

The Linen Belt

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Preacher: Dick Lucas

[0 : 00] Well, please sit. Well, as you know, Jeremiah chapter 13 is where we're going to be. I've got the New International Version, which may be a tiny bit different, and I'll explain that as we go along.

We're going to start this morning with a very strange situation, and that is God sending his faithful servant to the shopping mall to buy a new belt.

Verse 1, this is what the Lord said to me. Go and buy a linen belt and put it round your waist, but don't let it touch the water. Now, before we go any further, I do want to say that for me it's been a quite memorable week.

I don't think I shall ever forget the meeting here on Friday. You may already have heard about it.

This place was packed to the gunnels. I'm told there were at least 650 people here.

My guess is that in the future, looking back, people will feel it was a historic meeting. Everybody, I thought, spoke very much to the point. I shall not forget it.

[1 : 15] And your own minister spoke wisely and well, I thought, and I'm grateful for that. I'm also very grateful for the help, and I'd like to add my thanks to the ministers, to Willis, to the Young Ministers Conference and those who helped us.

I noticed that he specially underlined the good cakes. That seems to be something that he appreciates, and they were very good. But not only were the cakes good, but everything the team did was absolutely marvelous to make us so comfortable.

So thank you very much, team. It was a great week. It all went so well. A beautiful venue.

Everything ran so smoothly. It was fruitful and enjoyable, and I think everyone went away rejoicing.

So thank you. Well, now let's get back to the prophet and his shopping expedition. And the question is, what did he actually buy? Well, the translators find it quite difficult to decide.

The ESV says a loincloth. Other translators say girdle, or waistband, or sash. One translator says shorts.

[2 : 26] I think it's slightly quaint to think of the great prophet Jeremiah going around in shorts, but it may have been very warm, of course. And one distinguished commentator, who I think must have been a Scot, said that the word actually means kilt or something like it.

Again, I think it's very strange to think of the great prophet Jeremiah in a garment like a kilt. I'm not sure about kilts. You know all about them, but I don't think they're made of linen, are they?

No. Well, anyhow, I think it's better to say a belt, and that's what I'm going to stick with. Now, I don't think probably that Jeremiah was surprised at being told to go to the shopping mall.

God asked him to do all sorts of very strange things. You may remember that on one occasion he had to go and buy a clay pot, and then take all the elders of Israel down to a valley, and in front of them smash it.

And there's another very odd thing, but I'm going to keep that to the end, because it seems a crazy action, but I think it will end our sermon today on a very hopeful note.

[3 : 29] I'm not going to tell you now what it was, but it must have been the strangest thing that Jeremiah was ever asked to do. Let's quickly go through the three acts, verses 1 and 2, if you will follow.

So, he's told to go and buy this belt, and he does as the Lord directs. I don't know if he had much experience for shopping, but anyhow, it wasn't very hard to find a belt. He bought it and wore it.

Act 2 is in verse 3 and 4. He's told to take this belt that he's wearing and go, well, the ESV says to Euphrates, the NIV says Perath, but nobody knows where that was.

I think we have to say we don't quite know where he went. If it was to the Euphrates, it's 250 miles away. It would be a long walk for an old man. I rather doubt if he went as far as that.

And it doesn't matter anyhow, does it? Because he's told to go somewhere, bury it in the ground, and leave it behind. And he does so, as the Lord told him, verse 5. Act 3 is in verse 6.

[4 : 30] Many days later, the Lord said to him, go now to this place and get the belt I told you to hide there. So I went, dug up the belt, took it from the place where I had hidden it, and now it was ruined and completely useless.

I think your version says good for nothing, but I rather like the robust sound of completely useless. So what's going on? Well, we've got to discover this morning what's going on here, but everything is explained by God in verses 8 to 9.

And I find here something very moving in verse 11, if you'll glance at that. I find something very shocking in verse 10. They're not at all surprising. And I find something very final and unalterable in verse 9, yet not without hope.

So I want you to have your Bible open to look at these, that which is moving, that which is shocking, and that which is final and unalterable. First then, what I've called a unique privilege.

And I really do mean unique. We use this often, don't we? We say it's a unique program or whatever it is. But this really, really is unique. And you'll find it in verse 11.

[5 : 43] It's a description of God's people, of the Church of God in the Old Testament, and its responsibilities. Verse 11. For as a belt is bound round a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, that is the whole of the people of God, the Church of the Old Testament, I bound this church to me, declares the Lord, to be my people for my renown and praise and honor.

Now this is God's holy nation. This is his royal priesthood. This, if you like, is the apple of his eye. This is the visible church on earth. This is the people of God, then and now.

It is, let's acknowledge it, a mixed multitude of course. You don't suppose that everybody in Israel was pious, do you? And you don't suppose that everybody in Judah was pious.

So the visible church is always a mixed multitude. It's never perfect. It wasn't then, and it isn't now. But you notice the two things that are in verse 11.

First, it's intimate nearness to God. God binds the church, the visible church, a mixed multitude. He binds it to himself. It is with God wherever he goes.

[7 : 10] The church goes with him. It is very close to him. It is very intimate with him. He holds it, keeps it, and sustains it. And what is the responsibility of the visible church, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament?

Well, I was very moved by these words. I never really noticed them before. I've never spoken on Jeremiah's linen built before. I thought at first it was rather an odd little chapter. And then I was greatly moved by what is said in verse 11.

The whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah are to be my people for, now look at it, for my renown and praise and honor.

Not for their own praise, not for their own renown, not for their own glory, but for God's renown and praise and honor and glory. That is the responsibility of the visible church in the Old Testament and of the church in the New.

Now, I'm going to make a confession, so I better have a quick drink of water before I make a confession, because confessions are always rather shaming. Aren't they? I have to say that when I was a young man, recently converted, just after the war, I was like many new believers in those days.

[8 : 30] I was brought up in a scripture union camp. That's how I came to know the Lord. I went into the Navy, came out and went to university at Cambridge, where the union, the Cambridge Union, Christian Union, was immensely strong.

It had fighter pilots back from the war. It had majors and colonels and seamen, 400 strong. It was an enormous influence in my life as a young man.

Then there was Youth for Christ. Some of you will have heard of Youth for Christ. And there were the great parachurch organizations, Navigators, Campus Crusade, and of course UCCF then called the IVF.

And on top of that, the evangelism in the country was done by people like Billy Graham, drawing enormous numbers of people in 1954 to Harringham Stadium. We'd never seen anything like that before.

That was my beginnings as a young Christian. And when I looked at the churches, now you'll forgive my arrogance, but young people are often arrogant, and it wasn't altogether untrue. [9 : 33] When I looked at the churches, I saw something that was nothing like as effective as those camps, as Billy Graham, as the Christian Union at Cambridge, where people seemed to be converted every week.

It seemed that the churches were living in the past, that they were slow-moving, that when you went to here, they were often dull and often stuffy, that there was an enormous amount of nominalism. It seemed, in other words, that the churches were not able to do what was needed. It seemed as though we'd got to depend upon these movements that God had raised up, partly because the churches perhaps were weak at that time.

And so I think myself, and a number of people like me, in fact a very large number of people of my generation, did not have a very high opinion of the visible church, because as yet we had had no experience of it.

And if that was arrogant, I think the appearance was enough to make anybody think rather similarly. But I was wrong, of course. Since then, it has become clear to me, and I want to say this from the heart, it has become clear to me that whatever their appearances may be, the visible church of God on earth is the means, is the instrument, that he uses to glorify his name and to spread his kingdom. [10 : 55] that the local churches, whatever we may think, are God's main tool in his hands to do what he wishes to do in the world. That's what I learned that I did not know at the beginning.

Indeed, I came to realize that all these other movements, Scripture Union, UCCF, all the others, depended upon the visible church for their existence. Now, clearly, some local churches have particular opportunities.

They're not all the same. It's true here at the Tron that you have great privileges and very special opportunities. It was true at St. Helens' Bishopsgate when I was appointed rector there in 1961, where I stayed for 38 years, and I'm so thankful for those years because it taught me afresh the importance of the local church wherever it is.

In about five years' time, if you were to go down to the city of London with your family as tourists, you would find little St. Helens' Church surrounded by three of the most massive skyscrapers all at the moment being built.

You're not allowed to build a high building at the west part of the city because there is the great St. Paul's Cathedral. So anything that's going to be tall has to be at the east end of the city, which is where Bishopsgate and St. Helens' Church is.

[12 : 21] The massive skyscraper pinnacle, which is going to be the biggest in Europe, is in process of being built. They have such odd names, these buildings. The next one behind us is going to be called the Cheese Grater because it looks like a cheese grater.

It doesn't seem a very honorable name, does it, for a big building? And then we have just heard that on the other side, right up to our north wall, is going to be the biggest of them all. In five years' time, presumably, they will all be built.

And I suppose that they're going to be a very important part of the City of London and our future financial prosperity. We had that at the Lord Mayor's dinner. This last week, you may have seen it at the television.

Long and rather boring speeches, but obviously very important for our future. And of course, it's going to be a great tourist attraction to see the tallest skyscrapers in Europe and possibly even in the world.

And I can imagine a conversation rather like this. Some visitors saying, what is this little church building tucked in the middle, so tiny by comparison? Why did they leave it here?

[13 : 25] Why didn't they clear the ground while they were making these skyscrapers? And the answer of the city guide will be something like this. Well, you see, this is all a matter of heritage. You can't knock down these old buildings.

It doesn't have any particular use, of course, today. The British are odd in that regard. It's a relic from the past. Very ancient, I believe. It goes back to the 13th century and they move on to the next site in the City of London.

Is that right? No, that's not right. That little building there does go back to the 13th century, but with many additions to the building, the latest, of course, being the complete restoration of our building as you have done here, this is the result of the bomb that Jerry Adams sent, two bombs that he sent

to London that managed to destroy all the unpleasant things in the building and enable us to build again.

So, when I meet Jerry Adams, I shall not punch him in the nose as I'd already planned to do, but I shall thank him and I think he will be rather startled when I tell him that he's furthered the work of the Kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ, of which I think he knows nothing whatever. And so, I thank God that under my successor, William, hundreds, even thousands of people are through that little church hearing of what?

[14:40] Look at verse 11 again. Hearing of God's renown and praise and honor. They hear it through Bible talks and Christian fellowship. I gather to my amazement that a thousand meals are served every week and that little groups are going out from this visible church into every part of the city, meeting in the lunchtime, before work, after work, and so on, to study the glory and the honor of God.

It is a unique privilege. There is no other institution called to do this. There is no other body of men able to do this. No government can do this.

No university, no clever, wise people can do this. No other institution in the world is given this privilege of being bound to the Lord in order to tell people of his honor and glory and wisdom and praise.

So it is a unique privilege. Don't take it for granted. Never let yourself think that what we are doing in the church, however feeble, and often we are feeble and we know it, often we are disappointed and we know it, nevertheless, that's how God is extending his kingdom.

But now, my dear friends, get ready for some bad news. I want to talk now about an unthinkable betrayal. An unthinkable betrayal. What was happening in Judah?

[16:07] What was the condition of the Old Testament church in Jeremiah's day? These are God's special people. Well, I tell you, and I don't suppose I'm telling you something that is new if you are a Bible reader.

You will know that the last chapters of two kings are some of the most miserable chapters in the Bible. Bob File tells me he's writing a commentary on one or two kings and I've told him he'll have to be a genius if he's going to make those final chapters of two kings anything other than miserable. What a lot they were. Those kings, Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim, Kezekiah, well, you don't want to remember their names, they were a hopeless lot. It was the end of Judah before the Babylonians took them into exile.

And you will see the word, I think it was good for nothing in your translation, but in my translation I feel it's even a bit more robust because it said twice about them. They were now ruined like the linen belt and verse 7, completely useless.

And in verse 10 that phrase is repeated again. The people of God, Judah, completely useless, no longer usable by God, exiled into Babylon for 70 years.

