

Grace in the Wilderness

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Preacher: Rev Calum M Smith

[0:00] Well, let's turn back to our reading in Jeremiah. We're going to read again at verse 2 of chapter 31, verse 2 and 3. Thus says the Lord, The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness! When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you. Next weekend, God willing, we have our communion weekend when we look forward to visiting preachers coming to minister to us.

We look forward to being under God's word, taking communion. But what does it mean to you? What does that mean to you?

We hear phrases at this time such as taking communion, sitting at the Lord's table, being or becoming a member.

We hear about meeting the session. And perhaps we know little of what these things mean, or perhaps we're very familiar with what these things mean. What does it mean for you?

[1:14] Is it something you are going to do? Or do you see it as just something that is for others? Well, at the heart of communion, at the heart of what we are doing, it's not any of the things I've mentioned.

At the heart of it is remembering what has been done for us by Jesus Christ. By remembering what he did for us at the cross that he gave his life.

Because we, by our nature, are sinners. Every one of us is that. We are all in the same boat when it comes to being sinners.

But Jesus came to save his people from their sins. And he did so by coming to give his own life. So how are you sitting here today?

Or how are you sitting at home listening online? When you hear all of these things, are you thinking, I am glad to be numbered among those who will come and sit at the Lord's table and remember my precious Savior?

[2:24] Remember his precious steadfast love that saves me from my sins. Or are you sitting here today or listening and thinking, I wish, how I wish I could do that.

How I would long to come and just show that sense of giving to the Lord, remembering him for what he has done for me. But I'm not good enough.

Or perhaps you're sitting here today or listening and you're thinking, it's not for me. Not just now. Not at this time. Maybe another time. It's just not for me.

Whatever situation you find yourself in today, whatever situation you find yourself in in this coming week as we're thinking about approaching the Lord's Supper, one thing we can say for sure, we can only do it by the grace of God to us.

The grace that he gives and by faith in him and him alone. So this morning, we're going to look at this passage in Jeremiah, a passage that reminds us about this grace, the wonder of God's grace.

[3:36] And it's grace even in the midst of hard times. Grace even in the midst of times of difficulty, times of struggle, times of challenge. It's a grace that he gives.

And Jeremiah, if you're familiar with the book at all, you say, well, how can you find grace in Jeremiah? Because as you read through it, you see, you might say, there's so little here about grace.

Jeremiah, the prophet, was so often one associated with bringing bad news, associated with a sense of hopelessness. And you can read through the whole of the book of Jeremiah and think, well, where is hope found in the midst of this book?

One person described it in this way, 52 chapters of almost uninterrupted gloom and doom. It's not. It is God's word to us.

It's not gloom and doom. Yes, there's challenges in it. But it's not like what we see on the news today. If you watch the news at all in these days, that is doom and gloom all the time.

[4:47] There's so much sorrow, so much sadness, so many things going on around us. There's almost nothing positive. It used to be you could watch the news and you would get that story at the end when they would say, and finally, and there was something positive to speak about, some good news story, but seldom do you even see that now.

But as you look at Jeremiah and as you look at the word of God, the Bible as a whole, what you see is a story about God's people and the journey that they are on and reminders, constant reminders as you're going through it of sin, of waywardness.

We see all that in these verses that we're going to look at together today, but we see a God who cares. And a God who calls his people.

And there are a number of encouragements in the book of Jeremiah. It's not always just that everything's positive. It's not. There are challenges too, but there are still encouragements in it.

One of my own very personal ones is from this book, chapter 8, verse 20, a verse there that says, the harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.

[6:04] It sounds gloomy. The harvest has passed, the summer has ended, still you're not saved, and yet it was a verse that was used in my own conversion, preached nearly 23 years ago by the man who's now out into the moderator in Shabbos.

And those words spoke to me, challenged me, but also spoke about the grace of God. How, although we can be in that situation, there is hope as we look to Jesus.

One of the best known verses in Jeremiah is Jeremiah 29, 11. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

These may be words that you've heard and know well. They're encouraging words, but they're in the midst of difficulty and in the midst of challenge. And so too, as we turn to the end of chapter 30 and into chapter 31, we see both challenge and encouragement in these verses as well.

And what we have is surrounded here by the grace of God. And you see that in verse 2, which is really our text, if you like, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

[7:23] Grace in the wilderness. And it's these, that word, grace in the wilderness, that I want us to think about. And we see grace here in three different ways.

At the end of chapter 30, we have a grace that warns. A grace that warns. And then as you go into chapter 31, we have a grace then that reminds, and then thirdly, we'll see we have a grace that renews.

A grace that warns, a grace that reminds, and a grace that renews. So the first thing we want to see here is a grace that warns. And we see that at the end of chapter 30.

Jeremiah had a very long ministry. He ministered to the people for about 50 years. It's hard to imagine preaching and ministering for 50 years in any kind of situation.

But Jeremiah's situation was one where it was 50 years where no one listened. There's no record of anyone repenting, of believing.

[8:33] Nobody listened. They mocked him, they shunned him, told him to go away. They wanted nothing to do with him. Imagine 50 years of ministry and no one's listening.

difficult. But it does not mean that his ministry wasn't fruitful because he was faithful to the word of God.

And although it took time, the people did come back. But much of Jeremiah's ministry was of giving warning.

And we see that at the end of chapter 30. In verse 23, Behold the storm of the Lord. There is a warning here. But it's a gracious warning.

It's a warning that comes from God. Silence at times can be bliss. There are times, I'm sure, every one of us would say, I just want to get away and have a time to myself, a time of peace, a time of silence, to get away from the noise and the busyness of life and just find a place, a place of solitude.

[9:43] It's lovely to get that kind of place. We need it from time to time. But silence can sometimes be an awful thing. Silence when you're waiting for news of maybe a loved one who's missing.

It's an awful thing not to hear anything. It's an anxious time. Silence when you're crying for help and nobody's hearing. Silence from someone you love who's not speaking to you.

We can know and maybe you do know these kinds of situations for yourself where silence can be agony. Silence can be painful. But where do we see the greatest silence that took place? It's not for ourselves but it's what was done for us and especially as we think of a communion week it's where we look to as we approach a communion season it's at the cross where Jesus there suffered for our sin.

Where as we see here behold the storm of the Lord that was coming upon the people. Behold the storm of the Lord that we can have in our lives. As we look to the cross we see the way that Jesus suffered for us.

[11:04] in Matthew 27 verse 45 now from the sixth hour there was darkness over the land until the ninth hour and about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying Eli Eli lemma sabachthani that is my God my God why have you forsaken me?

There was silence. but when we see here a storm warning we see it is a gracious warning because we see that God is not silent but God is speaking.

God is warning. And Jeremiah was warning his people here as well. He was warning them to learn to heed these warnings.

Professor John L. Mackay who was a lecturer in the Free Church College he wrote a commentary on Jeremiah and one of the points he makes on these verses is he says there is a prevalent tendency to grasp the promises of the Lord and to forget the warnings that he gives.

A warning is given that the future time of blessing and its continuance are not to be lightly assumed as inevitable. We must take care not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

[12:24] What mistakes? Well as you look at this passage and as the end of chapter 31 Jeremiah is warning his people behold the storm of the Lord he is warning them that they have made mistakes that sin leads us down the wrong path.

The mistakes of taking God lightly of not listening of rejecting him they did it for 50 years they didn't listen to a word that Jeremiah was saying.

You do it I do it. We don't listen. We take God lightly. We can reject him so easily. And we can see that there is doom and gloom.

The storm of the Lord can feel very much upon us. There's a word in the dictionary and it's Jeremiah. And what does it mean? Well if you look at what the definition of Jeremiah it means a prolonged lamentation or mournful complaint.

That's very much from Jeremiah. You can see it so clearly. Do you feel Jeremiah today? Do you feel that sense of just the weight of everything upon you?

[13:44] the weight of sin the fears of life the worries the anxieties everything that just comes our way so often.

We can feel Jeremiah doom and gloom but yet what we see here is that God is still in control because even as it speaks of a storm here he says in verse 24 the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intentions of his mind.

In the latter days you will understand this. God has a plan and a purpose even in the storms. Even in all these things God is saying this is part of my purpose for you in the days of Jeremiah and he says it to ourselves as well.

These are my purposes for you and in the latter days you will understand that there are times that we cannot understand things. Just like the hymn writer William Cowper said God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. He moves in mysterious ways but as it says he rides upon the storm. And so even as we see here the warning behold the storm of the Lord the Lord is riding on that storm and he is with his people.

[15:20] And so we see the grace of a warning. But the second thing we see here is the grace that reminds the grace that reminds us of all the wonders of God when we feel that we are in a wilderness at times.

And that's seen as you go into chapter 31 and verse 1 to 3. At that time there is a reminder here that God does not forget.

At that time declares the Lord I will be the God of all the clans of Israel. He's not silent he's not absent he is very much with us.

