

hope
in the *upheaval*

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AN ADVENT JOURNEY WITH JEREMIAH

MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH | BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

INTRODUCTION

This Advent season, we invite you to journey with us through the Book of Jeremiah to get a deeper glimpse of the man known by some as the weeping prophet. Over the course of these five weeks, we'll move through the Book of Jeremiah, following the pattern of the biblical prophecy of sin, judgment, and renewal. Jeremiah speaks out against the people's sin. Jeremiah warns them of God's coming judgment, which would come through exile by Babylon. And Jeremiah preaches that God's punishment would be for the purpose of renewal, to restore the people to God. Jeremiah weeps, yes, but he also hopes. There is hope in the upheaval because of God's covenant with his people and his commitment to keep his promises.

During these five weeks, we'll read selections from the Book of Jeremiah that follow the book's outline according to The Bible Project videos. We've included a printout of The Bible Project's handout on the Book of Jeremiah that we hope you will find helpful in your studies, along with a QR code you can scan to watch this video. We've also included a timeline as a way to help you orient yourself in the story. As you read Jeremiah, you'll notice that the book isn't necessarily organized in chronological order; in some ways, it might feel like a topsy-turvy jumble of prophecies that don't follow a linear timeline! This is because Jeremiah is a refugee, and so the book looks a lot like refugee literature. Take a moment to check your timeline when you hear the name of a king or other historical figure and know that Jeremiah's point was less to tell the linear story of the rise and fall of Judah and more to tell us the story of God's people, of their faithlessness, and of God's faithfulness.

The Book of Jeremiah can also be challenging because of all that is happening in the world during his lifetime. In 722 BC, Assyria conquers Israel, the northern kingdom, and is the dominant world power. But things quickly change with Babylon's rise to power. Judah, the southern kingdom, struggles to maintain independence in the wake of the world superpowers vying for control over that part of the world. Jeremiah speaks to Judah and warns Judah's kings against making political alliances for the purpose of self-preservation, declaring that God has sent Babylon to judge their nation.

As you read about Jeremiah's own journey of faith and ministry, about his message of uprooting and breaking down, of destroying and overthrowing, of planting and rebuilding, my prayer is that you would see Jeremiah as more than just a weeping prophet. Rather, my prayer is that you would see him as a prophet who sees the depths of despair and yet chooses to hold out hope that God isn't finished yet with his people. I pray for you to see him as a prophet who refuses to allow sin to have the final word and who believes God will come again to rebuild what had been torn down, for our good and for God's glory. Jeremiah's hope points us forward to when hope will come down to live among God's people in the person of Jesus Christ, who put on flesh to dwell among God's people to enact a new covenant, to write the law on our hearts, and to bring eternal peace.

This is the message of Advent, that even in the depths of despair, even in the lowest points of the story of Judah (and even in the lowest points of our story, too), God isn't finished yet. God uproots sin so that he might plant hope. Hope can exist, even in the dark, even in the upheaval, even when it seems as if all hope has been lost, because of Jesus.

Ang M. Hirsch

TIMELINE OF JEREMIAH

- 931 BC - The kingdom of Israel is divided into two kingdoms: Israel*, the northern kingdom, which has kings that are not from David's lineage and Judah, the southern kingdom, which has kings from David's lineage.
- 732 BC - Assyria conquers Israel, the northern kingdom, makes Israel a province of Assyria, and places Hoshea, Israel's last king (732-722 BC) on the throne in Samaria. Assyria takes exiles.
- 722 BC - Assyria destroys Samaria and ends Israel's monarchy for continued rebellion. Assyria takes exiles.
- 701 BC - Assyria invades Judah, captures all cities except Jerusalem, and takes exiles from Israel and Judah.
- 697-642 BC - Manasseh, perhaps Judah's most idolatrous and unjust king, reigns in Jerusalem. Many reforms will be needed to undo his work.
- 640-609 BC - Josiah rules as the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, bringing many reforms to the land beginning in 628 BC and continuing in 622 BC.
- 627 BC - Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC), Assyria's last powerful king, dies.
- 627 BC - Jeremiah is called to be a prophet.
- 626 BC - Nabopolassar (626-605 BC) becomes king of Babylon and leads rebellion against Assyria.
- 612 BC - Babylon destroys Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.
- 609 BC - Josiah is killed by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt.
- 609 BC - Babylon conquers Assyria and assumes control of lands Assyria formerly controlled.
- 609 BC - Jehoahaz rules as king of Judah for three months before being taken to Egypt by Pharaoh Neco.
- 609 BC - Jehoiakim (609-598 BC) is put on Judah's throne by Egypt.
- 605 BC - Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC) becomes king of Babylon, succeeding his father Nabopolassar (see above). For the sake of simplicity, we will follow the biblical account and refer to him as Nebuchadnezzar.
- 605 BC - Babylon defeats Egypt at Carchemish and requires Judah to send Daniel and others to Babylon (see Daniel 1:1-7).
- 598-597 BC - Jehoiachin rules as king of Judah for just three months before being taken to Babylon; he is later released in 562 BC by Babylonian king Evil-merodach (562-560 BC), Nebuchadnezzar's son.
- 597 BC - Nebuchadnezzar marches to Jerusalem, deposes Jehoiachin, puts Zedekiah on the throne of Judah, and takes more exiles to Babylon.

- 597-586 BC - Zedekiah rules as king of Judah, trying to secretly align with foreign nations for protection while professing allegiance to Babylon.
- 586 BC - Zedekiah's rebellion is discovered; Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem, captures and blinds Zedekiah, and destroys the city. All Judah falls to Babylon, and more exiles are taken from the land.
- 586 BC - Gedaliah, a Judean, is appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to serve as governor of Judah, but is killed by Ishmael.
- 586 BC - Jeremiah is taken to Egypt against his will by fellow countrymen.
- 582 BC - More exiles from Judah are taken to Babylon.
- 562 BC - Nebuchadnezzar dies and is succeeded by his son, Evil-merodach (562-560 BC), who releases Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon. Jehoiachin dines at the king's table for the rest of his life.
- 539 BC - Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530 BC), defeats Babylon.
- 538-537 BC - Cyrus begins rule over the Babylonian provinces, declaring that the Jewish exiles can return home.
- 537 BC - The first wave of exiles returns to the Promised Land.

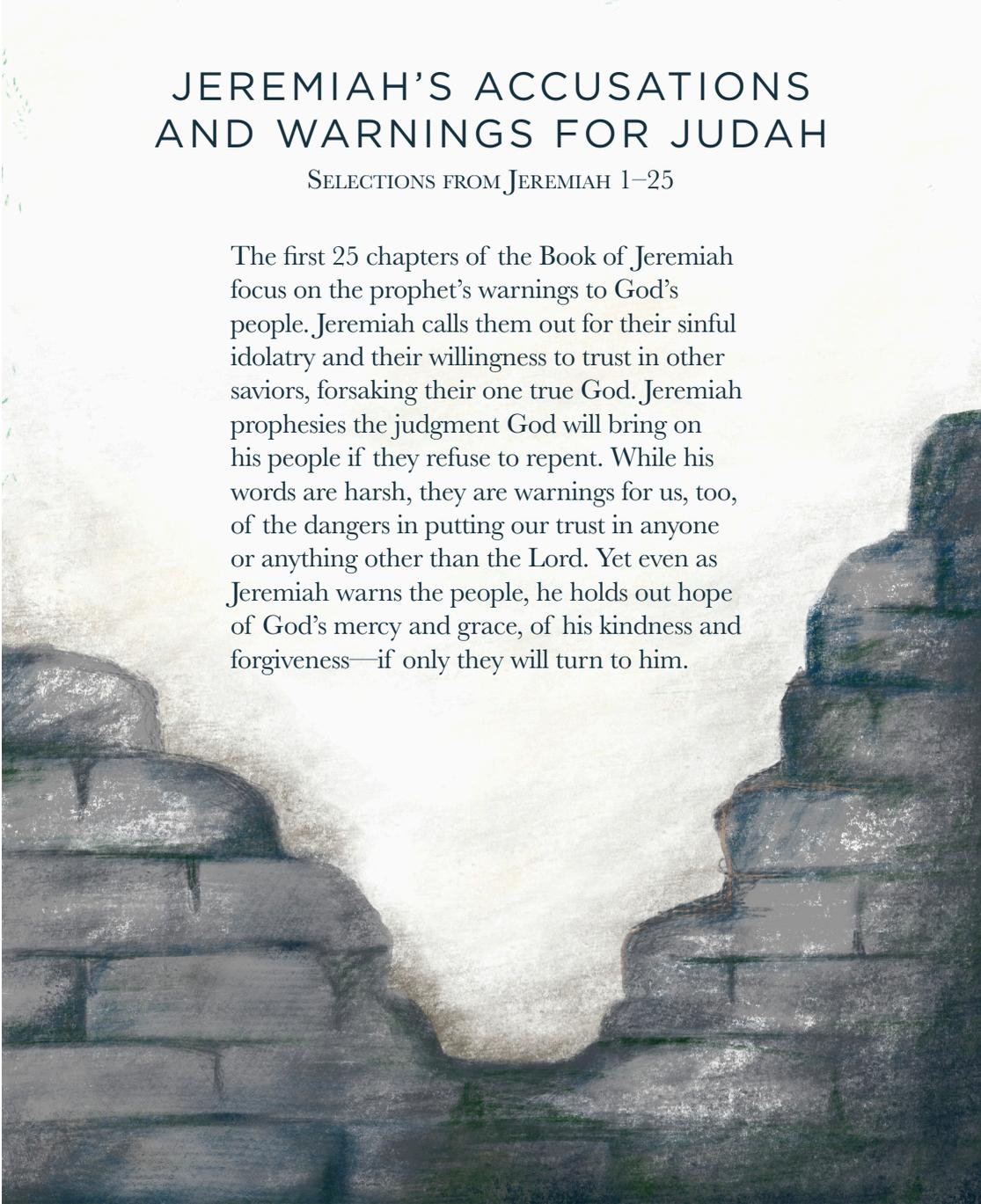
*A note on the term Israel: The word "Israel" points back to Jacob, who was renamed "Israel" by God in Genesis 32. This was the name for God's people, who were delivered from slavery in Egypt, who wandered in the wilderness, and who were given the Promised Land. Israel was a united nation under its first three kings (Saul, David, and Solomon). After the kingdom splits in 930 BC, the ten tribes of the north make up the northern kingdom, continuing to be known as Israel, and the two tribes of the south make up the southern kingdom, which will be called Judah. As we read, Jeremiah will speak primarily to the people of Judah, but sometimes he will use the term "Israel" either to refer to the conquered northern nation or to refer to God's people as a whole. He also refers to Israel and Judah, especially when writing about the future (see, for example, Jeremiah 31:31-34). Part of the prophetic hope God gives his people is that the kingdom would be reunified and restored—that there would be one Israel, ruled by one king from the line of David. For the purpose of clarity, we have chosen to primarily use the term "Judah" to refer to God's people, except in situations where we are referring to both kingdoms or where the text uses the term "Israel."



JEREMIAH'S ACCUSATIONS AND WARNINGS FOR JUDAH

SELECTIONS FROM JEREMIAH 1–25

The first 25 chapters of the Book of Jeremiah focus on the prophet's warnings to God's people. Jeremiah calls them out for their sinful idolatry and their willingness to trust in other saviors, forsaking their one true God. Jeremiah prophesies the judgment God will bring on his people if they refuse to repent. While his words are harsh, they are warnings for us, too, of the dangers in putting our trust in anyone or anything other than the Lord. Yet even as Jeremiah warns the people, he holds out hope of God's mercy and grace, of his kindness and forgiveness—if only they will turn to him.



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28 | JEREMIAH 1 | AMY HIRSCH
“THE WORD OF JEREMIAH, THE WORD OF THE LORD”

Who was Jeremiah? What does his prophecy have to do with Advent? These are two questions before us as we embark on this journey. While some biblical prophets revealed few details about their lives, over and over we'll see Jeremiah reveal much of his story and give us insights into his very soul. Jeremiah is a young priest from Anathoth, a small town just north of Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. His ministry spans 40 years and the reigns of several kings. God calls and appoints Jeremiah before he is formed in the womb to be a prophet to the nations.

