

THE SECRET OF STRENGTH

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we resume our studies in the book of Jeremiah. We return to this book at a very important place, because Chapters 30-33 are a remarkable and unique section of this book. They constitute a trumpet note of hope and certainty arising out of the midst of deepest despair and distress.

If you look at Chapter 32 you will note that this section is dated in the tenth year of King Zedekiah, who, you remember, was the last of the kings of Judah. The captivity of Judah by Babylon took place in the eleventh year of his reign, so things are very close to the end. When we last saw our hero, Jeremiah, he was awaiting trial, under the indictment of the government for what they regarded as his treasonable activities against the king and the country, because he was recommending that people actually desert Jerusalem and give themselves up as captives to the Babylonians. We find Jeremiah now as a prisoner in the court of the guard. Nebuchadnezzar and his armies are at the gates of Jerusalem for the third time. The city has been under siege for over a year, and already sharp famine has set in. There is no bread in the city at all, and it looks to be only a matter of weeks before the city must capitulate to the siege of the Babylonian forces. There is no relief in sight, no one on the horizon to help them. The nation is facing perhaps the darkest hour in all its history. It is out of this darkness that the two chapters we will look at today, 30 and 31, arise.

They are part of what we might call "The Song of Jeremiah", a beautiful section of hope and confidence in the midst of despair and distress. It might be more accurate if we were to call it "The Dream Of Jeremiah," Martin Luther King was noted for a great speech in which over and over he used the phrase, "I have a dream," as he outlined the hopes and desires and longings of the Negro people in America. This song really is a dream of Jeremiah, for in Chapter 31, Verse 26, a very strange statement is suddenly introduced. Jeremiah says, "Thereupon I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me." Then he goes back again to the vision he is expounding. So this prophecy evidently came as a dream to Jeremiah in the night, a vision of the restoration and the glory God has promised his people.

But it is far more than that, because as you and I read through the account, we will see that this is the way God is working in our lives as well. God always works the same way. He is a God who does not change. The revelation of the great purposes and programs of God in the Old Testament is given to us to show us what is happening to us. So there is much to learn from this account as we look at it together.

There are four notes sounded, in this song. They are blended and entwined together, but they are clearly distinguishable. We will not attempt to read the entire chapters, but will select from them the passages which mark these definite notes sounded out in this great vision. The first and most dominant is the note of certainty of joy. This is the most often expressed feeling in this song. Chapter 30, Verses 8-9:

"And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord of hosts, that I will break the yoke from off their neck, and I will burst their bonds, and strangers shall no more make servants of them. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them." {Jer 30:8-9 RSV}

This passage looks far beyond the return from the Babylonian captivity. It looks down through the years beyond our own day to the time when God promises to restore the fortunes of Israel, and even to raise up David to be king over the people again. Therefore, it is a promise not yet fulfilled. God is still waiting for this time to come. There are other beautiful expressions of this in the song. Notice Verses 16-17 of Chapter 30:

Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity; those who despoil you shall become a spoil, and all who prey on you I shall make a prey. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, says the Lord..." {Jer 30:16-17a RSV}

All through the record of history it has been noteworthy that every nation which has attacked the Jews has found itself suffering as a result. God promises here to watch over his people, and to return evil upon those who harm them in any way. Further on in this passage, beginning at Verse 18:

**"Thus says the Lord:
Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob,
and have compassion on his dwellings;
the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound,
and the palace shall stand where it used to be.
Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving,
and the voices of those who make merry.
I will multiply them, and they shall not be few;
I will make them honored, and they shall not be small.
Their children shall be as they were of old,
and their congregation shall be established before me,
and I will punish all who oppress them.
Their prince shall be one of themselves,
their ruler shall come forth from their midst;
I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me,
for who would dare of himself to approach me? says the Lord.
And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God." {Jer 30:18-22 RSV}**

It is evident that these words have never been fulfilled in all the history of Israel. In all the restorations they have gone through they have never come to anything like this describes; so this awaits the future. There are many other passages -- I am picking only a few. Look at Verses 7-8 of Chapter 31:

