



“BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING . . .”

Catalog No. 1319
 Jeremiah 30:1-31:40
 20th Message
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 January 27th, 2002

Webster's Dictionary defines hope as "a feeling that what is wanted will happen; desire accompanied by anticipation or expectation." All of us hope for certain things: economic recovery, slimmer waistlines, good marriages, healthy families, godly children. We long for love, acceptance and joy. We have to hope, otherwise we will be swallowed up by darkness and despair.

We especially need hope when life is not turning out the way we thought it would. The Bible offers great words of comfort and encouragement in this regard. Surprisingly, the greatest word of hope in Scripture is given in the book of Jeremiah. In the middle of Jeremiah's doom and gloom prophecy there is a marvelous text to thrill our souls and lift our hearts. As we return to the remarkable and moving words of Jeremiah our focus over the next few weeks will be the Christian's hope in the glorious future that lies ahead for the believer.

Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah from 627 B.C. until the fall of Jerusalem, in 587 B.C. His ministry spanned the reign of five kings of Judah, beginning with Josiah and ending with Zedekiah, one of Josiah's sons (the others were Jehohaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin). Jeremiah was called by God to be his voice of warning to Judah concerning his impending judgment if the nation failed to turn from their disgusting, idolatrous worship of Baal. But the prophet's forty-year ministry was an utter failure. His life was filled with hardship, unbearable pain and unrelenting persecution.

We know from previous studies that this prophecy is largely a book about judgment. Listen to the words that God spoke to Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry, "I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow" (1:10). Despite God's repeated warnings, however, Judah would come under his hand of discipline and be exiled to Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed, and a large portion of Judah's population was carried off to exile at three different junctures.

But God's mission to Jeremiah also included another word, and that was "to build and to plant" (1:10). Chapters 30-33 is the text that raises the hope of a coming day when that building and planting would occur. Chapter 32 indicates that this word from the Lord came to Jeremiah at the end of Zedekiah's reign, just prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. While in exile, Judah could read these words and find comfort in the midst of barrenness. This is why Jeremiah 30-33 is often referred to as the Book of Comfort.

I am now fifty-one years old, and I would have to say that life has not lived up to my expectations. I have tried diligently to order my life according to my wishes – and Hollywood's fantasy at times! I have used all of my ener-

gies to satisfy the longings of my heart. But I have failed in my quest. I have tried even more diligently to order the lives of my children according to my expectations. But I have failed in that too. I feel defeated, discouraged and filled with despair at times. I need a fresh vision that will give me hope, comfort and encouragement. Now this is exactly what Jeremiah offers in these three chapters of his prophecy.

The poetic themes of hope in Jeremiah 30-33 are very beautiful. But they are so intricately interwoven that they demand quiet meditation. What I really would like to do is take a small section of text, have all of us share our longings and desires, and then worship for about an hour. But that is not possible. Instead I will introduce its themes this morning, and ask you to read these four chapters every week for the next four weeks. Then I will ask you to write down your longings and desires and connect them to this text. If you do this, you can be assured that God will speak to you.

The first three verses of chapter 30 introduce the text.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Write all the words which I have spoken to you in a book. For behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and Judah.' The LORD says, 'I will also bring them back to the land that I gave to their forefathers and they shall possess it.'" (Jer 30:1-3, NASB)

Two phrases in chapters 30-33 merit close examination. The first, which is repeated five times, is, "Behold, days are coming":

"For behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and Judah." (30:3a)

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast." (31:27)

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (31:31)

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the city will be rebuilt for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate." (31:38)

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth." (33:14-15)

Judah may be in exile but, "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD. God announces that a day is coming when some dramatic things will happen. Life will change in just one day. Can that really happen? you ask. If you have any doubts, just remember the events of September 11. Our world, our way of life, our plans can all change radically in just one day. On some day yet future God says he will "restore the fortunes of my people Israel and Judah." "Restore the fortunes," repeated eight times in chapters 29-33, is the second critical phrase here. God announces that "days are coming," and with them the promise of restoration.

"Restore the fortunes" literally means, "to turn the turning." The words come from the same Hebrew word to turn or return, a term used in the Old Testament for repentance. The implication is that everything will be reversed. Restoration is certain. Sin, exile, barrenness, even the exiles' desire to turn away from God will be reversed.