John L. Mackay's words we must not repeat the mistakes of the past. That is what Jeremiah is focusing on here. Thus in verse 2 the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

He takes them back. He takes them back to the mistakes they made previously in the days of Moses as the children of Israel were led from Egypt to the promised land but journeying through the wilderness.

[16 : 32] They found grace in the wilderness. But he also is taking them forward here as well. He's speaking to the people in Jeremiah's day who were going to be taken captive by Babylon a powerful nation.

They were going to be taken into exile again into the wilderness again but they would find grace in the wilderness there too. So what does this remind us of?

Well it reminds us that sin leads to this an exile from God. It leads us into this wilderness that the tragedy of sin is that keeps God at an arm's distance.

And yet grace calls us in the wilderness. Grace speaks to us in the wilderness. The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.

Think of that in your own life. What has sin done in your life? What is it doing now? Sin is always active all around us and in us.

[17 : 42] And what sin is doing is keeping us from God. Keeping God at an arm's length at times. Even as a Christian. Even as those who will come and sit at the Lord's table.

In our hearts right now we can feel a sense of that sin a distance from God. sin has that tendency to just drag us back into the wilderness.

And all we feel is a sense of unworthiness, of burden. And what can we do? Well we can look to this grace.

The grace that has been shown. Because it says they found grace in the wilderness when Israel sought for rest. When they looked for rest.

John Newton is the author of that hymn Amazing Grace. And Jeremiah 31 was one of his favorite passages. He often returned to it because it reminded him so much of his own life.

[18 : 47] He was one who had been in the wilderness living his life in a wild way, away from God. He knew the distance. He felt like that wretch that he describes himself as.

grace. But he found grace in the wilderness. Grace that saved a wretch like me, he says. He found the Lord in the midst of his own storm, in the midst of his own wilderness.

And Israel it says here they found rest when they sought, they found that grace when they sought for rest. And are you seeking for that rest?

Are you longing for that rest? That rest, that grace when you feel like you're just in the wilderness? I learned about something this week I'd never heard of before.

It was about a stone that would be familiar out on the moors many years ago. You can still find them in different places, but when the shillings were used more often for tending the sheep and the cattle out in the moor during the summer months, there was a stone that would be close nearby to the shilling and it was called a clachtasich, or an itching stone, because the moorland is barren in many ways.

[20 : 11] But as you know if you go out there there's all kinds of, when you see animals they're always itching whether it's midges or ticks or whatever it is and there's no relief for them. But these stones would be erected beside the shillings, quite large stones about the size of a wooden strainer, a fence strainer, and they'd be put into the ground and erected so that the sheep or the cattle could come and find relief in scratching themselves against this stone.

Well when we think of our lives, what is the stone that gives relief to us? when we have that scratch, that sin you could almost describe as an unscratchable itch, we just can't get to the heart of it.

Where is our stone? Where is our rest found? Well it's in the stone, the rock that is Jesus Christ.

When Jesus says in Matthew 11 28, come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest, I will give you relief.

He's saying seek me, and when you seek me you will find me, when you seek me with your whole heart, and I will give you rest.

They found grace in the wilderness when they sought for rest, so can you, so can I. When we seek the Lord, when we look for his grace, when we come to him, the wilderness can be a horrible place to be.

[21 : 48] But there is still grace there for us when we seek the Lord. You think of the prodigal son. There's so much of that in his life, where you think of him going away from his father, into the wilderness, into the wilderness, there was life away from the father, thinking it was the bliss that he

was looking for.

But it wasn't. But when he came to his senses, he returned to his father. Charles Spurgeon has a great way of showing that coming home.

Charles Spurgeon said the prodigal saw his need to come home. But listen to this, his last steps before entering the house were with a kiss still warm upon his cheek and the welcome still musical in his ears.

Isn't that a wonderful way of looking at it? How could he say that? Because of what the father did. the father ran to the son. The son knew that grace in the wilderness and the father came from afar. And you see that in verse 3 here, the Lord appeared to him from far away saying, I have loved you with an everlasting love. That is the love of God the father, shown to the prodigal and shown to all of his people who are in the wilderness, but seek after the Lord.

[23 : 11] the kiss still warm on his cheek because the father had run to him. He is faithful and he gives us amazing reminders of a grace that loves, an everlasting love.

So we are to come, we are to come to seek him and not to come to the Lord's supper praising ourselves, slapping our own back, saying, well done you.

But to come sometimes broken, sometimes weary, sometimes just with that weight still on, but coming thankful for the love that he has shown. That love that he speaks of here, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

Therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. he didn't leave his people. Even though you could say they deserved it, the same is true for us.

