

## FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

A man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothes and left him badly wounded. A priest came along, looked at the man and hurried on by. A Levite came along next, and passed by on the other side of the road. Lastly, along came a psychiatrist, who stopped and looked down at the injured man with scientific interest. “Oh dear, dear!” he exclaimed. “Whoever did this, needs help!”

That’s the way it is today – we blame our misfortunes on anyone and anything, but never on the sin that caused them. In the ancient times of my childhood sin was sin, and deserved a resounding slap on the bottom. Today it’s your parents, your teachers, your friends, or the government, that has spoilt the perfect life you deserve.

But come to think of it, is this blame-game so modern? Suddenly I remember that Adam played it too: he didn’t have any parents to blame, so he blamed his wife, who, in turn, blamed the serpent. Maybe it’s been humanity’s way all along.

It certainly was so with the nation of Israel. Under Solomon’s rule she reached the peak of her power and prosperity, but when his son Rehoboam acted as the dictator, the nation split, the ten northern tribes appointing a king of their own, and leaving the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to maintain the kingly line descended from David. For the next 200 years the two kingdoms co-existed uneasily, with Israel becoming more and more evil until, under the judgement of God, they were conquered by the Assyrians and taken into captivity, never to recover entirely as a nation.

Judah continued on, self-righteous in her worship of God, even if it was rather sporadic. After all, she had the Temple, she had the truly lineal monarch, and she had the covenant of God. But her heart was not right before God. Granted, there were revivals in the reigns of godly kings, notably Josiah, but when Josiah’s ungodly son Jehoiakim ascended the throne, God sent the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Judah with a solemn warning that, because they had not listened to His repeated admonitions, they were soon to suffer the same fate as their Israelite brothers.

***Read Jeremiah 25:1-14. Can you see God’s mercy there, interwoven with His judgement?***

### **So, what happened to the Covenant?**

The prophecy was exactly fulfilled. In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, destroyed their city and their Temple, and carried them off to his pagan home of Babylon. And what a-weeping and a-wailing was there! Bereft of their homeland, physical and spiritual, and the comforting ritual of their worship in the Temple, the people of Judah cried long and loud. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion”, they record in Psalm 137. “There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

Of course, in their misery they were quick to pass the buck. In Lamentations 1:12 we read, “Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the Lord brought on me in the day of His fierce anger?” And again in chapter 2:20, “Look, O Lord, and consider: whom have you ever treated like this?” Where now were all the covenants the Lord had made with His people?

***How often have you heard people blame God, for catastrophes such as wars, earthquakes etc., or for personal tragedies, whether or not they resulted from their own sin? How often have you heard people thank Him for all His constant goodness? Do we treat God fairly?***

Yet, even though they had ignored the teaching of Jeremiah, that faithful prophet still sent a message to the exiles. Instructed by God, he urged them to settle down in Babylon, build houses, raise families, enter their business world and actually pray for the peace and prosperity of the city. In hindsight we can see their time in Babylon as a training ground for them to develop from a nation of farmers to one of adroit merchants and businessmen – skills that would stand them in good stead later as they rebuilt their nation.

***Read Jeremiah 29:10-14.***

Amazingly, right in the midst of their punishment, God gave them through Jeremiah a ray of hope, “This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you .... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.....You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you .... and will bring you back from captivity.’”

God had not forgotten His covenant with His people. In fact, it was about to be widened in scope, enhanced in meaning, fulfilled in part whilst pointing to the ultimate fulfilment that God intended. It was, in fact, coming into that springtime of fruition where the tiny budding leaves on a seemingly dead twig, give promise of the glorious flowers to come.

***One of the outstanding proofs that the Bible is true, comes through prophecy that was fulfilled to the exact detail. The Jewish captivity did indeed last 70 years, just as God had said. Can you think of other amazing examples of such prophecies, fulfilled exactly, in the Bible?***

***Was that seventy years a waste of time for the Jews, or was it used by God for His own purposes?***

**A new covenant.**

***Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.***

God sets the scene in verse 3 when He says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” and then proceeds to show them a future glorious with hope, in verses 31-34. “The time is coming”, declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” They had broken His covenant yet He would establish with them a new covenant where “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people .... I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Their relationship with God would be not a mere outward obedience to the letter of the Law, but an inward response of love and trust to the God Who first loved them.

