

The Journey to Christmas: God's Love in Babylon

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith

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(read text)

How Did We Get to This Point In The Journey?

We read this text of a prophet preaching about exile, predicting a new covenant and while the word is never used, I cannot think of a more potent example of the love that God has for His people. He speaks this powerful, loving word to people being carted off into captivity. I cannot imagine a moment when we need to hear that sort of message more.

You need to know how big and strong and deep and wide God's love is precisely when you feel alone, exiled, captive and a slave to selfishness and sin. You need to be reminded of the love of God as you consider what exactly this relationship, this new covenant in Christ truly is. So let's try to do that briefly and unpack this as expeditiously as possible. Before we do that, I am reminded of a story.

The Evidence of Guilt was Consumed by Another

I had one last piece of birthday cake left. My children were still very little, around 3 and 5 years old. I had a fantastic red velvet cake for my birthday, because that is truly the greatest of all the cakes. It sits alone. If there was a Mount Rushmore of cakes, all four faces would be Red Velvet Cake. I don't do much in the sweets, but I make an exception for Red Velvet Cake. And this particular birthday cake was the reddest of reds, the velvetiest of velvets and the cakiest of cakes.

I left it on a plat on the counter and stepped away for a moment when someone took a bite of my cake. It couldn't have been my bride because we stepped away together. I had her under surveillance. But I came back, and that tell-tale bite was taken. To clarify, it wasn't a bite. Someone had carefully eaten just the cream cheese frosting off of the outside of the cake. Knowing my children, I went to the top of the usual suspects list. I found her in her room, eyeballing the door as if she knew someone would be coming for her. It was the look of the guilty. With a subtle white handlebar mustache. I asked her. And in the sweetest way, with those big blue eyes and with that too-cute-it-slays you lisp, she said "It wathn't me!"

She had the unmitigated gall to even pretend that she had no idea what cake even was. So, I went back to the scene of the crime. Only to find there was now no scene. The entire piece was gone. No trace, no remnant. No dirty plate. No crumbly residue. Someone came and consumed all of the evidence of the guilty party. And without any evidence with which to render a verdict, I sent her back to her room. The problem was consumed before I could use it as the basis to punish her.

Jeremiah in Jerusalem, People in Babylon

This passage provides the summary of Jeremiah's message. This is the proclamation of a new covenant. Remember, David's son Solomon reigned over the united twelve tribe as the King of Israel. However, after Solomon's death, Israel would divide into a southern kingdom called Judah and a northern kingdom called Israel. Judah's capital was in Jerusalem and David's family rules there. Israel's capital is Samaria. By the time the prophet Jeremiah is preaching, the northern kingdom of Israel has been exiled, carried off into captivity under the Assyrians.¹

Now, Jeremiah preaches to Judah when they are about to be taken into exile in Babylon. The Babylonians are not the first outside kingdom to meddle in Judah's affairs. After King Josiah died, it appears that landowners in Judah appointed Josiah's son, Jehoahaz as the next king, even though he was not Josiah's oldest son. However, Egypt removed Jehoahaz after three months in favor of the oldest son, Eliakim. The Egyptians rename him Jehoiakim, and his policies apparently were more in line with Egypt's wishes.

Jehoiakim ruled eleven years and the prophet Jeremiah opposed his policies completely. During these eleven years, the Egyptian handlers were defeated by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiakim died and his son reigned for three months in Jerusalem before he surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who installed yet another son of Josiah named Mattaniah as king. Mattaniah's name was changed by the Babylonians to Zedekiah. Zedekiah tried to rise up against Babylon but failed. And around 586 BC, Jerusalem fell. Babylon looted the temple, burned the city and took thousands into exile.

While all of this political instability and war posturing was happening, Jeremiah was preaching as God's prophet to Judah in Jerusalem.

¹ Israel falls to Assyria around 722 BC.

However, at some point, his message was being preached to people about to head off to Babylon. Jeremiah consistently preached a message of God's judgment because God's people had never learned their lesson about sin and rebellion. Particularly memorable was Jeremiah wearing a yoke to symbolize servitude to Babylon. Jeremiah was actually under house arrest in Jerusalem when Babylon breached the walls.

Jeremiah and his friend Baruch, who would assist in writing, were eventually taken to Egypt and continued to preach. In chapter thirty-one, he moves the message from the righteous judgment that has come on both Israel and Judah because of their disobedience to the restoration of God's people in a new relationship with him.

One can only imagine the powerful message of hope, of possibility, and of the future that these people in captivity found in this passage. Consider the hopelessness they faced in exile, not sure if they would ever see their homeland again. Consider the impossibility of returning to those you might have left behind in Jerusalem. And what's more, what kind of future would you aspire to when you were in captivity because of God's judgment over your sin? How can you come back from that?

It is in times like this, when people feel hopeless, when things seem impossible, when the future seems lost, that they need to be reminded of one important thing. God loves them. And to show that love, God will establish a new covenant.

Written On Stone Or Written On Hearts

God's *torah* ("law," or the verbal expression of God's will) will change. It was written down on stone tablets. But now this will become a part of a person or people as God writes it on their hearts. Imagine hearing that promise. Your thoughts are centered on the Big Ten.² God wrote those on stone tablets. But that was the old covenant. In this new covenant, God will write His words, or express His will, on our hearts. The old covenant pressed people from the outside to love, trust, and obey God. But now this new covenant will change. A person will be motivated from within their hearts to love, trust, and obey God. It is a completely different understanding of how the relationship with God will work.

² The Ten Commandments written on stone tablets in Exodus 32:9-16.

