

The Revitalization of a Ghost Town

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Jeremiah chapter 33. We're going to look at this passage from the beginning of the chapter down as far as verse 13. We can just read at verse 10 as a summary of what we hope to see in this passage.

Thus says the Lord, in this place of which you say, it is a waste without man or beast, in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast.

There shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord.

The book of Jeremiah is not arranged chronologically. In other words, you don't begin at the beginning and think that in the book you're following out, the history of Jeremiah's experiences chronologically just as they took place.

Because when you go through it, it becomes obvious that there are certain things that he speaks about near the end of the book that actually took place early on in his ministry or in his career as a prophet of God.

[1 : 17] So the book is really arranged in many cases, in many of the chapters really arranged according to the themes that Jeremiah is dealing with. According to whatever topic it is you find him speaking off or setting out, that's how sometimes in many cases the book is actually arranged.

And Jeremiah's ministry, although it was a fairly long ministry, covered the final days of the nation of Judah. Going your way back to the beginning when the two nations, when the nation split after the death of Solomon during his son's reign, Rehoboam.

Remember that tribes broke off, formed the northern kingdom, which took the name Israel. And then others at Jerusalem gave the name Judah to that part of what really was the same people. And from then on you had Israel and Judah existing together, sometimes at peace and sometimes at war with each other. And here Judah, Israel having been already overrun by the Assyrians before this, Judah came to be surrounded and eventually overrun by the Babylonians, who had come to be in power after the Assyrians as the empire in Jeremiah's time.

And what he's dealing with here really is the final part of the Judah history, in those terms at least, because what he was saying was that God was going to bring about desolation because he was going to take so many of the people to Babylon, or the Babylonians were going to do it as part of the judgment of God.

[3 : 04] And that's why he's talking here about Jerusalem and the cities of Judah and the streets being without man or in heaven. And they're going to become ghost towns under the judgment of God for all the time that the people will be exiled in Babylon.

And that took 70 years before they began to come back and rebuild, as you find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Nehemiah, and you'll find some of that there then.

Well, that's the kind of situation that Jeremiah was dealing with. These are the circumstances that he had his ministry in. And although he's saying here about, or God is saying through him about, these cities becoming ghost towns, what we're really looking at is the revitalization of these ghost towns.

You'll find that, of course, in an ordinary sense in our own country as well, in other countries where you find places that have become abandoned or dilapidated or certain areas of ground that have just been left waste or have been under industrial use and then have gone into waste.

They're being revitalized. They're being changed into something different to what they were. And in a spiritual sense, that's really what Jeremiah is dealing with as well. The ghost towns are going to be revitalized.

[4 : 20] They're going to be repopulated. Instead of the moan of the wind whistling through empty buildings, there are going to be again the sound of gladness and mirth and joy, the voice of the bride, the voice of shepherds with their flocks.

It's a great turnaround. And that's a great challenge, but also a great encouragement to ourselves. Because what you're really seeing in so much of our own society is spiritual wasteland, spiritual ghost towns.

People are living in certain areas where there's hardly at all any evidence of the gospel actually being pronounced or actually being known. And there are so many people in our own country, indeed in our island nowadays, that really have little idea of what the gospel is or even what the Bible teaches.

We have spiritual wastelands. We have ghost towns in a spiritual sense, where people have simply come into ignorance of the gospel.

And it's our great privilege and it's our challenge to face that and to seek to bring the gospel to people so that they will come, hopefully, to see a re-establishing of spiritual values and spiritual lives where presently they don't exist.

[5 : 42] That's the kind of thing that you have here brought us. That's the kind of message that you bring out of this kind of passage in the Bible. You're not just looking at it as a history from the days of Jeremiah.

You're extracting from it things which you need to apply to our own circumstances. Let's first of all look at the call to pray for revitalization because that's where God begins with Jeremiah.

At the beginning of the chapter, the word of the Lord came to him while he was still shut up in the court of the guard. He was still really held in custody. And as he was there in custody, the Lord came into his circumstances, of course, as God can.