***Actually, God had already set this out as the ideal. Read Deuteronomy 10:12,13 and then verse 19: what was the central requirement in their relationship to God and their fellow-men?***

***Read Matthew 22:34-40. This is Jesus’s confirmation of God’s ideal. Again, what is the central requirement in our relationship to God and our neighbour?***

So were the original covenants to be discounted? No way! Those great covenants stand today as landmarks of the faithfulness of God and God Himself referred to them as proof of that faithfulness.

In fact, in that chapter 31 He goes on to refer right back to His covenant with Noah – “He who appoints the sun to shine by day ... the moon and stars to shine by night ... Only if these decrees vanish from My sight, will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before Me.”

***Read Jeremiah 31:35-37, then check back to Genesis 8:22 .***

Back in chapter 30:3 in His word to the exiles, God harks back to His promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:7, “To your offspring I will give this land,” when He says, “The days are coming when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess.”

**Read Jeremiah 30:18-22**, where God gives details of that triumphant return. Verse 21 says, “Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to Me, for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me? declares the Lord.” The leader who did in fact bring back the exiles, as God had promised, was none other than Zerubbabel, a direct descendant of David, who actually was respected as a prince by the authorities in Babylon. He was one of the people of Judah, and as being in the royal line, it was fitting that he should be the one to supervise the re-building of God’s temple.

**Read the following passages to see the significance of Zerubbabel:- Ezra 2:2, Ezra 3:1-2, Zechariah 4:6-9, Matthew 1:1,12, 16.**

But, to coin a phrase, “Wait, there’s more!” That word “ruler” in verse 21 is rendered by the Targum (ancient translations and writings on the Old Testament books) “Messiah” and now we see a whole new meaning to the passage. We can trace the line of Zerubbabel right down to Jesus, One who indeed rose from among the people yet who was in the royal line of David. As Zerubbabel led the captives to freedom, so Jesus has set us free from sin so that we may lead a new life in Him. (See Romans chapter 6). As Zerubbabel built the new temple, so Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church!” And as for the next sentence in verse 21, “I will bring him near and he will come close to Me,” it was Jesus, through His death, who was able to tear down the temple veil that separated man from God and make the way for man to come near to God unhindered. (**Read Matthew 27:51 and Hebrews 10:19-23.**)

Here we glimpse the great significance of the covenants. In their own way they all point to Christ! We see it in the mercy’s sign of the rainbow, we see it in the blessing of all nations through Abraham, we see it in the Passover Lamb, we see it in the Shepherd-King. And here we see it in the deliverance of the captives from bondage – not just from Babylon, but from the inward chains of sin which Christ would accomplish through His death. Each covenant, like a milestone, points to the past but also to the future.

**Read Romans 8:1-4. Jesus said, in Matthew 5:17, that He had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it. We fulfil the Law’s requirements as we obey God out of love and by the power of His Holy Spirit. In so doing, we fulfil the promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34.**

### **Hope for Israel.**

In Jeremiah 30 and in several other places, God speaks of Israel and Judah as being reunited. There was a remnant of Israelites who had been left in the land, who remained faithful to Jehovah, and who joined with the people of Judah in renewing worship and nationhood once the exiles of Judah had come back home. Back in the reign of Judah’s godly king Josiah, some Israelites had celebrated the renewed sacrament of Passover with the people of Judah, (2 Chronicles 35: 16-19) and later, at the completion and dedication of the temple, Ezra offered as a sin offering 12 male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. (Ezra 6:17.)

**We see the unity that binds the Jewish people strongly today. Can we as Christians have that same unity? Read John 17:20,21. Can we also have unity with our Jewish friends? Zechariah 10:4 says that from Judah will come the cornerstone and Isaiah is speaking to Israel when he says in Isaiah 28:16 that the one who trusts in this precious cornerstone will never be dismayed. (Ephesians 2:20 calls Christ Jesus the chief cornerstone.) Paul quotes this verse in**

***Romans chapters 9 and 10; read Romans 10:11-13. Is Israel still God's chosen people? Can Gentile Christians regard themselves as God's chosen people too? (See 1 Peter 2:9,10)***

In Jeremiah chapter 30, verse 11 outlines God's promise – "I am with you and will save you ... though I completely *destroy all the nations* among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice." And in chapter 31, verses 10,11, God continues, "He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over His flock like a shepherd. For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they." Where are Assyria and Babylonia today? Yet tiny Israel survives in the midst of the powerful, hostile nations surrounding her.