Through his account, Jeremiah pulls back the curtain to show us the difficulties of ministering to complacent and obstinate people, bringing to life his joys and his sorrows. Jeremiah models being honest before the Lord about our shortcomings as he confesses to God how incapable he feels. Though he feels unqualified, God gives him confidence—not because of his own abilities, but because of God's promise to be with him, regardless of what he might face.

But these aren't only Jeremiah's words. These are also God's words, given to his servant Jeremiah to declare. God's message, delivered through Jeremiah, is relevant for us in this season of Advent. Through Jeremiah, God declares he will pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant. Like other prophets, Jeremiah's message follows a pattern of sin, judgment, and renewal. Jeremiah will condemn their sins against God, especially their idolatry and self-trust. He will warn them of impending judgment from the nation of Babylon, “a boiling pot, facing away from the north” (Jeremiah 1:14 ESV). God will use Babylon to break down all they hold dear, to overthrow their government, and to destroy life as they know it. But the message won't end there. The same God who will pluck up and break down, who will destroy and overthrow, will also build and plant again. God's punishment will be for the purpose of restoration, to draw his people back to him.

We enter into this story on this first Sunday of Advent as we enter into the anticipation for a Savior to come and ransom Israel. Just as the people exiled by Babylon waited, we also wait. They waited for God to deliver them from foreign oppression, to plant them back into their homes, and to rebuild their land. Ultimately, they were waiting for the coming of the long-expected Messiah, who would save them from their sin. We enter into this same kind of waiting, but not for Christ's first coming. This Advent, we sigh and we lean into the sorrows and difficulty of this last year waiting for Jesus, our Emmanuel, to come again and deliver us. Even in the struggles, Jeremiah makes sure that hope is firmly planted in all of our hearts. Christ will come again.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29 | JEREMIAH 2 | NATHAN KING
“A HOPEFUL JOY, FOUND IN TRUST”

The second chapter of Jeremiah may seem like a dreary, hopeless collection of condemnations from God. But if we take a look at the bigger picture, the reality of this passage offers something a lot better than we expect.

Jeremiah is tasked with preaching to Judah about how far they have strayed from the Lord (and he does so boldly!). But, before he even begins to express God’s accusations, he presents Judah with a statement of remembrance to remind them of where they came from and the faithful people they used to be. Verses 2 and 3 preface the direction God is going with this proclamation and can ultimately be viewed as the centering verses that help the people understand where God is coming from in the rest of the chapter.

“I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; disaster came upon them, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 2:2–3 NRSV).

The remainder of the chapter, therefore, can be seen through a lens of hope: a hope that God’s people will return to him, the One who delivers and sustains. This is the reason for the extensive description of their shortcomings. It is for their own benefit that God calls them out for who they have become. God is greatly urging his people to turn away from their sin, because eventually, their sin will end up destroying them. Verse 17 displays this idea perfectly:

“Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, while he led you in the way?” (Jeremiah 2:17 NRSV).

This passage is incredibly relevant in our lives today! God has created all of us out of love, for love. We have the full capacity to take part in a life abundant with joy, but if we do not trust the fact that God will bring us that joy, it becomes impossible to be freed from ourselves. God just wants us to recognize what it is that he is doing in our lives. A patient trust in our Creator constructs a space—not of destruction, but of restoration.

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30 | JEREMIAH 3:6-4:4 | BEN WINDER
“FINDING GRACE IN OUR DISGRACE”

I am all too familiar with the feeling of disgrace, being prone to lingering in the self-loathing of the recognition of my own failures. Perhaps this is never truer than when I have let someone down by my failure. You've perhaps felt the dread of an impending meeting with someone you've wronged or failed. In those moments, I have some anxiety about the response of the other person, running through scenarios in my head of what they might say and what shape their anger, disappointment, or—worse yet—confirmed suspicions might take. However, even that anxiety pales in comparison to the all-too-familiar feeling of having the truth of my own shortcomings revealed for another to see. There is perhaps nothing more exposing than admitting disgrace. If you've ever shared these feelings, I pray you have at least occasionally also shared the experience of being met in this moment of vulnerability by the overwhelming grace of the one you've wronged. There is perhaps nothing more beautiful than being exposed for the imposter you are and yet still being engulfed in the grace of the one you've hurt.

Today's passage from Jeremiah pulls no punches about the shortcomings of God's people. In vivid, graphic detail, their sins are laid out. They have done the unimaginable. God describes their actions as worse than an adulterous spouse. Even the times they have appeared faithful have been nothing but pretense. Yet still—even still—God's grace meets them there. Exposed as sinners, their plan is to wallow in the shameful disgrace their sin has wrought, but God invites them to return to him and in righteousness find blessing. They are invited to return, confess their sinfulness, and test the Lord's faithfulness. In acknowledging their guilt, they are surprised to find a God who is not angry forever, but who is faithful, always.

What might we take from this passage? When we have been wronged, we might pray to be so shaped by the grace of God we've encountered in Christ Jesus that we would hold no one's wrongs against them but offer grace. And when it is we who have wronged others, we might be courageous enough—even in our disgrace—to return to them, confess our sinfulness, and there in that vulnerability open the door for the potential of grace.

The promise of Advent, the hope in the coming of Christ, is that when we come to God with our disgrace, God meets us with beauty of grace beyond imagining. Return to God. Confess. Find God to be faithful. Always.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1 | JEREMIAH 5 | WAYNE SPLAWN
“COMPLACENCY KILLS”

You have likely heard the phrase “complacency kills.” The saying succinctly but powerfully communicates the truth that our failure to be faithful and vigilant in any area of life will eventually lead to disaster. We have all seen this truth play out time and again in many areas of life.

From athletes and coaches who lost a game to an inferior opponent because they thought they were unbeatable regardless of their level of effort, to businesses that were forced to close their doors because they assumed they would dominate the market despite their unwillingness to innovate and meet the changing demands of customers, to musicians who failed to produce quality art because they assumed their fans would support whatever they made—we know of countless examples of people and organizations who fell from lofty heights of success because they were complacent.

The same principle applies to our spiritual lives. In Jeremiah 5, the prophet Jeremiah warns the people of the judgment they will experience if they refuse to repent of their sins and walk according to God’s will. As Jeremiah describes the people, it is clear they are complacent in their relationship with God. They have engaged in immoral sexual practices, taken advantage of the poor and oppressed in the land, and served foreign gods. Rather than responding to Jeremiah’s message with faith and repentance, they choose to listen to false prophets who assure them that all is well and that they will never be held accountable for their sins.

During Advent, we are called to consider the truth that Jesus will one day appear in our world to make all things new and judge those who continue to pursue evil rather than walk according to God’s ways. The idea of appearing before the Lord is a sobering one because most of us no doubt struggle with complacency as we wait for the Lord to return. Ask the Lord to show you ways he is calling you to repent of your sins and more faithfully pursue his will as you wait for his return.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2 | JEREMIAH 7:1-8:3 | TIM SANDERLIN
“FEAR FAKE FAITH”

Have you ever been caught in a lie? A lie where, at some point or another, both parties knew the truth had been left behind and falsities had been brought into the light? In this moment, there are two options: come clean and ask for forgiveness or continue to bury the truth under more lies. When you double down on deceit in this way, the only one you are now trying to convince is yourself. This also results in not only hurting the one you have deceived, but also hurting yourself and your reputation. It takes humility—albeit delayed—to realize you have broken someone’s trust and ask for their grace. This was God’s word to the people of Judah through his prophet Jeremiah. The people were living in a two-faced reality in which they were only fooling themselves, for God sees the heart of humankind.

Here’s the scenario: God’s people profess that they follow the decrees of Yahweh by sacrificing and worshipping in the Temple regularly. They attend worship out of habit. And while this is pleasing to the Lord, they falsely believe this is all he requires for them to be his image bearers to the rest of the world. In Jeremiah 7, however, God clears his throat and repeats to them the words he spoke to their ancestors on the shore of the Red Sea: “Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you” (Jeremiah 7:23 NIV). In other words, God requires that his people live the way he tells them to so that his presence can reside with them, thus leading to their well-being and blessing. As we know, it is truly impossible to keep every command, and we know there is only One who would be able to do this. The God of Israel knows this and is asking something deeper of his people than just keeping a list of laws: “Treat others the way I treat you.” In Exodus 34:6, God declares himself to be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. This is how he deals with his children, and this is what it means to obey all of God’s commands.

Judah is guilty. Judah is caught in her own lies. God’s people forsake the widows and orphans, they are unfaithful to their spouses, they oppress the foreigners, and they worship gods that do nothing but distract them from the God who saves. In this chapter, they now have a choice: to double down and continue hurting themselves in these infidelities or repent and ask for forgiveness. Jeremiah brings a sobering word to God’s people: While you might feel safe in the Temple, your misdeeds are actually laid bare before the eyes to whom you must give account. God sees and knows. God forgives. Will you repent?

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3 | JEREMIAH 8:18-9:6 | MARY SPLAWN
“JEREMIAH HURTS FOR HIS PEOPLE”

It is really hard to see people we love suffer, especially if their suffering is a result of personal sin or deception from the evil one. Our consolation and hope in these seasons is to believe that God can take someone from a place of defiance and restore them by teaching them about his love, mercy, and plan for their lives. In the midst of frustration and worry, we have hope that God can change the hearts and behaviors of those we love.

This is the situation we find Jeremiah in! He hurts alongside the people because of the destruction their sin has caused. He longs for them to turn their hearts to the Lord. He warns them again and again of the destruction to come. But they just won't listen.

As Scripture teaches us, God patiently waits for the nation of Israel to repent, but ultimately they bear the consequences for their sins because of their defiance. As a result, they are defeated as a nation and exiled to a foreign land. This punishment is meant to bring them to their knees, help them see their waywardness, and turn in repentance to God.

As bad as their judgment is, God's mercy remains. If we fast forward many years past their judgment, a time does come when faithful Jews are allowed to return to rebuild their homeland. The punishment gave way to forgiveness and renewal!

As we contemplate the great gift we receive in Jesus this Christmas, let's meditate on the patience and kindness we have received from the Lord. He has rescued us from the power of sin and death, even though we are bent toward sin and often forsake his commands. And, let us pray for others, that they might not have to suffer grave consequences for their sins, but rather that they would see and behold the gift of renewal and forgiveness found only in Jesus our Lord!

Father, please examine my heart, convict me of sin, and free me from the power it has over me. Please help _____ (insert names of loved ones) see your kindness and mercy and turn from their sins to know and follow you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4 | JEREMIAH 10 | AMY HIRSCH
“THE FOLLY OF IDOLATRY”

Growing up, my mom despised the word “stupid.” She would quickly correct us when we called someone or something “stupid,” and to this day, I refrain from using the word—partially out of the habits of childhood and partially because my mother was correct. But as I read Jeremiah 10, a phrase popped into my head: “the stupidity of idolatry.” Stupid means “having or showing a great lack of intelligence or common sense.” While we should never call someone stupid (it’s such an unkind insult), I think Jeremiah would have used the word “stupidity” when he described idol worship in this chapter, had he written his letter in English.

In Jeremiah 10, Jeremiah tells us about the stupidity, folly, and vanity of idolatry. Idolatry and self-worship are the two besetting sins continually plaguing God’s people. And these sins have been an issue all along, ever since God freed his people from slavery and delivered them from Egypt. (Remember the golden calf?) The people have always been quick to lift up their souls to something other than God. Little has changed by the time we get to Jeremiah’s prophecy, except that this sin has become so prevalent that even the priests, teachers, and leaders—who were supposed to shepherd the people and lead them in God’s ways—have fallen into the same trap.

