

## The Glory Of God's Eternal Purpose

Valley Center January 12, 2008

If someone were looking for a message of encouragement and hope, I don't think many would look into life and times of Jeremiah. Things looked anything but hopeful then! In fact, things had pretty much fallen apart. But, our study today comes from the period in which Jeremiah served as prophet to the kingdom of Judah, and where one of the most precious messages of hope ever written is found.

We're told that the human eye can detect on a dark night the light of a single candle from a distance of 30 miles (Richard A. Swenson, M. D., More Than Meets The Eye, p. 34). The passage we're going to look at was like a light in a dark place. And don't be misled—even though this was written about 2600 years ago, it is very relevant to our lives today. That's why this Book is so priceless! God miraculously preserved these writings because He knew we would need them in 2008. To study divine history and the dealings of God with His people in the past is to gain insight into our own situation and need.

Who was Jeremiah, when did he live and what were things like then? Jeremiah (his name means "Yahweh exalts") lived during a very tumultuous time. Things were in total upheaval. His ministry covered the period just before and during the invasion of Babylon against Judah, from 626 B.C. to 586 B.C. It was a time of great crisis and national peril. The future seemed uncertain. And, to make matters worse there were many contradictory voices that made things confusing.

What had brought them to this point? For centuries, God, through His messengers, He had been trying to call His people back into relationship with Him. He had planted them in the Promised Land and strategically located them at the crossroads of the world to model His principles and thereby draw all peoples into knowledge of His great purpose, which was and always has been, a loving relationship with Him through which He would bless and guide them, and prepare them for eternity.

But the nation of His choosing had chosen otherwise. Instead of giving Him glory and gratitude for His blessings, they had allowed these blessings to pull them away from Him. They had allowed themselves to be drawn into patterns of false worship that glorified

material things, and gave credit for His creatorship and sustenance to objects of wood and stone. In many ways they had become worse than the heathen nations whom God had dispossessed. They had fallen prey to greed, materialism, injustice, violence and every form of selfishness. They had lost sight of His divine purpose.

Because of this situation, God saw no other way to get their attention than to allow them to suffer the discipline of foreign invasion. If they chose not to listen to His messages of love and warning through verbal means, perhaps they would listen to His voice of discipline through the tones of calamity. He would suffer with them, as any parent would, in giving correction to a disobedient child, but it was done in charity and not vengeance. It would break His heart to pull back His defenses and allow Nebuchadnezzar and His armies to come and bring destruction, but He had a reason for doing so.

During this painful process, He inspired His messengers to lay before the people clearly the divine purpose in their circumstances and to constantly hold before them the objective of the divine goal. Faithfully Daniel represented Him before the king who accomplished the disciplinary action, Nebuchadnezzar. Loyally Ezekiel ministered to the captives in Babylon and held forth God's majestic plan. And steadfastly Jeremiah counseled the people of Judah who had been left behind regarding God's long range purpose in this situation.

Yes, the times were confusing and chaotic, but like a beam of light in a dark cave the message of God brought hope to the willing listener. To many, the fact that a foreigner had come and invaded their homeland, destroyed their beautiful temple built by King Solomon, killed thousands of their people and taken nearly all the rest captive was beyond comprehension. How could God allow this to happen? Did He still care for them? Their minds spun with the bewildering happenings. It seemed as baffling as "wheels within wheels." So the Lord graciously gave to His messenger Ezekiel in Babylon, with the captives, a view of the situation from His perspective, showing that although things might look confusing from the human point of view, God was still on the throne and in charge (See Ezekiel 1).

What had happened to their glorious kingdom? Where was the magnificence of David's throne, the majesty of the scepter of Solomon? What had happened to mighty Israel and Judah and where was God in all this? Through His prophet Daniel in the court of Babylon, God brought assurance that though kingdoms might rise and fall, He was still in charge and there was a point to "all this".

Now the land was desolate. The city was in rubble. The "kingdom" was but a skeleton of her former splendor. Only a small remnant wandered among the ruins of the once powerful nation. Was there nothing left? Was there nothing to look forward to? Was there any reason to have hope? At this very time, when things looked so dismal, through the voice of His delegate Jeremiah He brought a precious message of hope.

God had not forgotten His people! In one of His messages, He showed Jeremiah a vision of figs, good and bad, and let him know that "Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place *for their own good* into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart." Jeremiah 24:5-7. Notice that the restoration of the material blessings was tied to spiritual regeneration. The return to their homeland was tied to their return to Him.

Clearly Jeremiah explained to them why these things had to have happened. "From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the LORD has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said 'Repent now every one of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hand; and I will not harm you. Yet you have not listened to Me,' says the LORD, 'that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt.'" Jeremiah 25:3-7.

But even within this experience, He would be with them. He would be with the people suffering the **three-fold invasion** and punishment.

Nebuchadnezzar came in 605 B.C. and took some of the royalty captive to Babylon, including **Daniel**.

Nebuchadnezzar came in 597 B.C. and took many of the craftsmen and working class citizens to Babylon, including **Ezekiel**.

