

God meant it for good

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah 30 verse 1. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it. These are the words that the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah. Thus says the Lord, we have heard a cry of pain, of panic, of terror, and no peace. Ask now and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach, like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale? Alas, that day is so great there is none like it. It is a time of distress for Jacob, yet he shall be saved out of it.

And it shall come to pass in that day, declares the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off your neck, and I will burst your bonds, and foreigners shall no more make a servant of him.

But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. Then fear not, O Jacob, my servant, declares the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel. For behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, declares the Lord. I will make a full end of all nations among whom I scattered you. But of you, I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished. For thus, says the Lord, your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous. There is none to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you. All your lovers have forgotten you. They care nothing for you. For I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe. Because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant, why do you cry out over your hurt? Your pain is incurable.

Because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant, I have done these things to you. Therefore, all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity. Those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you, I will make a prey. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the Lord, because they have called you an outcast. It is Zion, for whom no one cares. Thus, says the Lord, behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings. The city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be.

Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate, I will multiply them, and they shall not be few. I will make them honoured, and they shall not be small.

[3 : 2 7] Their children shall be as they were of old, and their congregation shall be established before me, and I will punish all who oppress them. Their prince shall be one of themselves. Their ruler shall come out of their midst. I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me. For who would dare of himself to approach me, declares the Lord? You shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Behold, the storm of the Lord. Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest. It will burst upon the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intentions of his mind. In the latter days, you will understand this. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 30 on page 657. And before we look at the passage, let's have a word of prayer.

Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the way and opened to us the scriptures. Father, we praise you that when the Lord Christ, by the power of his Spirit, opens his word to us, it does indeed cause our hearts to burn. No human abilities can do this, and so I pray, Lord, that you will take my human words and all their weakness and imperfection. You will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

I think it's true to say that no one is particularly happy to get a consolation prize. The word consolation always suggests second best. We didn't get what we wanted. We didn't get what we hoped for. We didn't get what we felt we deserved, and so we get this consolation prize. It is very unfortunate that this section of Jeremiah we are beginning, this is chapters 30 to 33, is called by the commentators the book of consolation, because that does suggest to me the book of the second best, almost as if God is saying to his people, well, you've blown it. You've made a mess of it. Can't give you what I'd hoped to give you. They'll give you something to compensate for it. This is not the book of consolation. This is the book of the glorious promises of God. Now, I'm not imagining for one moment that anyone remembers what I said on Jeremiah 29 back in August. Indeed, I couldn't remember it myself. I had to reread my notes when I was preparing chapter 30, so you'll forgive me if I take a few minutes to place Jeremiah in context, just so we know where we are. Briefly, Jeremiah prophesies in the closing days of the kingdom of Judah before they are taken into exile in Babylon. He prophesies in the reigns of five kings, the great reforming king, Josiah, whose reforms we know from his book he approved of, but felt they had not really made the impact they might have made. And then various short-lived kings, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiakim. Don't mix up your Jehoiakims and your Jehoiakims. And then the puppet king Zedekiah installed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And here, as we know from chapter 32, we're within months of the exile. Within months of this chapter, Nebuchadnezzar is going to destroy the city, burn the temple, take the people off to Babylon in exile.

[7 : 38] And therefore, Jeremiah's message up to now has been a message of judgment. Back in chapter 1, verse 10, he was told that he was to pluck up, to break down, to destroy, and to overthrow.

Now, that's not a very cheery message, is it? To pluck up, to break down, to destroy, and to overthrow. Judgment coming, which can't be avoided. But he was also told to build and to plant.

In other words, the message of judgment is going to be followed by the message of hope. And we've got that here in these chapters we'll look at over the next few weeks, chapters 30 to 33 and beyond.

Back in chapter 29, 11, Jeremiah had said, the Lord has plans for you to give you a future and a hope.

Now, these are being developed in this section. In this section, we're beginning. And that is a passage that's referred to in the book of Daniel as the exile comes to an end. Because judgment is never an end in itself. Judgment is there to prepare the way for blessing. Repentance to prepare the way for forgiveness. But here's where we are in Jeremiah. Jeremiah is probably in prison at this moment.