And he said, Now, of course, that's God himself that came to call Jeremiah to pray and to pray for revitalization.

And we're taking it that what God is saying in the rest of the chapter is really the answer to this prayer of Jeremiah. That's the way God has put these two things together.

[6 : 49] God has come here to call Jeremiah to pray, saying, Call to me and I will answer you. It's not because he's seen any change in the people.

The people are still idolatrous. The people are still disobedient to God. The people are still not listening to Jeremiah's message or what God is saying through Jeremiah to them.

It's not because God has seen any change in them. It's not because they've repented that God has come to say these things. It's simply that God has made the first move.

God has taken the first step. And you know, very often that first step towards revitalization or if you want to use the word revival, it comes to the same thing.

The first step towards that is when God moves people or maybe just one person to really pray earnestly and consistently and continuously for this revitalization, for this revival to take place.

[7 : 51] And he comes here to show what God's own desire is for these people and for these places. He doesn't like ghost towns.

He's not pleased with these empty towns and these empty cities that are, the empty streets that are going to shortly be seen where now there is a population.

God is not pleased with that. God himself desires the opposite of that. God's desire is to see things change, to see that that will be reversed, to see ghost towns become repopulated, to see where there is a spiritual emptiness, to see that being filled again with joy, with the knowledge of salvation, with things that are pleasing to God himself.

But you see, he's waiting. Instead of rushing in to do that, it's going to take 70 years. It's going to take a whole generation. And although Jeremiah is told here to pray, Jeremiah will be gone by the time people actually begin to repopulate these cities.

And still, he needs to pray. God waits for us to pray, though he can do without us. God can act even if we don't pray.

[9 : 20] But that's not his pattern. That's not how he has arranged things. And when God is saying to Jeremiah, look at these streets, they're going to be repopulated, I'm going to revitalize this, but meantime you have to pray.

You call to me and I will answer you. You begin with this prayer to God, with this calling unto God, with this pleading with God.

And then you have this exciting promise that he's given to Jeremiah as well. I will answer you and I will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

Now that's exciting when God is saying, I'm going to reveal things that presently you don't see. presently you don't know about or if you do know about you're presently not experiencing them.

God is saying I'm going to show you hidden things and of course he meant by that further knowledge of his ways of his salvation as time went on God revealed more of himself and that culminated of course in the coming of Jesus Christ and the coming of his ministry and his death on the cross and his resurrection and all that you have in the New Testament you could say that that's really all God's hidden things in the time of Jeremiah and bit by bit he was going to reveal them.

[10:41] But even for Jeremiah's own day and for the days immediately following that you could say that there would be things that the next generation in Babylon had not seen.

They had not seen God at work powerfully. They had not seen God worshipped at Jerusalem in his temple. And God is saying I'm going to bring to you an answer to your prayer and I'm going to make it in such a way that I will tell you of great and hidden things.

Hidden things things you have not seen. And they are not insignificant things. They are deliberately described as great and hidden things.

They are not small things. They are great things. Things which God calls substantial. Things to do with his glory. Things to do with his name.

Things to do with his salvation. His redemption. With the eternal good of people. Great things.

When God describes something as great it must really be great.

[11:47] We use that word great very loosely don't we? When we say well that was great. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that but it is still excessive compared to things that are really great.

truly great. The things of God the things of his kingdom. The things of his salvation. Now you apply that you see to our day as well. When God brings us to think of our need of our own lives being revitalized.

Of the lives of people around us being revitalized. Of the spiritual deadness around us being changed. And instead of it that you come to see spiritual vitality and lives that are filled with the service and worship of God.

That's things we're not seeing at the present time. And these are great things and that's the thing he asks us to pray for. When we pray to God is that what we're praying for?

Are we really stopping? Do we have the boldness as we should to ask God Lord will you please not do great things? Will you not do things that are presently hidden from us?

[12:57] Will you not bring about such power through your spirit and through the gospel as presently we don't know but that we heard of from previous generations? That's what Jeremiah is being encouraged to pray about.