As I read this chapter, I thought about God’s omnipotence. In other words, God is all-powerful. This is one of the incommunicable attributes of God—things that can only be true of him. (For a helpful book on this topic, check out Jen Wilkin’s *None Like Him*.) Jeremiah begins by telling us how idols are formed: They are manmade objects, crafted and decorated by people. They are immobile and inactive. In fact, some of the idols he describes are so flimsy that they have to be nailed to some kind of support so they won’t fall over (see verse 4). Jeremiah contrasts these created idols, these mute gods, with the Lord Almighty. While these idols were crafted by human hands, the Lord God spoke all things into existence, including the very humans who made the idols! He formed the very wood and precious metals they were using to create these idols. While these idols were lifeless, God is the true and living God, the everlasting king.

It would be easy for us to condemn God’s people for such silly actions; after all, who lifts their souls to a golden calf or wooden statue? But far too often we find ourselves doing the same things, don’t we? We trust in things that are manmade and fickle and that can never bring us total fulfillment. I find myself echoing the prayer in verses 23–24 with my own paraphrase: “Lord, I know that you alone know all things,” (which is God’s omniscience, another incommunicable attribute of God), “and that you alone direct people’s steps. Correct my false worship, Lord, but please don’t discipline me in anger! Please reorder my steps in justice, for the glory of your name.”

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5 | JEREMIAH 12 | JOEL BURKS
“UNCHANGING”

In Jeremiah 12, Judah finds themselves on the brink of destruction. I think we can all sympathize with Jeremiah, seeing as he was given the task of delivering this sad proclamation to his fellow countrymen. Judah, God’s inheritance and joy, is about to be destroyed by the nations surrounding it. One can read through this chapter, as well as those that precede it, and see that this destruction will not be a pretty sight. Judgment is coming for God’s people.

In this Advent season, I am reminded of the parallels between Jeremiah 12 and Ephesians 2:1–10. In the English translation of each passage, the conjunction of “but” (or “and”) is used to indicate a progressive movement. This conjunction is important, because it shifts the focus of the passage from God’s wrath against sin toward God’s compassion for his people. In a passage like the one in Jeremiah, it can be easy to focus on the existential dread that blooms in the announcement for Judah. But narrowing our focus to just this aspect of the proclamation causes us to miss the very important progression of the passage that expounds upon the heart of God for his people.

In Jeremiah, we read how Judah is about to bear the weight of their sin. The nation has been given opportunities to repent but instead has chosen to turn their backs on God. Jeremiah spends the entire first half of chapter 12 talking about how Judah is about to come to ruin. But then, in the fifteenth verse, we read:

“But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to their own inheritance and their own country” (NIV).

Jeremiah 12 shows us two aspects of God’s character on display: God’s wrath toward sin and his compassion toward his people. These same character traits are on display in Ephesians 2, as well. Paul begins the chapter by talking about how we are all dead in our transgressions. Just like God’s people can’t save themselves from Babylon, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves from the wages of our sin. Then, in Ephesians 2:4, Paul shifts to God’s compassion: “But because of [God’s] great love for us...” (NIV). Jesus is God’s ultimate sign of compassion. Jesus, who came to this earth to bear the weight of sin, offers us new access to God the Father. Our access to God may have changed, but the two aspects of God’s character remain unchanged from Old Testament to New. God’s wrath toward sin and his overwhelming love for us are true yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6 | JEREMIAH 16 | BEN WINDER
“THE WAGES OF SIN”

God takes sin seriously. God being holy and perfect invites us to be holy and perfect, and when we fall short of the glory of God—in action or inaction—we sin. The hard-to-hear news is that God cannot abide our sin. Our sin separates us from him. Cut off from the source of all life, we wither and die. As Paul bluntly reminded the Romans, “The wages of sin is death.”

Thanks be to God this is not the end of the story! Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah in today’s passage, the Lord makes clear the sins of his people. Having forsaken God and turned to other gods who could not offer life, God’s people have dug their own grave. Their sin has consequences. In this case, the bad news is that they would find themselves exiled; the Promised Land would be ripped from them as just punishment for not upholding their end of the covenant with the Lord.

This picture of God’s wrath might at first be uncomfortable for us. Yet if we understand the basis of God’s wrath being his holiness paired with his deep love for humanity, we come to see that exile is a tool God uses to draw his people back into covenant relationship. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us in his work *The Crucified God*, “The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference.” God loves us too much to allow sin, death, and exile to be our end and will use whatever extraordinary tools required to demonstrate love and invite restored relationship.

Jeremiah points this out for us in revealing God’s promise to restore the people to the Promised Land. The punishment and the promise go hand in hand. The Lord will banish the people to exile as a just punishment for their sins, but they are not left without hope. The promise is that the Lord will work amid their exile to draw them back to the Promised Land, and even more importantly to reestablish their covenant relationship with him.

As we walk through this season of Advent, we are reminded that God still takes sin seriously. Yet God still loves us too deeply to allow us to wither and die in our sin. And so, in fulfillment of his promises, God made a way for us. While we were still sinners, while we were still in an exile of our own making, Christ came, lived, and died, and was resurrected to restore our covenant relationship with God. The promise the ancients awaited has been made manifest for us: God incarnate in Christ Jesus. The promise we await—the full restoration of all creation—is coming, too. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7 | JEREMIAH 17:1-18 | AMY HIRSCH
“CHRISTMAS TREES AND SELF-TRUST”

Now that we’ve entered the second week of Advent, you might be decking the halls in your house. But some Christmas decorations require some maintenance to make it until Christmas Day. For instance, you’d never purchase a real tree from a tree lot only to bring it home and put it in a stand without water, trusting it to sustain itself. No, you would be sure to water it regularly to keep the needles from drying and falling off before your Christmas festivities begin, because without access to water, the tree would surely die quickly!

Christmas trees can’t sustain themselves. And neither can we. In Jeremiah 17:5–8, Jeremiah uses an agricultural metaphor to warn Judah about the dangers of self-trust. Apart from the Lord, they will be parched, like a shrub planted in the desert with no access to the water. If they choose to trust in their own strength, in other humans, and in other gods rather than in the Lord of heaven and earth—the true Fountain of Living Water—they will find themselves forever thirsty. The consequences of their sin will take them into exile, to a place much farther away than they will ever want to go.

What is so dangerous about trusting in ourselves? As Jeremiah continues, he helps us understand that he’s talking about more than just having confidence. Jeremiah is talking about people who have put their trust and hope in that which cannot save—in themselves. We can’t save ourselves. Our hearts are deceitful and wicked, Jeremiah tells us, and terribly sick. Even our very best intentions are flawed. We cannot simply follow our hearts, because our hearts will deceive us.

Reading a passage like this brings me to a moment of self-examination. Am I truly trusting in the Lord and putting my hope in him, or am I putting my trust in my own abilities? Am I submitting to his authority and his leadership? Am I abiding in him, recognizing that while I am the branches, he is the vine, and that apart from him I can do nothing? Trusting in myself and believing I can sustain myself means I am actually denying myself access to the true source of life: the Lord. It is like believing the Christmas tree will last all month without ever being watered. The tree can’t sustain itself. And neither can we.

In response to his own prophecy, even the prophet Jeremiah cries out, “Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed” (Jeremiah 17:14 ESV). Jeremiah recognizes this tendency even in himself and asks the Lord to help him!

Oh Lord, would you help me, too, to be a person whose trust is in the Lord, who is like a tree planted by the water, who does not fear when trials and tribulations come, who remains reliant on you as her source of life?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8 | JEREMIAH 18 | TIM SANDERLIN
“SIT STILL”

April 6th, 2020. Only a few weeks after the United States shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided, like many others, to spend most of my time outside. Upon doing this, I realized that my yard and its landscaping were a disaster. Above all, I prioritized removing a shrub from our front yard. If you have ever tried to remove a shrub that has been in the same place for years, you will know it is a bigger undertaking than you could have ever imagined. After using two different kinds of shovels, an axe, and a collective seven hours of trying to mine it out of the earth, I took to more reckless methods—an automated hedge trimmer.

I put on my work gloves, gassed up the trimmer, and went to work. Not three minutes later, I was headed inside with a finger that had made direct contact with a pretty sharp and very fast blade. I couldn't go to a hospital at this point in time, so I simply called a nurse friend and asked if she could come help. While I no longer have feeling in the tip of my middle finger, it is now hardly noticeable that the incident ever took place. At the time, though, my finger was in pretty bad shape, and in order for it to be mended back to its original figure, my friend told me I had to “sit still” and let her restore my finger. Sitting still is a hard thing to do.

Jeremiah, circa 600 BC. The Lord comes to Jeremiah, telling him to go down to the potter's house. Upon approaching the potter at his wheel, Jeremiah notices the pot the craftsman is tending is far from finished. The clay is marred and mangled. The potter seems to not even look up from the task at hand and decides to keep working with the disfigured pot and “shaping it as seemed best to him” (Jeremiah 18:4 NIV).

At times when creating something even as simple as a cup of coffee and things go awry, we can be quick to dispose of the failed product and start over; but not this potter. This potter saw the problem, addressed it, put his hands on it, and slowly shaped it into something usable. What did the clay need to do? Sit still. All the clay had to do was stay right there in the hands of the potter.

Notice this is not a quick craft! Pottery takes time. But the product is something far more than a trinket; it is often an intricate vessel with multiple uses. The Potter, our Father as we know him, is not interested in making us into ornaments. Instead, he is sitting at the wheel, willing to make us into vessels, people, children, image bearers, apprentices, and priests. What do we have to do in this painstaking process of redemption? Stay in his arms. “Sit still.”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9 | JEREMIAH 20 | WAYNE SPLAWN
“A FIRE IN OUR BONES”

Jeremiah faces many challenges during his prophetic ministry. Chief among these challenges is the opposition he encounters from people in positions of power who vehemently oppose the message he is called to proclaim. In Jeremiah 20, we read of the conflict between Jeremiah and Pashur, the priest, who is the chief officer in the house of the Lord. Pashur is so threatened by Jeremiah's ministry that he beats him and places him in stocks in an effort to silence Jeremiah. However, no amount of persecution can convince Jeremiah to turn back from his calling. Jeremiah does not enjoy the conflict that comes his way and wishes he could be silent. Like all human beings, Jeremiah wants to avoid the suffering and shame that accompanies his prophetic ministry. But the message God has placed in his heart is like a fire in his bones that must come out.

During the Christmas season, it is easy to lose sight of the truth that the gospel we have been given to proclaim is just as controversial as Jeremiah's message. As we sing familiar Christmas carols, decorate a Christmas tree, gather with friends and family to enjoy delicious food and exchange presents, and hear messages of peace and goodwill, it is easy to forget that Jesus faced opposition from the moment he was born. In Matthew 2, we read of Herod's response to the news that one has been born who is King of the Jews. Herod does not receive this news as a message of glad tidings and great joy. Instead, he tries to snuff out Jesus' life by killing all the baby boys in Bethlehem two years and younger. Herod knows there can be only one king in the land, and he has no intention of bowing his knee to Jesus.

Jesus' entry into the world is a powerful reminder that we can't save ourselves. Each of us has sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and the only remedy for our sickness is to acknowledge our sins, place our faith in Jesus Christ, and submit to his lordship in our lives. We, and everyone who would partake in the eternal life Jesus came to secure on our behalf, must repent and give up our thrones.

It is likely that each of us knows someone who has not yet embraced Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. And, we are likely tempted to shy away from the opportunities the Lord will give us in this season to share the good news of the salvation God has made possible to everyone who will confess their sins and embrace Jesus' lordship in their lives. We know the message isn't popular with everyone, and some will even oppose it. However, we also know that abundant and eternal life is only found in him. May the Lord make this message of salvation like a fire in our bones. Rather than being silent, may the Lord use us to share the news of the greatest gift anyone could ever receive regardless of what such a proclamation might cost us.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10 | JEREMIAH 23 | MARY SPLAWN
“RIGHTEOUS BRANCH”

I love hearing the backstories of people’s nicknames. Some of the most interesting names I’ve heard are Bug, Green Un, Hollywood, and Nightcrawler. As you can imagine, each nickname has a very interesting origin.

“Righteous Branch” is a title found here in Jeremiah 23:5 and also in the Old Testament prophetic books for the Messiah. Or, in other more colloquial terms, it is a nickname for the Savior.

The question is, “Why the nickname ‘Righteous Branch?’” Jeremiah tells us why he is “righteous.” Look at verse 5 again. He is “a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5 NIV). This is in stark contrast to the self-serving leaders and priests of Israel during Jeremiah’s lifetime.

The term “branch” can be more clearly understood in light of Isaiah 11:1, which reads, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit” (ESV). The somewhat cryptic reference to the stump of Jesse is an image for the line of kings from the dynasty of David that is being cut down because of disobedience. But, from this stump, from this line of David’s father Jesse, a King will come who will do what branches should do: bear fruit!

This rich combination of terms, “righteous” and “branch,” finds its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah who is born from the line of David. His long-awaited kingdom is marked by wisdom, faithfulness, and righteous judgment.

This Christmas, let us renew our vow to welcome him as King of our hearts, rejoicing in the great gift of righteousness he bestows on those who believe in him!

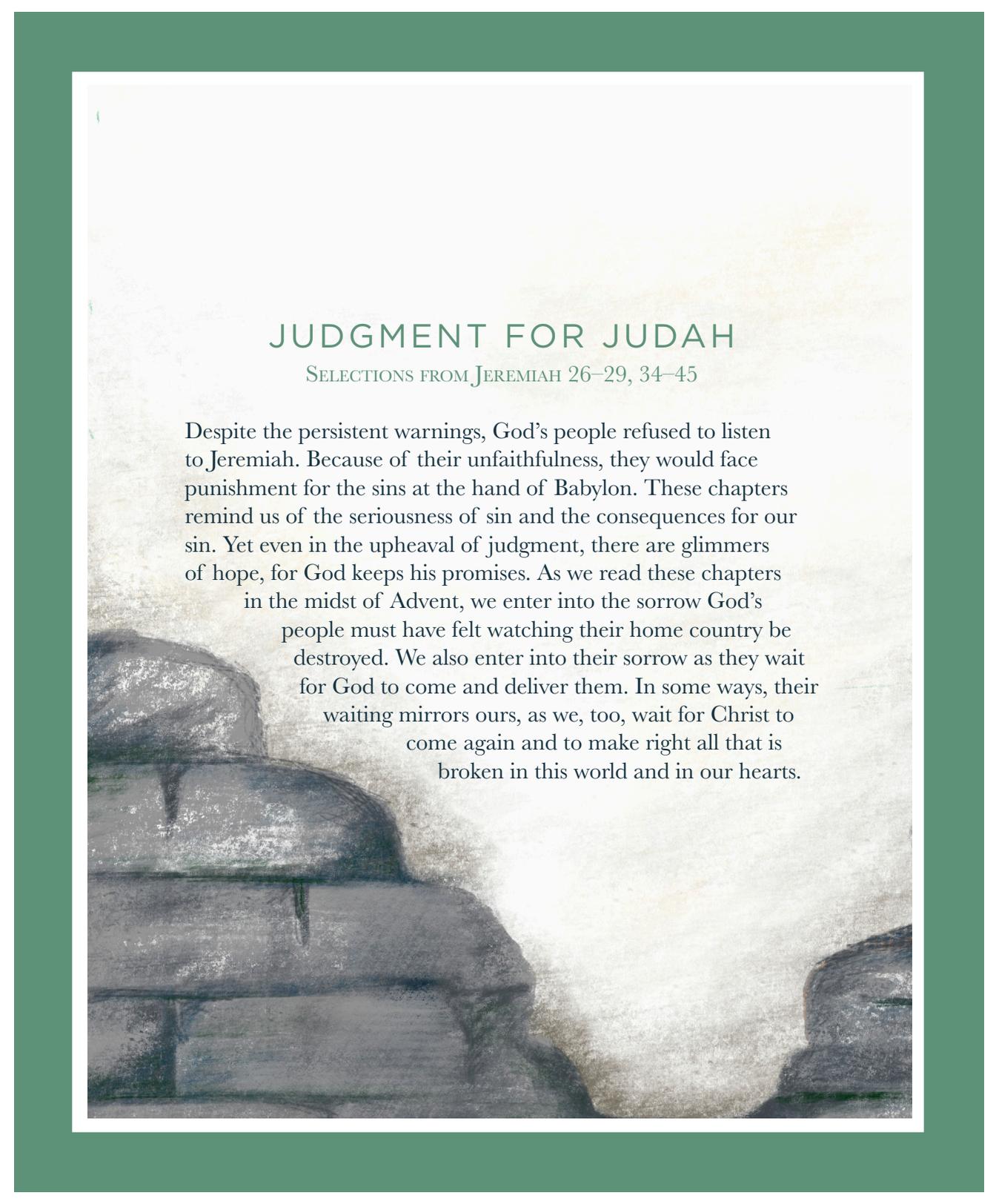
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11 | JEREMIAH 25 | AMY HIRSCH
“THE CUP OF GOD’S WRATH”

“I’ve been telling you to clean your room for 20 minutes!” Chances are, if you’re a parent, you’ve probably said something like this to your kids (and as a child, you probably were on the receiving end of a message like this, too). As we read Jeremiah 25, I am amazed at Jeremiah’s persistence. He has been preaching the same message of warning and judgment, calling the people to repentance, for more than 20 years at this point! What a faithful man who would preach this unwelcome news repeatedly to people who refuse to listen, all because of God’s call on his life. I’m also reminded of the faithfulness of a God who declares he is slow to anger (Exodus 34:6–7). For these many years of Jeremiah’s preaching, God continues to show the people grace and give them time to repent. In fact, this has been true for all of Judah’s history. God continues to be patient with his people, even when they don’t deserve his patience.

But now, the tide is turning. Before, Jeremiah warned of a judgment approaching from the north, but now the judgment has a name: Babylon, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. The context for this passage is key; you see, Jeremiah receives this message in 605 BC, during the first year of King Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. Babylon has just defeated Egypt in the Battle of Carchemish. This might not seem like a big deal, but it is, because Judah had been a vassal state of Egypt until Egypt was defeated. All of a sudden, Babylon is taking over the Mediterranean, and according to this passage, Judah, too, will fall to the nation, facing exile by Babylon as a punishment for sin.

But notice that even mighty Nebuchadnezzar is called God’s servant in verse 9—not because he is righteous or walks in God’s ways, but because God will use Nebuchadnezzar to bring judgment on the people of Judah for their sin and rebellion before also bringing judgment on Babylon. All of the nations listed in verses 17–26 will drink the cup of God’s wrath; they will face judgment from God because of their sins.

This imagery of the cup of God’s wrath is a difficult place to end today, as we see the people wail and cry out and stagger as if they are drunk. But it’s not a place without hope. You see, this cup of wrath is a biblical allusion used throughout the Old Testament to tell us that God will deal with sin. It never goes unnoticed or swept under the rug. All that is wrong in this world will be made right. But for those of us who know we are sinners, who recognize that we are part of all that is wrong, who cling to Jesus, our hope lies in the picture of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he cried out to God and asked for his cup of judgment to pass from him. Yet Jesus resolved to drink it for us, taking the punishment for our sin in our place. Praise God for this hope!



JUDGMENT FOR JUDAH

SELECTIONS FROM JEREMIAH 26–29, 34–45

Despite the persistent warnings, God's people refused to listen to Jeremiah. Because of their unfaithfulness, they would face punishment for the sins at the hand of Babylon. These chapters remind us of the seriousness of sin and the consequences for our sin. Yet even in the upheaval of judgment, there are glimmers of hope, for God keeps his promises. As we read these chapters in the midst of Advent, we enter into the sorrow God's people must have felt watching their home country be destroyed. We also enter into their sorrow as they wait for God to come and deliver them. In some ways, their waiting mirrors ours, as we, too, wait for Christ to come again and to make right all that is broken in this world and in our hearts.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12 | JEREMIAH 29 | BEN WINDER
“SETTLE IN”

The 29th chapter of Jeremiah—especially verse 11—is among the most quoted and beloved of all of Jeremiah’s prophecy. And while it is beautiful to rest in the promise that God has a plan for us, in the context of the full letter we are reminded that plan might not always be the easy path we might have hoped for.

The context of Jeremiah’s letter is to set the theological framework for the people’s exile to Babylon and to give them a concrete plan for moving into the future. Their well-deserved exile is assured, as is their not-at-all deserved homecoming to the Promised Land. God’s justice is matched by his mercy. But this journey from exile to restoration will not be a short one. A full generation—70 years—will be lived in a place that is not their home. What can they do as they await God’s promise being fulfilled (especially when a large number of them almost certainly won’t live to see it happen)? Jeremiah provides the answer:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:5–7 NIV).

In short, even while they wait, they need to live abundant lives and care deeply for the place in which they are temporarily residing.

Advent is well known as the season of waiting for the coming of the Lord as a baby at Christmas. It is also a reminder that we still await the fulfillment of God’s promise that Christ will come again. Some Christians have been misguided, believing that, because Jesus is coming back someday, nothing that happens here and now is of any importance. While they might not say it, their actions demonstrate their belief that “the world can go to hell because I’m going to Jesus.”

Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles doesn’t let us hold onto that false and unfaithful way of living. We are called to live full, abundant, and purpose-filled lives even as we wait for Jesus to come. We are not to treat the here and now as a waiting room for the sweet by-and-by. We are to seek the welfare of the place God has us. Advent reminds us that all God’s promises are trustworthy. God holds our future, so we need not be anxious as we wait. Instead, we are to be hard at work in our waiting—building, settling, planting, eating, marrying, increasing, praying, and prospering—in order that as we wait for Christ to come, we might be used of God as an answer to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13 | JEREMIAH 39 | WAYNE SPLAWN
“AN UNLIKELY CAST OF CHARACTERS”

Throughout the story of Scripture, the Lord uses unlikely people to accomplish his purposes in the world. In Jeremiah 39, we read of God’s promise to preserve the life of Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who serves in King Zedekiah’s house, even as King Zedekiah and his officers face a tragic end when Jerusalem finally falls to the Babylonians. Why is the Gentile Ebed-melech spared while the Jewish ruling class is decimated?

Jeremiah 39:18 states that Ebed-melech is saved because he trusted in the Lord. Ebed-melech displayed his trust in the Lord back in Jeremiah 38, when he risked his own life by pleading with the king to spare Jeremiah by delivering him from the cistern that would have surely been his grave apart from Ebed-melech’s intervention. What ultimately matters is not a person’s ethnicity or position of power, but whether a person will trust in the Lord.

The story of Jesus’ birth reminds us of this same truth. In the people who are featured in the story of Jesus’ entry into the world, it is the most unlikely folks who trust in God’s ability to accomplish salvation through the baby born in the Bethlehem manger. Elizabeth was barren and advanced in years, Mary was a virgin, the shepherds were outcasts who made a living on the fringes of society, and the wise men were foreigners from the east who came and bowed their knees to King Jesus. This hodge podge of humanity, composed of Jews and Gentiles alike, would not have been the folks voted most likely to be used by God. However, what mattered most was not their resumé, but whether they would trust in God’s provision.

This Christmas, you may be someone who occupies a position of authority in this world or you may feel like you are an outcast overlooked by everyone in the world. But, what matters is not where you are from or what you have accomplished in this world. What is most important to the Lord is whether you have placed your trust in God and received the free gift of salvation he offers to all who will place their faith in Jesus Christ.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14 | JEREMIAH 40 | MARY SPLAWN
“GOD SUPPLIES OUR NEEDS”

All throughout Scripture, we see God’s hand of provision in miraculous ways. He provided a well in the desert for Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:8–20), rained down manna from heaven to feed the wandering Israelites (Exodus 16:4), and sent ravens and a widow to feed Elijah (1 Kings 17:4–16).

In Jeremiah 40, we also see God’s supernatural provision for his servant Jeremiah. The time is sometime after 586 BC; Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians, and the people are being driven to Babylon in chains. Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar’s guard, has been given the task of taking the people of Judah off to Babylon. Only the poor and needy are left to work the land along with those put in leadership by the Babylonians. Jeremiah is put in chains like the others and begins the trek to Babylon—until the Lord does a miraculous thing. He gives the pagan official understanding and his servant favor!

