplate! And yet, God promises that in the case of Judah, those splintered families are going to be restored when He brings the exiles back to the promised land. This is an occasion not of hopelessness, but of hope.

Today, friends, even though thankfully we don't have to deal with slavery, it is just as important to us that God is a God of hope. Tragedies happen in this world all the time. Lauren recently started interning at Joliet Hospice, and every time she works, she comes home with stories that make me wince in sympathy. Sometimes life is like that. Sometimes, disasters happen.

At other times, the disaster is caused by human evil, whether someone else's or even our own. Our spouse has just done this terrible thing, or our child has just done this terrible thing, or we ourselves have done this terrible thing, and in the moment, we can't imagine how life is going to go on.

Without God, maybe life doesn't go on. Without God, maybe that cruel trick of fate or destructive sin does wreck our lives forever. But with God, that's not the way that things work. As long as we don't abandon God, He will never abandon us, and He always offers hope and a future to His people. Maybe he will see to it that the evil is remedied in this life, that the sinner will repent. Maybe He will merely give us strength to endure and to serve. In either case, He will get us through, and He will get us to heaven.

Jeremiah next shows that we can count on God's grace in **FORGIVENESS**. Look at Jeremiah 31:18-20. Even though Ephraim, which represents the nation of Israel, had rebelled against God and long since been in captivity, more than 100 years at the time of Jeremiah's writing, God still hadn't forgotten them. Whenever the Israelites were willing to repent, God was willing to forgive. As a side note, we will sometimes hear about the "ten lost tribes", but that's not really a Biblically accurate term. Even after the northern kingdom was destroyed, we still see people from the ten northern tribes popping up. For instance, the prophetess Anna in Luke 2 is of the tribe of Asher. God did indeed forgive and restore those who repented.

Today, we need to remember the forgiveness of God, particularly when we struggle with forgiving ourselves. To be honest, this isn't a spiritual challenge that I've ever faced, but I know plenty of Christians do. We do something wrong, we ask for and receive God's forgiveness, but then we continue beating ourselves up over it, much like we see Ephraim here hitting himself on the thigh.

As noble as these continued feelings of guilt might seem, I think they actually represent a temptation, and the temptation is to emphasize the importance of our feelings over what God has revealed to us in His word. If God says we are forgiven, we are forgiven. We may still have to deal with the consequences of sin in this life, and those we have sinned against may not be as ready to forgive as God is, but spiritually, the books have been balanced. Sin isn't important because we recognize it. It's important because God recognizes it. Once He has blotted out the record of that sin, it no longer matters.

When we emphasize our opinions over God's judgments, though, several problems arise. For one, we continue to suffer because of a debt that Jesus has already paid. God wants His people to rejoice in their salvation, not trudge along wearily through a wasteland of imagined guilt. Second, there is a certain amount of pride in being unable to forgive ourselves. In effect, we're saying, "Yes, yes, I know that God has forgiven me, but what I subjectively feel is what's truly important here." Once we start down that road of subjectivity, it's equally reasonable to say, "Yes, I know God's word condemns my actions, but I subjectively feel that I have not sinned, and my feelings are what matter most to me!" I've seen people justify adultery on the basis of their own subjective feelings of right and wrong. In either case, we must rely on what God has said and what we know to be true rather than being concerned with our own fallible standards.

Next, God promises **PEACE**. Consider Jeremiah 31:21-26. In many ways, this passage contains the emotional resolution of the whole book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is certainly one of the more pitiable characters in Scripture. God wouldn't let him get married, have a family, or even attend weddings and funerals. God commanded him to preach a message that nobody was going to listen to, and it made the people hate and abuse Jeremiah. On top of that, Jeremiah loves his nation and is horrified by the coming disaster.

Here, God repeats what He has been saying throughout the chapter: He will lead the exiles home, and the nation of Judah will once again be established in the land. In response, the text tells us, Jeremiah was able to get a good night's sleep, possibly for the first time in years.

This should remind us of one of the most important things that God does for us. He frees us from worry about the future. A lot of the time, the problems that I find myself worrying about aren't even problems I have right now. I get lost in a death spiral of gloomy what-ifs: what if this bad thing happens, and this one, and this one, then where will I be?

In reality, of course, the future is utterly unknowable. It's prudent to prepare for it, but worrying about all the disasters that future days and years might hold is pointless. In the first place, many of the things we worry about never happen. Second, our ability to affect the future is quite limited.

It's much more sensible, then, to spend less time worrying and more time trusting. We don't know the future, but God does. We can't control the future, but God can. He's on our side, He's looking out for us, and if we rely on Him, He will make sure that everything turns out all right. Indeed, if our ultimate destination is heaven, how can things fail to turn out all right? There is no worry that is worth losing sleep over. Like Jeremiah, we need to accept that God is on it and let Him deal with the things we can't.