**For thus says the Lord:
'Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations,
proclaim, give praise, and say,
'The Lord has saved his people,
the remnant of Israel.
'Behold, I will bring them from the north country,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
the woman with child and her who is in travail, together,
a great company, they shall return here." {Jer 31:7-8 RSV}**

Many thought when Israel became a nation again, and Jews came from all parts of the earth back to the land of Israel, that this was the fulfillment of this passage. But I do not think so. It was a foreview of it, as were other foreviews in history. But it is not yet fully fulfilled, for at the present time they are not there in belief but in unbelief, whereas this passage speaks of their coming back in joy and worship. Look at Verses 10-12:

**"Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands afar off;
say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.'
For the Lord has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall be like a watered garden,
and they shall languish no more." {Jer 31:10-12 RSV}**

Then Verses 27-28:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord." {Jer 31:27-28 RSV}

Then the chapter closes with a very specific promise concerning the city of Jerusalem, Verses 38-40:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be uprooted or overthrown any more for ever." {Jer 31:38-40 RSV}

That encompasses practically the whole city of Jerusalem at the present time. It is obvious that this too is yet to be fulfilled. But what a scene of beauty and glory, what a promise of joy and of gladness, after years and centuries of wandering and sorrow! And will you notice when this promise is given? Remember, this is given at a time when these people were at the lowest stage of their national life. They were a wanton, wicked, and wayward people, stubborn and rebellious. God had been dealing with them in faithfulness for many, many centuries, trying to turn them around. It has been four hundred years since the days of David and the height of the nation's power and glory. Now, despite reforms which occasionally came in, they have sunk lower and lower until, in stubborn determination to have their own way, they are now about to be carried away into captivity in Babylon, Jerusalem to be leveled by the Babylonian forces, and all their national glory to perish. From every human reckoning, the state of this nation is absolutely hopeless. There is nothing which can be done for them. What would you suggest that God do at this point to try to reach this people to restore them, which he has not already done? You see, the case is hopeless. There is not a thing more he can do. And yet in the midst of that darkness comes this great song of certainty and joy. God promises that he is going to save this people, to change them, and that they will return in the beautiful way described here. That is the dominant note of this song -- one of the most beautiful passages of Scripture.

Closely mingled with this is another note which is quite different -- the note of the agony of distress. In fact, that is the introductory note of this vision. Notice Verses 4 and following of Chapter 30:

These are the words which the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah: "Thus says the Lord:

**We have heard a cry of panic,
of terror, and no peace,
Ask now, and see,
can a man bear a child?
Why then do I see every man
with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor?
Why has every face turned pale?
Alas! that day is so great
there is none like it;
it is a time of distress for Jacob;
yet he shall be saved out of it." {Jer 30:4-7 RSV}**

These words remind us of what Jesus said in Matthew 24: "For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be," {Matt 24:21 RSV}. And in Jeremiah's vivid figure here the men are seen gripping themselves like a woman in labor, in agony and pain and terror, as this day advances. The Lord says, "It is a time of distress for Jacob." We know that this is yet to come.

Just this past week the guns on the Golan Heights have fallen silent. Many are wondering how long it can last -- this temporary peace Israel has reached with its neighbors around. The Scriptures make very clear that it will not last, that sooner or later it will be broken again, despite the work of Henry Kissinger or any other man, that the time of Jacob's trouble is yet ahead. And it will be a time of great distress, worse than they have ever seen

before. Now, when you think of the holocaust in which six million Jews were murdered in the gas chambers of the Nazis, you can hardly imagine what this upcoming time is going to be like, when it is said to be like no other in all the history of Israel. God is careful to point out the reason for it, in Verse 15 of Chapter 30:

**Why do you cry out over your hurt?
Your pain is incurable.
Because your guilt is great,
because your sins are flagrant,
I have done these things to you. {Jer 30:15 RSV}**

God takes the full responsibility for what happens to Israel. He says, "I have brought it to pass." It is as though he stands with his hands on his hips and says to them, "Look, I'm responsible. Any questions?" He says that it is because of their sins, their flagrant sins.

