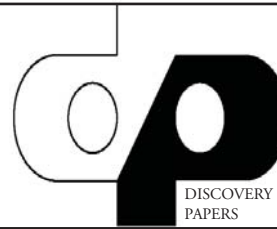


WHO WILL GET US OUT OF THIS MESS?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



Catalog No. 090913
Jeremiah 23:1-8
9th message
Paul Taylor
September 13, 2009

As we've studied the book of Jeremiah, we've seen that it is written to a nation on the brink of crisis by a man whose own life is filled with crisis. One of the things I really appreciate about this book is its raw honesty with the types of emotions that we feel when we are in crisis—the types of emotions that we sometimes think we aren't supposed to feel as Christians. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, God is seen in the midst of overwhelming personal and national crisis, and Jeremiah weeps his worship; that's why this series is called "Weeping in Worship." Somewhere along the way most of us learned that worship only happens when we feel good, so this has been a bit of a different picture for us.

Each segment we've studied has dealt with a significant theological issue. This is often what happens in the midst of crisis. We ask questions of God when things are falling apart around us. So we've talked about calling, sin, religion, atheism, sovereignty, pain, and hope. The next four segments will largely deal with how God intervenes in a broken, crisis-filled world to save us. Today we'll talk about salvation, then we'll go on to talk about guidance, justice, and endurance. My hope for these four weeks is that we'll be encouraged, that we'll see how our God intervenes in our world, and that we'll be convinced that God has saved us, that God is saving us, and that God will save us.

The 2007 movie *The Great Debaters* tells the story of a group of students from a black college in the 1930's. These students form a debate team and go on to be the first black debate team to debate Harvard University. The film explores the culture of racial injustice that existed during the era when our country was segregated by race. In one powerful scene, one of these debaters argues for the importance of desegregated education. Her call rings out clearly as she demands that blacks be admitted to all universities. She insists, "The time for justice is always now."

These students live in a broken world amidst racial prejudice, hatred, and violence. And here comes a hero in the form of a debate student who speaks of fixing that world, offering a solution to make things better. And it's inspiring. Something within us resonates with her speech because we know that the world she lives in is broken and we want it to be fixed. We want someone to rise up and fight the injustice of the world she lives in. We celebrate people like this: we name holidays after them and honor their legacy.

We live in a broken world too. As we study Jeremiah, we are reminded that our world is just as broken as his. Our country is working its way through a national crisis. Many of us are facing personal crisis. The whole world is

in crisis, and there is injustice everywhere.

We live in a broken world, and we want a hero, someone to stand up and tell us that the time for this world to be fixed is now, that we can have justice in our world. We long for a leader to lead us into a world that is better than what we know. But we've been disappointed by our leaders in the past. Filled with cynicism, hope, and desperation, we ask, "Who can make things right? Who will help us out of this mess?"

And that is the question that the people of Jerusalem were asking. Jeremiah answers the question in chapter 23, verses 1-8. As we study this passage, we will see what happens when people who are supposed to get us out of our messes fail, how God steps in with a promise, and what is our response to God's promise.

Admit Our Leaders' Failure

The first two verses of the passage criticize the kings of Israel, men God had placed into leadership who were supposed to make sure that the nation didn't get itself into a mess. Because these leaders have failed the people of God, they will be judged. Jeremiah 23:1-2:

¹"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. ²Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.

So God criticizes the leaders of Israel. He calls them shepherds. This imagery is pretty familiar to anyone who has been around church for a while. We've seen pictures of Jesus as a shepherd and heard a lot about the Good Shepherd. It is one of the most common Old Testament metaphors for God and for leaders that God places over His people. It is first used of God in Genesis, and it is used of Joshua a little later. But it gets new meaning when it's used of King David, because David actually was a shepherd before becoming king. God tells David that He's going to take him from shepherding sheep to shepherding His people. So comparing the kings of Israel to shepherds reminds us of David, the shepherd who became king.

But these shepherds aren't like David. They have failed in their jobs. Most of us aren't too familiar with what it's like to be a shepherd, but we can probably figure out what the main responsibilities of a shepherd are. They are supposed to keep the sheep together. And they are supposed

to protect those sheep. Does that sound accurate? Well, our text says that these shepherds, the leaders of Israel, have failed in two ways. They have scattered the sheep. And they have destroyed the sheep. They've done the exact opposite of the basic requirements for any shepherd. This charge is repeated throughout Jeremiah. The shepherds have failed their sheep. It's echoed in Ezekiel, too, where the prophet says that instead of caring for the sheep, the shepherds have eaten their fat and worn their wool. So we're talking about bad, negligent, abusive shepherds here.

