

Written on the Heart



Purpose

To seek the life that comes from a covenant written on the heart

Listen

The Scripture for this lesson is Jeremiah 29:1-14; 31:31-34. Selected verses are printed below.

Jeremiah 29:10-14

10 For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.

13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

14 I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31 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.

32 It 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.

33 But 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.

34 No 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.

Key Verse: 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. (Jeremiah 31:33)

Look

"Tevye," the struggling hero of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, had to deal with a constant stream of problems. Poverty was a continuing fact; so was the daily threat of pogrom. Then there was the pain of trying to maintain the traditions he loved, which his daughters set aside. The most poignant moment in the play, however, comes when Tevye seeks reaffirmation of his wife's love. The playwright leads us through a half-spoken, half-sung dialogue, in which Tevye asks repeatedly, "Do you love me?" His wife answers by reciting the spouse-like things she does. Yet after each one, Tevye asks plaintively, "But do you love me?"

We want to know that we are loved. Some proof comes in the faithful performance of routine deeds, some in words spoken or written, and some in particular moments of celebration. We want to know that the bonds of covenant, whether within family, friendship, or marriage, are substantial. In our Bible Lesson, the prophet Jeremiah promises the people of Judah a better day when they will have a new covenant with God, one that will assure them of God's love in ways they have never known before.

Live

We usually remember the prophet Jeremiah for his messages of doom. We call him "the weeping prophet." His name has given a word to our language, *jeremiad*: "a lamentation, or mournful complaint." Yet Jeremiah also had happier moments and messages.

In our Bible Lesson, Jeremiah's message was sent in a letter. The date is approximately 597 b.c. Jeremiah was in Jerusalem, writing to the Judahites in exile in Babylonia. They were a despondent lot, far from home. Different foods, customs, and language can be exciting when we are on holiday or when we have embarked on a special venture or a new way of life. They are quite another matter when enemies force them on us.

Above all, there was the difference in religion. Many of the people had not been particularly loyal to the Lord God at the time of the Babylonian invasion, but they felt that their faith was something they could fall back on when necessary. Now that an enemy was taking their faith from them, it became their primary passion. They did not want pagan religions imposed on them. During the people's captivity one of their poets told how they wept when they remembered their homeland. When their captors asked them to sing some of the songs of Zion, the poet cried, "How could we sing the Lord's song / in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4).

Although the people were in Babylonia and Jeremiah still resided in Jerusalem, he nevertheless saw himself as their spiritual leader. The people to whom Jeremiah was writing were the movers and shakers and the professionals of the community: "the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths" (Jeremiah 29:2). The victors in ancient warfare generally took captive the best of a vanquished people. Doing so brought talented slaves to the conquering nation, and it

left the defeated people with no viable leadership of the kind likely to organize a revolt.

The people in Babylonia, to whom Jeremiah wrote, were just the sort who might organize politically or at least dream of doing so. They would have confidence in themselves and in their ability to rise up against the Babylonians; and there were advisors who encouraged such an attitude. Jeremiah warned against “the prophets and the diviners who are among you [to] deceive you” (Jeremiah 29:8). Do not listen to “the dreams that they dream,” Jeremiah insisted, because “it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in [God’s] name” (29:8-9).

It was the kind of message the people wanted to hear, a message that appealed to their national pride and awakened all kinds of unrealistic expectations. Yet the Babylonians were a powerful people; any idea of revolting against them was irrational. We often believe what we want to believe, however, especially when national pride is involved.

What kind of false hopes do modern-day “prophets” provide?

Bad News and Good News

Jeremiah had an unpopular message for the people; he declared that their experience in exile was God’s will (Jeremiah 29:4). The idea that God had ordered this exile was bad news, but Jeremiah had something even worse to say: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters” (29:5-6). In other words, he told them to settle in, as if they were going to live in Babylonia forever.

If the people wondered whether Jeremiah was collaborating with the enemy, his next sentence sounds as if he were: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7).

Two questions arise here. First, in what sense had God sent the people into Babylonian exile? That is, does God send trouble our way? As a basic rule, I think not.

Most of the experiences of exile that come into our lives are of our own making. Now and then, however, we suffer adversity that seems to come out of nowhere, as if life itself were against us. As both pastor and friend, I have struggled alongside people who have suffered such circumstances; I know what a test of faith such a situation can be. Yet, more often, our problems are products of our own perverse genius.

Judah had for generations followed a national way of life that would lead eventually to the Babylonian captivity. It was not a question of whether there would be an exile but simply when it would happen. When the Scripture says that God sent the people into exile, it is a merciful word, since it infers that God was at work in their circumstances.

