



LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

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 Jeremiah 32:1-44
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 John Hanneman
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How many of you bought Enron stock recently? Few would consider making such an investment today. That would be utterly foolish. Most people like to play it safe, choosing investments that can reasonably be expected to pay off.

But at times the investor who does something that seems absolutely foolish is the one who reaps the greatest reward. If you could read the Financial Times for ten years from now, you could make some extremely profitable investments. They might look like losers today, but if you were certain of the future, you could invest with full confidence.

In Jeremiah 32 we come to a remarkable story in our studies of this prophecy. Jeremiah makes an utterly foolish investment, but one that was based on an absolute certainty in the future. This text should encourage us to evaluate our Christian experience. Will we risk based upon our future hope, or will we hold back and play it safe?

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. Now at that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard, which was in the house of the king of Judah, because Zedekiah king of Judah had shut him up, saying, "Why do you prophesy, saying, "Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I am about to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will take it; and Zedekiah king of Judah will not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans, but he will surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he will take Zedekiah to Babylon, and he will be there until I visit him," declares the LORD. "If you fight against the Chaldeans, you will not succeed" '?" (Jer 32:1-5, NASB)

In the years 587-586 B.C. the city of Jerusalem was about to fall to the Babylonians. Jeremiah was under arrest for proclaiming God's message of judgment regarding Judah and Zedekiah, her king. The prophet was always getting in trouble with Zedekiah; he didn't take kindly to Jeremiah's predictions. But notice that Zedekiah listened carefully enough to be able repeat the message word for word. He listened, yes, but he was unable to understand. His "Why?" question receives no answer. Jeremiah, falsely charged with collaborating

with the enemy, was shut up in the court of the guard. But he was permitted certain freedoms, including the ability to receive visitors.

And Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle is coming to you, saying, "Buy for yourself my field which is at Anathoth, for you have the right of redemption to buy it.'" Then Hanamel my uncle's son came to me in the court of the guard according to the word of the LORD and said to me, 'Buy my field, please, that is at Anathoth, which is in the land of Benjamin; for you have the right of possession and the redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. I bought the field which was at Anathoth from Hanamel my uncle's son, and I weighed out the silver for him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed the deed, and called in witnesses, and weighed out the silver on the scales. Then I took the deeds of purchase, both the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the sight of Hanamel my uncle's son and in the sight of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, before all the Jews who were sitting in the court of the guard. And I commanded Baruch in their presence, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Take these deeds, this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last a long time." For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land." ' " (Jer 32:6-15)

This delightful narrative, related in extraordinary detail, concerns a transaction between Jeremiah and his cousin Hanamel. God informs Jeremiah that Hanamel will offer to sell him a field in Anathoth, Jeremiah's home town, a stone's throw from Jerusalem. God's prediction is fulfilled. Hanamel approaches Jeremiah because, as a family member, the prophet had the right to buy the field and thus keep it in the family—an important consideration in the Middle East.

Consider the timing of this offer. Jerusalem is under siege. The value of the land is dubious due to the military occupation. Hanamel is being selfish. He is trying to pull a fast one to get some money for the upcoming trip to Babylon. He is acting like a land salesman un-

loading swamp-land in Florida. But Jeremiah knows that this whole exercise is from the Lord. He is humbly open to what God might have him do and thus is neither hurt nor angry at Hanamel's preposterous overture.

Jeremiah proceeds to close the deal with all the formality of signing off on a house closing in Silicon Valley. The purchase price is 17 shekels of silver, roughly 7 ounces. Witnesses are called in to the title company to verify the signing of the deed (which is recorded in duplicate), and the exchange of money. The deed is given to Baruch for storage in a safe deposit box. All the appropriate public proceedings are meticulously followed. There will be no question of illegalities, and no basis for lawsuits. What Jeremiah is doing might seem foolish, but it is all in line with standard protocol.

Buying a field in Anathoth seems foolish, and yet Jeremiah's response is one of obedience and confidence. He is confident that houses, fields and vineyards, the most common elements of economic life, would again be bought and sold in the land of Judah. He is making a long-term investment based upon a future hope. He believes, based on what God said, that there would be life after the exile in Babylon, and he is willing to back up his words with his money.

As Christians, we are called to make long-term investments in a future hope that there will be life after Babylon, just as Jeremiah hoped. There will come a day of complete joy and glory. Now we talk about this a lot, but will we put our money, time, resources and energy where our mouth is? Or will we sell off the future, like Hanamel, so that we can live in comfort in Babylon?

