

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Jeremiah 30:1-33:26

No more stirring passages ever were written than those found in this section of Jeremiah. Although most of his messages concerned judgment and doom, when he dreamed of the future he could preach the way he really preferred. All his heart went into these sermons.

I. The Source Of True Optimism (30:1 to 31:26)

How did it happen that the dejected prophet could have such confidence in the future? It is not easy to hope for a better time when your world has crashed down upon your head. These chapters were probably composed after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B. C.

1. Cause for Pessimism

There was every reason to despair. Israel had been struck a mortal blow by her God (30:14); the exile had begun. There was no cure for the wound (30:12 to 31:15). Apparently there was nothing to do but await the hour of death.

2. Cause for Optimism

The pessimist overlooks the most significant fact of all. There is a physician who can help when all others fail. God specializes in the miraculous. He has the ability to effect a cure (30:7), and he does not wait to be summoned. When everyone has given up on the patient, he volunteers his services. He seeks out the one wounded by his wrath, knowing that at last he will be heeded (31:3).

One of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament follows, picturing the process through which Israel will be restored, a description of the journey back to God (31:4-14). The return will be inaugurated by God himself (31:8a). They will return just as they are (31:8b). At the start they will weep with remorse and beg for mercy (31:9a). When the restoration shall have been completed, "their soul shall be as a watered garden" (31:12), like an irrigated field in a desert land.

Now the prophet was disturbed by the sound of weeping. It came from Ramah, in whose vicinity Rachel had been buried after she died in childbirth. Indeed it was Rachel herself weeping, refusing to be comforted because she had lost all her children.

Until now Jeremiah has emphasized how God feels toward his helpless people. In an instructive passage (31:18-20) he gives insight into the pardoned sinner's heart, who cries out in sincere repentance. Whatever way God desires to turn him, he is ready to go. Through suffering he has learned to submit to the will of God (31:18).

Although one repents when he first comes to God, he cannot really see how terrible his sin is until after he leaves it. He thinks that he hates his sin when he first forsakes it, but afterward he is even more amazed than ever at the stupidity of sin. This sincere repentance brings a ready response from God. Like a compassionate father, all the time that he was forced to discipline his child his heart was bleeding. Now that the lad's attitude has changed he can restore him to favor (31:20).

As Israel returns to her land, she is to set up signposts along the way, piles of rocks that mark the road home (31:21). What Jeremiah had in mind was that the first to travel the road should mark the way for those who would follow. Those who take the way of life today should make it easier for those who follow after them.

II. The New Covenant (31:27-34)

Of all the sayings of Jeremiah these are without doubt the most significant. It is this passage that Jesus had in mind when he instituted the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:28). The expression "new testament" literally means new covenant. In other words, Jesus was saying that the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah was now being instituted.

1. The Basis of the Covenant

First in importance is the intention of God (31:27-28). He is determined to restore Israel and has set his mind to this purpose. The second fact is that in any dealings with Israel, God will work with individuals. Each person will be held responsible only for his own sins (31:29-30).

2. The Nature of the Covenant

The new covenant will not be made until after Israel shall have been restored to its land (31:33).

The new covenant is contrasted with the old in several striking ways.

(1) The success of this covenant is guaranteed by God. It is clear that the success of the old agreement was dependent upon Israel's ability to keep it. This she could not do. Why, then, was it made with her? To lead her to see the necessity of the new one. Man would never accept grace if he thought he could deserve the favor of God. And he thinks he deserves it until he comes to see his own helplessness.

The old covenant revealed Israel's inability to meet God's requirements. When this covenant was first made, she thought she could keep her side of it. It took long centuries of tragic failure to prepare her for the new one.

(2) The new covenant is the ultimate in grace. The first covenant forgave the sin of Israel, but the second even pardoned the breaking of the first covenant itself. "It forgave the breach which had destroyed the old."

(3) The impulse to keep it comes from within. It is written on the heart rather than on tables of stone (31:33). Obedience under the new would issue from personal desire rather than a sense of duty. Man would serve God because it was what he wanted to do, rather than just because he ought.

(4) This new covenant is to be an individual matter (31:34). Each person must have his own encounter with God. Personal faith cannot be taught as one can teach a law that is written on a stone. It must be experienced to be real. Jeremiah did not mean that there would be no place for teachers under this new

covenant. There will always be a need for them. Their function, however, will be to lead people to the conviction that they must have an experience with God to be under covenant, and after they are within it, to help them see the implications of the faith. "The only thing which men cannot hand on in this world is their experience."

(5) The permanence of this covenant. The man who knows Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour has a relationship with God that will endure forever. For such a man to be lost would mean that God had not kept his covenant.

III. Faith and Circumstance (32:1-44)

There come times in every man's life when outward circumstances discourage faith. Jeremiah was in such a situation. Nebuchadnezzar's armies were already encamped around the city, and the prophet was "shut up in the court of the prison" (32:2), having even exasperated Zedekiah himself (32:3). If ever he would take a dim view of the future, it would be now.

1. The Vision

Jeremiah had a vision in which he was informed by God that Hanameel, his cousin, was coming to offer him a chance to buy a field in Anathoth, which was up for sale (32:6-7). Jeremiah was first in line for the property. The prophet was not told what he was to do about the offer. It was a strange time to buy that field, for the Babylonian armies were probably encamped upon it at the time!

2. The Actual Scene

Just as God had said, Hanameel came to him and made the offer. When this happened, Jeremiah knew that God was in it (32:8).

3. Jeremiah's Dutiful Behavior

Jeremiah knew what God expected of him, for he would not have informed him before hand unless he had wanted him to transact the business. So the prophet weighed out the money, since coined money was not in use.

4. The Rising of Doubt

No sooner had Jeremiah performed his duty than his doubts began to come. What a stupid thing to do! The city would soon fall, and the nation be destroyed. How could the land ever be worth anything again (32:25)? It is significant that the prophet did not publish his doubts but rather he prayed about them.

5. The Reassurance of God

In replying to Jeremiah the Lord used the same words he had uttered in his prayer.

The prophet prepared his heart to receive God's truth, and it was given to him. When all others about him were in despair, he was led to see that God would keep his covenant with David and Levi. One day God would restore his people to their land and reinstate their Temple worship. The future of God's people was secure, for they were in the hands of the God of grace (33:4-26).