The captain essentially says, “Hey, I understand that God is bringing this disaster on your people! I’ve heard your prophecies, and they are coming true. But, I’m releasing you from bondage. Come with me and I’ll take good care of you, or stay here if you want and go live near Gedaliah, whom we have appointed governor! He’ll take care of your needs as well. Oh, by the way, here is some food and a gift for your journey.”

The surface reason for the release of Jeremiah is unclear, but we know the deeper explanation. God has power over all and can use the hand of pagan authorities to release his servant.

The Christmas connection surfaces as we meditate on God’s ability to provide. Jesus could have been born within a secure palace with the help of trained midwives, but God chose instead for his birth to be among the weak and the lowly. After a long journey to a meager town of Bethlehem, Mary arrived depleted and in the pains of labor. She and Joseph were in need of shelter, provision, and protection. And, as the beautiful story reminds us, God provided a stable, a manger, and gifts from kings who had traveled great lengths to see the Christ Child.

God’s provision for the birth of Jesus his Son and for Jeremiah his servant teaches us the great truth that God provides. He makes a way when there seems no way. He supplies the needs of his servants as they trust in his abundant love and care.

Father, thank you for providing through miraculous means to teach us about dependence upon you. Guard us from self-sufficiency and pride and teach us to stand amazed at your daily provision in our lives. We thank you most of all for Jesus, the One who met our deepest need! Praise be to you, Lord! Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15 | JEREMIAH 41 | JOEL BURKS
“PROMISES”

Jeremiah 41 stands out to me as a chapter that takes things from bad to worse. The evil displayed by Ishmael toward the people at Mizpah is overwhelming at times. Reading this chapter had me at a loss for words as to how to even tie these events into Advent. During this season of glad tidings and cheer, this chapter is a reminder of the depths of human depravity and where we would be without Jesus. What Ishmael does here is so much more detestable because there seems to be no other motive than the proposition of the king of the Ammonites. The Ammonites opposed Babylon, and so they opposed Gedaliah, the governor Babylon had put in place over Judah. If we are to look at patterns in Scripture, it seems as though God’s people tend to find themselves in these downward spirals quite often. Yet we also see another pattern, one of God constantly calling his people back to himself and looking on them with compassion.

In Jeremiah 41, Judah can be seen in the midst of reaping the consequences of their sin because of their actions against God. For the sake of this devotion, though, I don’t want our focus to be on Judah’s situation. Yes, there are certainly implications to be made here about God’s position toward sin, but let us instead focus on the certainty of God’s promises to his people then and now. As I’m sure you would agree, it would have been easy during this disastrous season for Judah to take their vision off the promises that had been made to them. (How easily we also take our eyes off Jesus and let the worries of this world take hold.) But had Judah paid attention to Jeremiah’s full message, they would have known that God would still have compassion on them. Not only that, but God’s greatest act of compassion was still to come!

The sin on display in Jeremiah 41 is just like the sin we all have in our own hearts, sin that is deserving of punishment. But God would send his only Son to earth to die for the sins of all people, and ultimately his Son would take on the punishment that we deserve. Not only this, but as Wayne Splawn pointed out to me, Advent is a time when we look forward to Jesus’ second coming. We await the day when good triumphs over evil forever. God’s compassion is never ending. Let his Word testify to who he is, that we might believe it. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16 | JEREMIAH 42 | BEN WINDER
“A BETTER PLAN?”

There’s something about human nature that loves shortcuts. There are endless lists of life hacks on the internet to make life easier and more efficient. The mantra “work smarter, not harder” is not without merit. If something is equally effective when done in a more efficient manner, there seems little good reason to press on with the more difficult path.

Yet there is a fine line between finding true, helpful shortcuts and falling prey to modern-day snake oil salesmen. Unfortunately, there’s still no pill that undoes the need for a balanced diet and exercise. As of yet, a process for instantly downloading decades of education into our brains has not been found. Becoming like Jesus still takes what Eugene Peterson called a “long obedience in the same direction”; there is no shortcut to spiritual maturity.

With the exile bearing down on them in this chapter, God’s people believe they have found a shortcut, a loophole to escape 70 years in Babylon. If they head off to the prosperous land of Egypt, they think they can avoid the exile to Babylon and enjoy the abundance of life in Egypt, avoiding the war and famine they know is coming their way. To their credit, they decide to run this plan by God via the prophet Jeremiah. The response comes back, making clear their shortcut isn’t the flawless plan they hoped it was. In fact, God makes it clear that going to Egypt is a very bad plan. Exile will not be pleasant, but it is God’s will and way for them. God is going to use exile to shape them into the people he desires them to become.

Jeremiah makes it clear that sometimes God calls us into difficult situations because, through them, we are refined and molded. Beware of anyone who sells easy shortcuts to following the way of Jesus. We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus along the narrow path. It is under the weight of the cross along that narrow way—when we go the way God has invited us to go, to places and people God has called us—that we find life. Even when it is difficult, when we follow the way of Jesus, we find an easy yoke and a light burden. God knows better than us the way to abundant life; sometimes it is not in the obvious places, but in the places we least want to go. For God is often at work in the hard places, and we’re invited to join him there.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17 | JEREMIAH 43 | WAYNE SPLAWN “LISTEN TO HIM”

As technological devices invade more areas of our lives, it seems that people have an increasingly difficult time listening intently to what others have to say. You've probably experienced this in your own life. You're at lunch with a friend and as you are in the midst of a conversation, they look down at their watch or pull out their phone to check a notification before turning back to you. Perhaps you've experienced this repeatedly during one encounter with a friend and wondered if talking was worth the effort given the lack of attention you're receiving. However, as frustrating as it can be to speak with someone who finds it hard to focus on your words, it can be even more upsetting to clearly communicate a message to someone who doesn't believe what you have to say. It's not that they failed to hear you because they were distracted. Instead, they heard your message loud and clear, but didn't believe your message was true.

Jeremiah knew well the heartache associated with delivering a message others wouldn't accept as true. In Jeremiah 43, Jeremiah warns the remnant left behind in Jerusalem to remain in the land and trust that God will provide for their needs and protect them from further harm at the hands of Babylon rather than seeking refuge in Egypt. The leaders agree to obey whatever word Jeremiah receives from the Lord regarding this important decision, but when Jeremiah doesn't give the message they want to hear, they ignore his warning and trust in their own instincts. Despite warnings of sure doom that would come to them, they set out for Egypt.

In Hebrews 1:1–2, the author writes, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (ESV). In the past, the Lord spoke to his people through the prophets like Jeremiah, but in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son. And just as it was critical that God's people listen and obey the message of the prophets, so it is critical that we listen closely to what God has said to us through Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews spent much of his letter pleading with people to listen to the message they have received in Jesus.

In addition to the normal technological intrusions, this season brings its own unique distractions. Gift lists must be checked. Parties need to be attended. Church services will likely fill up your calendar. But, it would be tragic if we allow the busyness and distractions of this season to keep us from hearing the clear message of Christmas or if our hearts simply won't believe the message should it break through the noise. In Jesus, the Lord of all creation has humbled himself by taking on flesh and becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross so that we might be reconciled to God. The only appropriate response to this word of grace is to bow our knees in worship, glorifying the Lord for all he has done (Philippians 2:1–11). In the days that remain before Christmas, I invite you to take whatever steps are necessary to block out the many distractions in our world so that you might hear and respond in faith to the good news of salvation offered to you through Christ. This is a message you simply can't afford to miss.

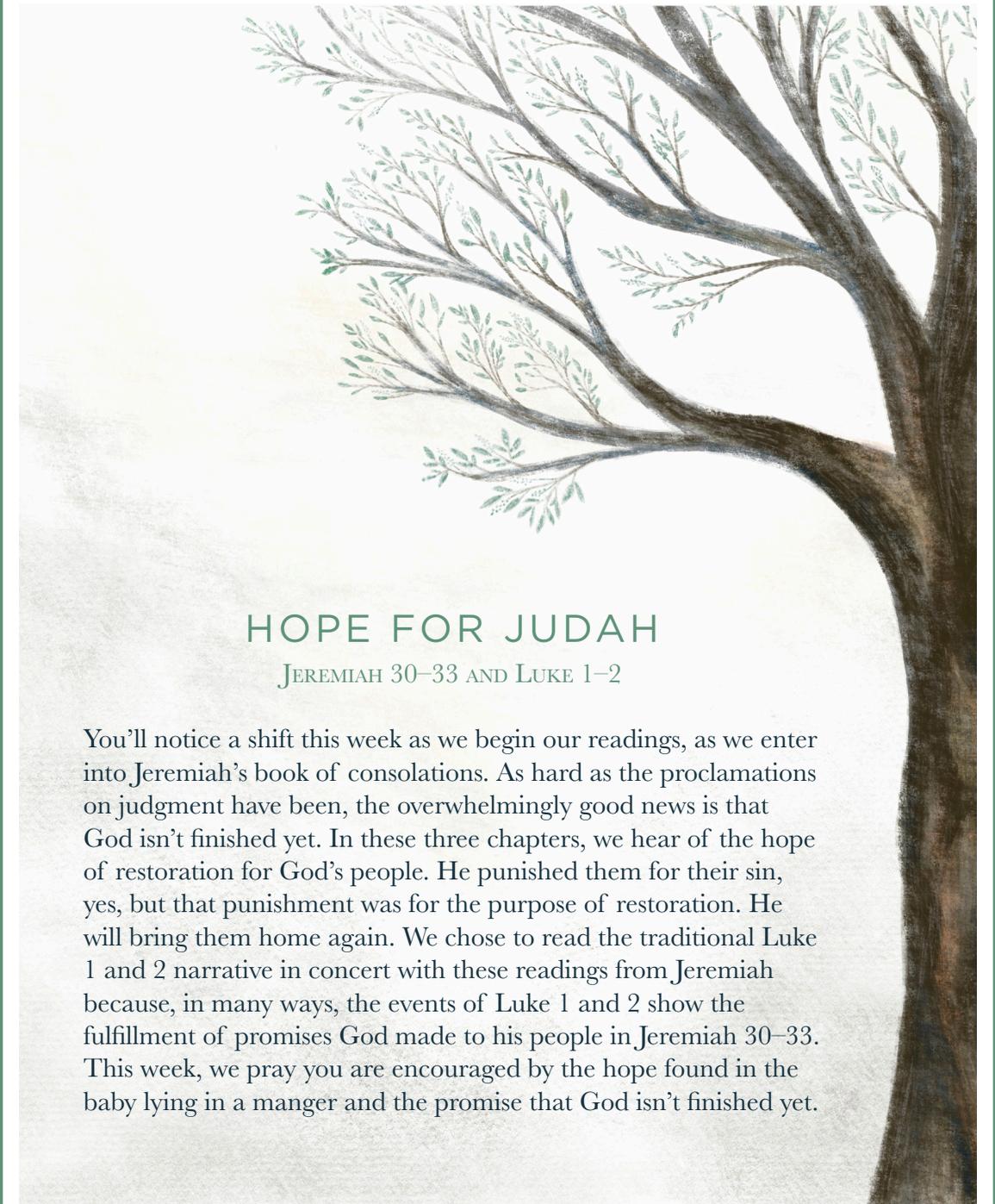
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18 | JEREMIAH 44-45 | AMY HIRSCH
“DO YOU SEEK GREAT THINGS FOR YOURSELF?”

In today’s reading, we find ourselves in Egypt sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jeremiah warns the people not to escape to Egypt, but they don’t listen to him—and somehow, against his will, Jeremiah ends up in Egypt, too. Jeremiah has been a witness to their unfaithfulness in Judah for decades, and little changes in Egypt. In verse 10, it’s as if Jeremiah says, “We’re singing the same song, second verse! You didn’t learn your lesson in Judah and you were exiled because of your idolatry, and now you’re here, doing the same thing in Egypt.”