The second question has to do with how we should respond to trouble. One might conclude from Jeremiah’s words that the only question is survival and that in that pursuit, anything goes. That was not Jeremiah’s intention. The Judahites knew full well what kind of conduct was acceptable under

God's law, and they knew that a prophet of God—particularly a prophet of Jeremiah's reputation—would not recommend bending the law. Jeremiah was saying that what had happened to Judah was God's will in light of the people's prior sins. Now it was the Judahites' responsibility to conduct themselves honorably in relationship to their captors and to trust God to make their experience of exile fruitful.

Better still, however, God had plans for Judah, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). There would be seventy years of exile and then a return. The seventy years turned out to be roughly fifty years. Perhaps "seventy" was intended as a symbolic figure, since seven was the number of completeness. Or perhaps the people of Judah got "time off for good behavior." In any event, Jeremiah promised that God had plans; therefore the people could have hope for the future.

What is the secret of living responsibly under adverse circumstances?

A Covenant on the Heart

Jeremiah must have loved the rest of his assignment. He was compelled so often to speak harsh words. He once complained, "I have become a laughingstock all day long; / everyone mocks me (Jeremiah 20:7b). Now, however, he was privileged to speak a beautiful word, wonderful beyond imagining: "I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile" (29:14).

This promise was so broad that one wonders how to interpret it. The people Jeremiah was addressing were exiles in just one place, Babylonia. Was his prophecy intended to include the northern tribes that, over a century earlier, had been taken captive by the Assyrians? Would some of them also return? Or was the prophet speaking in a more general way of anything that might happen to the people of Judah in the future? Probably no one has a right to set precise boundaries for Jeremiah's message.

Best of all, however, God "will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). Jeremiah's explicit reference to both the northern and southern kingdoms indicates that God was not done with the northern tribes even though they had been in captivity so long that they seemed to have lost their identity. Judah may have given up on Israel, and history may have done so, too; but they were still part of God's plan.

Jeremiah promised a covenant so great that some of his contemporaries might have thought it nearly blasphemous. This covenant would be better than the covenant God made with their ancestors "when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt" (Jeremiah 31:32).

Jeremiah could not have said a more daring thing. His people counted their very existence as a nation from the event of their deliverance from Egypt; to say that they would now have a better covenant must have seemed disrespectful to their historic relationship with God. As a people whose essence was found in their history, to promise something greater was to question who they were. Yet it was important for them to know that God is not only God of history but also God of the future.

Jeremiah reminded the people, on God's behalf, that they had broken their original covenant—"though I was their husband, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:32). God would not be satisfied simply to repair what had been broken; instead, an entirely new covenant would be enacted. How new? The original covenant was engraved in stone at Sinai, but the new covenant would be written on the hearts of the people: "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" (31:33). A new day had come, if only the people of God would accept it.

What differences do you see between a covenant written on stone and a covenant written on the heart?

Preparing the Heart

Only rarely do the most sensitive of us realize the wonder of what Jeremiah said in the verses we are studying. How could anyone claim such unique intimacy with the Divine? By definition, God is unattainable; but by faith, Jeremiah said, we can not only expect to attain God, this becomes our right.

Christians feel that Jeremiah's prophecy was uniquely fulfilled when we came to know God through Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul picked up on Jeremiah's language when he appealed to believers to "show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts"(2 Corinthians 3:3). Yet, we should never bypass the first and continuing relationship of this promise to the people of Israel and Judah. The promise is primarily theirs; it is ours by extension and grace.

This kind of relationship with God is possible only as it is possessed within. More than a law to be obeyed, more than a body with which we affiliate, this relationship is written into the deepest part of our being. The writing is done, Jeremiah said, by God. The One who knows the human heart best, with all its complexity and its capacity for both grandeur and abomination, has chosen to engrave an eternal covenant there.

This experience can happen because God first prepares the heart. So Jeremiah gives us God's promise: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34b). According to the ancient story, when Adam and Eve sinned, they hid from God. In a sense, their instinct was right: Sin is unacceptable in God's sight, so we want to get out of God's sight when we have sinned. Our vague contemporary notions about God and sin make it difficult for us to grasp this fact. But if God is to write a new covenant on the heart, the heart must become an appropriate surface. That can only happen when our iniquity has been forgiven and our sin divinely forgotten.

With the new covenant on the heart, it will no longer be necessary, Jeremiah said, to "teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know [God], from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:34). The prophet's vision is far from being fulfilled, for Judah or for any other collective body. Yet it is a living possibility for us who confess Jesus Christ as our Lord. His kingdom sets up rule in our hearts. When we feel its imprint most deeply, we live and love most purely. To live any other way is to dishonor the name we bear.

When are you most conscious of God's covenant in your heart?

***Help us today, O Lord, to renew the covenant you have written on our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen***