

SAVING THE OLD BY THE NEW

Scriptures: Jeremiah 23:5-6; Psalm 89:1-4, 38-45

Before I read our second scripture lesson, let me talk about the first scripture lesson. Psalm 89 describes a covenant—a commitment—that God made with King David in the Old Testament. Verses 3-4: “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’” God promised that there would always be descendants of David to reign as king.

However, from the stories we read this fall in the book of Ezekiel, we know that the descendants of David ran into trouble. In 587 B. C., in the time of Ezekiel, the Babylonian army marched into Jerusalem, destroyed the city, and took reigning king Jehoiachin, a descendant of David, into exile in Babylon. Jehoiachin was replaced for a time by his uncle Zedekiah, but eventually Zedekiah was also captured by the Babylonians, and all his sons were slain. That was the last time a true descendant of David reigned as king over the people of Israel—about 2,600 years ago. So what happened to God’s covenant with David?

That is precisely the question asked in Psalm 89. Listen again to verses 38-39: “But now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust.” Further on verse 49 says, “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?”

The prophet Jeremiah lived in the same time as Ezekiel, right about the time Psalm 89 was written. In chapter 22 Jeremiah says,

Is this man Coniah [a nickname for King Jehoiachin] a despised broken pot, a vessel no one wants? Why are he and his offspring hurled out and cast away in a land that they do not know? ... Thus says the Lord: Record this man as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days; for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah.

Do you feel the utter sense of loss, the deep feeling of abandonment that the people of Israel must have felt when their last king was hauled away in chains to Babylon? Perhaps it would help to think of losses that you have experienced or that have been experienced by people in our community. The website for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation reports that every three months 250,000 new families enter foreclosure. A lot of people in this country have lost their homes, not to the Babylonians but to the banks.

And if you haven’t lost your home, there is a good chance you have lost about half of your retirement savings. The *Washington Post* reports that the stock market decline has wipe out \$2 trillion dollars in American retirement savings in the last 15 months. You need not be conquered by a foreign army to experience devastating loss.

This is especially true of deep personal loss. In 2008 five people in our church lost their spouse. Two couples lost a child.

I am reminded of a description in Jerry Sittser's book *A Grace Disguised*. After his wife, mother, and youngest daughter were killed in a car accident, he fell into a darkness from which he thought he would never recover. Here is how he describes it:

I had a kind of waking dream I dreamed of a setting sun. I was frantically running west, trying desperately to catch it and remain in its fiery warmth and light. But I was losing the race. The sun was beating me to the horizon and was soon gone. I suddenly found myself in the twilight. Exhausted, I stopped running and glanced with foreboding over my shoulder to the east. I saw a vast darkness closing in on me. I was terrified by that darkness. I wanted to keep running after the sun, though I knew that it was futile, for it had already proven itself faster than I was. So I lost all hope, collapsed to the ground, and fell into despair (p. 33).

If you are beginning to sense what that loss is like, if you are beginning to realize what it means to think that God promises to you are over, that you have blown whatever chance you had, that your life will never be the same again—if you are beginning to feel what that is like in the pit of your stomach and to realize that it could happen to you at any moment, then you are now ready for our second scripture lesson. Turn in your pew Bibles to page 725 and follow along as I read Jeremiah 23:5-6. (Read)

When I was in college, I was given a button by one of my friends that had on it ten letters. The letters were PBPGINFWMY. They stood for Please Be Patient, God Is Not Finished With Me Yet.

That is the news Jeremiah has for the people of Israel in exile: God is not finished with us yet. God still has a future for us, but it may not be the future that we had imagined.

Take a pew Bible and turn to Matthew, chapter 1 (page 1 in the New Testament). Matthew chapter 1 is a genealogy of Jesus' ancestors, the kind of thing you would probably skip over if you were reading the Bible on your own. But let me show you something. Look at verse 12. "And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah [which is another version of the nickname for King Jehoiachin] was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel." So King Jehoiachin was not childless after all. He had a whole string of descendants listed here in Matthew 1. The problem is that none of those descendants ever became king. At one point people tried to make Jehoiachin's grandson Zerubbabel into a king. They even called him "the Branch" because of what Jeremiah said in our second scripture lesson. If you remember, Jeremiah said, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king." People tried to make Zerubbabel into that promised "Branch." In other words, they tried to save the covenant God made with David by finding someone—anyone—who could be the kind of king they had before. They were looking for a king like they had in the past. But it did not work. It was like Jerry Sittser chasing after the sun, trying to get back what he had before.

But now look at Matthew 1:16. This is the end of the list of descendants from David: “And Jacob [was] the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

Here is a new wrinkle. Jesus’ father Joseph was a descendant of King David, which technically made Jesus a descendant of King David. But Jesus was not really Joseph’s son. Joseph became Mary’s husband, but strictly speaking he was not Jesus’ father. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary.

Do you see what is going on here? God fulfills the promise made to David of an eternal kingship among his descendants. But it happens in the way that no one expected. It is someone not biologically descended from David that saves the promise to David’s descendants. It is someone not born in a palace that becomes the promised king. It is a new work of God—a new covenant—that saves the old one.

The same may be true for you. It may be a new work of God, something that you had not expected or foreseen, that saves the promises of God in your life and in the lives of your children.

After Jerry Sittser had that waking dream of chasing a setting sun and feeling a vast darkness closing in on him from the east, he told the dream to his sister Diane. He writes,

Later my sister, Diane, told me that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise (p. 33).

I probably do not know all the losses you are mourning this Christmas: the missing family members, the disappointed dreams, the unfulfilled expectations. I probably do not know all the losses you are experiencing this Christmas, but I do know this: God is not finished with you yet. God may not take you back to the life you had before; in fact I suspect God won’t. But God can take you forward through the darkness to a new life made possible by the new covenant in his Son.

- Ken Onstot
December 7, 2008