And if that wasn't amazing enough, God promises that the effects of sin to spoil relationships are completely done away with in this incredible claim that God will no longer remember them. God will forsake the destructive influence that sin has on a life. How is this even possible? How can sin be removed? It has to be connected to sacrifice. "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin."³ Under the old covenant, everything was purified with the blood of an animal. Under the new covenant, everything will be purified with blood, but not over and over and over. It will be one sacrifice that will atone for all sins.

And this sacrifice will be so perfect, that it will not only never need to be repeated, a once for all time sacrifice, but this sacrifice will remove sin. What an incredible promise! As God's people are struggling through this introduction to Babylonian captivity, they are encouraged that God is now going to initiate a new covenant with them, one that will remove sin to the point that God forsakes sin's corruptive and destructive influence altogether. And then God will write His word on their hearts.

Further, this message was intended for both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. That means that all of God's people are included in this. At this point, the new people from Judah would have been mixed together with those generations of Israel that had been in captivity for over one hundred years. And this message isn't for one over the other. It is for them both. What a positive message of inclusivity. God will extend this new covenant to all of His people.

However, to be clear, it is not a new covenant because God made it with any specific partner like Judah or Israel. What made this covenant new was the quality of the community that God created with this amazing act.

While God's people were being hauled off and reunited in exile in Babylon, God promised them a new promise of community, a relationship that the Messiah would make possible. Messiah wasn't just a myth or an old legend. The Messiah was God's promised deliverer, who would save God's people.

New Testamentum

The Messiah would become a reality. That is what we see in Bethlehem. The Messiah would come and be revealed as God's brilliant, wonderful, glorious, powerful Reality.

³ Hebrew 9:22

This is the only mention of the new covenant in the Old Testament, although Jeremiah would refer to an “everlasting covenant” a few times.⁴

There will be an ultimate restoration of the covenant relationship between God and His people. This new covenant shapes the entire kingdom moving forward. In fact, New Covenant has been used for centuries as the title for the second part of the Bible. The Latin word *testamentum* translates the Hebrew word *berit* or “covenant.” A bridge has been made between Jeremiah’s prophecy and the gospel that God set forth in Jesus Christ.

You see this New Covenant context at the Last Supper when Jesus describes the cup as a representation of the “new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Two other Gospel writers record the phrase “blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24), which reflects the initial covenant ceremony at Sinai (Exodus 24).

The Apostle Paul understands that the gospel of new life in Christ is a fulfillment of the hope expressed in Jeremiah’s prediction of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:1-18). Paul describes himself as a servant of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. Paul understands that Jeremiah’s prediction of a transformed heart is the work of God’s Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian.

What a powerful promise to people in the darkness of exile to be reminded of the immense and incredible love of God. For those in exile, the future would bring redemption. However, for those who came after Bethlehem, the redemptive promise made through Jeremiah was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ and this redemptive promise will be brought to its ultimate fulfillment in His second coming at the end of the age.

This promise that God made through Jeremiah to both the house of Israel and house of Judah is applied to all Christians who comprise the Church. Don’t you see? God loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son. That means that the not-yet that Jeremiah foretold has become our “already.” All that those people in exile had was that not-yet covenant to look forward to. But we have one better! We have an already-and-not-yet covenant relationship. We can experience salvation already through the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ!

⁴ 32:40; 50:5

And we hold to a similar hope of the not-yet aspect. The first advent of Christ meant we can experience the already of salvation. But the second advent of Christ means that will then experience the completion of the not-yet salvation of everything.

Our Hope

So, what does the promise of this new covenant mean for people who live today? Well, remember, God is completely holy and has been separated from sinners like us. That means that we have a problem. How can anyone be in a relationship with God? How can anyone be right with God?

Because God loved us, He offered His Son, Jesus Messiah, who is simply the greatest Reality in existence. He offered Jesus for us. Further, if you accept this Jesus, spiritually speaking, Jesus moves into our hearts, into the very core of who we are. Our sinfulness is traded for the righteousness of Christ.

Because of His great love for us, God placed our sins on Jesus and then God judged our sins there, on Him. This means that because of Christ's sacrifice, God will then forsake our sins. Sin's destructive influence will simply be set aside, and God will then deal with us mercifully.

Because God loves us, Christ bore our sins on his own body when he died.
(1 Peter 2:24)

Because God loves us, Jesus stood in our place and under our judgment.
(Romans 8:3)

Because God loves us, the Messiah canceled our guilt. (Romans 8:1)

Because God loves us, Jesus Christ our sins away. (Acts 10:43)

In verse 34, God tells us that He will forget our sins. Because we are in Christ, our sins no longer exist to be grounds for condemnation. In that way God will "forget" sins.

Don't you see? When you come to Christ in salvation, when you trust Jesus as Savior and Lord, your sins are consumed at the cross. They're gone. Replaced with Christ's righteousness. How can it be that you, my King, would die for me? It is through God's amazing love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:

Have you ever considered the already-not yet aspect of salvation? What does that mean?

What reveals the evidence of our sin? (what we say, do, think?) What reveals the evidence of God's redemption?

Jeremiah 31 is the voice of an inspired spiritual ancestor who spoke to his audience about the shape that God's actions would take in their lives. (return from exile, purified worship, understanding of their forgiveness). What things in our lives in the present are signs of God's working?

What should these signs of redemption point us to? (consider the already/not-yet aspect of salvation as you think through this question)

How does God write his word on our hearts? What does that mean to you?

What aspects of salvation are future promises? What aspects of salvation can be known and experienced today?

How does forgiveness help us anticipate the future?