Call to me and I will answer you and I will tell you of, I will show you things. Things that are great and things that are hidden. I will bring revitalization is what God is saying.

I call to pray for revitalization. Well it's our privilege to pray. It's our privilege to come before God and seek that he will do such things in our generation.

That we will see a rebuilding of things that have been broken down, of human lives, of relationships, of many aspects of our people's lives and of the lives of those in our society.

That he will bring a change such as we find in this chapter. So there's a call to pray for revitalization. But then there's secondly an account of what revitalization looks like.

[14:16] Because he tells us here things that are going to take place in some detail. And there are four things especially that we can mention and notice from the passage as to what revitalization looks like.

First of all, verses 5 to 6, you can see there that God is saying that he's hidden his face from this city because of all their evil. And then he goes on remarkably to say, Behold, I will bring to it health and healing.

And I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. Now he's saying on the one hand, I have hidden my face from this city.

I have in my wrath so much against these people now that I'm not going to hold back this banishment of them any longer. They are going to become prisoners or exiles in Babylon and this city is going to become a waste town, a ghost town.

And then you find this word, Behold. Behold. In the same breath, God is saying, I have hidden my face from this city and yet he's saying, Behold, I will bring to it health and healing.

[15 : 27] And God is exactly like that. You find that so often in the Old Testament as well when Paul, for example, is describing the gravity of sin, the pollution of sin, the guilt of sin, the guilt that sin leaves us with when you find him describing all of that.

For example, like in his letter to the Ephesians, and then you come to this sudden change, but God, who is great in mercy. And that's what you find in Jeremiah as well.

Yes, there's an emphasis on God's part of his wrath against these people, of his displeasure, of his judgment against them. And in the same breath, it's as if God is hurrying on to saying, but I'm not leaving it at that.

That's not my preference. My preference is grace and rebuilding and revitalization and salvation. Behold, I bring to it health and healing.

And as he does that, he then describes in verses 10 to 13, something of what that's going to be like, a reversal of conditions. In this place of which you say it is a waste without man or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride, and the voice of, he goes on then to speak about shepherds, again with their flocks, they're going to come to inhabit.

[16 : 58] In other words, God is going to bring about in this reversal of conditions, he's bringing about the very opposite of this wasteland, of this deprivation, of this judgment, he's actually bringing things around so that you're going to see the very opposite of presently what you see in this ghost town.

That's what grace does. And in fact, it's just the restoring, isn't it, of what did not exist? Or the opposite of what did exist.

And of course, the reference there to shepherds with their flocks. And flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the Lord.

That's very often in the prophets especially, you find shepherds describing those who are spiritual leaders.

And Jeremiah and other prophets as well speak about the way God denounced the shepherds. the way that God had a word against these shepherds, those spiritual leaders who were failing in their duties, who were not feeding the people properly, who were actually leading them into idolatry.

[18 : 13] So God is saying woe to the shepherds. You'll find the same in Ezekiel as well, where there's a denouncement of those spiritual shepherds. But what God is saying is, in revitalization, I'm restoring shepherds spiritually as well as literally.

People will come again to be taught the things of the Lord. Now you apply that of course to our own situation as well because what you find there is a restoration of worship, a restoration of praise.

These words from the psalm, give thanks to the Lord of hosts for the Lord is good for his steadfast love endures forever. In other words, the ghost town has suddenly become a place that's vibrant and filled with this praise, with this restored service for God.

And isn't it hurting to your own heart to look around you and find so little apart from those who are in church today and those who would be if they could but aren't?

Apart from that, where is the worship of God? Where are people's service for God? Where is the service that we owe God?

[19 : 34] Where you find so much instead of that of just sin and worldly pleasures? We want to see that changed, to see that reversed, to see the opposite of that wasteland, to see God coming with his power of revitalization to bring a reversal of these conditions, to actually find people coming with a hunger for the word of God, where now there is simply no appetite.

These are the things you take from this passage. You study them and you bring them before God in prayer and you say, Lord, you have laid on my heart today a burden for the way things are and for you to change them throughout our land, throughout our nation, from the top to the lowest in society.

