

Jeremiah 31:26-40 "Living in Light of the Future" **

Main Idea: In Jeremiah 31, we discover the transforming power of living in light of the future. In Jeremiah 31:26-40 the Lord gave Jeremiah three promises regarding the future that brought great refreshment to him in the very difficult present in his life.

The Setting: Jeremiah's present situation was challenging.

1. He knew God's judgment was coming.
2. He received a vision of the future that refreshed him (26).

I. Promise #1: I will restore my people (27-30).

- A. The Lord said He wasn't through with His disobedient people (27).
- B. The Lord said He was going to build and plant Israel again (28).
- C. The Lord said that changes were coming (29-30).
 1. People won't blame their problems on the sins of others (29).
 2. People will deal with their own sins (30).

II. Promise #2: I will make a new covenant with my people (31-34).

- A. The new covenant isn't like the old covenant (31-32).
 1. Under the old covenant, God was like a husband to His people.
 2. Under the old covenant, Israel was like an unfaithful wife.
- B. Under the new covenant the Lord changes people inside out (33-34).
 1. He puts His law on our hearts (33a).
 2. He establishes a permanent relationship with us (33b).
 3. He enables us to know Him personally (34a).
 4. He removes the sin barrier that once separated us (34b).

III. Promise #3: I will preserve my people (35-40).

- A. The Lord guaranteed that He wasn't done with the nation of Israel (35-36).
- B. The Lord guaranteed that He wouldn't reject all the descendants of Israel (37).
- C. The Lord guaranteed that He had plans for the city of Jerusalem (38-40).
 1. He used the nation to give us the Messiah.
 2. He used the city to give us the cross.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself two life-changing questions...

1. Am I living in light of what God did in the past?
2. Am I living in light of what God will do in the future?

This past Wednesday evening while I was winding down and heading for bed the phone rang. I heard a hesitation on the other end of the line which let me know it was probably a telemarketer. It turned out to be some organization taking a political survey. The young man asked me a host of questions, but two in particular stick in my mind. One went something like, "*Are things in the state of Ohio getting better or getting worse?*" And the other was, "*In your opinion, what's the biggest problem in the state of Ohio?*"

If asked, how would you answer those questions? I could tell that the fellow who asked me could care less about my answers—it was just his job to click off the required questions to get his paycheck. But the questions are certainly worthy of our attention.

What do you think about the future, specifically the future of our state and country and world? Which words first come to your mind? Are things *getting better* or *getting worse*?

I told the man I was concerned about the issue of *morality* in our state. He asked me to repeat the word, like he hadn't heard it before. "Oh, okay, *morality*," he said. "Next question."

And that sort of sums up the way things are these days. It's the economy that matters, right? What we need most are better jobs and the assurance of financial security. But morality? Who cares about morality? As if there's no connection between the direction of our economy and morality.

We would do well to pay attention to the Old Testament prophets. Now there's a group of men who saw the connection between the morality of a country and its direction. Read what Amos had to say, and Joel, and Isaiah, and the rest. And of course, as they pointed out, the root problem isn't morality itself, but idolatry. When we fail to worship the true and living God as He deserves and begin to worship false gods of our own making, we inevitably turn away from the commandments of the Creator God and begin to plummet down the moral slide that leads to destruction.

We've been sitting at the feet of the prophet Jeremiah for several weeks now. I admire Jeremiah. He had one of the hardest jobs I can imagine. He was called to be a prophet and given the assignment of telling his people that their country was going to be destroyed and they would either be killed or carried into exile in chains. And his people not only rejected his message, but thought he was a traitor and hated him for it.

But he kept loving his people, and he demonstrated his love by preaching God's Word to them year after year, by calling them to repent, and by warning them of the impending judgment. And even after the judgment came, he showed his love for them by writing lamentations for them to help them grieve and turn back to God.