Chapters 30, 31 and 33 have many poetic images describing this restoration: land, cities, feasting, worship; things that were very meaningful to the exiled Jews. Let's look at a few of these images:

"And I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you," declares the LORD, "and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile." (29:14)

**"Thus says the LORD,
'Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob
And have compassion on his dwelling places;
And the city will be rebuilt on its ruin,
And the palace will stand on its rightful place.
From them will proceed thanksgiving
And the voice of those who celebrate;
And I will multiply them and they will not be diminished;
I will also honor them and they will not be insignificant.' "** (30:18-19)

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Once again they will speak this word in the land of Judah and in its cities when I restore their fortunes,

**'The LORD bless you, O abode of righteousness,
O holy hill!**

"And Judah and all its cities will dwell together in it, the farmer and they who go about with flocks. For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes." (31:23-25)

"Men will buy fields for money, sign and seal deeds, and call in witnesses in the land of Benjamin, in the environs of Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the lowland and in the cities of the Negev; for I will restore their fortunes," declares the LORD. (32:44)

"Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them; and I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. 'I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. 'I will cleanse them from all their in-

iquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. It will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it."

Thus says the LORD, "Yet again there will be heard in this place, of which you say, 'It is a waste, without man and without beast,' that is, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say,

**'Give thanks to the LORD of hosts,
For the LORD is good,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting';**

and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the LORD. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first," says the LORD. (33:6-11)

**"Again I will build you and you will be rebuilt,
O virgin of Israel!
Again you will take up your tambourines,
And go forth to the dances of the merry-makers.
Again you will plant vineyards
On the hills of Samaria." (31:4-5)**

**"They will come and shout for joy on the height of Zion,
And they will be radiant over the bounty of the LORD—
Over the grain and the new wine and the oil,
And over the young of the flock and the herd;
And their life will be like a watered garden,
And they will never languish again.
Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance,
And the young men and the old, together,
For I will turn their mourning into joy
And will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow.
I will fill the soul of the priests with abundance,
And My people will be satisfied with My goodness,"
declares the LORD. (31:12-14)**

Restoration here is described in physical terms: a return to the land; rebuilt cities; an abundance of vineyards, crops, and animals; freedom and peace; punishment for their enemies; the joy of a wedding feast with instruments playing and people dancing; sorrow completely eclipsed by joy; Rachel will cease from her weeping and be comforted. Restoration will result in a fruitful land and a fruitful people whose satisfied hearts will turn toward God in meaningful worship.

Now when was this prophecy fulfilled, and to whom does it apply? The phrase "Behold, days are coming" refers to the "day of the LORD," or the "last days" as it is called in other O.T. prophecies. It is a day of judgment and a day of salvation. The promise of restoration is made not only to Judah but also to Israel. The people of the northern kingdom are long gone at this point in history. The fact that Israel and Judah are mentioned together means that

this restoration is promised to the entire people of God.

I believe that this coming day is past, present, and future. It was fulfilled when Judah returned to the land from exile in Babylon. The temple was rebuilt; the land was repopulated; Baal worship ceased. But that day never reached the glory and the joy described here.

It was fulfilled again when Jesus ascended the throne of David through his death and resurrection, and he initiated the new covenant in his blood, referred to in chapter 31. The Spirit was poured out and a new humanity created, made up of Jews and Gentiles united together in Christ; a new, living temple was built. In Ephesians, Paul uses this language of building and planting in his description of the church.

And yet, even though we as believers now live in the new covenant, the church has not experienced the utter joy, the absence of sorrow and elimination of idolatry that is depicted in these images. The final fulfillment of Jeremiah's word will come about when the new heavens and new earth are revealed. Jeremiah's text speaks of a day of complete glory and indescribable joy. The vision here is the same as that of the book of Revelation. Every tear will be wiped dry and the people of God will be united in marriage to the Lamb in a ceremony of joy and celebration.

This word is an awesome promise by God to Judah, and to us, too. Despite their idolatry, and the well-deserved judgment that would result, God promises his people a time of utter joy and glory. As believers, we have entered partially into this time even now. We are raised and seated with Christ. The Spirit indwells us. We have begun to taste the glory. But there is more. A time is coming that is beyond anything we can imagine. This is the day that our hearts long for, the day when we will be filled and satisfied. "Behold, days are coming..."

Do you long for joy? Do you long to be delivered from weariness? Do you long for fruitfulness? Do you long to rejoice and dance and sing? Do you want to be surrounded by the watered gardens of Eden? "Behold, days are coming..."

I certainly long for this day, and my longing grows with every year. I don't want to buy any more cars. I don't want to move into a bigger house. I've lost both my parents to cancer and my brother in a car accident. Last year we lost a really close friend. As the years go by I am becoming more and more detached from the things of this world. I long for the glory of heaven, and I want to take as many people with me as possible. "Behold, days are coming..."