You want to see a reversal of conditions and that's what revitalization does, that's what revival does. It brings such a change of reversal of conditions that you find as described in the passage, the opposite of things.

as they presently are. And then there's also a recovery of the past. There's a reversal of conditions, but revitalization in looking at it also has a recovery of the past.

Look at verse 7 and also verse 11. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were. At first, and you find a similar reference in verse 11, the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, for I will restore the fortunes of the land as at the first, says the Lord.

[21 : 25] Now why is he saying as at the first? What does he mean by that? What first is that? And it seems that that goes back really to the good days under David and under Solomon when there was so much prosperity before the kingdom split into two, before the various disasters that then happened and especially these disasters of the Assyrians and now the Babylonians overrunning these people who are in covenant with God and are going to be taken away captive to Babylon.

I will restore them as at the first. In other words, when you come to see a revitalization, it is a recovery of the past.

It's restoring what had been lost. It's taking us back to the way things were. Now you have to be careful because there's such a thing as just looking at things with rather rose-tinted glasses as you might say and just maybe longing that you were back in the old days.

That's not what it's saying. You can't go back to the old days. You can't actually live as they lived a generation ago or whatever. But what it's saying is these principles and these values and these great experiences that God brought about in those days, we want to see them in our day as well. In other words, God is saying you need to go back in order to go forward. You need to recover the things that have been lost in order that you can move forward positively and find a rebuilding and find the strengthening and the blessing that you lack at this time.

[23 : 07] You find a similar thing in 2nd Chronicles and chapter 34 and from verse 8 onwards. And Jeremiah was a prophet during the reign of this king, Josiah.

He was very young when he took over and had a long reign. But you remember the famous incident where in repairing the temple or carrying out some repairs to the temple, they found the book of the law.

And this was a great discovery. They had actually lost this book of the law, lost sight of its contents. They had actually not been living according to what the laws of God required, to what God had specified.

And once it came to light, and Josiah and those around him had discovered what the book of the law actually contained, they tore their clothes. It was a sign of repentance and grief that they had failed so much to live as God wanted them to live, as God required of them to live.

And you see what was happening. They had to go back to discover again what God had specified in order that it be restored in their own day. And what was the Reformation, for example, that took place in Scotland and throughout Europe during those years of the 1500s, 1560 in Scotland, when it was finally established in the nation.

[24 : 41] What was the Reformation? What did Martin Luther actually come across? What did he come to realize? What did John Calvin and all of these early reformers, what were they actually about?

What was their intention? Why did they live? Why did they bring the kind of message that they did? Why was Luther so concerned to stand out against the church of his day and the political system of his day?

Because God had brought him again to discover the teachings of the Apostle Paul on justification by faith. They had lost sight of it. It was buried under years and years and centuries of superstition. And God had brought him back in these wastelands. Luther had been brought to see, hey, this is really what we're missing out on. This is how I come to live before God.

This is what God requires of me. And the revitalization then followed on from that. So when God comes with revival, when God comes with his power to revitalize a people, there's a recovery of the past, of the important things in terms of scripture principles that were lost and are now being rediscovered.

[26 : 03] And how much do we need that in our own nation as well? How much do we need our leaders to realize that actually God has already given us as a people instructions as to how to live and how to govern and how to view life and what things are really of critical importance and what are not?

We need that to be recovered. And that's what revitalization does. It's a reversal of conditions. It's a recovery of the past.

It involves, thirdly, reconciliation with God because it talks here about sin. I will cleanse them, he says in verse 8, from all the guilt of their sin against me and will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

It doesn't come quite across in the translation but the three great words for sin in the Old Testament are used in the compass of that verse. Sin as rebellion against God.

Sin as falling short of God's standard. Sin in terms of it being pollution and defilement in God's eyes.

[27 : 21] Just as you find in Psalm 51 in David's great prayer of repentance. So the Lord is saying here when he comes to restore, when he comes to revitalize a people that have been broken down, that have come to spiritual wasteland, God actually deals with sin because sin is the problem.