[9 : 02] This section is followed by a parallel section which describes the experiences of Jeremiah during these last few years, few months of Jerusalem before it falls. Rather like Paul's great letters from prison, letters like Ephesians and so on. Paul, Jeremiah is looking to the future.

Peter, looking to the whole story. Verse 3, days are coming. He is looking to the future glory beyond the terrible judgment that's about to engulf the people. Now, that's, I think, enough by way of introduction because I suspect if I had given a long historical ramble about Jehoiakim and Jehoiakim, I would have lost everybody. I may have lost everybody. Anyway, the days are coming, he says.

Better days are coming. Now, if you look at the bookends of the chapter, verse 2, write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. And then this is echoed by John in the book of Revelation where the risen Lord says, write in a book the things that I show you. And then in the last verse, you will understand this in the latter days. In other words, this is not just for Jeremiah's own time.

It's for our time as well. Write in a book and you will understand it. And this book is a book of good news. And the title I've given this is the title from Joseph's words in Genesis 50, verse 20, God meant it for good. As Jeremiah looks to the exile and beyond, just as Joseph looks back on his own experience of bitter exile. He speaks the words, God meant it for good. Through judgment, through disaster, through exile, the kingdom will come. That's what we're going to look at there in this chapter. Three main sections and a fourth as a kind of footnote. When I say footnote, you know that final section is going to be brief so you can lift up your hearts. First of all, verses 1 to 3, good news to write down. Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. This isn't just passing good news. This is something that future generations need to hear. Jeremiah had a scribe called Baruch. We meet him in the later chapters. And Paul often mentions people who helped him in this way. For example, at the end of Romans, I, Tertius, who wrote this letter. Paul had a scribe in

Emanuensis. And Jeremiah clearly has this man, Baruch, who preserved his sayings, preserved his speeches and his sermons. So, good news to write down. Now, that means, first of all, that Jeremiah's words are being authenticated by God. Not just this section, chapters 30 to 33, but the words he's already spoken and the words he is going to speak. Now, remember, Jeremiah's words had been ridiculed.

[12 : 13] They had been mocked. They had caused anger and dismay. And he had been persecuted. You see what God is saying, Jeremiah, these words may not have, may not have been accepted, may not have been welcomed by the people to whom you spoke them. But they are going to become part of the permanent record. They are going to be in the Bible. In other words, what God is saying to Jeremiah is not just what he's saying to Jeremiah, but what he's saying to us here and now. Heaven and earth will pass away, said Jesus in Matthew 24, but my words will not pass away. Now, so that's the first thing to notice.

Good news to write down. Jeremiah's words are authenticated by God, but also in this little section, verses 1 to 3, God is giving to Jeremiah his view of the exile and beyond. Jeremiah, what I'm going to show to you is the reality behind this. Days are coming. Now, when you come across this word in the prophet, sometimes in the latter days, this means the time when God will visit his people, what the letter to the Hebrews calls the last days. God has spoken to us in the last days in his son.

What will he do in the last days? I will restore the fortunes of my people. Now, the thing to remember about prophecy is prophecy isn't all fulfilled at once. There are various fulfillments before we come to the final fulfillment. That's why prophecy is relevant to every generation. Clearly, Jeremiah is speaking to the people of the time. After all, you can't speak to the people of any other time. You have to speak first and foremost to the people who are there, to your contemporaries. And what Jeremiah is saying in the first place is the exile will be over, and you will return, and the city and the temple will be rebuilt. That's the first fulfillment. You read about this in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai, when the people of God returned from Babylon to rebuild, first of all, the temple, and then the city. But that's very low-key, and it's quite downbeat. These books, actually, are... there's a sense of disillusionment in them, almost, because the great growing prophecies haven't been fulfilled. The desert is not blossoming like the rose. The people are not coming to Zion to hear the word of God, to praise the God of Israel.