But the people still refuse to listen. Imagine Jeremiah’s heartbreak even as he continues to faithfully preach. What’s more, this is Jeremiah’s last recorded message; his ministry seems to end on this note of defeat after preaching tirelessly with apparently only two converts (his scribe, Baruch, and Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch) and years of suffering to show. He’s been taken to Egypt against his will, where he will die (likely as a martyr, killed by the Jews). It’s not the life we would choose for ourselves, is it?

The scene shifts a bit in Jeremiah 45, back to Judah in 605 BC, to hear from Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch. Here we get a glimpse into this scribe’s heart as he cries out because of his suffering. He’s had to hear Jeremiah preach these awful judgments, write them down, and proclaim them to the people. Baruch was from a powerful family, but being Jeremiah’s mouthpiece couldn’t have made him popular. Perhaps he was seeking great things for himself. But God’s answer to Baruch silences any notion of self-service. In verse 4, God pulls the curtain and gives us a glimpse into his own heart. “You think this is hard for you, Baruch? Imagine creating these people, loving them, and wanting the best for them, and having them turn their back on you. I am breaking down all that I built. I am plucking up all that I planted.” The Lord says to Baruch, in effect, “This is the hard work I am doing. Are you seeking great things for yourself? Because if you are, this isn’t the right line of work for you.”

This week’s reading tells us that Baruch counted the cost and continued to follow to the very end, even going with Jeremiah to Egypt. But as I read this passage in light of Advent, I can’t help but think of Jesus’ example in regards to seeking great things for ourselves. He didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, put on flesh, and took the form of a servant. He humbled himself—not only to be born as a baby, but to die a death he did not deserve on the cross, that we might be reconciled with God (Philippians 2:6–7). Are you seeking great things for yourself? If you are, you will likely find that following in the ways of the Lord, who humbled himself even to the point of death, may conflict with those plans. But know that, in his time, God lifts up the humble who faithfully follow him wherever he leads.



HOPE FOR JUDAH

JEREMIAH 30–33 AND LUKE 1–2

You'll notice a shift this week as we begin our readings, as we enter into Jeremiah's book of consolations. As hard as the proclamations on judgment have been, the overwhelmingly good news is that God isn't finished yet. In these three chapters, we hear of the hope of restoration for God's people. He punished them for their sin, yes, but that punishment was for the purpose of restoration. He will bring them home again. We chose to read the traditional Luke 1 and 2 narrative in concert with these readings from Jeremiah because, in many ways, the events of Luke 1 and 2 show the fulfillment of promises God made to his people in Jeremiah 30–33. This week, we pray you are encouraged by the hope found in the baby lying in a manger and the promise that God isn't finished yet.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19 | JEREMIAH 30 AND LUKE 1:1-25
AMY HIRSCH | “THE GOD WHO CAN DO IMPOSSIBLE THINGS”

Today, the tide turns in Jeremiah’s prophecy from judgment to restoration. In Jeremiah 30, God makes a number of promises to his people that seem impossible. He will bring his people back home, protect the line of David, heal their seemingly incurable sin wounds, restore their fortunes, and bring them to a place of celebration and joy. God will give them a Prince who will be like them and yet who can approach God. They will be God’s people again.

I have to be honest: After three difficult weeks trudging through prophecies of judgment because of the people’s sin, these words should bring joy. But if you’re slightly cynical like me, this reversal might be hard to believe. And can you imagine how the people might have felt hearing this prophecy? Surely they had their doubts, too, as they sat on the shores of Babylon watching the consequences of their wickedness play out under foreign rule.

Yet as we turn to Luke 1, we see glimpses of fulfillment. Seventy years after captivity, God did, in fact, bring the people back to their land. In Luke 1, we see this prophecy partially fulfilled as we find faithful Jews like Elizabeth and Zechariah living in the land God had given his people so long ago; though they are living under the rule of Herod and Rome, God had brought his people back home nonetheless.

In Jeremiah 30, God describes their hurt as being incurable and their wound as being grievous. Who could heal them? Who could save them from themselves? But in verse 17, God declares, “I will heal your wounds.” It might seem impossible that God’s people will ever come back from this, having sunken so far in the depths of sin, but God will heal them. God can do what we think is impossible. Likewise, in Luke 1 he promises to do the impossible for Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have experienced barrenness for many years, not because of their sin but so that the good purposes of God might be fulfilled in his timing. From Elizabeth’s womb would come another prophet who would boldly speak truth—a man named John who would “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17 ESV).

John’s preaching would prepare the way for the Lord, for the birth of Christ, the Messiah and the Son of David. Those hearing Jeremiah’s prophecies probably scoffed at the idea that a son of David would reign on the throne of Judah again one day. Yet this week, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, a descendant of David. God would indeed send the people a ruler like them, and yet One who could approach God himself (Jeremiah 30:21). Like God’s people, and like Elizabeth, we lift our voices, too, in celebration with songs of thanksgiving for the One who came to take away the reproach of his people!

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20 | JEREMIAH 31:1-26 AND LUKE 1:26-56
MARY SPLAWN | “JOY COMES THROUGH THE MOURNING”

When I lived in Mexico for two years with the Journeyman Missions Program, I wasn't able to come home during the first Christmas. To make matters worse, I had the flu on Christmas Day and couldn't even raise my head to talk on the phone with my family. But during the second year of my journey, I had permission to make the trip home. I started listening to Christmas music in August of that year in anticipation for the trek home! During my visit, it was so wonderful to see my extended family. On top of a great Christmas celebration, I got to experience a deep snow that was perfect for making snow angels. The snow storm extended my trip home for an extra day, so Wayne and I really enjoyed the bonus time together. When I look back, I remember the time with great joy! The joy is heightened as I recall the difficulty of Christmas the previous year.

Joy is the common theme in these passages we read today. Jeremiah prophesies that those who are long exiled will return to the land of promise. He says they will dance with joy! Luke says that the time of waiting for the Messiah has come to an end. Miraculously, baby John, who is in Elizabeth's womb, leaps with excitement and joy.

These passages are a breath of fresh air after the many words of warning and despair we read in Jeremiah. They remind us that God promises to bring us to a place of ultimate joy, even if all of life is full of mourning. And as we wait for the final day of salvation and the day when we—who are exiles in a foreign land—will be at home with the Lord, we must ask the Holy Spirit to give us anticipatory joy.

In this season, are you experiencing longing or grief, sorrow, or stress? If so, may these passages be a reminder that God does not forget his people. As we await the greatest joy of being with Jesus forever, let us rest in the promise that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10). May we exude expectancy this season for God's promises to come.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21 | JEREMIAH 31:27-40 AND LUKE 1:57-80
BEN WINDER |“GOD’S PROMISES”

It has been said that quite often, we can best see God’s hand at work in our lives only in the rearview mirror. It can be difficult in the midst of living life to understand the way God is at work, using the situations and circumstances through which we’re living to bring about divine purposes. Yet over and over again, God has been proven faithful in doing just that. There is power in reading the Old Testament prophecies on this side of their fulfillment in the New Testament. What God has promised, God has brought to pass.

Today’s passages are a clear example of God working beyond our wildest imaginings to bring his purposes to bear. Jeremiah tells us that even while God’s people were in exile, as they faced their darkest days, as hope seemed dim—even then and there God was making promises of a new and better thing to come. Jeremiah tells them a new and better covenant is coming—one written not on tablets of stone but on human hearts. What has been broken and destroyed as a result of human sin will be rebuilt better than ever as a result of God’s faithfulness. Because of God’s rich love for humanity, God will become known to them like never before.

Then as we turn the page to Luke, we begin to see the first signs of the new covenant breaking forth. As Zechariah speaks, he reveals what God is up to. God is fulfilling all the promises he made through the prophets of old. The thing God promised in the darkest of moments in salvation history is dawning. As Zechariah says, God is raising up a horn of salvation just as he promised to do.

As people living in the age of the new covenant, God has been fully revealed and made known to us in the person of Jesus. We have seen the promises God made through the prophets of old made good. So now, even when we face darkness, we can be confident God is at work to bring about a better thing, because God has over and over again been faithful to keep every promise that has been made. So we can be sure that in Christ, what is broken will be bound up and what is lost will be found. We can be sure God is faithful, because Jesus is living proof. In Christ, the promised salvation is ours. Thanks be to God.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22 | JEREMIAH 32:1-15 | TIM SANDERLIN
“BELIEVING AND BUYING”

“Put your money where your mouth is” has a whole new meaning when you have little of it. In college, my friends and I would often bet one another to do things: “I’ll pay you \$20 to chug that hot sauce,” or “I’ll give you \$40 to go ask that girl out.” On the off chance that one of your friends accepts the challenge, you have to rethink the entire thing. It is one thing to say you will put money on the line and another to actually do it. When \$20 is about all you have for the weekend, you know the wager you are about to make is weighty, and you have to decide if you are going to put your money where your mouth is. Probably nine times out of ten, the person would say, “Never mind; not worth it,” and put their money back in their pocket.

Jeremiah, like all prophets, is asked to bring a word from God to the people of God. Furthermore, like other prophets, he is asked to bring them a word of instruction, discipline, and correction. These words could ultimately lead to deliverance if the people of God choose to listen; but often the story ends on a more somber note. Jeremiah’s story continues the trend. By the end of this book, we see Judah overtaken by the Babylonians through the eyes of Jeremiah, and God’s people are scattered all over the world—just as the Lord had spoken. But while the story seems to end here, Jeremiah does an odd thing in chapter 32: He buys a field.

A large part of the word of Jeremiah is that the people will be scattered, yes. But not forever. God, as always, is patient and persistent with his people. He was slow to anger to bring the calamity and he will be persistent in keeping his promise—the promise being that his people will return to this land.

The walls are starting to shake. The Babylonians are at the gates. This army cannot be stopped, and furthermore the Lord said Judah will be defeated. Now is the time for them to leave their homes and grab as many possessions as they can because they know they will never see this homeland again. But God instead asks Jeremiah to do something absurd: Buy a field here. Now, I’m no expert, but you don’t buy real estate in Pompeii in the spring of AD 79! If your land will be overtaken, most likely pillaged and burned, you don’t start shopping for a three-bedroom, two-bath with a patio. However, God is instructing Jeremiah to put his money where his mouth is.

For better or worse, my money always follows my beliefs—just check my transaction history! God promises that his people will return to this land. Do I believe him? If we believe what God promises, no matter how absurd it seems, then we must put our money where our trust is.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23 | JEREMIAH 32:16-44 | NATHAN KING
“GOD’S LOVE IS SUFFICIENT”

The final 28 verses in Jeremiah 32 offer a reality about God that stays true to this day. Judah’s history has been shrouded in turning away from God, and much like Judah, we are not too far separated from this problem. While we may not be building altars to ancient weather gods, it is part of our human condition to rely on our own judgment—something that could be extremely problematic. This is an issue God’s people are facing in these verses. Although God has constantly provided for them, Judah becomes fixated on walking their own path.

“They have turned their backs to me, not their faces; though I have taught them persistently, they would not listen and accept correction” (Jeremiah 32:33 NRSV).

As we find out later in this passage, though, God has a plan for his people that is so much better than what their iniquities are deserving of. Through Jeremiah, God says:

“I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Jeremiah 32:37–38 NRSV).

God promises hope. God shows mercy. There is ultimately a greater plan for Judah, and incidentally, a greater plan for all of us. In our own ways, we have all been like Judah—people whose trust comes from themselves, not from the One who created them. But, God’s promise to the people of Judah and to us is that there is a goodness that lies beyond our understanding of anything. This goodness is found in the person of Jesus Christ. There is wonderful goodness in his birth, life, death, and resurrection—a gift that restores all who receive it.

Even though the people of Judah were not deserving of grace, God continued to love and provide for them. It’s a loving provision that is available for us, something we can have security and confidence in. As Paul articulates in his letter to the Ephesians:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4–5 NRSV).