Nebuchadnezzar came in 586 B.C. and took most everyone else, but left the "poorest of the land" as a remnant in Judah, including **Jeremiah**.

Just as He was *with* the **three** Hebrews in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, He would be *with* His people in this **three**-fold fiery furnace trial of captivity and would bring them through it, if they would be faithful to Him.

To impress upon their minds the reality of His messages, Jeremiah was conscripted to illustrate the sermons in action.

He was compelled to make for himself "yokes and bonds" and wear them, showing the certainty of this coming captivity. (See Jeremiah 27:2) Try to imagine if the pastor were to go about his work every day, and in the pulpit with hand cuffs and leg chains!

He was instructed to purchase a piece of property at full price, at a time when it seemed that because of the invasions and captivities all property was next to worthless. (See Jeremiah 32)

Jeremiah (remember he was left back in Judah) was told to write a letter of encouragement to the captives taken to Babylon, and it is within this letter that we find the passage we'll look at today. Here it is: "For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity." Jeremiah 29:10-14.

### **Seventy Years**

As we look at the message the Lord gave, we might ask, why "seventy years"? Was that just a number chosen at random? The Bible gives us a clear answer: "And those who escaped from the sword he (Nebuchadnezzar) carried away to Babylon, where they became

servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years." II Chronicles 36:20, 21.

Apparently one of the major reasons why the Lord allowed this captivity was because of His people's disregard concerning the Sabbath. They violated His command regarding the weekly seventh-day Sabbath as well as the years of Sabbath-rest the land was to enjoy every seven years and at the time of the Jubilee. The prophet had told them "If you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched." Jeremiah 17:27.

To imprint on their minds the significance of His commands, the Lord chose a period of seventy years for the captivity, to "make up for" the lost years of Sabbath-rest the land had experienced.

### **I Will Visit You**

What a message of hope in a time of despair! This verse is like the John 14:1-3 in the New Testament, when Jesus promised, "I will come again." Despite their sins, despite their rebellion, despite their failure to live up to the divine calling, God was telling them that He had not forgotten them. He would "visit" them. This is such an important word, a word that conveys a critical concept that it deserves a few moments of our time.

The Hebrew word translated "visit" is *paqad*, and comes from a root which means "to look" or "inspect." The way that it is used many times in the Bible implies not only God's "looking," but "looking into" and "looking out for" the interests of this world, be they good or bad. It means that God, according to the justice of His divine timetable, becomes **directly involved and takes direct action** in the happenings of this globe. This was a concept that was largely unappreciated in the ancient world, where it was thought the gods were basically unconcerned with the things that took place on this earth. Let's see how this word is used in the Bible.

Used in the *negative sense*, God is portrayed as "looking into" the wicked affairs of this earth and "visiting" or "visiting upon" evil doers the just reward of their sins.

This is the word that is seen in the second commandment when it speaks of the Lord, "*visiting* the iniquity" to the third and fourth generations. Exodus 20:5.

The Lord told Israel after the golden calf transgression, "Nevertheless, in the day when I *visit* for punishment, I will *visit* punishment upon them for their sin." Exodus 32:34.

This verb is used in a host of other passages indicating the Lord's direct involvement for correction, discipline and punishment (See for example Isaiah 10:3; Isaiah 23:17; Isaiah 24:22; Isaiah 26:14; Jeremiah 5:9, 29; 6:6, 15; Ezekiel 38:8; Hosea 9:7; Micah 7:9.).

On the other hand, many are the texts that point us to God's direct involvement in the matters of this earth in a positive way.

"And the LORD *visited* Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him." Genesis 21:1. The Lord took action and Isaac was born!

"And Joseph said to his brethren, 'I am dying; but God will surely *visit* you and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.'" Genesis 50:24.

Moses at the bush was told by the Lord, "Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying "I have surely *visited* you and seen what is done to you in Egypt.'" Exodus 3:16. The Lord took action and Israel was delivered from Egypt!

"But the LORD *visited* Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters." I Samuel 2:21. When Hannah dedicated her miracle son Samuel to the Lord, He responded by giving five more children to the one who had been called barren.

The Lord promised restoration for His people: "For the LORD of hosts will *visit* His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them as His royal horse in the battle." Zechariah 10:3.

The coming of God in the person of Jesus Christ to this world, although recognized by only a few, was the greatest incidence of God's involvement on this planet. By His coming, God was saying, "I know. I have seen. I'm going to do something about it." The New Testament word translated "visit" has the same idea as the Hebrew word. It is *episkopos* (all of our words which have "scope" come from this root),

which means, "to look over" or "to look out for." This was highlighted twice in the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has *visited* and redeemed His people. Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has *visited* us." Luke 1:68, 78.

This was recognized by some during the ministry of Jesus. After bringing to life the son of the widow of Nain, "great fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us'; and, 'God has *visited* His people.'" Luke 7:16.

Jesus lamented that this personal involvement of God in His coming to earth was missed by most. He said the days would come when Roman armies would level Jerusalem "because you did not know the time of your *visitation*." Luke 19:44.