Nevertheless, it's an important part of the fulfillment. Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament, says, the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. Now, there had to be a temple for him to come to. So, that's the first fulfillment. But the second fulfillment, far more spectacular, on the day of Pentecost, when the prophecies are fulfilled, people from every tribe, language, and nation come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, to celebrate the Exodus, and they hear news of a greater Exodus. They hear news of Jesus Christ, the one who will lead them from darkness and despair into new life. So, there's another fulfillment, God's people gathering as the word is preached. But the ultimate fulfillment is Revelation chapter 7, a fulfillment which is still in the future, where John writes, I saw a great multitude whom no one could count, from every people, language, tribe, and nation, standing around the throne of God and of the Lamb. So, you see these different levels of fulfillment, they're all important, but the fulfillment, the ultimate fulfillment lies in the future for us as well. Now, you see, this is very practical. It's not just a theoretical view. It makes sense of the little bit of the story that we are in. We are always, we always, at any given time, are in our part of that story, the journey of God's people as they make their way towards the heavenly city. It means, first of all, not to be dismayed if things are going badly.

It means that the plan will still work out. It also means not to be proud and conceited if things are going well, because it is God who is working out the plan. It is God who is gathering his people.

[16 : 45] Look at our little bit of the story. Look at the encouragements, look at the discouragements, and say, well, this is the way it's been. This is the way it will be until the final fulfillment.

Good news to be written down. What Peter, in his second letter, calls a light shining in a dark place, the word of the prophets and the apostles. That is why it is so important, if we want genuine encouragement, to read our Bibles, because this will give us the big picture, the big story.

So that's the first thing. Now, the second movement, if you like, in the chapter is verses 4 to 17. Good news will come after bad news. Do you want the good news or the bad news? Well, Jeremiah doesn't shrink from giving us both and giving us both in full measure. Restoration is going to be a costly business. There is no cheap grace here. Remember, cheap grace was the phrase used by Bonhoeffer, the courageous German pastor murdered by Hitler. Bonhoeffer described cheap grace as Christ without the cross, salvation without repentance. There will be no cheap grace, but there will be grace.

And the important thing is, verse 4, the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah. All of God's people will return. The northern kingdom had long gone in Jeremiah's time, gone to Assyria a hundred years and more before. The southern kingdom of Judah was about to go, and the great prophets of the exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are always insistent on this. It is the united people of God who will return. No one will be missing. And the name Jacob is hugely significant. Verse 7, a time of distress for Jacob. Verse 10, fear not, Jacob, my servant. Jacob reminds us of the costly disciplines by which Jacob became Israel. In a sense, Jacob's story was almost a kind of preview of the story of his people.

After all, in exile in Mesopotamia, the same place that these people were going to go to now, then returning, and so on. Then back then in Egypt, and but finally at the end of his life, seeing that God, like his son Joseph, that God had meant it for good. Now, I say good news after bad news. The bad news comes first. The negative before the positive. Time of distress. Verse 7 is a time of distress for Jacob, yet he shall be saved out of it. Now, when does this time come? You've got to remember what I said already about prophecy. This is not just one time of distress. This is not just the time of distress of Jeremiah's day of the exile. It's the time of distress later on when they, throughout the whole history of God's people. Time of distress, time of judgment. And in different ways, this is true of every generation of God's people. It is a time of distress, a time of trouble. And remember, Jeremiah is a poet. And as a poet, he uses imagery, and sometimes fairly extravagant imagery to make his point, nowhere more so than here. Verse 6, ask thou and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale? And he uses here the imagery of the pain of childbirth. I think the point he's making here is that these are the pains, ultimately of life, not of death. And I think Paul picks this up in Romans chapter 8, when Paul is talking about the future time when the children of God will be like Christ, when creation will be redeemed. And he uses a metaphor there of creation, groaning in the pains of childbirth. You know, whereas the present distress is going to lead to future life. That is the point that's being made here, and I think developed in Romans. And I think this is the point.

[21 : 15] What will happen is far, far bigger than the return of people to this piece of real estate on the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Far more even than the salvation of God's people, wonderful as that is.

What's going to happen is a whole renewed and restored creation. See that particularly next week when we look at the new covenant. The whole of creation will rejoice. The whole of creation will wear its wedding finery when the king returns. And there is a bright future for Israel. There is a bright future for God's people.