Ezekiel too was given a message from God for the exiles. In Ezekiel 11:17, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered and I will give you back the land of Israel again." The new temple was dedicated in 516 B.C.- exactly 70 years after Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the one built by Solomon, and the nation was reborn. Ezekiel goes on to say in verse 18, "They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols," and it is a fact that the Jewish nation has never again resorted to any form of idol worship. It is also significant that, during the couple of decades from 1948, when modern Israel was acknowledged as a nation, Jewish people returned from Britain, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen to the land of Israel, the land of their forefathers!

**The scope of the New Covenant.**

In Jeremiah chapter 32, as Jeremiah grieves over the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, God comes to him with an encouragement which, though meant primarily for Israel, also points to His purpose for the world. Verse 26 says, "Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, 'I am the Lord, *the God of all mankind*. Is anything too hard for Me?'" Israel was God's special race, but only within the larger scope of God's plan for all humanity. We see this again in chapter 33, verse 6-9, where God promises restoration to Judah and Israel: "Then the city will bring Me renown, joy, praise and honour *before all nations on earth* that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it." Israel would be redeemed from captivity not just for herself – she, the guardian of the Word of God, the nation to whom the Messiah would come, would be the channel through which God would demonstrate the true prosperity and peace that comes only from Him, through Jesus Christ. Thus God's Name would be renowned among the nations of the world. His plan of love encompasses us all!

**The Christ of the New Covenant.**

***Read Jeremiah 33:14-16.***

Here God promises that Israel and Judah shall have a king again, from the line of David, a just and righteous Branch, and his name will be "The Lord Our Righteousness." This is one of the most important Messianic passages in all of Jeremiah: it undoubtedly refers to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Verse 17 goes on to point to the enduring nature of this promise, "that David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, nor will the priests ... ever fail to have a man to stand before Me ... to present sacrifices." We have only to look at Revelation 11:15 to read, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever." And in Hebrews 7:24, 25 (written to the Jewish people to impress on them the scope of God's salvation) we read "Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them." Jesus, forever our King and our Priest!

Once again God cites His covenant with Noah – “My covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth” as a witness to His word in Jeremiah 33:22 – “I will make the descendants of David my servant” (i.e. kings) “and the Levites who minister before Me” (i.e. priests) “as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.” That might sound incredible, until we turn to Revelation 1:5,6 – “To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be *a kingdom and priests* to serve his God and Father – to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” Countless, and measureless, is the company of the redeemed through Jesus Christ!

***In what way are we “kings” and “priests” as we follow and serve Jesus our Lord?***

In Jeremiah 32:37-41 God lays the new covenant before Jeremiah, whose mind surely must have been completely boggled! “They will be My people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear Me for their own good *and the good of their children after them*. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and *I will inspire them* to fear Me, so that they will never turn away from Me. I will rejoice in doing them good.” The covenant that applied to Israel then, would stand throughout the centuries of succeeding generations, broadening out to include all the believers in Jesus Christ.

“I will inspire them,” says God. As Scripture is described by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 as inspired, or God-breathed, so God breathes His Holy Spirit into His children, enabling them to respond with “singleness of heart and action.” The breath of God, the Holy Spirit, at work then for the good of God’s people Israel, today is at work in the hearts of God’s people, the followers of His Son Jesus Christ. The new covenant is supremely a covenant of love – the everlasting, unchanging love of God who delights to give us joy that is eternal as we respond to His love.

We have seen that each covenant stands alone yet points ahead, interacting to make one complete whole, fulfilled in part yet still looking ahead for ultimate fulfilment. And God refers to them all as if to say, “Look how many promises I have made. Have I broken any of them? Can’t you trust Me to keep My promises for the future?” Hebrews 10:23 declares that God Who promises, is faithful. Chapter 13:20 says, “The God of peace, through the blood of the *eternal covenant*, brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus” – the risen and glorified Christ brings to perfect culmination all the covenants of God.

This might be a good place to stop – but there is one quite exciting thing left to say. The covenants bring blessing to us, but, as with Abraham, with Israel and with David, it is so that we - mumbling, bumbling, stumbling creatures - can pass on that blessing to others. We could never do it on our own. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, that our competence comes, through Christ, from God, who has made us ministers of a new covenant!

Doesn’t that take your breath away? We have a God-given part to play in the unfolding of the great covenants of God! What can we do but fall down and worship Him, as Paul did in his great doxology of Romans 11:33-36, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgements, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.”

**Prayer and Praise.**

***Let the verses above be your praise. Praise God that He has condescended to use you! Pray that you will be faithful to the great ministry He has given you, that others may come to be part of His great covenant of love for them.***