In our passage of study, the Lord promised them that He would *visit*; that is, He would "look over," "look into" and "look out for" His people following the seventy years of discipline and perform His "good word" toward them and cause them to return to their homeland.

### **I Know My Thoughts Toward You**

Why would God "become involved" and "take direct action" in these matters? The answer is explicitly given. Those who think that the God of the Old Testament is vengeful and stern somehow miss the beautiful expressions of His character of love such as this one! Listen to these words and hear God speaking to ***your*** heart. "I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." Can words be found that picture His heart of love in a clearer way? The truth is that the same God Who hung on the cross spoke through the prophets in Old Testament times. There is no difference. The message was always the same because He is the same always. His government is based on the same principle of love throughout the history of the universe.

God's glorious purpose for them would be fulfilled if they would return to Him, pray to Him and seek Him. "Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity." The message was clear: God would not accept a heart with divided allegiance. A full and complete surrender was required.

Back in Jeremiah's day, He yearned to see them "return" to Him. He took a personal interest in all that went on. He was not ignorant of their situation! The prophet himself was told that he had been "groomed from the womb" for his particular role in the redemptive purpose of God. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5.

The omnipotent God of the universe had stooped to take a personal interest in the affairs of Judah and seek their well-being. How it must have grieved His great heart of love to witness the continual self-seeking, self-serving habits His people were following! It was not His will that Nebuchadnezzar come with his battering rams and catapults and destroy what had been built! But because they had chosen to reject Him they would suffer His discipline, but He would have them know that:

It was given in love

It was given reluctantly, only after years of patient forbearance

It was given because they had chosen their own path

He would be with them every step of the process

He had a plan of hope and restoration

This plan would be fulfilled if they returned to Him and sought Him with all their heart

Because He only accepts the allegiance His creatures given by free will, the Lord's great promise of hope through Jeremiah was conditioned upon their acceptance and obedience. A great future awaited them if they would follow His leading! There **was** reason to hope and rejoice despite gloomy surroundings!

Twenty-six centuries later, the word of the Lord through Jeremiah speaks to us today. This passage has every bit of relevance to us in 2008 as it did back then. The situation is not very different.

We live a chaotic, confusing world. For many, life is spinning in pointless circles without meaning. There is much that perplexes the human mind. We may not be worrying about Nebuchadnezzar and his siege engines, but many have questions today: Will global warming, food shortages, overpopulation, nuclear warfare, new diseases or fuel depletion threaten our existence? With a falling housing market and rising oil prices, are we on the cusp of economic collapse and a return to depression? Will a radical Islamic terrorist attack jeopardize us in the days to come? I met a man while golfing some time ago who worked for Homeland Security. He was quite high up in the system,

and when I asked him (this was a short time after 9/11) what he felt about the safekeeping of our country in the future, he replied soberly, "I see no cause for optimism." When you think of how vulnerable our society is, you can understand his point. The fact is that the problems of this world will not be solved before Jesus comes. ***We need the message of Jeremiah today!***

Besides national and international concerns, each of us has his own or her own personal challenges. Many face a crisis with respect to finances, health needs, relationship issues, work problems or family problems. ***We need the message of Jeremiah today!***

Many struggle with guilt, spiritual problems and set backs. How can I be accepted by God? Can He forgive my sins? How can I know I have eternal life? Can God re-make my heart and change my thoughts and life patterns so that I am like Christ? ***We need the message of Jeremiah today!***

When it looks like things are falling apart, as it did in Jeremiah's day when it looks like "collapse" is the forecast, God is there. When it looks like there's no cause for optimism, as was in the day of Jeremiah, God promises hope. When it seems that He's distant and uncaring, He promises to become involved and take direct action.

Like many in Jeremiah's lifetime, today many are living as if there is no God in heaven. They live as if this world will continue day after day and year after year. The purpose of life, as they see it, is to gather as much of this earth's goods as they are able and heap upon themselves as much pleasure as they can. "Eat, drink and be merry" is the predominant philosophy of the age. They are looking for solutions to their problems in capsules or bottles. They refuse to look to Him for answers. They refuse to give Him glory as Creator God. They reject the premise that He is involved and will take direction action in the things of this earth. They deny His promise that this life is but an interruption in eternity and that soon He will come to usher in the grand hereafter. By their lives, if not by their lips, they say, "There is no God."

In contrast to that approach to life, God says, "I know you. I knew everything about you, even before you were born. My thoughts to you are born in love. They are thoughts of peace and not of evil. My plans for you are good and full of hope. If you will return to Me, seek Me, pray to Me and search for me with all your heart, I will fulfill all your needs. I will pardon your sins. I will cause My Spirit to live in you

so you will walk in My ways. And I will visit you on that Day and take you home with Me to live forever.”

So I ask you—is your world falling apart? Do uncertainty, anxiety and foreboding knock at your door? May I invite you to believe in this God of purpose and hope? May I invite you to call upon Him, to pray to Him, to seek Him and search for Him with all your heart?