There is also a bright future for the universe. But it is not easy. I mean, look at verse 11. The end of verse 11. I will discipline you in just measure. I will by no means leave you unpunished.

For thus says the Lord, verse 12, your heart is incurable. Now, this, it isn't the case that we're just going to go straight from where we are into the new creation, so to speak. There is a painful discipline on the journey. But notice, God retrieves the irretrievable, cures the incurable. Verse 12, your heart is incurable and your wound is grievous. There is none to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you. Ultimately, only God can do this.

In verse 14, your lovers have forgotten you. The lovers are the foreign nations with whom God's people made unwise alliances. That had begun long, long before in the times of the great Solomon himself.

[22 : 59] If you read that sad chapter 1 Kings 11, where Solomon turns away from the Lord to foreign gods. And these nations are going to punish God's people. This was already happening in the time of Solomon.

But when the judgment is over, God will forgive. Notice twice, verse 9.

Sorry, verse 7. He shall be saved out of it. And then verse 11. I am with you to save you. Verse 17. I will restore health to you. Now, how is it possible? The reason it's possible is because ultimately it is not those foreign nations who have destroyed Israel. It is the Lord himself who has brought judgment on his people. And because the Lord has brought judgment, the Lord is able to forgive. No mercy from Babylon. No mercy from Assyria. No mercy from the great, powerful, chilly, bleak forces of the world. But there is mercy from the Lord. That's why it's so important to have a proper understanding of the anger of God. Sometimes when people talk about the anger of God, they talk about it as if it was something like a live wire. If you touch a live wire, you'll be electrocuted. If you put your hand into the fire, you will be burned. How long ago, C.S. Lewis pointed out that was a very, very unfortunate metaphor. Because it is a metaphor as well. If we talk, the only way we can talk about the anger of God is by using metaphors and pictures. And Lewis says, what do you substitute by, sorry, what do you gain by substituting the metaphor of a live wire for outraged majesty? Because a live wire cannot forgive.

Outraged majesty can. And that is the point. It is the outraged majesty of God which will bring back his people. If the anger of God will like a live wire, then we really are all finished. Every time we've sinned, we'd be justly condemned, and that would be it. But there is grace, there is mercy.

And that's the, and that is why, after the time of distress, there's the good news after the bad news. And the good news is that the true king will reign. Verse 9, It's difficult to exaggerate the importance of David in Scripture. And very often the prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel, will use the name David not just to refer to the great king of the past, but to refer to the one who is to come, the new David. But I think it's important to realize that in David's reign there was a genuine glimpse of the coming kingdom in two ways. First of all, in David defeated God's enemies. All the land from the river Nile to the river Euphrates was conquered by David and reigned over by David. We'll be back this in 2 Samuel.

[26 : 24] And this fulfilled the promise to Abraham. Abraham was promised in Genesis 15, your descendants will inhabit this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

So it's a genuine glimpse of how one day David's son will govern the whole earth. There's also another genuine glimpse in David's kindness. Particularly, you read the story of Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, Jonathan's son, whom David took into his own home and sat at his table.

And this is all summed up in 2 Samuel 23 when David talks about just rule, just like the sun shining in the morning or the rain falling on parched earth. So in a genuine way, David's reign prefigured the kingdom that is to come, the new creation. But if that were all, it'd just be nostalgia. Oh, can't we have another? This is not saying, oh, can we have another David? This is pointing forward to a David who will be greater than any David of the past was. David's greater son, who would come in the middle of time and then again on the last day, who would himself bring in the final chapter of this story. So David will, their king whom I'll raise up for them. Ezekiel says a similar thing, Israel and Judah will return and my servant David will reign over them. So this is good news, which is preceded by bad news. The bad news is there to show us really that we can only make it by grace. If we think we can build the kingdom by our own merits, if we think by being just trying a little harder, the kingdom will come, then we're doomed to failure. The kingdom will come because the king will bring it. And thirdly, then there's good news of the coming, developing this, there's good news of the coming kingdom, verses 18 to 22. In other words, what will the reign of David be like? When David returns, when David's greater son reigns, what will it be like? Verse 22 is the key, you shall be my people and I will be your God. When Emmanuel comes, this is what it will be like. The first thing is God's original purpose will be fulfilled. Verse 18, I will restore the fortunes of Jacob. Now restore once again, don't misunderstand this. God is going to do more than restore. He is going to bring something better. That's the end of the book of Revelation. The Lord says, see, I am making everything new.