We've all had leaders in our lives who have let us down, people who were supposed to gather us and protect us but failed in their responsibility. Sometimes these people are negligent and simply fail to shepherd us. But sometimes they are abusive; instead of protecting us, they eat us alive. We've all had shepherds who have failed us—parents, teachers, pastors, political leaders—who have used us and hurt us instead of caring for us. They may have tried their best, but we are still left with deep scars.

What do we do with this? How do we respond? Well, the first thing our passage invites us to do is to acknowledge that our leaders have failed us. Admit the failure of our leaders. Sometimes we don't feel like we can say that. I mean, come on, our parents tried their best; how can we fault them? My teacher didn't really mean to abuse me; it just kind of happened. Well, this passage gives us the permission to admit that our leaders have failed. This is a broken world, we are broken people, and even the best of intentions can lead to hurt and neglect and abuse. It's OK to acknowledge that your parents failed in some ways or that your pastors haven't always been helpful in guiding you closer to God.

God says that these leaders will be brought to account. Their failure to meet their responsibility will not go unpunished. Jeremiah uses a bit of a word play here. In verse two, the same Hebrew word is used twice. It's translated the first time as "bestow care" and the second time as "bestow punishment." The word itself means "to attend to" or "to notice," and it can be used in a positive or negative sense. A good corresponding English word would be "take care of." God says to the leaders "because you didn't take care of my people, I'm going to take care of you." The failure of these leaders is going to come back to them.

That helps us to realize that, in whatever ways we lead, God takes that responsibility seriously. But it also helps to know that God sees when our leaders don't live up to their calling in our lives. Their failures don't escape God's notice. So our passage starts out by saying that those people whom we hoped would get us out of this mess can't do it. They have failed. And so we're left with a hole, with real disappointment. We're left still asking, "Who will help us out of this mess?" That's when God steps in.

Look for God's Intervention

After criticizing the current leaders for their failures, notice what God does next. Verses 3-4:

³ "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

The human leaders that God has placed over His people have failed so miserably that Jerusalem is about to be destroyed. So what does God do? Verse 3 starts off with God saying that He Himself is going to step in and lead His people. He will be the shepherd of His people. The leaders God has established over His people failed, so He is going to roll up His sleeves and do it Himself.

The whole focus of this section is that God will be the one who intervenes. These first four verses are arranged in what is called a chiasm, with parallels at the beginning and end that focus your attention on what is in the middle. They start with a criticism of the bad shepherds and end with a promise of good shepherds. The failure of shepherds who scatter and destroy is contrasted with God who will gather and protect. And in the center is God's miraculous intervention. The point is that the failure of our human leaders prepares us for the work of God. Did you get that? The failure of human leaders prepares us for the intervention of God.

So you start off by acknowledging that our leaders fail us. You start off with disappointment. And that's what is great about Jeremiah. You take disappointment with leaders and frustration, things that we sometimes think we aren't supposed to feel as Christians. But then you realize how that disappointment opens you up to God's work. And that's what our passage invites us to do: look for God's intervention.

When people in our lives fail us, look for God to step in. Think back to people who have failed you. Have you seen God step in amidst their failure? Has their failure become an opportunity for you to see God at work? Now, don't misunderstand me—this doesn't excuse the failures of our human leaders by any means. But it helps us to know how to handle them. When our leaders fail, we look to see how God is going to step in.

And how does God step in? First, He says that He will gather them. He will bring them back together. And He will bring them to a place where they will be fruitful and multiply. They'll be safe enough to do what sheep do and have little baby sheep. He will do what the other shepherds failed to do. This phrase "be fruitful and increase in number" is a direct quote from Genesis 1. In the beginning God created men and women gave them life in a garden. Life was good there. But they turned away from Him and He sent them out of that garden. And ever since then, we've all been trying our hardest to get back into that garden. Well, here God says that He will step in to bring His people back into the garden. When the leaders He gives fail, He steps in.

I've seen this in my own life because I have a tendency to really look up to the people that God gives me to guide me. I've had probably 6 or 8 older men in my life that have been really significant mentors to me. And I'm so thankful for them. But what I've often done is expect too much out of them and then be frustrated when they don't live up to my expectations. I've wanted too much from the leaders God has given me. So I've been disappointed. Or maybe I've wanted the right things and God leads me through disappointment so that I can see Him, so that He can step in. Maybe God puts leaders into my life knowing that, when they disappoint me, He'll be there and I'll see Him. Isn't that His purpose anyway, to break through the density of my preoccupation with myself so that I can actually see Him for a moment?

How does God do that? Well, in verse 3 He says that He'll intervene, but then He says that He'll send new shepherds. The days are coming when shepherds who know how to care for and protect their sheep will be raised up. And that is a hopeful thing. For the Israelites in Jerusalem, this pointed to people like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, the leaders that led God's people back to the land and rebuilt the temple after 70 years of exile. But it also points further ahead. That's what we see in the next few verses.

