



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

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Waiting for the Promise Jeremiah 33:14-16

"I can hardly wait for Christmas!"

I can't tell you how many times I said that as a child.

But in all honesty, it wasn't always because I was so eager to celebrate our Lord's birth. It was often because of something I'd been promised for Christmas, and I was waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

Now waiting is a difficult thing, isn't it?

We all know that very well. Whether it's in anticipation of something good or in anxiety about something bad, waiting patiently is hard work. I want things to go ahead and happen so I'll know how it's all going to turn out. I'm a lot more than I care to admit like the fellow who prayed, "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me right *now!*"

And as difficult as waiting can be, a promise can be a precarious thing—it depends on the will and favor and ability of the person who makes it. It's a pledge to do or not to do something. And it's always in the *future tense*.

So when you put the two together—*waiting* for a *promise*—it gets to be a particularly difficult thing to do.

A grim situation

Our text for this First Sunday of Advent is about a promise, God's promise to **the house of Israel and the house of Judah** (33:14).¹ It was a promise about the future. It was a word from the LORD through His prophet Jeremiah about hope beyond horror and deliverance beyond destruction.

It was a grim time for the people of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel, which along with the southern kingdom of Judah made up the people of Israel, had fallen to the Assyrian empire in 722 BC. About 135 years later, Judah was now facing a similar fate. The armies of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Jerusalem.

Now you understand how a siege works, don't you? When your enemies hold up in their fortified city and they're too strong to overrun immediately, you surround the city and cut off all traffic into and out of it. No traffic, no commerce, and no way to get food or supplies into the city from the surrounding countryside—it's a way of starving a city into surrender. It might take a while, so you build siege ramps, large earthen mounds next to the city walls to enable you eventually to go over the walls into the city.

Sooner or later, if the siege is long enough, the people will either give up or starve to death, or become weakened physically and emotionally to the point that they're no longer able to resist

your onslaught, and you simply overrun and take the city. If you're the Babylonians, you take the cream of the crop—royalty, nobility, artisans, craftsmen, wise people—back to Babylon and put them in your service. You leave the poor people, and you either set up a puppet ruler who swears allegiance to you, or you totally destroy the city.

That's what the people of Jerusalem were facing. The siege had been on for nearly a year and a half. Food had run out, and the people were starving. Many of the surrounding towns of Judah had already fallen, and now it was just a matter of time for Jerusalem. Jeremiah had already given a word from the Lord that made its inevitability clear.

Though it had been a long time coming, what brought on the siege was the ill-advised decision of Judah's King Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon. About a decade earlier in 597 BC, the young King Jehoiachin had surrendered almost immediately to King Nebuchadnezzar. Thousands were deported to Babylon, removing the royalty, nobility, artisans, craftsmen, and wise people. Then Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah king of Judah, and gave him a new name—*Zedekiah*, which means "The LORD is my righteousness."

Despite his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah decided after a decade to plot with Egypt and other nations against Babylon. The siege was the result, and would end in 587 or 586 BC with the destruction of the city, including the temple that had stood since the reign of King Solomon. A second, much smaller deportation would leave only the poorest of the people to care for the vineyards and crops. All the leaders who remained were executed, except for Zedekiah. His fate was perhaps even more cruel. As he and his army tried to flee the city, the Babylonians overtook them. They executed all his sons in his sight, then put out his eyes, so that the last thing he saw was the slaughter of his sons. They bound him in bronze shackles, took him to Babylon, and put him in prison.

When this destruction was drawing near, Jeremiah had declared that it was sure because of Judah's continual rebellion against God. But even as he proclaimed this judgment because of their sin, he also proclaimed this word of hope, this **good word**—this promise that God would raise up a righteous king to deliver His people and execute justice and righteousness in the land. Jeremiah stated it in such a way as to draw everyone's attention to it: "**Behold, days are coming,**" **declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken to the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . ."** (33:14). Many recent translations leave the Hebrew interjection *hineh* untranslated. But according to my seminary Hebrew professor, Dr. Elmo Scoggin, *hineh* means something like, "Hey! Look here!" It calls special attention to what's being said or draws the reader or hearer into the surprise of the turn of events. The more formal equivalent translations (NASB, KJV, NKJV, RSV, ESV) translate it as *behold*, in our sense of "Lo and behold!"

A hard promise to believe

Still, Jeremiah's proclamation must have seemed hollow to those who heard him. How in the world could he believe it? Did he *really* believe it?

Well, Jeremiah took the LORD at His word to the point of buying a field from his cousin Hanamel (32:6-15). The LORD had told Jeremiah this opportunity would come, and Jeremiah seized it. He signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and instructed his assistant Baruch to store it in a clay jar for future use, in his confidence in the word of the LORD that houses, fields, and vineyards would again be bought and sold in Judah.

