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Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations

Westminster Bible Companion

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Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations

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SERIES FOREWORD

This series of study guides to the Bible is offered to the church and more specifically to the laity. In daily devotions, in church school classes, and in listening to the preached word, individual Christians turn to the Bible for a sustaining word, a challenging word, and a sense of direction. The word that scripture brings may be highly personal as one deals with the demands and surprises, the joys and sorrows, of daily life. It also may have broader dimensions as people wrestle with moral and theological issues that involve us all. In every congregation and denomination, controversies arise that send ministry and laity alike back to the Word of God to find direction for dealing with difficult matters that confront us.

A significant number of lay women and men in the church also find themselves called to the service of teaching. Most of the time they will be teaching the Bible. In many churches, the primary sustained attention to the Bible and the discovery of its riches for our lives have come from the ongoing teaching of the Bible by persons who have not engaged in formal theological education. They have been willing, and often eager, to study the Bible in order to help others drink from its living water.

This volume is part of a series of books, the Westminster Bible Companion, intended to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently. Whether such reading is for personal direction or for the teaching of others, the reader cannot avoid the difficulties of trying to understand these words from long ago. The scriptures are clear and clearly available to everyone as they call us to faith in the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and as they offer to every human being the word of salvation. No companion volumes are necessary in order to hear such words truly. Yet every reader of scripture who pauses to ponder and think further about any text has questions that are not immediately answerable simply by reading the text of scripture. Such questions may be about historical and geographical details or about words that are obscure or so loaded with mean-

ing that one cannot tell at a glance what is at stake. They may be about the fundamental meaning of a passage or about what connection a particular text might have to our contemporary world. Or a teacher preparing for a church school class may simply want to know: What should I say about this biblical passage when I have to teach it next Sunday? It is our hope that these volumes, written by teachers and pastors with long experience studying and teaching the Bible in the Church, will help members of the church who want and need to study the Bible with their questions.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is the basis for the interpretive comments that each author provides. The NRSV text is presented at the beginning of the discussion so that the reader may have at hand in a single volume both the scripture passage and the exposition of its meaning. In some instances, where inclusion of the entire passage is not necessary for understanding either the text or the interpreter's discussion, the presentation of the NRSV text may be abbreviated. Usually, the whole of the biblical text is given.

We hope this series will serve the community of faith, opening the Word of God to all the people, so that they may be sustained and guided by it.

JEREMIAH 3052

"I Will Restore the Fortunes of My People"

Jeremiah 30-33

Jeremiah 30-33 is often referred to as the "Book of Comfort." There is a dramatic shift of emphasis in these four chapters from Jeremiah 1-29. Although the first twenty-nine chapters of Jeremiah do contain some material that look to God's eventual restoration of Israel and Judah (for instance, 1:18; 2:14-17; 16:14-15; 23:18; 24:47; 29:10-14), the emphasis of these chapters is decidedly upon God's judgment. Jeremiah 30-33 assumes judgment but looks beyond judgment to the time when "God will restore the fortunes" (30:3, anticipated in 29:14) of Israel and Judah.

The material contained in Jeremiah 30-33 has been collected and placed in these chapters because of its concern for God's restoration. The prophet Jeremiah likely delivered some of the oracles now recorded in Jeremiah 30-33 at different times during his career. For instance, texts such as Jeremiah 30:10-11 and 31:7-9 suggest a reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah. These texts may reflect Jeremiah's support for the reforms of Judah's King Josiah, which included efforts to reunite Israel, the northern kingdom destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C., with Judah, the southern kingdom. Other material may reflect Jeremiah's vision for Judah's future even as the Babylonian invasion was underway (32:1-15). Some scholars, noting that portions of the material in Jeremiah 30-33 are written in a style and use vocabulary that is very different from that found in speeches or poems from Jeremiah himself, have suggested that parts of Jeremiah 30-33 were added by later editors of the book (for instance, 31:27-30, which resembles Ezek. 18:25-29; 31:10-14, which sounds like the latter parts of the book of Isaiah; or 31:38-40, whose rebuilding theme is like Zech. 14:10-11 and Ezek. 40:48).

In the way it has come to us, Jeremiah 30-33 provides the most sustained articulation in the book of Jeremiah of the hope that God will "restore the fortunes" of Israel and Judah following judgment.

Jeremiah 30:13

30:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:2 Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you.3 For the days are surely coming, says 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 ancestors and they shall take possession of it.

