

“The Weary World Rejoices”

Jeremiah 30:18–22; Jeremiah 33:14–16; Ezekiel 36:24–28; Ezekiel 37:1–14

The true story

The prophets of Israel were men and women (yes, women) whom God called to bring his word to his people. Nearly always, they called the people back to God and God’s ways. They warned God’s people of the consequences that would result from making their own path forward and chasing after various pagan deities. Some prophets we learn of through writings like the book of Kings. Others we know as “writing” prophets for their messages are preserved for us in the sacred scrolls of the Hebrews. Moses was the first and Malachi the last, working in the fourth century BC.

This week we turn to the prophets of Israel, who urged the people to faithfulness and righteousness. They weren’t called to “foretell” coming events but to “tell forth” God’s word, words of warning and words of profound hope. The lonely prophet we’ve all seen the cartoon. A lone figure with bushy hair, a scraggly beard, dressed in rags standing on a street corner holding a sign reading, “Repent! The end is near!” Every political season, I hear more than few speeches referred to as “jeremiads” meaning a list of woes and complaints often delivered in a tirade. And yes, it is a reference to Jeremiah. It isn’t really unfair, because Jeremiah was given the weighty task of telling God’s people that the end was upon them, that they were headed over the cliff.

The year is 588BC. Jerusalem will be dead in less than a year. And it gets worse.

For several years, Jeremiah has warned the King of Judah about revolting against their Babylonian overlords. The prophets’ protests have earned him the hatred of the king’s ministers and in a futile effort to shut him up, they’ve tossed Jeremiah into prison.

Could it get any bleaker? I guess so if you were an investor in Jerusalem real estate. And that is just what God tells Jeremiah to do.¹

With the Babylonian army arrayed outside the walls of Jerusalem and Jeremiah confined to a prison of sorts, God tells Jeremiah to buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 32). The entire transaction must take place in the courtyard of the place in the “court of the guard.” The parties to this transaction will have to come to Jeremiah.

I wonder what must have gone through Jeremiah’s mind? Surely, this seemed as idiotic to him as it would to anyone else. The death of Jerusalem is at hand and Jeremiah is supposed to go make a land investment. Five times in chapter 32, Jeremiah makes it clear that this is God’s doing, saying “Thus says the LORD.” Based on all the other stuff God had told him to do, Jeremiah probably figured that the land would be lost, just as the loincloth was ruined and the earthenware jug broken.

But instead, 32:15 makes clear that this time, the action is not an enactment of loss but of hope. God is having Jeremiah buy the land for the future, the day when the Israelites would return to Judah. Jeremiah was going to make a profit on this field of hope.

Thus, we read God’s words from Jeremiah 33 (above) in a fresh light. Yes, God will one day restore his people, and through them restore the whole world. God keeps God’s promises, even if his people can’t imagine how.



¹ Anthony Saldarini’s reflections on this passage are very helpful. His commentary is part of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.

Seeing out of the darkness

The truth is that when things turn evermore bleak, it can be very hard to sustain any hope that the sun will again shine. This is the kind of despair that gives way to suicide. No path forward is seen to lead to anything but more pain and darkness, unyielding and without end.

Even Jeremiah seemed at times on the verge of giving in to the darkness. Elijah too laid himself down to die. If you have never experienced something like such despair, you are indeed a blessed person.

Where is God as we languish in the midst of darkness and despair?

An angel came to Elijah in his despair, waking him and feeding him. But no angel comes to Jeremiah. Instead, God tells Jeremiah that if he wants to see past the darkness, to see light and hope and restoration, he simply has to ask!

Time and again this story is repeated in Scripture. We come to these stories expecting to hear about a mighty God who sees the messes we make and then fixes them. If not, what is the point of being mighty anyway? But instead, we discover that God works *with* us as much as he works *on* us.

“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” (33:3), God tells Jeremiah. How remarkable. God isn’t going to force his word on Jeremiah. There is much that God wants to tell him, great things, things Jeremiah could never know absent God . . . *but the prophet needs to ask.*

Like Jeremiah, we too must come to God, seeking genuine communion and conversation with the one who made us. Too often, Christians get the impression that God drags us along, as we kick and scream all the way. But no, that is not the God we worship. The LORD God Almighty insists on this being a *mutual relationship*. God is not just a speaker, but also a genuine listener. This is true of every valuable relationship we have, so why should it not be true of our relationship with God?

And what does God reveal to Jeremiah? God’s wondrous promises of restoration and renewal. God reminds Jeremiah that his covenant with his people is unbreakable. The house of David will be restored. (33:19-22). Yes, the people of God are going over the cliff to destruction and exile, but God will still be there in the midst of the wreckage: “For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them” (33:26).

From Jeremiah to a baby named Yeshua/Jesus

And so the city is burned, the temple is lost, and the people become exiles. Fifty years later, the Babylonian empire will be supplanted by the Persians, and King Cyrus, the self-styled Great Liberator, allows the Jews to begin returning to their burned-out city.

As some of God’s people return home, they strive to rebuild but there isn’t much to work with. As the years turn into decades and the decades become centuries, the people of God find they merely trade in one oppressor for another. The Persians for the Greeks, the Greeks of the Egyptians, the Egyptians for the Syrians, and on it goes.

Almost six centuries after Jeremiah, the latest pagan rulers are the Romans. The people, beset by rebellion and violence, cry out: Will the great promises brought by Jeremiah ever be kept? Six centuries and no king from the house of David. Could it be that God made some promises that even God couldn’t keep? Could it be that yes, some things are too hard even for God (Jeremiah 32:17, 27)?

Of course, you know the answer. Jeremiah got it right when he said, “Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard you!” (32:17). So it is, nothing is too hard for God. The LORD God himself will supply a faithful Jew who will keep the covenant and restore his people.

And so we come to a baby born in a small Galilean village to a young woman, a girl really, that mattered not at all in the grand schemes of humankind. And here find the new covenant, promised by God through Jeremiah.

A new covenant

This new covenant would represent the movement from darkness into light, as Isaiah had so poetically expressed it. Yet, reading the Old Testament prophets can be pretty difficult. One of the problems is that they seem to talk about future events as if they had already happened. Past, present, and future all get rolled up together.

The prophets understood that God's promises were not possibilities, they were certainties. With God, a promise made is a promise that has already been kept. God speaks and things simply . . . are. Even as the Jews lived in exile, Jeremiah knew that God had spoken the new covenant into existence.

Thus, when the Israelites faced dark times, the prophets would paint word-pictures of the light that lay ahead. The exact shape of the light might not have been always clear, but the truth of God's light, his commitment to his promises, was always there . . . like a light at the end of the tunnel. But the path to the light is not always what we think it would be.

For example, in psalm 51:17, the psalmist writes that the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. I bet that one gives you pause. I've been writing these studies for twenty years now and I could not begin to count the number of times I've had to confront a phrase or an idea that runs counter to nearly everything the world has sought to teach me. Indeed, when it comes to the Bible, that is pretty much the norm.

Ask yourself . . . have you ever wished that your child's or your sibling's or your friend's spirit would be broken? I doubt it. What could the psalmist mean? And more to the point, what does it mean to us? Surely, by "broken," God can't mean oppressed or dysfunctional or damaged. God is our loving Parent and what sort of parent would want that for his children.

Still, I've raised two daughters and if there is one thing I remember about small children it is that they are a selfish lot. I've yet to meet the two-year old who doesn't think that he or she stands at the very center of the universe. All parents struggle to lead their children away from self-centeredness. I suspect that for some of us, our parental work is never quite finished. Indeed, the psalmist, King David, understands this about himself. By a "broken spirit . . . a broken and contrite heart," he speaks to simple humility and selflessness, to putting God and others ahead of ourselves.

A new heart?

But how can we come to such humility and selflessness? A new heart . . . that's what we need. But what does a new heart look like? How does it differ from an old heart? You might recall the 'ole Grinch, the guy with a heart two sizes too small. So small he hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season. He hated it so much that he set out to steal it. Dressing up like Santa as best as he could, he "enlisted" his dog and set out through the wood. He went to the *Who*-homes and broke into them all. He took the stockings, the presents, all the toys to be found, just as he'd do in each home in *Who*-town. "He slunk to the icebox and took the *Whos'* feast. He took the *Who*-pudding! He took the roast beast. He cleaned out each icebox as quick as a flash. Why, the Grinch even took their last can of *Who*-hash!"

And when he was done, up the mountain he went, his fur flying, oh yes!, he was surely hell-bent. But Christmas still came and that Grinch was in shock; he heard joyful *Whos* in each city block. They didn't need presents or all that roast beast, they had something better, a God-centered feast.

I imagine that if you asked the Grinch just what a new heart looked like, he'd tell you that he saw one in the town square of *Whoville* as they all gathered to celebrate Christmas despite the Grinch's best efforts. A new heart puts the interest of others ahead of its own. A new heart is forgiving and generous. A new heart doesn't insist on returning every slight with a slap. A new heart is humble and compassionate. At the center of this new heart, we'd find Jesus and the rejoicing that is ours when we revel in him. Celebrate! Jesus is Lord! Celebrate!