How'd he do it? How did Jeremiah respond in such a God-honoring way to such difficult circumstances? Here's a more relevant question. *How can we do it?*

That's what this series is all about, *Living By Faith When Times Are Tough*. We've been looking at a few highlights from Jeremiah's life that reveal to us how he did just that, how he lived by faith during the toughest of times.

This morning we'll finish our series by looking at an event that happened to Jeremiah towards the end of his life. It's found in Jeremiah 31. The year was 587 B.C. which makes Jeremiah a sixty-or-so year old man. It's just one year before the Babylonian army breaks down the walls of the capital city of Jerusalem, destroys God's temple, kills thousands and thousands of Jews, and carries the rest away from the promised land and into captivity. That's the setting of today's message.

The Setting: Jeremiah's present situation was *challenging*.

Overwhelming might be a better word, and that's because...

1. *He knew God's judgment was coming.* The false prophets were saying, "The Lord won't let our city be taken! We're His chosen people!" But Jeremiah knew better. Yes, we're God's people and that's the very reason He *will* let this city be taken. We're His people but we haven't been living like we're His people! So judgment is coming! And for thirty-nine years Jeremiah preached that message to a hard-hearted, sin-loving people.

What kept him going? In short, what kept him going was that he *saw what others failed to see*. That's what living by faith is all about. He saw the seriousness of sin. He saw the need to repent. He saw the inevitability of divine judgment for unrepentant sin. And he also saw, by God's gracious enablement, that there was life beyond the judgment.

Let's begin our study at verse 26, "At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me." As far as I can tell, that's the only time we find Jeremiah experiencing anything *pleasant* in the book. It wasn't just that he had a good sleep. It's what happened while he was asleep that encouraged Jeremiah. Apparently, he had a dream, a God-sent dream in which...

2. *He received a vision of the future that refreshed him (26).* The content of the vision actually begins back in 30:1 and goes through 31:25. In the vision the Lord gave Jeremiah a revelation of what was coming after the judgment ended. If you scan the text of the vision in chapters 30-31, you'll see some key phrases that jump off the page again and again. Notice...

30:3 "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD."

30:8 "'In that day,' declares the LORD."

31:1 "'At that time,' declares the LORD."

31:6 "There will be a day."

31:17 "'So there is hope for your future,' declares the LORD."

31:27 "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD."

31:31 "'The time is coming,' declares the LORD."

31:38 "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD."

What's the subject of this message, this message the Lord gave to Jeremiah while he was sleeping and enabled him to wake up refreshed? It's about *the future*.

In today's text, we're going to discover the transforming power of living in light of the future. And not the *one-year-from-now judgment is coming* future, either. Jeremiah had been preaching about the near-future for thirty-nine years, yet that certainly didn't cause him to wake up refreshed.

But this did. There's something else coming, says the Lord, and I want you to write it in a book because I want my people to know about it (30:2). And that's what Jeremiah did. It's called Jeremiah's "book of consolation," and you'll find it in chapters 30-33.^[1]

I want us to see one section of the book, Jeremiah 31:26-40. In this passage the Lord gave Jeremiah three hope-giving promises regarding the future that fortified his soul for the present.^[2] The promises of God can do the same for you and me, too.

I. Promise #1: I will restore my people (27-30).

Listen to verses 27-30, “The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,’ declares the LORD. ‘In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge.”

With those words the Lord made three things quite clear.

A. The Lord said He wasn’t through with His disobedient people (27).

B. The Lord said He was going to build and plant Israel again (28).

C. The Lord said that changes were coming (29-30).

Let’s ponder those predictions for a moment. If you know your Bible history, you’ll know that there hadn’t been a united Israel since the nation split 350 years earlier in 930 B.C. What’s more, there hadn’t been a “house of Israel” for some 150 years since the Jews in the northern kingdom were carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. But did you catch God’s announcement in verse 27? He said, “I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals.” He made it clear He was going to restore and reunite the northern and southern nations of Jews.

