

A Promise to Hold on To

Jeremiah 30-34

Ecc. 1:2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

It's the famous opening line of the book of Ecclesiastes. The word 'meaningless' is a translation of the Hebrew word for vapour, or mist.

It captures the reflection of 'the teacher' that so many aspects of life that we pursue prove themselves substanceless, temporary... disappointing.

That is life under the sun.

Even if we finally catch what we have been striving for, we sit back and enjoy it, but before long we say 'now what'.

This existential dilemma can prove even more troubling when we run up against realities that we have no hope of defeating.

If our pursuit of meaning and something to hold fast to is shaken by success, how much more acute is it when we face loss?

That feeling when the inevitability of impending failure becomes clear...

...you're not going to get it done in time, there's no way you will pass, your business simply cannot recover.

The feeling when something broken cannot be fixed... your health, your memory, a relationship that you once held precious, maybe even the reality that you are getting older, and that thing you used to be able to do, you will never be able to do again, the reality that the days ahead of you are becoming far fewer than the ones behind you...

This is the existential dilemma that at some point confronts everybody whether by gain or by loss. What endures? What is NOT vapour?

What is there that I can truly hold on to?

This is a question that our secular world has no real answer to.

What comfort can atheism provide?

'Just accept it... you and those you love are magnificent biological machines, impressive but soulless flukes, do your best to fulfil your biological programming and further your species... make the most of life... and then embrace oblivion'

Oh ok, so my life is broadly irrelevant.

Sounds great! Let's get some motivational posters drawn up...

And our lazy agnosticism has no answer either... *the answer may be out there, or it may be not... maybe we go to another place or maybe we don't... maybe there is a god who cares... probably... we like to think so...* and at funerals we get those strings of nebulous poetry that attempt to make us feel good about the fate of our departed loved one by asserting beliefs that few of us would agree to if they were proposed to us by someone knocking on our door.

Hope is merely wishful thinking and becomes as ethereal as the realities we were wrestling with in the first place.

No. We want... *we need* something to hold on to. A promise that will not fade away.
A hope with a backbone that can truly reassure us that life is not meaningless and give us confidence in a future that as yet we do not see.
Well, that hope is what we are going to see today.

True hope, powerful hope, is hope that reassures even while staring existential terror in the eyes. That is when its truth needs to be heard the loudest.

And that is what we will see in chapters 30-34 - chapters full of amazing hope!
But these great promises take place while terror is on the doorstep.

Terror on the Doorstep

Have a look in your Bibles at chapter 30:12-17...

“Your wound is incurable,
your injury beyond healing.
13 There is no one to plead your cause,
no remedy for your sore,
no healing for you.
14 All your allies have forgotten you;
they care nothing for you.
I have struck you as an enemy would
and punished you as would the cruel,
because your guilt is so great
and your sins so many.
15 Why do you cry out over your wound,
your pain that has no cure?
Because of your great guilt and many sins
I have done these things to you.
16 “But all who devour you will be devoured;
all your enemies will go into exile.
Those who plunder you will be plundered;
all who make spoil of you I will despoil.
17 But I will restore you to health
and heal your wounds,’
declares the LORD,

Hope, yes, but in the midst of serious darkness.

And what about these just before the great promise of the new covenant in chapter 31...

Jer. 31:15 This is what the LORD says:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

Jer. 31:16 This is what the LORD says:

“Restrain your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,

*for your work will be rewarded,”
declares the LORD.*

“They will return from the land of the enemy.

17 *So there is hope for your descendants,”*

The image is the despair of one of the ancestral mothers of Israel weeping in grief because her children have been taken away only to be told that they would return. But God gives his greatest reassurance to Jeremiah when the terror is not poetic, but very visible and very present.

Have a look at Jeremiah 32:1-2

Jer. 32:1 *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. ² The army of the king of Babylon was then besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah.*

Under siege and under guard...

We are reminded of this same situation again in chapter 33:1 and 34:1

Listen to the beginning of 34:

Jer. 34:1 *While Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms and peoples in the empire he ruled were fighting against Jerusalem and all its surrounding towns, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Go to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, ‘This is what the LORD says: I am about to give this city into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will burn it down. ³ You will not escape from his grasp but will surely be captured and given into his hands. You will see the king of Babylon with your own eyes, and he will speak with you face to face. And you will go to Babylon.*

This is the place where that message from Jeremiah was probably given. It is the ruins of the king’s palace in Jerusalem.

The hills across from this photo would have been covered with the hordes of Babylonian soldiers and their camps. You could hear their voices, their taunts, their battle songs. You could smell their cooking while you were starving. Siege ramps were being built across the valley, creeping ever closer to the city walls. And whatever side you went to you would see the same thing. There was plenty of time for your imagination to get to work. What will they do when they break through. How long do I have left to live? Do I have any chance of escape?