These verses function as the introduction to Jeremiah 30-33. The word of the Lord that is the focus of this section of the book concerns the "coming" days, that is, the future of Israel and Judah (v. 3). God commands that Jeremiah write this word of the Lord in a book. The implication is that the "coming" days will be well in the future. The word needed to be written down so that it could be remembered over a long period of time (compare a similar instruction, though about God's judgment, in Isa. 8:16-18, 30:8). Although these chapters offer hope to Israel and Judah, they do not negate God's judgment, as the prophet Hananiah had tried to do (Jer. 28).

God's word about the coming days is the promise that "I will restore the fortunes of my people" (30:3). We are given a hint about what God's restoration of the fortunes of Israel and Judah might involve when, in the last half of verse 3, God promises to bring Israel and Judah back to the land of their ancestors. In Jeremiah 12-19, we hear repeatedly that God's judgment will mean the loss of the land of promise. God's promised restoration will reverse this judgment, and the land lost through judgment will be restored. As we will see throughout these chapters, the meaning of "restore the fortunes" is the reversal of God's judgment and the restoration of Israel and Judah as they were prior to the exile.

"Restore the fortunes" is the theme of Jeremiah 30-33. This theme is anticipated in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in the prior chapter (29:14). The restoration of the fortunes of Israel and Judah is identified as the content of God's word in these first verses of Jeremiah 30. The promise that God will restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah occurs at several places throughout these chapters (30:18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:11) and is used at the very end of these chapters in Jeremiah 33:26.

It may be a surprise that Jeremiah announces a word of hope and restoration, inasmuch as he has been in severe conflict with other optimistic prophets who have offered Judah hope. In fact, we hear a prolonged condemnation of such optimistic prophets throughout Jeremiah 27-29. Notice, however, the

difference between Jeremiah's announcement of God's restoration and the promises of the optimistic prophets Jeremiah

condemns. The optimistic prophets announce a promise that attempts to undermine God's judgment and make light of God's intentions to pluck up and tear down (1:10), to destroy Judah through Babylon. In only "two years," says Hananiah, the Babylonian threat will be over (28:3). The optimistic prophets do not take seriously God's judgment of Judah. The promise of restoration introduced in Jeremiah 30:13 assumes the full force of God's judgment, the loss of the land, and a long period before God might restore Israel and Judah. Jeremiah announces building and planting, but not before God's plucking up and tearing down (1:10) has cleared the way for a new beginning between God and God's people.

In the church, God's Easter triumph over death is joyfully celebrated, and rightly so. However, the celebration of Easter Sunday assumes the cost and pain of Good Friday when God contended on the cross with the powers of death and evil. God's Easter building and planting assume Good Friday's plucking up and tearing down. Long before Jesus' death and resurrection, Jeremiah knew that Good Friday was essential to Easter. As we read Jeremiah 30:33, we will need to remember that God's promised restoration assumes God's judgment.

Jeremiah 30:49

30:4 These are the words that the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah:

5 Thus says the LORD:

We have heard a cry of panic,
of terror, and no peace.

6 Ask now, and see,

can a man bear a child?

Why then do I see every man

with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor?

Why has every face turned pale?

7 Alas! that day is so great

there is none like it;

it is a time of distress for Jacob;

yet he shall be rescued from it.

8 On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will break the yoke from off his neck, and I will burst his bonds, and strangers shall no more make a servant of him.⁹ But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.

10 But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, says the LORD,

and do not be dismayed, O Israel;
for I am going to save you from far away,
and your offspring from the land of their captivity.

Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease,
 and no one shall make him afraid.
 11 For I am with you, says the LORD, to save you;
 I will make an end of all the nations
 among which I scattered you,
 but of you I will not make an end.
 I will chastise you in just measure,
 and I will by no means leave you unpunished.

While Jeremiah 30:33 is about God's promised restoration, the initial poem of these chapters begins with a portrayal of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord was, in the popular thought of ancient Israel and Judah, a day when God would finally set the world right and the enemies of God's people would be judged. Among Israel's prophets, however, the day of the Lord was imagined as an occasion when God would call to account Israel and Judah, and not their enemies. This is clearest in Amos, where the prophet asks why Israel wants the day of the Lord since it will be "darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear" (Amos 5:18-19; also see Isa. 2:12-21 and Zeph. 1:14-18). In verses 57, the day of the Lord is presented much as it is in Amos, as a day of judgment, "a time of distress for Jacob" (v. 7). Central to the portrayal of the day of the Lord in these verses is the image of men writhing like women in labor, in pain from which there will be no escape (v. 6). Their condition reflects the terror of the day in which there will be no evidence of "peace" (well-being, wholeness; compare uses of this word in Jeremiah 29) for Judah. Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, the image of a woman in labor is used to portray the anguish of Judah as an invader approaches (4:31 and 13:21). The images of verses 57 summarize what has been imagined about God's judgment in Jeremiah 129.