But going through, and this really is a kind of summary of the history of it. I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, reminding us once again the story of Jacob who lived in tents most of his life. The desert, and of course the people in the desert, and the city will be rebuilt.

Once the city, verse 18, shall be rebuilt on its mound, the palace shall stand where it used to be. Now that did happen when Ezra and Nehemiah and the pioneers returned. The city was rebuilt, the palace, and the temple. But it's far, far more than that. Look at verse 19 and 20. Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. Times of joy and celebration.

[30 : 08] Remember, one of the pictures of the new creation is the image of the wedding, the image of the party, the image of joy and celebration. So the things that make life wonderful, the things that make life beautiful will resume. And in one sense, of course, that will happen when Ezra and Nehemiah return, because the life of the city can take on some kind of stability. But surely it's one of the great pictures of the new creation, picture of festival, picture of rejoicing. And notice verse 19, I will multiply them, they shall not be few. Once again, Revelation 7, a great multitude that no one could count. So God's original purpose fulfilled, but better than the, than, than Eden, better than the days of David, better than anything we experience on earth. Because this is simply the, this is simply the title page to the great story, which goes on forever, which no one on earth has ever read. I'm not going to tell you where that comes from, you probably guess. The great story has not yet begun.

And the, the other thing about the coming kingdom is the king priest will reign, one of themselves, themselves. Their prince, verse 21, shall be one of themselves, developed with the idea of David, their king. He will be both king and priest. And that's only truly fulfilled in Jesus, as he brings God to us and us to God. Since we have a great high priest, says the letter of Hebrews, let us come with confidence to the throne of grace. And in verse 22, what was always an ideal becomes true in reality.

Now remember, this is always true from God's side. I am your God. You will be my people is only imperfectly true in this world. But in the world to come, it will be perfectly fulfilled from both sides.

God will be God. God will be God. The world will know it. God will be God and his people will be truly his people. Good news of the coming kingdom. Jeremiah in prison in the dying days of Jerusalem, surrounded by misery and terror and fear and apprehension, looks forward to this glorious time.

And very briefly, the final footnote, verses 22, sorry, verses 23 to 24. Good news for the future.

[32 : 52] And once again, in 23, the first part of 24, there is a reminder that evil needs to be destroyed before the kingdom can come. If evil things are allowed to grow and flourish and remain, the kingdom will never come. In the latter days, you will understand this. In the last days, you will understand this.

Now in one sense, that's true. When the whole canon of Scripture is completed, when we know about the cross, the resurrection and the coming, not least in the book of Revelation, the two comings of Christ, the coming in the middle of time, which has already happened, and the coming which is still future.

You will understand. Now, even in this world, we can understand enough to believe, to be forgiven, to become God's people. Without understanding everything, we can understand enough to understand enough to come to Christ, understand enough to live for him. It will be fully true in the world to come.

And as I referred already to 2 Peter chapter 1, you have this word of the prophets, which is like a light shining in a dark place until the day dawn and the day star rises. Until the day... You see, at the moment, how do we know that it's true? How do you know that somebody who is preaching the biblical gospel and some who is not... How do you know which one is telling the truth? Well, of course, we only know now by faith, don't we? But on that day, says Peter, when the light dawns, it will be obvious that this is true. It will be obvious that the kingdom has come. It will be obvious that the kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. It's not the book of consolation. This is not the second best.

This is not something we get if we don't make a mess of it. This is the wonderful promise, which next week we're going to see enshrined in the new covenant. And it seems to me that this message of the future is the only message that will keep us going in the present. The more firmly we believe that Christ will one day come to destroy evil and to set up his kingdom, the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes. That's what Jeremiah is saying to us.

[35 : 34] Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the words of the prophets, the light shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the day star arises in our hearts. Help us in this perplexing and murky and difficult entangled world to walk in your ways to follow the light until one day the darkness gone and the imperfection removed. We see you face to face. Amen.