Like a python slowly crushing its victim, their doom was coming and even the Lord’s prophet is saying ‘you are going to lose’.

And so it would prove.

They have found in the excavation a thick layer of ash from where it was burnt down.

They found Babylonian and Israelite arrow heads scattered around the place.

And it is in this context – with the place surrounded by the Babylonian forces – that God gives some of the most hope filled promises of the whole Old Testament...

The Days are Coming

Its almost as if the intensity of the looming disaster must be matched and exceeded at each point by the majesty of the restoration to come.
Five times through this section we are told that 'the days are coming' and each time another facet is featured of the jewel of God's promise.

First, on the eve of their removal from the land it is promised they shall be returned to it. **Jer. 30:3** *The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess,' says the LORD.*"

To those about to be exiled he gives this **comfort**...

10 *"So do not be afraid, Jacob my servant;
 do not be dismayed, Israel,'
 declares the LORD.
 'I will surely save you out of a distant place,
 your descendants from the land of their exile.
 Jacob will again have peace and security,
 and no one will make him afraid.*
11 *I am with you and will save you,'
 declares the LORD.*

But there is another feature of these chapters revealed there: did you see who would be restored?

Not just the tiny leftover remnant of God's people, but both Israel AND Judah.
Throughout these chapters it is as if these promises are as much for the hundred-years-ago-destroyed Northern kingdom as they are for those of Judah.
They are for ALL God's people, not just a portion of them.

And then when they return to the land it will not be to irrelevance and poverty but that they might flourish with joy and new life...

Jer. 31:27 *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. ²⁸ 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.*

Just listen to joy in these verses earlier **in 31**...

12 *They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
 they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—
 the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
 the young of the flocks and herds.
 They will be like a well-watered garden,
 and they will sorrow no more.*
13 *Then young women will dance and be glad,
 young men and old as well.
 I will turn their mourning into gladness;
 I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.*
14 *I will satisfy the priests with abundance,*

*and my people will be filled with my bounty,”
declares the LORD.*

Imagine how sweet that would sound for a people who have endured humiliation and shame and the unspeakable deprivations of famine, sword and plague.

And then this...

Restored to the land, flourishing in the land, something amazing and new would come. A new, even more secure relationship with God...

Jer. 31:31 *“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
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.*

You see they were going into exile because they continually failed to keep their side of the covenant. Ever since they entered the land the first time under Joshua they couldn't and wouldn't keep it. Why would a return be any different? If they could not keep it before why should they expect that history would not repeat itself and they find themselves in exile again?

Because God would do something new.

As we will explore again in a few minutes time, this time, when he brings them back, God promises he will transform his people from the inside. The insecurity caused by their own sin would be done away with.

And a restored people, in a restored land, under a new and better covenant, will need a new capital.

As their sin saw Jerusalem defiled and destroyed, God promises its magnificent renewal...

Jer. 31:38-40

“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.”

The holy city would actually BE a holy city.

Free of defilement, and so never again to be destroyed.

And who should dwell in that holy city, but God's promised king...

A country so horrifically let down and led astray by its corrupt rulers are reminded that God would keep his promise to provide them with a perfect one...

Jer. 33:14 “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

Jer. 33:15 “‘In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.

16 In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.
This is the name by which it will be called:
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

And with the assurance of righteous kingship comes the equally wonderful assurance of a faithful priesthood that will never ‘fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer offerings’ (33:18) on behalf of God’s people.

They are five amazing promises. Wonderful words of hope.

You know there is this beautiful sentence in chapter 31.

It seems that the word of God in chapters 30 and 31 came to Jeremiah in the form of a dream. Well at the end of it we read **this:**

Jer. 31:26 At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me.

You ever had that? A dream so good it makes you wake up in a good mood?

Well imagine how Jeremiah must have felt...

After 30 years of being given words of judgment to finally be given this overwhelming word of hope.

But as he looked around, what did he see? He was still an outcast in doomed Jerusalem. Could these promises really be true?

Again the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah... listen to these words of assurance...

Jer. 31:35 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:

36 “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,”
declares the LORD,
“will Israel ever cease
being a nation before me.”

Jer. 31:37 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.

In fact, in chapter 32 God gets Jeremiah to do another piece of performance prophecy.

He tells him that his cousin Hanamel is going to come and ask him to buy his field. Now one look out the window at the surrounding armies of Babylon building siege ramps up towards the walls of your city would tell you that this was the equivalent of throwing your money away.

The whole land was under occupation and God has told everyone that the future is death and exile.

Yet God says to Jeremiah – buy the field and have it witnessed as a sign that even after their punishment and exile, they will return and ‘houses fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land’

As dark and terrifying as the surroundings seemed, God’s promise was something that Jeremiah could literally bank on.

But of all the promises in these chapters, there are two in particular that I want us to return to briefly so that we don’t miss their particular significance.