Wait for God's Justice

First, we get the promise of new shepherds, then the focus moves to one particular shepherd. Verses 5-6:

⁵ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.

Well, we've been talking about shepherds like David and now we see David named. God promises that the days are coming when He will send one shepherd in particular. He calls Him a righteous Branch from David. This is a parallel to Isaiah 11 where the idea of the branch of David is first mentioned. David is pictured as a stump because most of the sons that followed from him didn't live up to his reputation. There hasn't been a king like David since him. But there will be. Have you ever seen a stump with a little branch growing from it? I walked past one the other day in my neighborhood and thought it was so fascinating that new life could grow straight up from a stump. And that's what this new shepherd will be. He will finally be a king like David was. The same stuff that produced David will produce another king, one who will finally do what is right in the land.

We're familiar with talk like this. If you remember back to the elections last year, some people essentially said that John McCain was a branch from the stump of Ronald Reagan. And other people essentially said that Barack Obama was a branch from the stump of Franklin Delano

Roosevelt. We do the same thing. We pick a model leader from the past and want our new leaders to live up to their reputation.

So God compares this new leader to David. But in verse 6 He gets personal. You see, the king of Israel at this time is a man named Zedekiah. He wasn't a very good king—he didn't listen to God, and he didn't listen to Jeremiah, and he was going to ultimately preside over the final destruction of Jerusalem. But His name came from two Hebrew words: *tsadiq*, or righteousness, and *Yahweh*, the God of Israel. His name would roughly be translated "My righteousness is YHWH." And yet Zedekiah had not lived up to his name. He hadn't exemplified the righteousness of YHWH. He hadn't established the justice that God desires within Jerusalem or the world. And so God says that He is going to send a new king. This king will be called *Yahweh tsadiqenu*, or roughly "YHWH is our righteousness." So the name of this new king is a direct slam on the current king. The new king will be what the old king isn't. This new shepherd God sends will be everything David was and nothing Zedekiah is. This king, who exemplifies the righteousness of God, will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. This king will establish justice.

This is an important idea. You see, we might be tempted to read this phrase "The LORD our righteousness" and think it refers to our personal holiness, to think that this means that God will come and save us and make us righteous—essentially make us into good people. And that is part of what God does, but the emphasis here is not on God making His people into good people, but on God doing justice in the world. The emphasis here is on a king who will exemplify the righteousness of God and establish that righteousness as justice on earth, a king who will fix this world. And so in the midst of a broken world with failed leaders, God intervenes and invites us to wait for the justice He will establish.

This is largely an emphasis that we've neglected in the American evangelical church. We've done a great job talking about personal holiness and learning how God transforms our lives. We'll be talking more about that in two weeks. But we haven't always paid as much attention to this idea that the savior that God will send will be a king who will establish justice in the world and set things right. We want God to change us, we want God to fix us, but we've sometimes forgotten that God has promised to come and fix our world. It won't be a debate student who destroys injustice, or a new president, or a non-profit organization, or any of us. It will be the righteous branch from David. He will be our hero. This righteous branch is the one who will help us out of our mess. This is Jeremiah's answer to the question that plagues us. God is sending someone that will fix the world. And we know that person to be Jesus, the Christ. Jesus, who died and rose again so that we could know the Father. Jesus, who is returning to earth to complete His work of establishing justice.

The problem for some of us is that we aren't disillusioned enough with our human leaders. We haven't seen them

fail and we haven't learned to look for God to intervene amidst their failure. We expect so much from our leaders, and that's why we have this passage. Do you see the cycle here? We want someone to fix our world. We give them a shot. They fail. And that makes us ready for God to step in. He promises to bring us back to the garden. And so we wait. We need to see that it is God who will bring justice. He is the righteous branch.

We work for God's justice

But our passage doesn't just end with the promise of a new leader; it ends with a focus back on the community to see how they have responded to this promise. Listen to verses 7-8.

“So then, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when people will no longer say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’⁸ but they will say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

Again we see this phrase, “the days are coming...” Again we are told to look toward the future, toward something that God will do. And what we learn about these days is that the standard of salvation will be changed forever. We've talked before about how the Jewish people being redeemed from the land of Egypt was the defining event for the nation of Israel. That is where they got their start. And through most of the Old Testament, they refer back to that as their founding moment.

But after these new shepherds, after this new season of righteousness and prosperity, that will change. God's people won't refer to themselves as the people that God brought up out of Egypt anymore. They'll refer to themselves as the people whom God rescued from the north and the people that God brought back from all the places where they had been banished. God will be the one who brought them out of exile.