And He even included the animals. “I will plant the hose of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men *and of animals* (22).” Why mention animals? Keep in mind that by 587 B.C. there weren’t many animals left around Jerusalem, for the Babylonian army had been hauling off men and animals for nearly twenty years (their invasion began in 605 B.C.).

What an amazing promise! Know this, says the Lord. I’m not through with my people. I am going to replant the house of Israel and the house of Judah together right back here in this land, and I’ll bring the animals back too.

And there will be some other changes, too. First of all, in that day...

1. *People won’t blame their problems on the sins of others (29).* That’s the point of verse 29. “In those days people will no longer say [as they were saying in Jeremiah’s day], ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’”

It’s not our fault our country is going down the tubes, said Jeremiah’s peers. It’s our forefathers’ fault. God’s punishing us for what they did.

Wrong, says the Lord. It’s not either/or, but both/and. Yes, your forefathers sinned, but so have you. And the day is coming when my people will stop blaming their problems on others. In fact, in that day...

2. *People will deal with their own sins (30).* That’s the point of verse 30, “Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge.”

It’s a fact. As sinners, we’re blame-shifters by nature. We tend to blame others for our predicaments. And we may even blame God as we wrongly assume that He’s doomed us to misery because of what others have done to us.

My wife Sherry is a librarian in a local school, and she told me this week about a situation that illustrates the point. A group of fifth graders were making noise in the library and she told them it needed to stop. At which point one young female student raised her hand and said, “I can’t be quiet. I have an anger problem, and this computer makes me angry. You can’t expect me to be quiet when I’m angry.”

I love my wife's response. "Listen. This is the library and since there are other students studying, it will be quiet in here. And if you won't be quiet, then you can go down to the principal's office right now to talk to him about your anger problem." And the room became quiet!

That fifth grader's not alone, is she? She reminds me of *me*. I don't like to deal with my own sins either. I'd much rather put the blame somewhere else. I'd rather excuse my sinful anger and say the problem is my genetics, or my upbringing, or the way people have treated me, and so on.

But it's not true, and the Lord won't let me justify the notion that it is. He'll send me to the principal's office if need be so I'll face up to my problem. Like He did with Judah. That kind of thinking needs to change, says the Lord. And I'm going to change is, says the Lord.

That's the promise He gave to Jeremiah. *I will restore my people*, and I will restore them in such a way that they stop blaming their sin on others and start dealing with it in ways that please Me.

"How?" you ask. How does God transform blame-shifters? The answer is found in His second promise.

II. Promise #2: I will make a new covenant with my people (31-34).

Notice verse 31, "'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.'" There's the answer. There's how God chose to transform blame-shifters. He established a new covenant.

Many Bible scholars say the text before us is Jeremiah's greatest contribution to biblical truth. It's one of the most important passages, not only in the Old Testament, but in all of God's Word.^[3] It's here that he announced that a new covenant is coming.

What's true of this "new covenant"? Two things...

A. The new covenant isn't like the old covenant (31-32). "'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. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD."

The Lord reminded Jeremiah of two realities of old covenant living.

1. *Under the old covenant, God was like a husband to His people.* He chose to rescue the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and bring them to the promised land. On the way He took them to Mount Sinai and entered into a covenant relationship with them. He became their husband and He promised to take care of them forever. Unfortunately...

2. *Under the old covenant, Israel was like an unfaithful wife.* She who was loved unconditionally by her husband who was none other than God Almighty...kept running after other lovers. Not once, but again and again, for century after century. Israel ran after the Canaanite gods, and the Egyptian gods, and the Assyrian gods, and on and on. She spurned the love of her husband and lived like a prostitute, thus breaking the terms of the first covenant.

The new covenant isn't going to be like that, says the Lord. It's not that the old covenant was bad, just insufficient. Sinners need more than God's laws on stone tablets. They need new hearts that will keep those laws. And what they need, I will provide, says the Lord.

In fact, would you notice the words "I will" in this passage, for they are the key to finding lasting hope. A sinner cannot patch up things with God. God must do it for the sinner. And He told Jeremiah, "That's what I am going to do."