A New Covenant and a New King

The first is that promise of the new covenant.

I want us to see how this new covenant will work.

You see the old covenant, articulated in the Law of Moses detailed God’s relationship with Israel and the terms and conditions under which that relationship was to be lived out including the blessings that would come from obedience and the curses that would come from disobedience.

This was the law that God’s people were meant to teach their children and one another to ensure it would be kept.

Of course it was this Law that condemned them when they failed to teach it and failed to keep it.

But the new covenant would work differently.

It would not be outside them, nor would it be passive – something written down that depended upon the faithfulness and instruction of others in order to be passed on.

No, have a look at how God’s NEW covenant will **work...**

33 *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
 after that time,” declares the LORD.*

*“I will **put** my law in their minds
 and **write it** on their hearts.*

*I will be their God,
 and they will be my people.*

34 *No longer will they teach their neighbor,
 or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
 because they will all know me,
 from the least of them to the greatest,”
 declares the LORD.*

The time is coming when ALL God's people will know him, and know him from the inside – in their hearts and in their minds – because God HIMSELF will imprint his law upon them. This new covenant will not be mediated by mere people. God will make himself known, immediately and personally. But how could a Holy God do this and be present in an unholy, sinful people?

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”*

There will be an internal cleansing. Forgiveness, the taking away of sin will be at the heart of this new covenant.

OK.

Now let's focus on the second remarkable promise.

The promise of a Messiah, the King of the line of David...

There is more to this than just a promise that the line of David would be restored.

It is the promise is for ONE king.

Chapter 33:26 has the Lord swearing that he would place ONE of David's sons as ruler over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And we are in fact told WHO this one, righteous descendent of David would be...

Look at 33:15 and 16 again...

Jer. 33:15 *“In those days and at that time*

I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;

he will do what is just and right in the land.

16 *In those days Judah will be saved*

and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it [the righteous branch] will be called:

The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

The name by which the king will be called?

The Lord himself, Yahweh, will be the righteous Saviour.

This great new covenant will be God's work in us.

And he himself will be the king that brings this wonderful salvation about.

And you know what name in Greek means 'Yahweh is salvation' don't you?

It's the name 'Jesus'.

The Promise Fulfilled

You know after Jeremiah's 70 years, the Jewish exiles did come back to the land... in dribs and drabs, over a period of many decades.

And these great promises were fulfilled... sort of...

Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt... eventually...

But Judah was small, and its division from Samaria was as hard as ever.

And there was no Davidic king...

And the priesthood were still corrupt...

But then a man named Jesus turns up

A descendent of David.

Who preaches good news that the kingdom of God is now near.

Who says to a Samaritan woman in **John 4:23**...

a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth,

More than that, promises a magnificent restoration to fullness **of life...**

John 5:24 *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”²⁵ Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.*

But the forgiveness and new life would come at a tremendous cost...

On the night before he would die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sin, Jesus reminded his disciples of Jeremiah’s promise and pointed to the way this great new covenant would come **about**

Luke 22:19 *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”*

Luke 22:20 *In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*

This is the Lord, our righteous Saviour...

Who as Paul writes in Romans 4 was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

This is the Lord, our righteous Saviour whose Holy Spirit now dwells in every believer. A deposit, guaranteeing our inheritance, and who truly enables us to know God from the inside – not merely as his people but as his precious **children**.

¹⁵ *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”*

¹⁶ *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.* ¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

[Romans 8:15-17]

And this is the Lord and righteous Saviour whose presence we will stand before in the magnificent new creation that he has prepared for us.

That wonderful place of safety, healing, righteousness, peace, and life that we read earlier from the book of Revelation.

Hope to Hold on To

That is when the exile of God’s people truly ends

That is the greater hope, the ultimate fulfilment of the promises that God gave through a lonely and hated prophet in a city under siege and on the brink of destruction.

We called this series in the book of Jeremiah ‘the Hard word’

But not all hard words are dark words.

You know the hardest substance in the universe is a diamond, and it is also one of the most beautiful and precious.

The hope of the gospel is a diamond. And unlike the vapours of the rest of this world's glories, this is one you can hold fast to.

Even, and especially in times of darkness, when the decaying and fearful realities of this fallen world surrounds us.

The book of Hebrews, after testifying to the greatness of the promise of the New Covenant in Christ says this:

Heb. 11:1 *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*

And because Christ is risen, the promises that come with him are sure.

It is faith in those promises that helps us to let go of those things that are not worth grasping, and hold tight to what will endure.

I vow to thee my Saviour

*O tell me of the kingdom
That stands the test of time,
O lead me to its gateway,
And speak the word sublime
That tells me I'm forgiven,
My name is in the book,
The cross of Jesus holds me,
As heavenward I look;
Baptised into a living hope,
I'll walk the path that's new;
And the prize of God in Jesus
For ever I'll pursue.*