God mercifully loves us more than we could ever imagine. God just wants us to trust that he will always be with us.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24 | JEREMIAH 33:1-13 AND LUKE 2:1-21
AMY HIRSCH | “JEREMIAH’S FORETELLING OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY”

This Christmas Eve, we turn to a well-loved text in Luke, one you may have read many times; but perhaps you’ve never read it in concert with this prophecy of hope in Jeremiah. I think that, when we read these two texts together, we have a deeper appreciation for what happened that night in Bethlehem when Christ was born.

Around the tenth year of Zedekiah’s reign (588 or 587 BC), as they are enduring another siege by Babylon and barely hanging on, and as Jeremiah is being held captive by his own king because of his prophecies, Jeremiah receives another word from the Lord helping him interpret Judah’s current situation and look with hope toward the future. The Lord makes it clear that his people are suffering at the hand of Babylon because of their sin. God will allow his people to face siege and exile for their sins, but his plans for them won’t end there. Behold—a great reversal will come! God will restore their fortunes. God will forgive their sin. God will transform this land, once empty and war-torn, to be a place where his name is praised and feared. Gladness will ring out in the streets. Economic enterprises will be renewed as shepherds lead their sheep to graze again on the hills. And when it seems hopeless that the lineage of David could continue under threat of Babylonian invasion, puppet kings, and rampant wickedness, God declares he will keep the promise he made to Israel and to Judah that a King from David’s line would eternally reign, administering justice and righteousness in the land.

As we turn to Luke, perhaps we read these verses with different eyes, noticing the partial fulfillment already happening from the Book of Jeremiah. Bethlehem’s streets are packed with people who have arrived to participate in the Roman census. Shepherds are keeping watch over the sheep grazing on the hills. And a young couple expecting a child makes their way to Bethlehem from Nazareth to register for the census, because the man is from the house and lineage of David. While there, the couple gives birth to a baby. But this isn’t just any baby; he is the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. The word of the Lord to Jeremiah finds fulfillment as a new King, the Righteous Branch of David, enters the scene—not by being crowned in a temple, but by being born in a stable.

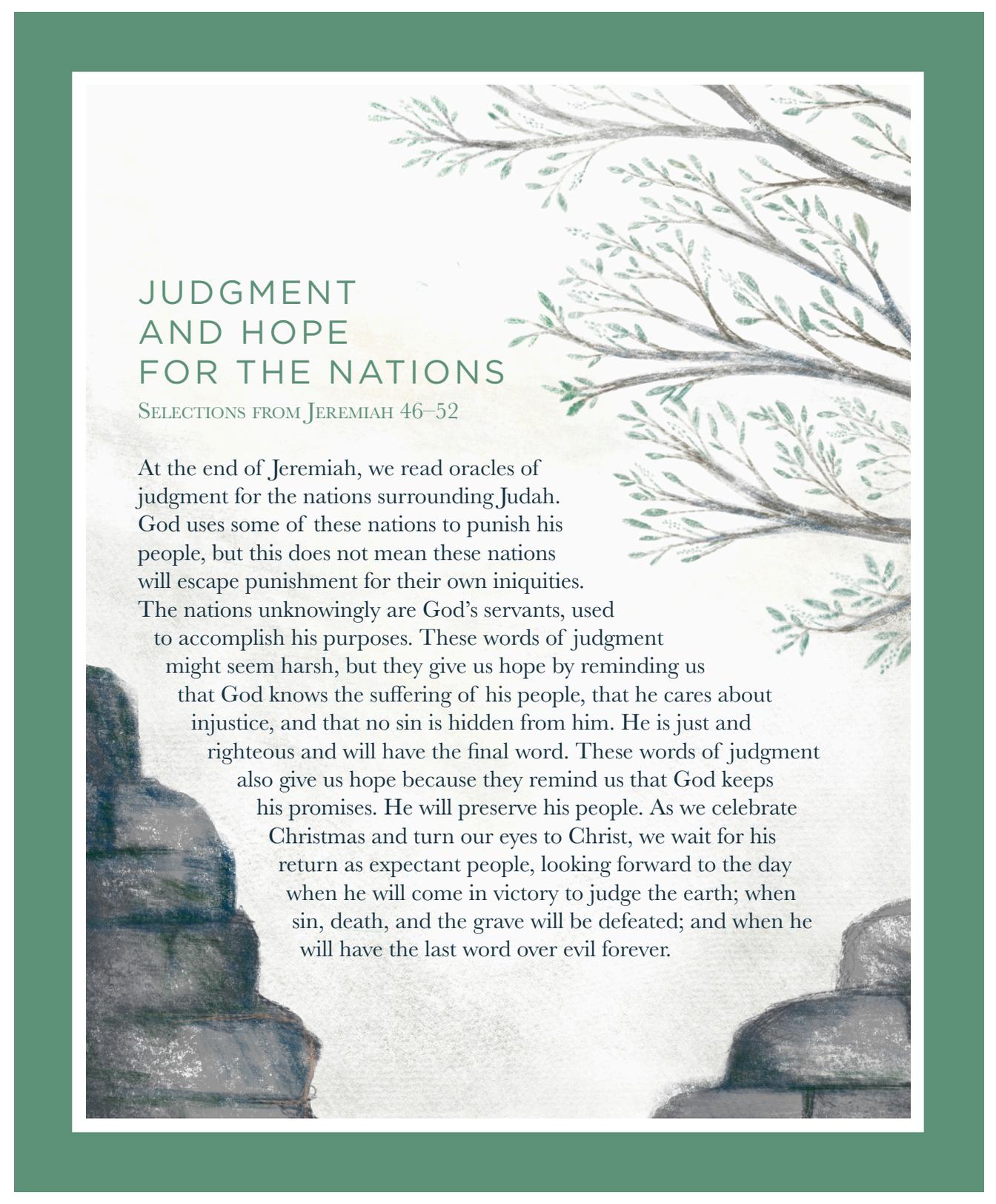
It’s all partial fulfillment even now, of course. We still wait for the full fulfillment of this passage, for the day when evil will be forever vanquished, for the day when we will dwell with Christ in God’s presence, for the day when sadness will cease. But on this Christmas Eve, we give thanks to God for the birth of Christ, who cleanses us from our sin, guides us in justice and righteousness, and gives us hope. Let us join the angels who first filled those night skies with their glad choruses, who sang the good news to the shepherds, who proclaimed it to everyone they met: “Christ is born!”

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25 | JEREMIAH 33:14-26 AND LUKE 2:22-40
WAYNE SPLAWN | “A GIFT OF INESTIMABLE VALUE”

Jeremiah 33:17–26 is filled with language that draws from the many saving acts of God in the Old Testament to describe a day in the future when one person would fulfill the longings and expectations of God’s people. Jeremiah describes this Righteous Branch from the house of David as a King who will execute justice and righteousness in the land. In addition to fulfilling the Davidic expectation of being a righteous King, this Righteous Branch will also be a Priest who will offer sacrifices to the Lord on behalf of the people. He will be the one descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and be the source of blessing to a multitude of people more numerous than the stars in the heavens or the grains of sand in the sea. According to Jeremiah, judgment will not be the last word the people receive from the Lord. Instead, the Lord promises to restore their fortunes and have mercy on them through the Righteous Branch from the house of David.

Anna and Simeon have spent their lives longing to see the fulfillment of such Messianic expectations. Both are advanced in years and likely have seasons in which they wonder if the Messiah will come before they depart the earth. Then, one day it happens. Mary and Joseph bring their baby boy to the Temple to present him to the Lord in accordance with the Law of Moses, and the Lord reveals to Simeon and Anna that this boy is the one for whom they have been waiting. He will be a light to the Gentiles and for the people of Israel. As the Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” puts it, in Jesus Christ, “the hopes and fears of all the years” are met in Jesus Christ.

As you celebrate Christmas, don’t lose sight of the true significance of all that we have been given in Jesus Christ. He is the true and better King from the house of David who rules in justice and righteousness. He is the true and better Priest who offered himself up as the once-and-for-all sacrifice for our sins so that we might be reconciled to God. He is the faithful offspring of Abraham through whom we have been adopted into God’s family. Let us join Anna and Simeon in praising God for allowing our eyes to see the birth of our long awaited Savior!

A watercolor illustration featuring tree branches with green leaves in the upper right corner and grey, textured rocks in the lower left and bottom right corners. The background is a light, textured wash of green and white.

JUDGMENT AND HOPE FOR THE NATIONS

SELECTIONS FROM JEREMIAH 46–52

At the end of Jeremiah, we read oracles of judgment for the nations surrounding Judah. God uses some of these nations to punish his people, but this does not mean these nations will escape punishment for their own iniquities.

The nations unknowingly are God's servants, used to accomplish his purposes. These words of judgment might seem harsh, but they give us hope by reminding us that God knows the suffering of his people, that he cares about injustice, and that no sin is hidden from him. He is just and righteous and will have the final word. These words of judgment also give us hope because they remind us that God keeps his promises. He will preserve his people. As we celebrate Christmas and turn our eyes to Christ, we wait for his return as expectant people, looking forward to the day when he will come in victory to judge the earth; when sin, death, and the grave will be defeated; and when he will have the last word over evil forever.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 26 | JEREMIAH 46 | TIM SANDERLIN
“GOD DOES NOT FORGET”

When I was young, my family would make an annual trip to my mother’s alma mater, Berry College. If you have never seen Berry or even pictures of it, my best way to describe it is a real-life Hogwarts. If that is an inadequate metaphor, then know this: It has over 27,000 acres of property, an operational cattle farm, a working water wheel, and underground tunnels. As a kid, it can seem like a world of its own—exciting and intimidating all at once. In the fall of 2008, we accidentally left my brother behind when we were leaving Berry College.

Now, please know this was purely an accident, and he has never let us forget it either! We had a buddy system in place and someone forgot to check for David, but nonetheless we returned for him swiftly. I can imagine his panic in that moment, however. As I have felt this before, I know the thoughts that probably ran through his head. Do they know they left me? When will they realize I’m gone? How do I find them? Who will come looking for me? These scary thoughts seem completely logical when in peril. The feeling of being forgotten is one that can leave a wound and damage trust in most any relationship.

God’s words toward his people of Judah can certainly seem like he has washed his hands of them and is planning to move on to another group of people—ones who might prove to be more faithful. The destruction of Judah, the defeat of Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the people make it appear as though the fate of God’s people is sealed. Just when you start to see this possible (and justified) end, the Lord reminds his people of his character. God is a faithful God. God, who is like no other god, holds steadfast love toward others and shows compassion toward the brokenhearted; yet, he will by no means clear the guilty. God will punish the nations surrounding Judah for their sins, including the nation of Egypt. This prophecy will come to pass when Nebuchadnezzar later attacks Egypt. God will again use Babylon to accomplish his purposes.

The hope in this passage is that God doesn’t forget his people; he doesn’t forget the injustices they experienced, and he doesn’t forget his promises. Even as God’s people see the fruits of their venomous labor because they did not take care of “the least of these” and so must be held accountable, they also experience his care and compassion as he draws near to the meek and downtrodden—which will one day be God’s people themselves! God draws near, and God brings judgment on the nations that have oppressed Judah, including Egypt. Just as the people of Judah are being cast aside and might feel forgotten by their Father, he draws near. He cannot help but be near to those who are poor in spirit. God does not come back, for he never left! It is the meekness and humility of his people, however, that has made his Spirit ever clearer to them. God does not forsake his people, and he does not forget.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 27 | JEREMIAH 47 | AMY HIRSCH
“NOSY PEOPLE AND THE JUDGMENT OF GOD”

Nosy people are everywhere. I can say that because, as I read Jeremiah 47, I realized I am a nosy person and had to confess that vice before the Lord! You see, as I read this passage foreshadowing the Lord’s coming judgment on Philistia, I kept thinking, “I wonder what they did wrong?”