I will make a new covenant—verse 31.^[4]

I will make it with the house of Israel—verse 33.

I will put my law in their minds—verse 33.

I will be their God—verse 33.

I will forgive their wickedness—verse 34.

I will remember their sins no more—verse 34.

Who will establish the new covenant? I will do it, says the Lord. I will make a new covenant and under that covenant I will do everything that sinners need in order to be right with Me.

And what is it specifically that sinners need which the old covenant missed and the new covenant provides? It's this...

B. Under the new covenant the Lord changes people inside out (33-34). Morality tries to do it outside-in, but that never lasts. I'm going to change sinners inside-out, says the Lord. Under the new covenant I will do four things for sinners. What are they?

1. *He puts His law on our hearts (33a).* "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.'"

It's amazing how prone we are to try to regulate religion. We settle for lists of do's and don'ts. But look at Israel's history. It doesn't work. The old covenant approach doesn't work. We need for the Lord to put His law into our minds and write it on our hearts. And that's what He does under the new covenant.

He gives us the desire to worship Him, and walk with Him, and give our tithes to Him, and raise our kids for Him, and tell other people about Him. If we don't desire those things, then we'd better take inventory concerning whether we are really members of the new covenant. The sad reality is that churches are filled with people who think they're right with God because they keep the list. That's the old covenant, my friend, and it doesn't work.

When God truly saves a person He gives that person a new heart and writes His law on that heart. If that's never happened to you, admit it and ask the Spirit of God to do it in your life. Ask Him, "O Spirit of God, give me a new heart!" That's what He loves to do under the new covenant. What's more...

2. *He establishes a permanent relationship with us (33b).* "I will be their God, and they will be my people." Notice the permanency in that promise. I will do it and it will be so, says the Lord.

3. *He enables us to know Him personally (34a).* "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD."

He's not saying we don't need teachers under the new covenant, for other passages make it clear we do (Eph 4:11-12; Titus 2:15). But we don't need teachers to tell us, "Know the Lord." Those outside the new covenant need that exhortation, but not those on the inside. If the Spirit has given you a new heart and put the law of God on it, then you know the Lord. Sure, you need to know Him better, but He's real to you, and personal. That's a blessing of the new covenant, for you've been changed inside-out.

4. *He removes the sin barrier that once separated us (34b).* "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." I can't get rid of my sins on my own. I can't erase them. But under the new covenant God does it for me. He forgives my sins and remembers them no more.

How can a holy God do that? Isn't He being unjust to just overlook our sins? No, because He's not just overlooking them. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for those sins. He judged His Son

on the cross, so that now He can pardon us. If you believe in Christ, God removes the sin barrier and brings you into His family!

But there's more, another promise. One, I will restore my people. Two, I will make a new covenant with my people. And three...

III. Promise #3: I will preserve my people (35-40).

The Lord revealed three guarantees regarding the preservation of His chosen people in the final section of the chapter.

A. The Lord guaranteed that He wasn't done with the nation of Israel (35-36). "This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD Almighty is his name: 'Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the LORD, 'will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.'"

Did you catch that last line? When will the descendants of Israel cease to be a nation? Only when God stops decreeing that the sun and moon will shine. In other words, not until His plan for the universe is accomplished. The Lord is guaranteeing to Jeremiah that He's not done with the nation of Israel.

Look back for a moment at verse 31 and answer this. With whom did the Lord say He was going to establish the new covenant? With the house of Israel and the house of Judah, right? That's important to see. The Lord said He would make a new covenant with the descendants of the people with whom He had established the old covenant. That's not the church, but Israel.

Does that mean that the church has no part in the new covenant? No, that's not what it means. As Charles Feinberg points out, "The same death of Christ that implemented the new covenant for Israel does so for all sinners for all time."^[5] And that's what the New Testament writers tell us. Paul told the Corinthian church members, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you...This cup is the new covenant in my blood (1 Cor. 11:23, 25)." And the writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:15-17 to make the point that the old covenant is gone and that believers today are enjoying the blessings of the new covenant that Christ established.