And sin is always the problem. It's the central problem. It's the critical thing that has caused God's face to be hidden from this city. That has brought about God's judgment upon these people so that they are now going to experience a time of wasteland circumstances.

But now he's saying, I am going to cleanse them from their pollution. I'm going to forgive the guilt of their sin and their rebellion against me.

And of course that means that they would come to recognize their sin first and come to repent of it and come to express their sorrow over it. And that's surely such an important feature of our society too.

But the whole concept of sin and certainly sin in terms of God's description of it as rebellion against him and as pollution spiritually and morally in his eyes.

[28 : 50] And as a falling short of God's own standard. Because you see when God is displaced from people's thinking when his word is put aside then all of that goes with it.

It disappears with it. The sense of sin. The gravity of sin. The shame of sin. It's no longer seen as such. And restoration will deal with that.

And only restoration. Only God's power will deal with that. Human beings are not by themselves going to come and see sin for what it is and come to express sorrow over sin as God requires.

It takes the power of God to do that. God. And we pray that that's what we will see. And if we don't see it yet as we pray for it we pray that our children will see it and the following generations if God spares them will see it and they will see a revitalization in terms of reconciliation with God.

And of course the amazing thing is that these sins or these aspects of sin that God is describing are the very reason why his wrath was against them and these very sins that caused that or brought that are now the very sins that he's saying but I'm going to forgive that.

[30 : 08] How great is God? How amazing is God's mercy? When the very sin that draws his wrath toward us is the sin he deals with when he comes to reconcile us to himself.

We all need that in our lives personally because that's really a description of us individually as well. We fall short of God's standard.

We can't reach it. However hard we try on our own. We are polluted in God's sight. We are disgraced and we are rebellious.

We transgress the boundaries that God sets before us. What do we do about that? Well we don't just pretend it's not real and we don't hope the sense of it will just go away.

We come to God and confess it and seek his forgiveness because that's what he has. An abundance of pardon.

[31 : 29] We need to ask for it. It's not going to come automatically. that's what God is promising Jeremiah that he will do and he does in revitalization.

It's a reversal of conditions. It's a recovery of the past. It's a reconciliation with God. Fourthly it's a reputation for God himself.

That's a very interesting and important part of the passage. In verse nine there he says this city shall be to me this is God speaking this city shall be to me a name of joy a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them.

They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

Revitalization brings God a good reputation where presently God is despised.

And that's surely part of the burden we carry in prayer today and carry in our thoughts and in our minds. How instead of bringing God's name into prominence in a good way it's so much despised isn't it?

[32 : 53] In our society it's dismissed it's spat out it's denigrated it's denied we thank God for everyone who doesn't do that for God's faithful people in our land who don't live like that but the vast majority still do.

God has a bad press today and we should be burdened that it will be reversed that it will come to God again being praised and his name again being honoured instead of what you see when it's a wasteland and that brings us back to prayer.

There's only one way you're going to see God getting this reputation amongst our people and that's through God's own work of revitalization in their lives. And that's why we're back to this call to pray to pray for these great and hidden things that God will actually do them in our day and to pray for the revitalization which involves the reversal of these conditions the recovery of the past the reconciliation that we need with God and the reputation that God will bring for himself for his name to be honoured and glorified.

May he bless these thoughts to us. Let's pray. our gracious and eternal God we ask that you would burden us more than we presently have for your glory and honour and reputation to be heightened in our midst as a people.

Forgive us Lord we pray for the many ways in which we fail to bring you that reputation ourselves. Forgive us we pray for the many times that we fail to pray as you call upon us to pray with earnestness and with zeal that you would come and manifest your glory and your power.

[35 : 21] We pray for ourselves as a people that your glory and power will be more and more made known amongst us that you would show to us O Lord as a people these great and hidden things things which past generations even in this building once experienced and we ask that we may find in our own day a return to us of the work of your spirit in abundance and that you would sanctify ourselves at this time so that we ourselves will be revitalized and we'll know that revival in our own spirits as you come Lord into our lives increasingly receive our thanks now we pray and pardon us for Jesus sake Amen to Krish to