We feel we didn't deserve his grace. But it is his love that's without beginning and without end. That is the love that we are to look to.

[24 : 27] And if we know that grace, if we love and know that love of God, then we are to come. Come and seek him and find that grace in the wilderness that gives us rest.

The final thing we see here is that grace that renews. I said earlier that when we watch the news, it seldom now we get that final story, and finally there's some good news.

But here we see that what Jeremiah is saying in this section is and finally there is good news. truth. Truly, there is good news because this closing section of this passage really is a sense of rejoicing. A rejoicing that God is able to help. God is able to give. And you could go back to verse 18 of chapter 30 where it says, There is hope. There is hope.

There is hope. But then you see it again in verse 4 and 5 of chapter 31. with that repeated phrase again three times in these two verses.

[25 : 40] And look at what he says, Again I will build you and you shall be built up, virginity. Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Again you shall plant vineyards in the mountains of Samaria. Three times he says again. Because there is a sense of renewing here. the blessings that they had enjoyed in the past they are going to enjoy again.

The people's lives were ruined by sin. And they were going to be ruined. They were going to be taken into exile. Their homes would be gone. Their joy would be gone.

Their vineyards would be gone. All these things that were important and precious to them all gone. Brought into the wilderness.

wilderness. But here is God saying I will bring you home. I will renew. I will restore you. And so you see the three things that will restore their homes, their joy, their vineyards.

[26 : 47] All that was important for life was going to be renewed. There was going to be a newness to it. Even in the midst of the mysterious ways of God working.

William Cowper's hymn goes on to say, Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace behind a frowning providence. He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour. The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower. You see there just how he's speaking of the frowning providence, not understanding, and yet God is in control and his grace unfolding his purposes hour by hour, so that even when there's a bitter taste initially, the flower will be sweet in the end.

And what you see here is that journey of God leading his people from warning to reminding them and then finally to renewing, to say that yes, you lost it all in the wilderness, but again you will have all of these things.

But what is the most important thing you see restored here? It's what you have in verse 6. It's great that they have their homes, their joy, their vineyards restored, but look at verse 6.

[28:08] for there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the whole country of Ephraim, arise and let us go up to Sion, to the Lord our God.

What is being restored there? A right worship. A right worship. Let us go and worship the Lord our God.

The watchmen had a vital role. They were often the ones who warned of danger approaching. They were often the ones who warned of seasons changing, of new moons and all of these things, times of harvest, times of festival.

Well here they are saying the day is coming when the watchmen will call, arise, let us go to Sion, to the Lord our God.

Do you see the change that's taken place? Where God is speaking initially in verse 22 of chapter 30, and you shall be my people and I will be your God.

[29:15] It's in the future, but here is a day when that is renewed. Let us go up to Sion, to the Lord our God, a relationship restored.

That is what we long for. It's great to have material blessings, the blessings of homes, of joy, of vineyards, Jeremiah is saying, but your greatest blessing of all will be to once again worship the Lord as your God, a relationship restored.

Our lives in the wilderness are hindered by sin, but the good news is there is grace in the wilderness.

And that that grace is able to renew. What do you want in this communion weekend? Surely, above all, we want to come and worship the Lord our God, to give him that praise, that worship that he is due.

And it comes if we see the grace that he has shown. If we seek after that grace as he speaks of there in verse 2, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness when Israel sought for rest.

[30:38] Seek that rest. Find it in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then you can come, arise, let us go, and worship the Lord our God.

John Newton said, it was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.

May you find how precious this grace is, even in the wilderness, even in the trials, the storms of life, God's warning is there graciously. God reminds us of his grace again and again, and God is able to renew.

Let us pray. Lord, our gracious God, we thank you for your word, we thank you for your grace, and we pray to seek it with all our hearts, and to know the rest that you are able to give to us through our Lord Jesus Christ, as we ask all these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. We'll conclude now by singing to God's praise in Psalm 4 once again. We'll sing these last stanzas from verse 6.

[32:02] Oh, who can show us any good? I hear so many say, O Lord, shine on us with your light, show us your face, I pray. We'll sing from verse 6 down to the end of the psalm.

Amen. Amen. O who can show us any good, I hear so many say, O Lord, shine on us with your light, show us your face, I pray.

You filled my heart with greater joy than others' men have heard, as they rejoice at harvest time, when pain and wine are burned.

I will lie down and sleep in peace, my heart will rest secure for you alone, O righteous Lord, will keep me safe and sure.

After the benediction, I'll go to the door to my left. Now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rest upon and abide with you all, now and forever more.

[34:20] Amen. Amen. Amen.