Why would God do this for Judah who had played the spiritual harlot? Why would he do this for you and me when our hearts are so prone to wander after broken cisterns that cannot hold water? Our text gives us four insights into God's reasoning.

**"For I will restore you to health
And I will heal you of your wounds," declares the
LORD,
"Because they have called you an outcast, saying:
'It is Zion; no one cares for her.' "** (30:17)

At times people will say of us, "There goes that suffering Christian. Why should I believe in his God? His God doesn't care." God's people are rejected by the world, but

days are coming when they will no longer be outcasts.

Secondly, God is calling out a people for himself and his plan cannot be thwarted.

**"And you shall be My people,
And I will be your God."** (30:22)

God's promise does not depend on us. He is calling out a community that will live with him forever.

The third reason is God's loyal love.

**The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying,
"I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness."**
(31:3)

God's love never ceases. He is committed to us no matter what we do.

But perhaps the most powerful reason is apparent in the following verses:

**"With weeping they will come,
And by supplication I will lead them;
I will make them walk by streams of waters,
On a straight path in which they will not stumble;
For I am a father to Israel,
And Ephraim is My firstborn."** (31:9)

**"Is Ephraim My dear son?
Is he a delightful child?
Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him,
I certainly still remember him;
Therefore My heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him," declares the LORD.**
(31:20)

Israel was God's son, and as believers, we too are his sons and daughters. This Father will come through. He will always be faithful. He will not let go of us. He cannot forsake his children. His heart "yearns" (lit., "his belly roars"). God's insides are churning, so agitated is he in his desire to be with us.

Have you ever had to wait for your teenager to come home at night? It's 1:00 a.m., way past curfew, and you are listening for the sound of a car. You pace the floor. Your belly is roaring as you think of what might have happened. You are mad and worried at the same time. Finally, the door opens and your anger explodes. Then relief replaces anger. You take your child in your arms and say, "I'm so glad you're home safe." This is the kind of love our Heavenly Father has for us, and this is the main reason we can be assured of our hope for a future day.

Listen to these words by James Bryan Smith from his book *Embracing the Love of God*: "I have come to believe that God is madly in love with us. God loves us with a passionate love. It is too great for us to comprehend; we do not have the words to describe it fully. It is too vast to grasp completely. But we can know it. And we can feel it. It is in his hands as he holds us. It is in his gentle words as he comforts us. It is written all over his face."¹

It is the love of this Father for his children that promises a coming day of glory, splendor and fruitfulness.

What is the object of your hope? The last time we studied this book we talked a lot about exile. Remember Jeremiah's letter in chapter 29 to the exiles in Babylon. The

false prophets told the people that they would be in exile for but a short time. But Jeremiah encouraged them to plant vineyards and build homes, because they would be in Babylon quite a while.

When we experience feelings that we are living in exile, that indicates that we are living a life that we don't want to live. Judah was in Babylon because of her sin and judgment. However, we can all identify with being in exile spiritually when we struggle with barrenness, when we long for home, for fruitfulness and joy. When life is not turning out to our satisfaction we tend to place our hope in any idol that promises to fulfill us. There is a definite connection between the idols in our lives and the object of our hope. We listen with great interest to the false prophet who says we don't have to live in exile, that we can have anything we want. But Jeremiah corrects all of that. In exile we become aware of our deep longings, and the prophet connects those longings to heaven. We may be in exile, but we are not without hope.

What a welcome word this must have been to the Jews exiled in Babylon. It is no less welcome to us today. Our dreams may be in shambles, we may ache and suffer, everything we try may disappoint us, but our hope is founded on something that is absolutely certain, something that cannot be touched by the affairs of this world. We are sons and daughters of a loving and merciful Father.

How much do we need this hope? Listen to these words of Emily Dickinson:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,
And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

There is a song in our hearts that keeps us warm, a song that never ceases, even in the midst of a storm. The song that the Spirit sings is a song of glory, restoration, joy and beauty. Is that the song that is in your heart today?

I am not saying that we have to be miserable every day of our lives. And I certainly am not saying that we will never have any joy here on earth. What I am saying is that no matter how good life is we long for something more splendid and glorious. Sensing our desires and longings is not a bad thing. Sad is the person who does not have holy longings. Perhaps it is the Christian who longs the most. Perhaps it would be better to stop expecting to have the perfect Christian life and just long together, waiting for glory. Augustine said, "The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. What you desire ardently, as yet you do not see. So, let us long because we are to be filled... That is our life, to be exercised by longing."² The apostle Peter wrote, "Set your hope on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:13, NIV).

"Behold, days are coming..."

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1. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 2.
2. John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 181.