In Jeremiah 46–51, Jeremiah turns his attention to God’s judgment for the nations, as if to say, “Yes, Judah will definitely receive judgment for her sins. But not so fast! The rest of you aren’t off the hook either!” In today’s passage, Jeremiah foretells the coming judgment on Philistia, a nation just north and east of Judah along the sea. In Ezekiel, we also hear a bit about their wickedness: “Because the Philistines acted revengefully and took vengeance with malice of soul to destroy in never-ending enmity, therefore thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will stretch out my hand against the Philistines” (Ezekiel 25:15–16 ESV). This judgment would come on like a flood, like an overflowing torrent, as God would use Babylon to accomplish his purposes by judging Philistia.

The punishment described here is extreme, to the point that the speaker asks how long this judgment will last in verse 6. In Jeremiah, the Lord’s judgment has been pictured as a sword, used both against Judah and against the nations in response to their unfaithfulness. “But what kind of unfaithfulness?” the nosy person in me asks. “How did they take revenge and show vengeance? What were they doing?” While we generally know that many countries surrounding Judah worshipped false gods and treated Judah poorly, we don’t know Philistia’s particular sins in this passage. But, as I thought about this text, I realized that doesn’t really matter; my concern over their particular sin (and what kind of judgment might have been warranted) shows my own brokenness, because it is evidence of a false belief that somehow I can be a better judge than the Lord. It is also a sign that I can be far too concerned with how other people are living when I ought to be more attentive to my actions. It is far easier to pick the splinter out of our neighbor’s eye than to get the plank out of our own, isn’t it?

God alone knew the hearts of the Philistines, and he alone had the authority to judge them. How can the Lord’s sword of judgment be quiet when it has been given a charge? God will judge them as he sees fit, in whatever way he sees fit, for as long as he sees fit—because he alone is the Righteous Judge. And just as God alone knew their hearts, he alone knows my heart, and apart from him, I would also stand condemned by the Righteous Judge because of my sins. But praise God that, for those of us who believe and trust and call upon his name, he has made a way for us through the blood of Jesus.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28 | JEREMIAH 48 | WAYNE SPLAWN
“HUMBLE AND HOPEFUL”

In recent weeks, we have spent a great deal of time celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and contemplating the implications of the truth that he will one day return to establish the kingdom of God here on earth even as it is in heaven. As the year 2021 comes to a close, many of us are using this time to take stock of our lives and prayerfully consider who God is calling us to be in the coming year. If you are currently engaging in such a practice of self-examination, I want to encourage you to consider how your celebrations of the seasons of Advent and Christmas ought to shape your heart and guide your goals for 2022. What should our lives look like if we are people who believe that God humbled himself by taking on flesh so that he might become obedient to the point of death on a cross to secure our salvation? What should our lives look like if we believe that Jesus will one day return to the earth to judge the living and the dead?

In Jeremiah 48, Jeremiah pronounces a day of coming judgment for the people of Moab. In his indictment, Jeremiah denounces the people for at least two sins. First, Jeremiah states that they are proud and arrogant in heart. Second, he states that they trust in their material resources rather than trusting in the Lord. When he comes to judge the people of Moab, the Lord will humble them and reveal the folly of trusting in riches.

Even though many years have passed since Jeremiah delivered this message of judgment in Jeremiah 48, the human heart hasn't changed. Just like the Moabites, we are prone to feeling proud and arrogant and are tempted to place our trust in the things of this world rather than God.

However, our celebrations of Advent and Christmas serve as powerful reminders that we must walk in humility and place our trust in God alone if we are going to experience the abundant life Jesus came for us to know and faithfully bear witness to the gospel in this world. As you look back to Christmas Day and toward Christ's eventual return, ask the Lord to help you walk in humility and to put your trust in him alone. If God so transforms our hearts in the coming year, then all the time we have spent celebrating the birth of Jesus and looking forward to his second coming will have been time well spent.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 29 | JEREMIAH 49 | MARY SPLAWN
“GOD DEFEATS THE PROUD BUT HAS MERCY ON THE POWERLESS”

I took piano lessons until I was in eighth grade. I wish I could sit down and play anything you requested, but I can't. My repertoire consists of one hymn by memory, a fun little duo with my dad, and one Christmas song. Each Christmas, I take some time to sit down at the piano to play my one carol, “O Holy Night.” I enjoy how the song builds to a crescendo, and I love the words that are rich with meaning. This song reminds me that the Messiah has come to rescue the world and bring hope to the poor and powerless. One of my favorite lines says:

“Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother,
And in his name, all oppression shall cease.”

This is the promise we have in Jesus, and this is the promise that the Book of Jeremiah points to, as well. Chapter 49 chronicles the fate of the nations that surround Israel. Instead of being helpful to “brother” Israel, their pride leads them to plunder the land of Judah when its people are defeated and carted off in “chains” to Babylon. Instead of defending the weak, they choose to add to the oppression. In their pride, they believe they will never suffer a similar fate. But God declares they will be brought low. He will judge the arrogant nations and defeat those who think they are high and mighty.

Yet in the midst of these judgments, there are hints of God's mercy and care for the defenseless. Look at verse 11: “Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive. Your widows too can depend on me” (NIV).

God shows his care for a powerless world most clearly in the Incarnation. God took on human flesh and became a poor peasant. He died an unjust death and through his resurrection power, he defeated sin and death. Even today, he does not leave us defenseless but has given us his Spirit as our guide. As the carol says,

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.”

If you have a moment, listen to the carol, or if possible, sit down at the piano and peck it out like me. As you meditate on the words, praise the Lord for defeating the proud and having mercy on the powerless. Celebrate his crescendo in Christ our Lord who has come to save the world by taking away our sins by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:26–28). May we fall on our knees in adoration of a God who comes to rescue sinners and live among us!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30 | JEREMIAH 50:1-20 | JOEL BURKS
“TURN YOUR EYES UPON JESUS”

Jeremiah tells us in chapter 50 how the people of Babylon will come to ruin. This will ultimately happen, Jeremiah writes, because of all Babylon has done to the Lord’s chosen people. This chapter also gives us a glimpse into how God’s people will turn back to the Lord. Judah appears to be responding with an appropriate level of emotion, but we’ll have to continue reading to discern whether or not they were true in their repentance. I can recall times in my own life where I did not turn to God in genuine repentance. I worshipped and repented with my lips, but in my heart I continued to sin. Look with me again at the text. How beautiful a picture do verses 4 and 5 paint?

“‘In those days, at that time,’ declares the LORD, ‘the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears to seek the LORD their God. They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it. They will come and bind themselves to the LORD in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten’” (Jeremiah 50:4–5 NIV).

When dealing with the sin in our lives, how often do we honestly turn our faces to God and bind ourselves to him? I can admit that I do not do this often enough. Instead, I usually attempt to overcome any shortcomings I have in my own strength. Maybe if I pray hard enough? Or fast enough? Or read the Bible? Unfortunately all of these things are devoid of power without the Holy Spirit.

Judah finds itself in a similar place in this passage. They are not able to save themselves from the hands of the Babylonians on their own. They are vulnerable, like sheep wandering around and open to attack; but to their surprise, they are released from captivity. This makes the importance of binding themselves to the Lord paramount. Do we realize that we, too, are unable to save ourselves? Hebrews talks about a new covenant that we may bind ourselves to, one in which God claims us as his own. Through Jesus, this new covenant can be ours. Whereas the priests in Judah were not faithful to lead correctly, we trust in Jesus who is our High Priest and in whom our hope will never be put to shame. Amen.

“IN THE END . . .”

Much of Jeremiah’s prophecy clearly lays out the punishment coming for God’s people as a result of their sinfulness, but those prophecies are always mixed with assurance of God’s faithfulness to restore them. Yet following this robust collection of prophecies about God’s people, one of the last things we hear in the Book of Jeremiah is a judgment on their enemies, Babylon. Babylon is the nation God has most directly used as a tool for bringing about the difficult days of exile for God’s people. However, God allowing it to happen does not excuse the actions they took and the way they mistreated his people. Jeremiah’s last words lay out how God’s justice will be handed out to Babylon. As punishment for all they had done, God will utterly destroy Babylon. There is no future for them. There is no hope.

It is wild enough that God would even have Jeremiah offer this prophecy while God’s people are still prisoners oppressed in Babylon, but the most amazing part of this prophecy is God’s instruction that it be read aloud in Babylon, including the dramatic demonstration of Babylon’s future—tied to a stone and sunk to the bottom of the Euphrates. God wants to publicly remind both the exiles and their captors that he has the final say. Babylon has only had success against God’s people because God allowed it. Their dominance will not last forever. God will bring an end to exile and an end to Babylon.

As certain as is Babylon’s destruction, so certain is the future God has in store for his people.

“For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the LORD Almighty, though their land is full of guilt before the Holy One of Israel” (Jeremiah 51:5 NIV).

As bad as it has been for God’s chosen people (and they certainly deserved it!), it will be worse for Babylon. Despite their sinfulness, God has a future hope for his people; the same is not true for Babylon.

In the same way God destroyed Babylon, in Christ, God destroyed sin and death on our behalf. God’s people were assured, even while they were still in exile, that he would bring about the destruction of their enemies and their ultimate salvation. In the same way, we live in an already-but-not-yet time frame of salvation history. God has put all enemies—even death—under Jesus’ feet; even still, the world is not yet all that it will be. In a way, when we publicly affirm our faith together by declaring Jesus is alive and Jesus is Lord—even in a world where death and evil seem to hold so much sway—we join a longstanding tradition of God’s people. We declare—even in the presence of God’s enemies who seem to be winning the day—our trust that God has the final say. As it was before, so it shall be again: God will destroy every enemy and bring us salvation.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 1 | JEREMIAH 52 | AMY HIRSCH
“THE GOD WHO KEEPS HIS PROMISES”

The Book of Jeremiah ends with both a word of judgment and a word of hope. Throughout his prophecy, Jeremiah has been warning the people about God’s coming judgment for their sin. As we journeyed throughout Jeremiah, we read about the wickedness and idolatry that ran rampant in Judah and how Jeremiah called the people back to God. And yet, they refused to listen to him. Because of this, Jeremiah warned them of the imminent judgment awaiting them at the hands of Babylon, God’s instrument. This chapter is the long-awaited fulfillment of decades of prophecy. God’s word is true and can be trusted, and he will keep his word to punish his people, because they have refused to turn back to him. There are real consequences for their sins, and the details here can be hard to read: The city will be devastated, the Temple will be ransacked, and the people will be decimated—or, carted off to Babylon in numerous exile (over the course of several years) against their will, taken to a foreign land away from all they know and hold dear. God will keep his word and the guilty will, by no means, go unpunished (see Exodus 34:6–7).

But as much as Jeremiah 52 is a word of judgment, it’s also a word of hope. Notice how the book ends. The scene flashes decades forward to 562 BC. Nebuchadnezzar’s son, Evil-merodach, becomes king and extends grace to Jehoiachin, one of Judah’s former kings. If you go back and do some reading on Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah), you’ll learn that he was a wicked king who ruled for only a few months at age 18 before being taken off the throne by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. Zedekiah, his uncle, became king in his place and would rule over Judah until he tried to rebel against Babylon. But for some reason, when Evil-merodach becomes king, he shows kindness to this former king of Judah. Maybe Jehoiachin was likeable, or maybe he was intriguing to the Babylonian king because he had been imprisoned for 37 years.

But I think there’s something deeper going on here. The book ends this way to remind us that God will keep his word and judge his people. A king from David’s line eats at the king of Babylon’s table. God has promised an everlasting lineage to David, that a king from his line will always reign forever—and God keeps his promises. The image of these two men sitting together at the king’s table is a reminder that God isn’t finished yet with his people. He will preserve a remnant, for his glory, and continue David’s lineage. And if you pick up Matthew’s genealogy, you’ll read about Jehoiachin’s lineage (a head’s up, though: Matthew refers to him as Jeconiah), which leads all the way to Jesus Christ. God is faithful to keep the promises he makes. He will preserve the line of David for his glory and for the good of his people, and through David’s line will come the Mediator of the new covenant. This is news to go tell on the mountains, hills, and everywhere—not only that Christ is born, but that Christ, the Son of David, is Lord! Even in the upheaval, even as God uproots sin through his judgment, there is hope—for he keeps every single promise.



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