

Remembering to Ask

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a nine-part series

September 4, 2011

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Jeremiah 33:1–9 (NIV)

While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him a second time: ²“This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it—the LORD is his name: ³‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.’ ⁴For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the houses in this city and the royal palaces of Judah that have been torn down to be used against the siege ramps and the sword ⁵in the fight with the Babylonians: “They will be filled with the dead bodies of the people I will slay in my anger and wrath. I will hide my face from this city because of all its wickedness.

⁶“Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. ⁷I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. ⁸I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. ⁹Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor 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.’

Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-24 (NRSV)

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^a for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, . . .

^aor *through the faith of Jesus Christ* [This footnoted translation is now dominant among North American Pauline scholars, including Grieb, Keck, Hays, and many others as well, such as N. T. Wright. I believe that this “faith of Jesus Christ” translation is one of the keys to a truer and more meaningful reading of Romans].

Ask yourself this simple question: Is anything too hard for God? There is so much that God wants us to know, if only we will ask. If only we will ask.

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.

Don’t you 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

¹Anthony Saldarini’s reflections on this passage are very helpful. His commentary is part of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, the twelve volume set that is part of the St. Andrew library.

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 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.

Seeing out of the darkness

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

We saw in early weeks of this series that 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.

What's the "Long Game"

Underlying all God's promises is the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, perhaps more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the OT, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

Abraham is not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. Jesus' disciples were not chosen for their sake alone but for the sake of the whole world. The same is true for you and me. We have been saved for a purpose larger than ourselves.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. . . . But it all began with that promise to Abraham.

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," 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 headed over the cliff, but God will still be there in the midst of the wreckage: “For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy on them.”

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 for 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 for 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.

Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself, taking on a full-blooded humanity? If your answer to these questions is “to save us,” you are right so far as it goes. But God’s rescue involves far more than just ourselves. It is the keeping of those promises that God made long before.

Seeing Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection as the demonstration that God not only makes promises but keeps them is the key theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written the scroll of Jeremiah, “I [God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

But they had waited a long time and it was natural for some to wonder if God’s promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren’t really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn’t really love God and neighbor every day.

Yet God had made the promise. And, for Paul, God is righteous and had kept the promises he had made – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. In a sense, Jesus was the “righteousness of God” in the flesh. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus’ own faithfulness all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the promise maker, but the promise keeper. In Christ, God’s covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

To reiterate, God’s righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

So God waits for Jeremiah to ask. Does that seem a bit frustrating to you? Why wouldn't God just tell Jeremiah all that he needs to know? What is the real value in expecting Jeremiah to ask? What might this say to us about our relationship with God, our own prayers?

Much is made of God's promises. I have several books devoted only to listing such promises. What would make your "top ten" list of God's promises? Do you think that we sometimes create such "promises of God" ourselves? Around what topics? Health? Prosperity? What do you really think God has promised you? What has he given you?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 36 The scrolls of Jeremiah	Tuesday, Jeremiah 39 The fall of Jerusalem and Jeremiah's fate
Wednesday, Jeremiah 42 Jeremiah and the "remnant of Judah"	Thursday, Jeremiah 32-44 Jeremiah in Egypt
Friday, Jeremiah 52 (the final chapter of the book) The fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The current series:

Culture Soup: hidden stories that shape our lives

Sept 4 – "Salvation by Therapy"

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Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We have just begun a new study of the gospel of John.

Join us whenever you can.

This is very "drop-in." Bring a lunch if you like
Bring a study Bible.

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Scott Engle is leading a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2011.

60 St. Andrew folks are going! There are still a few places open.

In addition to Israel, we will visit the Pyramids, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. It will be quite an experience. There is still time to join us.

For more information, go to www.scottengle.org.

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