And then Jesus comes. The righteous branch. The good shepherd. And He announces the beginning of His kingdom. Once again the standard of salvation has changed. The Messiah comes and is killed to satisfy the justice of God's righteousness so that His people may be forgiven and take part in His kingdom, which will establish justice on the earth.

So we stand in an interesting place. Before the exile, the standard of salvation was God redeeming His people from Egypt. After the return from exile, the new standard of salvation was God who gathered His people from exile. But after the death and resurrection of Christ, we have a new standard of salvation. We are the people whom God has saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And it leads us to the question of what we think our standard of salvation is. What has Jesus done? Too often

we think that all Jesus has done is forgiven us so that we can go to heaven. But it's so much more than that. His death satisfied God's justice so that He might rise again and establish God's justice in the world. And so the way we talk about our God has changed. In Romans 3, Paul says our God is just and the justifier of the one who believes. And we see in Revelation that He ultimately completes the work He began to bring justice to the world. So if that's what our king is doing, then that is what we as His followers imitate.

We live in a world of injustice. But we have a king who has come to establish justice. That's our standard of salvation. We find our identity in the kind of salvation that He brings. And we participate as agents of that salvation. So we wait. But we also work. Because the salvation that we are waiting for is for a king who establishes justice, we take part in that. We wait for God's justice, but we also work for God's justice.

Some of us need to learn to wait, but others need to learn to work. Some of us are disillusioned by human leaders and overwhelmed with the enormity of the injustice in the world. And we've seen failure after failure in efforts to address it. So we give up and say it is God's responsibility. We don't even try anymore. We're not really waiting; we've just given up. We can't muster the energy to participate in this work of justice because we it's just too complicated.

But we are called to take part in God's work of justice throughout the world. I'm excited because this is an area where we are really growing together as a church. More and more of our mission trips are looking to participate in God's work of justice, whether it is an AIDS clinic in India, a hospital in Pakistan, or community development in Kenya. More and more we are seeing God's work in the world as involving justice.

This fall our missions conference will feature speakers from an organization called International Justice Mission. This is an organization that works all around the world to bring justice to people who are living in injustice. They rescue the oppressed and prosecute the oppressors. And they do all this in the name of Christ, partnering with missions agencies to care for people whom they've rescued out of abusive situations, forced prostitution, or bonded slavery. It's a new kind of missions agency staffed not by evangelists but by lawyers who work within the legal systems of various countries to ensure that justice is carried out in places where justice is hard to come by, where justice is ignored, or where situations are just too tough for people to think about justice. I'm excited for us as a church to get challenged with the call for towards justice and to hear from this organization in November.

But I've said two very different things. We wait for God's justice and we work for God's justice. Well, which is it? It's both. The reality is that most people and most organizations end up emphasizing one or the other. They focus on the fact that Jesus is the one who will establish justice, so they wait patiently for it and they forget to participate. Or they focus on their role in participating in that work and

they work for it fervently, so much so that they forget to wait for Jesus' final work of redemption and justice. But you know what? That's OK. That's what the body of Christ is for. The people who focus on waiting can remind us to trust in God's work when we get tired and frustrated with the overwhelming aspects of injustice in the world. And the people who focus on working can challenge us and motivate us to get involved when we get tired and lazy and say that Jesus is the one who brings justice because we don't want to be bothered with it.

And so we as the church are in this tricky position of waiting for justice and working for it. Knowing that Jesus will come and realizing that our salvation into this kingdom invites us to participate in the work of its king.

The Time for Justice

In the film *The Great Debaters*, an inspiring young woman faced a world of injustice, prejudice, and violence. She stood up for the call of justice, and she challenged people to stand up and work for it. Her call rings in our ears: "The time for justice is always now."

And then we read a passage which spoke of human leaders who failed to be righteous and just leaders, who scattered and destroyed their followers. And we realized that we've had leaders like this—political leaders, family leaders, spiritual leaders—whose failure has hurt us. We've been hurt by the injustice that they caused.

But their failure opens us up to the work of God in this world. It allows us to see God intervene. And He does. He steps in to gather and protect His people. He changes our lives. He gives us purpose. He gives us life and love where we would only have death and competition otherwise. And He promises a leader who will be called "The LORD our righteousness." God Himself will be our righteous leader and will establish justice on the earth. And so we come alongside our king and work for justice in this world.

But we also know that He's coming back to complete His work and establish His kingdom for good in a new creation. And so we wait, asking Him to come sooner, eagerly awaiting the day when our world won't be broken and people won't suffer injustice.

And so we wait for Him. We wait for God's justice. And we participate. We work for God's justice.

God's time for justice is coming and we pray that it comes soon. But in the meantime, our time for justice is now.