We do not want to read this as though it is something remote from us. If you are inclined to say only, "Oh, it's such a pity what's going to happen to Israel," remember that this is your story, too. This is the way God works. He deals with Israel this way because this is the way he deals with everybody. There is a scriptural principle reflected here which all too often we forget. Paul said very plainly in Galatians 6, "Be not deceived [i.e., don't kid yourself]; God is not cheated," {cf, Gal 6:7a}. Just because judgment does not fall immediately upon people, they think they have gotten by. But Paul says, "Don't fool yourself; God is not cheated. Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption [i.e., trouble, pain, heartache, trial, distress, and disaster], " {cf, Gal 6:7-8a}. Now, that is inevitable. God does not cancel that out by the forgiveness of sin. That is part of what we call the natural consequences of evil, the temporal judgment of God. And it is never canceled out, any more than the rest of what Paul says is canceled out: "... but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" {Gal 6:8b RSV} -- life everlasting -- now -- not just in heaven some day but now. The joy and glory of life will come to us if we walk in the Spirit, and that is inevitable. But so is the judgment for our sin.

This means, of course, that ultimately a recompense comes to us in life now for the evil in which we have indulged our flesh -- whether it is blatant, open, sensual evil, or whether it is inward -- spiritual pride, bitterness, and all the other sins of the spirit. It makes no difference. Evil brings its own results. As someone has well said, "You can pull out the nail driven into the wall, but you can't pull out the nail hole."

If you want to study this question further, you can obtain a copy of a message I gave some years ago entitled The Scars of Sin [Catalog No. 279], which touches on this subject.

God reminds us here that there will be pain and heartache and trouble because of the evil of our past. The sins of our youth will catch up to us -- usually in middle age! And there is no escape. As Kipling has said, "The sins that they did two by two, they pay for one by one." God says this is inevitable. It is inevitable for his people Israel; it is inevitable for us as well.

But now there is a very necessary third note struck in this song, which is blended together with the others. It is the note of the faithfulness of love. Look at the first few verses of Chapter 31:

**"At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people." Thus says the Lord:
"The people who survived the sword,
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to him from afar." {Jer 31:1-3a RSV}**

"I will be with you in the middle of the trouble," he says. "You do not have to go through it alone. You will have to go through it, but you do not have to go alone; there will be grace and love to sustain you."

**"I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." {Jer 31:3b RSV}**

I want to return in a moment and comment on this quality of God's love, but first let's look at a couple of other passages. Verse 9:

**"With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I am a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my first-born." {Jer 31:9 RSV}**

Here is the Father's love which is behind this entire scene. Then Verse 20:

**"Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him," says the Lord. {Jer 31:20 RSV}**

As a Father who cannot forget his son -- no matter how sharply he must reprimand him, but whose heart is tender toward him -- so God is tender toward his people. And behind the darkness and the distress is the everlasting love of God. This phrase, "I have loved you with an everlasting love," is very beautiful.

The word "everlasting" is one of those words which baffle us. We hardly know what it means. Even in the original language it is difficult to define. "Everlasting" connotes more than duration, means more than merely "eternal"; it has in it an element of mystery. That is, it refers to the "vanishing point", literally. Let your mind run back into the past over all the years of history, and you come to a place where finally you just cannot think any further. Yet logic affirms that even beyond this point there has been existence and time, so this is the "vanishing point." And this is what "everlasting" means. Let your mind run into the future, and you come to the same kind of haziness, a place where you no longer can comprehend what the ages mean, where times and durations seem meaningless. That, again, is the vanishing point in the future, beyond which lie experiences for God's people, but which we are unable to grasp. That is the mystery of this word, everlasting. It is a word which means, really, "beyond dimension," "greater than we can think." This is what Paul is expressing in Ephesians: "...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge," {Eph 3:18-19a RSV}.

So when you get to the place where the sins of the past, and those of your mothers and fathers before you, are taking their toll upon your life, and you are tempted to cry out and say, "Why? Why should this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this?..." (It is remarkable how short our memories are, how we think of ourselves only in terms of what we are now, while God remembers all that we have been. We forget all that. So we think it is "unjust" of God to treat us the way he does.) ...When this happens, God is at pains to remind us that what we are experiencing is his everlasting love, his mysterious love.