[17:25] Now my friends, you don't have to be very clever to tell when a denomination or a group of churches are completely useless. Let me give you the indications and you can make up your own mind. First, there will be diminished authority.

That is, people will no longer listen to what the church says. It seems irrelevant. Then there will be redundant buildings. Then there will be the inevitable financial crisis.

There will be empty pews. There will be a manpower shortage and fewer people being ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. There will be increasing, and this is what we find in the Church of England, for we are in this position ourselves, our betrayal, increasing central control from the authorities, because when an institution is dying and decaying, you have to have increased central control to hold everything together.

And an astonishing refusal to face reality. Where everybody else can see these signs, at the center, it is quite simply living in denial.

betrayal. And why? Well, we are told why there is this betrayal and the nature of it in verses 9 and 10.

[18:45] And I want you to look there for the words themselves. They may be slightly different in your translation. It all adds up to the same. Verse 9, I will ruin the pride of Judah.

They are now proud. Secondly, they follow their stubborn hearts. Oh, sorry, I missed one out, haven't I? Verse 10, they are wicked. This is God talking about the people that he loves, that he's raised up.

They are now, by their betrayal of him, wicked and evil. They follow their stubborn hearts. And worst of all, and almost unbelievable if it wasn't here on the page, the people of God, the Church of the Old Testament, goes after other gods to serve and worship them.

They are ruined. And what is the actual reason for this? What has caused it? Let me go to the heart of it. I ask the question, how should such a thing happen?

I mean, it can't happen. How has it come to pass? And twice we're told, in verse 10, in verse 10 it says, these wicked people who refuse, just look at it, listen, who refuse to listen to my words.

[19 : 55] And at the end of verse 11, they have not listened. Isn't that interesting? Very simple. Because they have stubborn hearts, they've not listened to my word.

And if you don't listen to God's word, what do you listen to? Well, of course, you listen to your own heart. And inevitably, if you do not listen to the word of God, which is, of course, today the Holy Scriptures, if you part from the word of God, you part from God himself.

Who then do you listen to? You listen to yourself and other evil people, that is the world around you. You look elsewhere, to yourself and to the world, for a message and a meaning and a ministry that will fit with wicked people.

Very shocking, isn't it? Well, I hope you're shocked. As I see what is happening in the Church of England, I am shocked. And I guess this is so throughout the whole of the so-called Christian West. And yet, to me, partly because of my age, it is no surprise at all. Because when, as a student at Cambridge University, I read theology and sat under professors who were supposedly to be the leaders of the Christian Church, I found that they weren't listening.

[21 : 15] They weren't listening to the word of God in their beliefs and in their behavior. They were criticizing the word of God. They were leading us from the word of God. So as students, we were not encouraged to listen to the word of God.

And if you don't listen to it, you reject it. And if you reject it, who do you listen to? You listen to the words of the world around you. The pressure, the enormous pressure to conform.

And gradually, the rots spread. I think of the three men ordained with me in Rochester Cathedral in 1961. Just before we went into the cathedral to kneel before the bishop, we had to sign the confession of the Church of England, which is called the 39 Articles.

It's one of the more remarkable testimonies to the effect of the Reformation. All four of us signed. But the other three men told me at lunch afterwards they signed with their tongues in their cheek because, as one of them said, nobody believes this now.

And then I asked, why do you sign it then? Oh, because everybody does it. So what does this lead to, my friend? What does this betrayal lead to?

[22 : 25] Well, my third and very simple point here from this passage, it's not my word, it's the word of God through Jeremiah, is an unchangeable sentence. And in one word in the NIV, it is the word ruin in verse 9.

Then the word of the Lord came to me. This is what the Lord says. In the same way as your little belt was ruined, and of course it was ruined, having to be dug out from that wet earth if it was the river Euphrates, this is what the Lord says.

I will ruin the pride of the Church. I will ruin the pride of Judah. I will ruin the pride of the visible Church in the West. Jerusalem, the city of David, the city of the great King, the place of God's dwelling, the heart of the history of the people of God, the place of past victories and glories, the place of David's throne, the place where you could sum up all the history of the goodness of God to Israel and Judah.