The Christian life is not always practical. Following Christ involves doing certain things that seem foolish. We are not supposed to play it safe. Risk and adventure are part and parcel of the Christian life. Consider Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus. They lived very foolishly for the kingdom of God. According to the apostle Paul, the gospel itself is foolishness: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:18, 21).

In 1983, I left my job as a software engineer to become a pastor. We had three young children. My wife did not work outside our home, and I took a 50 percent pay cut. The move went against all reason. My parents and my wife's parents thought I was crazy. While I had worked long enough to vest a little for retirement, and I had insurance, this was a major risk and a step of faith for me. I could have lived a much safer, more comfortable life. But I can say without hesitation that I wouldn't trade what I did for anything.

But this is not the end of the story about the field. The rest of the chapter is a prayer by Jeremiah, followed

by God's response.

"After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, then I prayed to the LORD, saying, 'Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You, who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God. The LORD of hosts is His name; great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds; who has set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and even to this day both in Israel and among mankind; and You have made a name for Yourself, as at this day.' " (Jer 32:16-20)

Jeremiah begins his prayer with praise and a doxology to God's character and name. God created the heavens and the earth with his outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for this great and mighty God. The prophet recognizes God's fidelity and justice. God shows loyal love but does not overlook iniquity. He is faithful but exactly severe in judgment.

Jeremiah goes on to speak of God's great power in the exodus and the conquest of the land. But God's people did not obey him, so now the outstretched arm that saved Judah will judge her. The prophet concludes:

"Behold, the siege ramps have reached the city to take it; and the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans who fight against it, because of the sword, the famine and the pestilence; and what You have spoken has come to pass; and behold, You see it. You have said to me, O Lord GOD, "Buy for yourself the field with money and call in witnesses"—although the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans.' " (Jer 32:24-25)

Jeremiah recounts all of God's great and mighty deeds, his signs and wonders: the creation, the exodus, the conquest. Nothing is too difficult for God. All of Jeremiah's praise is leading up to a question. At last he gets to the point: "I know that you are a great and powerful God. But are you sure you have this right? Buy a field in Anathoth?" He has doubts about the return from exile. How will he ever be able to make use the field that he has just bought? The real issue may not be the land itself but how this disobedient people will be healed and changed. Maybe some things are just too difficult for God.

The word difficult is often translated "wonderful." It is always used to refer to the great and miraculous deeds of God. When Israel was about to cross the Jordan river, Joshua said to the people: "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" (Josh 3:5). When God told Abraham that Sarah would have a son, Sarah laughed. But God reassured Abraham, and said, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying,

'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult (too wonderful) for the Lord" (Gen 18:13-14). Jeremiah is asking whether the God of wonderful things in the past will be the God of wonderful things in the future.

When I made the change from engineer to pastor, it totally went against my play-it-safe nature. Those first few years were hard. I had very little savings. I didn't know how I would put my children through college, or replace my 1974 Pinto wagon. My family did without a lot of things back then. To put it mildly, my wife and I had a number of discussions over money. My father would always ask when was I going to get a "real" job. It was tough going. More than once I asked God, "Are you sure you have this right? I know that you are a great God, but this seems like a stretch, even for you. How will you do this?" I can relate to Jeremiah. Can you?

Now comes God's response.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?" (Jer 32:26-27)

God answers Jeremiah by asking a rhetorical question. Verse 27 parallels verse 17. "You want to know if anything is too difficult or too wonderful for Me? The answer is no! There is no limit to the wonders I can perform."

God goes on to outline the terrible judgment that will come upon Judah and Jerusalem as a result of their idolatry and Baal worship. Judah's guilt is plain; her discipline will be severe.

But then something amazing will happen: God will restore and heal his people. Nothing is too difficult for him.

"Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety. They shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul. For thus says the LORD, 'Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them. Fields will be bought in this land of which you say, "It is a desolation, without man or beast; it is given into the hand of the Chaldeans." 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 coun-

try, in the cities of the lowland and in the cities of the Negev; for I will restore their fortunes,' declares the LORD." (Jer 32:37-40)

The phrase, "I will restore their fortunes," is used eight times in chapters 29-33. God's people will be gathered and restored to the land. They will be united to him in a new relationship, and they will be united to one another. Their hearts will be changed and they will willingly obey God. He will make a new, everlasting covenant with his people. They will be so changed that they will never turn away again. The fear of the Lord will not be in the Law, but on their hearts. God promises to do them good and to faithfully plant them in the land. What a marvelous word of hope this is!