That is, he is saying to us, "Look, it may pain you, but it won't damage you. This very hurt you are going through is what will produce in you the character that both you and I want. It is this which will mellow you, refine you, soften you, open you up, make you a human being. Instead of a hard, callous, resistant, self-centered person, you'll become open and responsive and selfless." That is what God is saying. That is the mysterious quality of this love which draws us on. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." "I have not let you miss out on a thing which is a result of the exercise of the flesh in your life," he says. That sounds strange to us, does it not? We want to escape the consequences. God leads us through them, instead.

This brings us to the last note of this song, a remarkable one, found in Verses 31 and following of Chapter 31 -- the note of the discovery of a new way.

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the

house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." {Jer 31:31-34 RSV}

This is a marvelous promise, a promise that God is going to do what the people themselves could never do -- that despite all their failure, and all their efforts to do what God wanted, resulting in failure, he is going to bring them around. And he will do it by a new process, a process which he outlines here. The manifestations of it are very simple. There are three.

First, he says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts." That is a new motive. God is going to change the motivation of a person's life-changing it to come from within instead of without. The "Old Covenant", the Law, is a demand made on us from without. "Do this, and I'll do that," says God. This proves to be impossible for man to carry out. But the "New Covenant" is something put within us. What is it? Love. Love becomes the motive in the New Covenant. It is the motive for life -- to respond out of love for God, out of love for what he has already done in our life and heart. As love is built within us, as we understand and realize the glory of a relationship with a living God, love is our response. And it is on the basis of love that God then asks for a response. That is the new motive. "Love," says the apostle Paul, "is the fulfilling of the Law." No man can harm his neighbor who loves him first.

The second manifestation is a new power. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." That is, God himself is the strength of man's life. He supplies all the power to act. They are the ones who do the acting; he is the One who does the supplying. This is a beautiful description of the New Covenant. "Everything coming from God; nothing coming from me. God at work in me." Not, "I, trying to do something for God," but "God doing something for me, through me, in everything I do." That is the new power.

Then there is a new family. "And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord." "They will all know me." Isn't that marvelous? All those in the family know each other. All we have to do is find out each other's names! We already know what are the dominant drives, and underlying hopes and passions of each life, because they are all basically the same: That we might know Him better, become like Him. That is why, when Christians meet one another, though they have never met before, and may be from opposite sides of the globe, they always have a ground of sharing -- right from the start. They know each other, know the same Lord, share the same life. And that is why they can help one another.

A couple of weeks ago Brian Morgan and I were up in northern Minnesota amid the birch trees and lakes not far from the Canadian border. We were with a group of pastors and their wives in a conference. These were wonderful people, but they were inhibited, not free. I taught on the New Covenant all week long, not from this passage but from the New Testament. At the end of the meeting we had a Body Life service, in which I invited them to share their difficulties and to help bear one another's burdens as part of the family of God. They were reluctant to do so, even as pastors, and their sharing was very superficial. They talked about some ordinary victories and joys, and a few very minor problems -- like the need for a new mimeograph machine. Finally I stopped them and said, "Look, you're going to go back as pastors wanting to teach your congregations how to share, and you're not sharing yourselves. You're not opening up your hurts and your hearts." And I urged them to do so.

- A young man stood up and told about how he and his wife had returned from Brazil. They had been missionaries there for three years, and then had to come back. They had returned with a deep sense of failure, and had been resentful of others who had not understood what had gone on in their lives.
- Then a young woman stood up and told how her young husband, a pastor, had died the year before,

and how lonely her life had been, how empty it was. She said, "I know you can't meet my needs like my husband did, but I just ask you to pray for me." People began to weep and to pray for one another.

- A man stood up and said how he and his wife had been going through a terrible time of distress because their daughter had died. No one had known that they were going through this time, and they just shared their feelings.
- Then a man stood up and confessed his sin of judgmental criticism against a woman who was present, and asked her forgiveness. They forgave one another.
- Another woman stood up and shared how jealous she had been of her husband's ministry, and how wrong she knew this was. She realized that this was a sin in her own life, and asked for forgiveness.