But speaking only of a new heart can be too limiting. Notice in the Ezekiel 36 passage that it is both a new heart *and* a new spirit, which we should take to mean an all-encompassing regeneration, our hearts, mind, will,

souls – you name it, all new. So imagine “a new heaven and a new earth” filled with people of new hearts and spirits, ready and anxious to be forgiven by God, ready to simply love one another and to love God. That is the promise, the vision, offered by Ezekiel.

But from where?

There is an odd thing in Ezekiel’s message. Look at two simple verses: 11:19 and 18:31:

I will give them a single heart, and I will put a new spirit in them. I will remove the stony hearts from their bodies and give them hearts of flesh (11:19).

Abandon all of your repeated sins. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, house of Israel? (18:31)

“What gives?” you might ask. On the one hand, 11:19 makes it clear that God will give his people a new heart, but, on the other hand, 18:31 plainly states that God’s people are to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit. For those of us who like neat and clear answers to our questions, such passages are maddening. We just want a straightforward answer; is it God or is it us? Katheryn Darr helps us with this in her commentary on Ezekiel:²

. . . we perceive in them a kind of paradox—on the one hand, the call for human responsibility, on the other hand, the assertion that God is in complete control and effects all in terms of salvation. This tension is by no means limited to the Ezekiel scroll. To the contrary, it appears both in Paul’s letters and in the Gospels. Paul, for example, feels comfortable in exhorting the Corinthian believers to “clean out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Why, one wonders, is it necessary to “clean out the old leaven” if one is already unleavened? Or again, Paul can tell the Galatians, “if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25; “live” and “walk” are essentially synonyms. The Spirit moves us, but at the same time, we must follow the Spirit). The paradox is even clearer in Phil 2:12b–13, where Paul tells his readers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Of this striking but common Pauline paradox Günther Bornkamm observes:

. . . each proposition substantiates the other: Because God does everything, you too have everything to do.... The believer’s actions derive from God’s act, and the decisions taken by obedience from God’s antecedent decision for the world in Christ. Thus the two come together in equilibrium: to live on the basis of grace, but also to live on the basis of grace.”

From this perspective, faith is not simply mental assent to doctrine or truth. Rather, it is full participation in the life of God and the church. God’s gracious outreach toward the believer and the believer’s activity toward God coalesce. Each is integral to the other . . .

Roger Olsen’s *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* is one of my favorite books mainly on the basis of his table of contents. The book is organized into fifteen chapters, each one devoted to an “and” of the Christian faith: God is Three and One, Jesus is God and Man, Salvation is Gift and Task. None of the fifteen is expressed as an “OR,” all are an “AND.”

Our new hearts *and* new spirits are both a gift *and* a task. Our re-birth into God’s family is all about God’s grace and his grace alone. We don’t contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . living with new hearts is a process by which we come to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith), thus making our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Thus, these new hearts of ours must be enacted in how we live.

² Darr, K. P. (1994–2004). The Book of Ezekiel. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 6, pp. 1496–1497). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Time again, across the span of the Bible, the writers express this AND. Genuine faith in Christ must result in new ways of living, which we sometimes call “good works,” or, as Paul put it, the “fruit of the Spirit.” Indeed, to say that our rebirth in Christ must result in good works makes it seem like a command or instruction, but that isn’t going far enough. When we come to faith in Christ, we will have real change to show for it, we will bear fruit. If you claim to have come to faith in Christ and yet have no fruit, Paul would ask you to reconsider where you have really put your trust.

So, embrace and be grateful for the new heart that God had given you, even as you go about the day-today-work of making a new heart for yourself. The two will come together and usher you into a new life, a transformed life, the sort of life that we all seek and that God desires for us.

One last word

Is there a more dramatic prophetic vision in the Bible than Ezekiel’s of the dry bones being knit back together? The ankle bone to the shin bone and so on. But what did it mean to the Jews? Or to us?

It is a vision of the restoration of Israel after exile and a signpost to the great resurrection of the dead. We Americans tend to be a pretty individualistic lot, so it is hard for us to grasp all of the layers of community that make up the biblical testimony about and from God’s people. God asks Ezekiel in 27:3, “Son of Man, can these bones live?” Can Israel be brought to new life after the death of Jerusalem. Yes! For God Almighty is Savior *and* Redeemer. Of course, new life is not possible it is certain, for God is life, true life. A new heart, new spirit, resurrection -- all these flow from God’s love and power.

Yes, the prophets brought a lot of warnings, for God’s people proved to be a faithless bunch. But the words of hope and visions of restoration brought by the prophets point us to the concrete nature of God’s love and work in this world.