So if the church is enjoying new covenant blessings today, what happened to Israel? Is God done with Israel? Has the church replaced Israel in God's plan so that there's no longer a distinction under the new covenant between Israel and the church? Some say yes, but I disagree. In fact, in verses 36-37 the Lord Himself addressed this issue with a second guarantee.

B. The Lord guaranteed that He wouldn't reject all the descendants of Israel (37). "This is what the LORD says: 'Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the LORD."

Can the heavens above be measured, and can the foundations of the earth be searched out? They can't, and those are the conditions that must be met before the Lord will cast Israel aside for good.

So yes, the church enjoys wonderful new covenant blessings in this age. But that doesn't mean that the church has replaced Israel, nor that the Lord is done with Israel. To the contrary, He has a wonderful plan for Israel.

"What then happened to Israel?" you ask. In the New Testament we discover that at Jesus' first coming some Jews believed in Him, but the majority did not. As a nation Israel rejected Jesus, said no to His new covenant blessings, and experienced a hardening. Consequently, as Paul explains in Romans 9, God cut them off and grafted believing Gentiles into the vine (Rom. 9:30-33). But does that mean Israel

stumbled beyond recovery? No, says Paul in Romans 11:11. Indeed, at Christ's second coming Israel will be grafted back into the vine and experience the complete fulfillment of the new covenant blessings (see Zech. 12:10-13:1; Rom. 11:11-32).

I appreciate Feinberg's point of clarification, "The NT is careful to state in each instance what elements in the blessings promised Israel may be transferred to the common enjoyment of Israel and the church. It is neither warranted nor in harmony with Scripture to go beyond this."^[6]

Then comes a third guarantee, and this one is even more specific. It's not just about the nation of Israel, but the capital city of that nation.

C. The Lord guaranteed that He had plans for the city of Jerusalem (38-40). "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the LORD. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished.'"

Those details about Jerusalem might not mean much to us, but they did to Jeremiah. The Tower of Hananel was the northeast corner of the city. The Corner gate probably refers to the northwest corner. We don't know where Gareb and Goah are, but the point of all this description seems to be that not only will the city survive, but it's going to be expanded in the future. And this is no spiritual city, but a real city, a real city for a real nation, to fulfill a real plan.

The plan? "This city will be rebuilt *for Me.*" And it will be "*holy to the LORD.*"

You say, "What's the point about the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem?" It boils down to this.

1. *He used the nation to give us the Messiah.* And...

2. *He used the city to give us the cross.* That's the point. Sinners need a Messiah, and sinners need the cross. And what we need, the Lord has provided!

So now we know what made Jeremiah tick. He didn't live with his eyes glued to the problems of the present. He lived in light of the future.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself two life-changing questions...

1. *Am I living in light of what God did in the past?* I ask this because much of what was future to Jeremiah is now past to us. Christ has come and shed His blood and thereby established the new covenant. Are you living in light of it? Are you putting your trust in Him and His atoning sacrifice?

2. *Am I living in light of what God will do in the future?* I urge you to make a study of the promises of God. He's promised to do some things, for Israel, and for you and me. Are we living in light of the future?

^[6]Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

^[1] See the helpful explanation in the *NIV Study Bible* footnote on p. 1165.

^[2] I'm not sure if the Lord delivered these promises during the dream or after it. Verse 27 indicates that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, but doesn't specify when. It seems to indicate that the vision itself runs from 30:3-31:25. Then after Jeremiah woke up, the Lord gave him the implications of the vision in 31:26-40.

^[3] See Charles Feinberg, p. 574.

[\[4\]](#) This is the only mention of the “new covenant” in the Old Testament.

[\[5\]](#) Charles Feinberg, p. 575.

[\[6\]](#) Charles Feinberg, p. 575.