Jerusalem. Love to sing about it. Jerusalem, now to be ruined. Terrible thing to say and only God can say it. I can't say it, you can't say it, but God says it.

And we must take God's word seriously. There's so to be absolutely no hope in Judah and Jerusalem. I'd like you to turn over as I close to Jeremiah chapter 20, verse 29, verse 10.

[23 : 53] I'm so grateful to a book on the prophets by a man called Parma in which he adds up all the sayings of judgment in the prophets and all the sayings of restoration and tells us that the sayings of restoration are more than the sayings of judgment.

As we sung in that hymn just now, God is a God who creates and destroys. Yes, God does destroy, but his métier is to create. Though he may destroy, things will live again.

So look at Jeremiah 29. I'm so thankful I can turn to this this morning with you. These are very familiar words and much used by Christians today, but it's good to put them in the context, isn't it?

Jeremiah 20, and verse 10. I think I'll look just before that. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them, declares the Lord, but this is what the Lord says. Jeremiah 29, verse 10. When 70 years are completed for Babylon, that's about three to four generations.

[25 : 00] When the 70 years are completed, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back from captivity.

I will gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you, declares the Lord, and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile. Aren't those wonderful words?

Tuck them into your heart. The God who destroys is the God who recreates. The God who seems to bring us to the end of ourselves always is building a new beginning.

It may take many years for the ancient churches of the West to recover their life and their truth, but in the end it will happen. Meanwhile, God is beginning a new work for, as I say, his meti is to create.

[26 : 07] Don't let's become too depressed when tragedy and it seems unthinkable betrayal happens. Don't let's think that God is ever put on the back foot.

I want to finish by telling you a little incident in my own life just after I was ordained. I was sitting in the station in Tunbridge. I'd been at post-ordination training which had the initials P.O.T. and was commonly known as party training. And I was sitting there thankful to be going back to my own parish and into the carriage there came a tall and impressive looking man who sat down opposite me and produced a very large Bible on his knee.

And I thought, well, I'm a Christian and he's obviously a Christian, we'd better get into conversation. And we did. This was 1952. And he was one of the missionaries from the China Inland Mission that had just been thrown out of China.

Hudson Taylor's mission. All the missionaries in China, one of the greatest works that was being done. And the Christian people in this country were shattered that God should have allowed all these wonderful missionaries and all this work and all that had gone on over the earth suddenly had come to a dreadful end.

[27 : 27] Every stick and stone thrown out to do with the Christian church. Well, I started to commiserate with this man. I didn't know what to do. I was embarrassed.

I said, I'm so very sorry. This must be a great tragedy for you. I suppose you'll never be able to go back and do the work you love to do. I must have talked like this because he then gave me a ticking off.

If you know that bit of the railway line from Tamarish to Sevenoaks, there's about 20 minutes under a tunnel. tunnel. And I was ticked off for the whole of that tunnel. I was given a thorough roasting and told that if God was in this then it could only be for blessing.

I got out of the station at Sevenoaks, walked up the hill to where I lived and I thought to myself, such was my arrogance. I thought, he's whistling in the dark. But he was right.

it was a number of years before the curtain was lifted and then we find what? We find a vigorous church in China built upon Chinese foundations. Just recently the government in China has produced a paper on the possible future of the Christian church and estimates that in the next decades it will be between 300 million and 400 million.

[28 : 50] All founded on Chinese men. No foreigner in the foundations at all. And where are the missionaries?

Spread throughout the whole of Southeast Asia. Wonderful blessing to China, wonderful blessing to Asia. So my friend with the large Bible on his knee who gave me that ticking off for 20 minutes proved to be right after all.

It had seemed that destruction was the name of the game. But God loves out of chaos and destruction to begin a new thing which is far greater than what went before.

May the good Lord, the same Lord, lead his people in Scotland into new paths of fruitfulness and righteousness in the days to come as he surely will.

Amen. Amen.