Soon they were sharing with one another out of their depths. Tears were running down their faces, and they were really praying and upholding one another. I finally just sat down. The Lord was running the meeting, and he did not need me. We ended with a communion service in which many were feeling so healed, so restored, so cleansed! As they passed the cup to one another, they would say, "Your sins are forgiven you."

You see, the basis for this New Covenant is given in the final words of this section. It all rests on this great platform: "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." That is how God proposes to win this battle. When the Law, with its demands, fails, and we cannot respond the way we know we ought to, how are we going to win? When the case is hopeless, how is it going to be changed? Well, as God says here, it is changed when we begin to understand that provision has already fully been made for all our failure. And therefore God does not hold failure against us. His love will be with us and will sustain us through even the results of our folly and our failure. He does not hold anything against us; he is for us, and with us in it, and will turn all the difficulty we are going through to our own advantage, so that it brings us out beautiful people -- softened, helped, healed. That is the New Covenant in action. That is the way God does it. As we learn more and more to walk in dependence upon a new motive and a new power, in a new relationship with one another, resting upon the forgiveness of God, we discover that marvelous things are happening in our life.

Some day, historically, God is going to do this with Israel. Stubborn and willful as they are (and they themselves admit they are among the most stubborn people on the face of the earth), yet God is going to do this -- on this basis. If you read this with a calendar in mind, historically this is going to happen to Israel sometime in the future. Spiritually it has been available to all men for centuries -- ever since man first appeared on the earth. This blood of the new covenant has been shed before the foundation of the world, Scripture tells us, that man might come to God on this basis, and this alone. God guarantees that he is going to effect this with Israel. Look at these words in Verses 35 and following:

**Thus says the Lord,
who gives the sun for light by day
and the fixed order of the moon and 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, says the Lord,
then shall the descendants of Israel cease
from being a nation before me for ever." {Jer 31:35-36 RSV}**

Do you think Israel is in danger of being wiped out? No, they are not. Nothing can wipe out this nation. As long as the sun is in the sky, or the moon comes up at night, or the seasons come through the years, God will never allow his people to be wiped out. Never! He promises that this cannot happen, unless the very natural order of the universe be destroyed first. And furthermore,

**Thus says the Lord:
"If the heavens above can be measured,**

**and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,
then I will cast off all the descendants of Israel
for all that they have done, says the Lord." {Jer 31:37 RSV}**

That is, he guarantees that one of these days he will open their eyes and they will understand, and will turn again as a people. And Israel shall fill the earth and be the head of the nations, as God has promised. And David their king shall rule over them. Days of glory and joy shall come back again to earth. For as Paul argues in the eleventh chapter of Romans, if the temporary rejection of Israel meant riches and joy and grace to us, how much more will their full inclusion mean, the salvation of this people, when they come at last into their promise. And just as he has made it sure to them, so he makes it sure to us. This is our promise. We rest upon a New Covenant.

When Jesus sat down with his disciples in the upper room the night before the crucifixion, he took the bread and the cup, and he passed the bread among them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you." Then he passed the cup and said, "This cup is the blood of the new covenant," {cf, Matt 26:26-27}. God has made that covenant with any who are ready to come to him, who have reached the end of themselves, who have stopped trying to do it themselves, and are resting on what he is ready to do. That is why the Sermon on the Mount begins with the bankruptcy of humanity: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3 RSV}.

Prayer:

Our Father, forgive us for the way we are so sure we can make it ourselves, so sure we know better than you which way to take, and that if we are just let off from our evil, we will be able to correct our faults and do better. Forgive us, Father, for the "resources" to which we yet cling, thinking we can use these for success in life. Help us to assume this poverty of spirit which is rightfully ours, which then opens to us the very riches of eternity, riches we cannot even begin to dream of, which will make our lives full and complete and joyful and thankful. As we go to the Lord's Table together we pray that the meaning of this may break upon our astonished hearts afresh and anew, and that we will understand what Jesus meant when he said, "This is the blood of the new covenant." We ask in your name, Amen.

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