## God's Grace Forever

Roughly speaking, the final section of Jeremiah 31 that we're going to be looking at concerns God's grace forever. Within this, God first promises **HIS PROTECTION**. Let's read together from Jeremiah 31:27-30. Here, God reveals to His people that as He is now opposed to them because of their wickedness, when they returned from exile, He would protect them. Second, He tells them that children will no longer have to worry about suffering for the sins of their fathers. Sinners will pay the price themselves.

Here too, there are plenty of applications for us. The first concerns God's promise of protection in our lives. As we know, we do not have easy, trouble-free lives simply because we are Christians. However, there is a fundamental difference between our lives and the lives of sinners. We have the promise of 1 Corinthians 13 that God will never allow us to face anything we can't handle. With every trial will come a way to bear it; with every temptation will come a way to escape it. Those who are not under Christ's protection don't have that promise, and that's a big deal.

This tells us, then, that as long as we walk with God, we're never going to face anything that must inevitably crush us. Of course, this does not mean that every choice we make in trial or temptation is equally good. If we suffer some personal tragedy but pull away from the comfort that God and His people offer,

then yes, that tragedy might destroy us, because we've passed up the way of escape. However, there is always going to be a choice that is good, a way we can make it through with God's help.

Second, the reminder that we will only be punished for our own iniquity is an important one. Obviously, this is quite a change from what we see in the Old Testament, when God made a physical covenant with His people that had physical consequences. In Jeremiah's own time, even though the fathers sinned, very often it was the sinless children who were carried off into exile. Today, by contrast, we are concerned not with physical consequences, but with spiritual guilt. None of us will suffer spiritually because of the guilt of our father, or our grandfather, or even of our ultimate father Adam. Instead, every one of us will live spiritually or die spiritually according to the choices that we ourselves have made.

This is possible because of **THE NEW COVENANT** that God has made with us. We see the terms of this covenant defined in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Everything else we've seen so far is an Old-Testament promise with a New-Testament application. Not so here. For one thing, it doesn't fit the facts of the post-exilic Jewish nation. They were still under the Law of Moses, so their covenant with God *was* like God's covenant with their fathers. Likewise, because it was a covenant made with the nation of Israel as a whole, babies came under the covenant the day they were circumcised. They still had to be taught to know the Lord because, of course, no week-old baby boy has the slightest conception of who God is.

However, as the Hebrews writer explains in great length, the terms that Jeremiah describes do fit us. Our covenant is not like the covenant of Sinai. We are not a physical nation. We are a spiritual one. We do not inherit the physical land of Canaan as the result of our keeping covenant. Instead, we inherit the spiritual land of heaven. None of us become part of God's people involuntarily. Instead, we choose that for ourselves when we decide to become baptized. As a result of that, nobody has to explain God to any Christian, because all of us already know who God is. Likewise, under the terms of our new covenant, which is sealed with the blood of Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins, fully and forever.

It's almost impossible to overstate the significance of this prophecy. One of our core beliefs is that before the foundation of the world, God looked into the future, knew that mankind would sin, and devised a plan for our salvation. The story of the Bible is the story of God carefully, through thousands of years, preparing for Jesus to come to earth, and then through Jesus, accomplishing our redemption.

Here, almost 600 years before Jesus was born, we see God revealing His ultimate purpose. After the failure of the nation of Judah, it was clear that a physical nation would never serve and glorify God as He deserved. Some Jews cared, but other than for a few brief moments, most of them were no more righteous than our neighbors in the United States today. The only way that God could have a people fit to wear His name was by constructing one spiritual nation out of everyone who wanted to serve Him. If the Bible is not the story of God's eternal purpose, this prophecy makes no sense. However, when we consider it in the context of God's entire revelation, it makes perfect sense and clearly shows God's supernatural wisdom.

Finally, God proclaims **HIS FAITHFULNESS** to this promise. Look at Jeremiah 31:35-37. In poetic language, God is saying here that it is literally impossible for His word here to fail. This is the agreement that He will make with His chosen people, and it will last as long as the universe itself does.

Note, friends, that as we've just seen, "Israel" here is not the physical nation of Israel. It is the spiritual nation of Israel, those who are part of God's church, who are the heirs of this blessing. As Paul explains in Romans 9, it is not those who carry Jacob's DNA but those who share his faith who matter.

Also, even though we may not realize it, this promise from Jeremiah 31 also appears in one of our hymns. In the second verse of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness", where the hymn says, "Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above/ Join with all nature in manifold witness / To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love," this is the passage to which the author is referring. Every time, then, we look up at the heavens, we should be reminded not only of God's power, but of His faithfulness to His covenant with us. The sun, the moon, and the stars are a sign to us that we are still His people and He will still keep the promises that He has made.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's reflect on the significance of these things. All of the blessings that we have described this morning would be impossible without Jesus. When He said of the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," it was the Jeremiah 31 covenant that He was describing. The blood He shed on the cross is what binds God and us together in this agreement. God is faithful. He is keeping covenant. He will be our God forever if we are faithful to Him. Let's ask ourselves if we are keeping covenant too.