Finally, God gives Jeremiah the assurance for which he prayed: God will restore their fortunes, and fields will once again be bought and sold throughout the land of Israel. In essence, God says, "Just as I brought destruction in the past, so I will bring healing and restoration in the future. Nothing is too difficult for Me."

Nothing is too difficult for God. Exile can no more curb or limit God's resolve than chaos, bondage or barrenness. God can make the vilest sinner a saint. He can bring life out of death, restoration out of destruction, healing out of sickness. He can even change a human heart. God's ability is so wonderful that it is beyond our ability to grasp.

Let me reiterate what I said two weeks ago. The fulfillment of these promises is three-fold. The first fulfillment occurred when Judah returned from exile; the second when Jesus ushered in the new covenant in his blood; and the third will be on that future day when the new heavens, the new earth and the New Jerusalem appear in glory. Our hope is that what we taste now in the Spirit will be perfected for all eternity, because nothing is difficult, too wonderful for God.

Jeremiah, who was under arrest at the time, bought a field in Anathoth and made a long-term investment. By any standard, his investment was absolutely foolish. But he acted based on a hope in God's promise and his ability to fulfill what he had promised. He was convinced that God was working through Babylon to bring about a great purpose. So certain was he of this that he put his money where his mouth was.

Every day we make investments with our time, money, resources and energy. We make decisions to invest in things temporal or eternal. Some of these decisions defy worldly wisdom. What motivates us to make long-term investments in eternal things is our hope in a glorious future and the fact that nothing is too difficult for God. We can live foolishly because for us, Babylon is not the essential reality.

This isn't easy. We have been led to believe that complete restoration and healing should be ours right now. Our thoughts are consumed with short-term pleasures, successes and blessings. But the hope that we have is not tangible or visible. That is the nature of hope. G. K.

Chesterton said, "As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable."¹

Our hope is based not on what we see, but on what we don't see. The crucifixion took place on Friday and the resurrection on Sunday, but we are living in Saturday. We may be in prison or held captive. We may be under siege or lost in the wilderness. We may be in exile or on our way to exile. But our current struggles and difficulties are leading us somewhere. Our hope is that Sunday is coming, and we are to invest in that reality. Why would we be so foolish? Because nothing is too difficult for God! The God who created the universe, who saved Israel out of Egypt, who raised Jesus from the dead, is the same God who takes us all the way to glory. That is our hope.

We can take this hope all the way to the bank, because God says it is certain:

**Thus says the LORD,
Who gives the sun for light by day
And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for
light by night,
Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;
The LORD of hosts is His name:
"If this fixed order departs
From before Me," declares the LORD,
"Then the offspring of Israel also will cease
From being a nation before Me forever."
Thus says the LORD,
"If the heavens above can be measured
And the foundations of the earth searched out below,
Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel
For all that they have done," declares the LORD. (Jer
31:35-37)**

God is the God of everything that is constant, like the moon, the stars, and the sun, and everything that is constantly changing, like the roaring waves of the sea. To think that his promise will not be fulfilled is the most preposterous thing we could imagine.

Listen to these words of Eugene Peterson:

Every situation in which we find ourselves must be included in the kingdom that we are convinced God is bringing into being. Hope is buying into what we believe. We don't turn away in despair. We don't throw up our hands in disgust. We don't write this person off as incorrigible. We don't withdraw from a complex world that is too much for us. It is, of course, far easier to languish in despair than to live in hope, for when we live in despair we don't have to do anything or risk anything. We can live lazily and shiftlessly with an untarnished reputation for practicality, current with the way things appear. It is fashionable to espouse the latest cynicism. If we live in hope, we go against the stream.²

What is the basis of your hope? Is it vibrant enough to buy a field in Anathoth? Is it wild enough to live foolishly for Jesus? to take a week of vacation to go to Mexicali? to call up an enemy and take him to lunch? to forgive your spouse? to study the Bible instead of the Wall Street Journal? Is your hope strong enough to go against the stream, and brave enough to believe that God can heal and restore your heart? Remember, nothing is too difficult for God.

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1. G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1905), 114.

2. Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 177.