So when Jeremiah proclaimed the LORD's declaration that the LORD would fulfill the promise He had already made in 23:5-6 to cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, he wasn't just

blowing smoke. He really believed it! Despite the circumstances, despite the siege, God's original promise still stood, and Jeremiah was fully expecting God to keep it!

God's promise to His people

But exactly what was this promise all about? When you look at *all* of chapter 33, you see that it's full of assurances that even though destruction was imminent and would surely take place, restoration was just as sure. Even though judgment might be necessary because of Judah's rebellion, God's promise endured—He would raise up a ruler who would execute justice and righteousness in the land, and the LORD would bring salvation and security for His people under the rule of this righteous Branch of David. All this was, after all, rooted in God's covenant with King David that he would always have a descendant ruling over Israel. The rule of this righteous Branch would be of such character that what was said would be *His* name in 23:6 was now prophesied to be the new name of *Jerusalem* under His rule: **the LORD is our righteousness**. King Nebuchadnezzar had set up a weak puppet king and named him Zedekiah—meaning “The LORD is my righteousness.” *God* would raise up *this* king, *His* king, and give Him *and* His people the name **the LORD is our righteousness!**

So this promise was a promise of *mercy beyond judgment* and *restoration beyond destruction*, God's good purpose to give them a hope and a future, as He had promised to the exiles through Jeremiah's letter (29:10-14). It was the assurance of the ultimate triumph of God's gracious redemptive purpose. Indeed it was a **good word**.

But has it happened? The return from the exile and the restoration that took place afterwards paled in comparison to the glorious promises of the prophets. It seems to have materialized in only the smallest of ways. In the centuries following the exile, Judah was only a pawn in the successive empires of the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and the Seleucids. They enjoyed independence for only about a century, and that was under the rule of high priests, not a Davidic king. And then the Romans came on the scene, subjugating and occupying Judah once more. The Jews' rebellion against Rome in AD 66-70 ended in the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple. A second attempt in AD 133 led to the destruction of the nation that lasted from then until the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

Could it be that what Jeremiah was describing here was much broader and greater than what the Jews were expecting, much larger and more universal than one ethnic group and a tiny plot of land in the Middle East?

In the centuries between Jeremiah and Jesus, Jewish messianic expectations grew from an ideal ruler to an apocalyptic deliverer. By Jesus' day, both these views and many others somewhere in between all had their adherents.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus came as the expected Messiah—in fact, *Christ (Christos)* is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew *Messiah (meshiahh)*, the “anointed one.”

But Jesus didn't fit *any* of the Jews' expectations fully. He was a much different kind of Messiah, with a far broader purpose and plan than they had envisioned. He wasn't coming to deliver the Jews from Rome. He was coming as God in the flesh to deliver from sin and Satan and death all who would put their faith in Him! Through both personal redemption of individuals and corporate redemption of a people for Himself from all the tribes and nations of humanity, He began the fulfillment of the promise that would ultimately include the redemption of the creation itself in new heavens and a new earth! So looking back from this side of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, we who are Christians know and affirm that *in the coming of Jesus Christ*,

God has begun to fulfill His good promise!

Already . . . not yet . . .

But when we look around us, we see violence and injustice and oppression in a world filled with unrighteousness and rebellion against God. Our human existence is still filled with pain and peril, destruction and death.

But the promise has only *begun* to be fulfilled. Its total fulfillment awaits Christ's *second* coming, His return in glory! We live *between His comings*. The fulfillment has *already begun*, but it's *not yet complete*. God's kingdom rule has come in Jesus Christ, but it's still coming!

Many years ago when I was a student at Campbell University, because I was serving full-time as pastor of a small church in Bladen County, I took an extra semester to finish my college studies. That was December 1984, the first year after Campbell did away with its December graduation exercises. So I had to wait until May 1985 to graduate—well, sort of. I didn't receive my diploma until the graduation ceremony. Yet when I got it and looked at it, it was dated December 10, 1984! I had already graduated, but not yet. I had finished all my requirements, but my degree had not been conferred and I hadn't received my diploma. Yet my graduation was effective on December 10, 1984! I had graduated, but not yet fully until May 1985.

Even so we wait for the promise of Christ's return, our blessed hope! It's a hope that's now far greater than that of the Jews of Jeremiah's day. They didn't have the fullness of the revelation that we have in Christ, so God spoke to them in terms they could relate to—the greatest thing they could imagine was the restoration of the land of Promise and the righteous rule of a descendant of David. But in Christ, we look for far more than a restored homeland! As 2 Peter 3:13 puts it, **we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells**—the redemption of the whole creation! There our righteous King will rule in justice forever in the age of resurrection, and things will be set right as God intends, for all eternity!

So in this Advent season as we look to our Lord's coming, we believe and affirm that *in Christ's coming, God has begun to fulfill His good promise*. And in God's own good time, Christ will come again *to complete the fulfillment of that promise*.

What a glorious day that will be when all will be made right, when instead of sorrow there will be joy, instead of pain death, instead of oppression justice, and instead of death eternal life!

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:20).

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®.