However, at the end of verse 7 God promises "rescue" for the people from this day "so great there is none like it." While God's judgment is presented with all of its horror, these verses look beyond judgment to restoration. The promise that God will "break the yoke" from the neck of God's people refers to Jeremiah 27 and 28. Jeremiah has placed a yoke on his neck to symbolize servitude to Babylon by Judah and the nations (27:11). Jeremiah has condemned Hananiah because he has broken the yoke off Jeremiah's neck, an action that indicates Hananiah's anticipation of an early end to the Babylonian captivity. By contrast, the promise in Jeremiah 30 that God will break the yoke from the neck of God's people overtly recognizes the severity of God's judgment (vv. 57) and the long delay of any restoration (v. 3). God's removal

of the yoke from Judah's neck will mean that Judah will be able to

serve God and the Davidic king whom God will "raise up" (v. 9). Of course, the Davidic kings are charged by Jeremiah with leading Judah away from the Lord, and the judgment God has threatened through Jeremiah includes the removal of Judah's kings. The restoration promised in verses 89 is a reversal of the judgments of God threatened in Jeremiah 129.

The reversal of the judgments threatened in Jeremiah 129 is also very evident in the promises of verses 10-11. The promise that God will "save" the people is repeated twice (vv. 10 and 11), and both times God's saving is connected with the end of captivity. Captivity or exile in Babylon is, of course, a central way that God's people will experience God's judgment. In verse 10, the promise to save is elaborated to mean that Jacob will "return and have quiet and ease." In Jeremiah 129, God threatens judgment against Judah because they refuse to "return," that is, repent (see, for instance, 3:14, 22; 4:1). The people will not return, but finally, God promises to return them to their land. In verse 11, the promise to save is elaborated to mean that God will make "an end of all the nations" but not of Jacob. The claim that God will severely punish but not make a "full end" of Judah (v. 11) occurs earlier in the Book (see 4:27; 5:10, 18) to anticipate that beyond judgment God intends restoration. In verse 11, the promise not to make a "full end" serves as a reminder not to hear God's promised restoration apart from judgment. So, God's promise not to make a full end of Jacob leads to the assertion that the Lord will "chastise" and not leave Judah "unpunished" (v. 11).

God's reversals of Judah's fortunes, so important in these verses and throughout the Book of Jeremiah, remind us of the way Mary's song in Luke's gospel envisions God turning the world upside down through Jesus. Mary sings of God who will bring "down the powerful from their thrones" (Luke 1:52) and send "the rich empty away" (Luke 1:53). Jeremiah 129 imagines this kind of reversal. Judah is portrayed in these earlier chapters of the book as secure in their assurance that God will protect them and will never allow Judah or Jerusalem to fall; or, confident that through idols and political and military cleverness, they can keep themselves secure. God's judgment threatens to bring low the exalted leaders of Judah and to send them empty away to Babylon. Mary also affirms that God will "lift up the lowly" and fill "the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:52-53). God's restoration promised that finally Judah, humbled through exile, would be lifted up from captivity by God and restored.

The book of Jeremiah thus invites us to reflect in our time who is exalted that God might in judgment humble; and who is lowly, that God might restore and exalt.

Jeremiah 30:12-17

- 12 For thus says the LORD:
 Your hurt is incurable,
 your wound is grievous.
- 13 There is no one to uphold your cause,
 no medicine for your wound,
 no healing for you.
- 14 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 so numerous.
- 15 Why do you cry out over your hurt?
 Your pain is incurable.
 Because your guilt is great,
 because your sins are so numerous,
 I have done these things to you.
- 16 Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
 and all your foes, everyone of them, shall go into captivity;
 those who plunder you shall be plundered,
 and all who prey on you I will make a prey.
- 17 For I will restore health to you,
 and your wounds I will heal,
 says the LORD,
 because they have called you an outcast:
 "It is Zion; no one cares for her!"

Medical images are used in this passage, which continues the theme of God's judgment and restoration of Judah and Israel. As these verses begin, the diagnosis for God's people is bleak and shared forthrightly with them: "your hurt . . . incurable," "your wound . . . grievous," "no medicine . . . no healing for you" (vv. 12-13). Then, the news gets worse in several ways.

Jeremiah announces to God's people that they are abandoned and without support. Their "lovers," their political allies to whom they have turned for help, have forgotten them and no longer care for them (v. 14). Jeremiah links ominous medical images with stark political realism to describe God's judgment.

Still worse, this poem is clear that it is God who has inflicted the wound upon Judah, but for good reason, so there is no cause for complaint. The sequence