

The Community Crisis and the Lord's Unfailing Love

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Date: 30 November 2025

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to the prophecy of Jeremiah and to chapter 31, and we can read at verse 15. Jeremiah 31 at verse 15.

! Thus says the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more.

Thus says the Lord, keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord. And so on down to verse number 21.

I think it's fair to say in life in general that sometimes circumstances hide from us the true reality of our situation.

And that can make difficult times even more difficult to manage for us. And it's always great to have the kind of insight that enables us to see things as they truly are.

[1 : 10] And here in this chapter, that's what God is doing for the people of God, for his own covenant people. He is kind of giving them an aerial view of where they are.

So they will understand where they are in the light of who he is and what he is doing. And that was really necessary in the days of Jeremiah.

When we read the history of God's people at this time, we see that Jeremiah lived in a chaotic world. There was chaos everywhere amongst the people of God.

And when we read through this book itself, we see that there was a kind of permanent trajectory of people turning away from God.

The people were in rebellion against God. And we see that the king himself, the royal palace, that there the king was responsible in many ways for leading the people away from God.

[2 : 15] And in the midst of all of that, we have the ministry of this man, Jeremiah. And it should not surprise us that his ministry was, first of all, a ministry of judgment.

And if ever there was an unpopular prophet or preacher in the world, here is one who certainly was.

He was the enemy of the people because they did not like his message. Unpopular preaching, unpopular messenger because of the rebellion of the people of God.

And remarkably, we see that from chapter 30 of this book and to chapter 32, 33, we see that there is a message of comfort.

In other words, take note of my judgment, but don't ignore my comfort to you in these chapters. The promise that God will bring his people back to himself.

[3 : 21] And through, from verse 15 onwards, against the background of his everlasting love at the beginning of the chapter, he wants to encourage the people of God.

I want to think about that today. This is not unlike where we are at ourselves. A nation, a society, racing away from God.

A royal household and government that has little sense of trusting or turning to the word of God. And any sense of alerting a people to that is not acceptable, is often rejected.

And to do so is often resisted, perhaps, by those who should be doing that very thing. It's not unlike where we're at. So today, we want to think of the faith community crisis and the Lord's unfailing love.

Well, I think first of all, of the crisis and the encouragement. We need encouragement when we're in danger. And the encouragement comes because God is telling us what's happening.

[4 : 32] It's all about how God sees things. And the first thing that he sees, that there is a woman in a certain place. And that's significant.

He looks down and here is a place called Ramah. And if I can picture Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, I think of Ramah on the boundary between Judah and Israel, north of Jerusalem.

And it's the kind of place where those who are being deported would be gathered together and would be counted before they're carried away into exile in Babylon. It was a place where people are recorded as they were taken away from their own homes and transported to another environment, to another culture, to another society.

Ramah was a key place on the journey on which these people were traveling. And there, at that very place, there is this woman called Rachel.

She was the wife of Jacob. She's not living in these times. But Jeremiah and God uses Rachel to represent the community of faith and those who are the people of God.

[5 : 55] She is especially the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh that represent the northern part of the country. Rachel has a close relationship, a loving relationship with those in particular in Manasseh and Ephraim that the tribes are named after her own grandchildren.

Ramah and Rachel. What we find there is where the people of God are represented. What we find there is that there is a lament.

And what is Rachel doing? She is lamentation and bitter weeping. She is a broken woman.

She is not only weeping the tears, but she is howling with a kind of grief and sorrow that only a mother who has lost her children can mourn for and can have that bitterness.

It's a deep sense of sorrow. It's emotional. It's psychological. It's even intellectual. It's everything that she feels and knows at this stage finds expression in lamenting and in crying out and in weeping.

[7 : 15] And she's doing that because her children are no more. The place where all of her children, all of her descendants, the place where the people of the community of faith used to fill the place as according to the promise given to Abraham that his seed would be like the sand of the seashore.

Previously, looking in this location, the place was filled northward and southward with those who were the people of God. And now this woman who represents the people of God, she's looking northwards.

And there's no one there. She's looking southward. And there is the very likelihood that those who exist to the south are going to follow the same path as those who are northwards.

There are those who aren't there. And there are those who are in danger of not being there. And she's crying. And she refuses to be comforted.

And today, if you are the child of God, if you trust in the Lord Jesus as your Savior, you will have a prayer.

- [8 : 37] And we can use this building itself as an example. A prayer and looking, not that the children are no longer there, but they are not there in the same number.
- And there is the fear accompanying your prayer that because of the way things are, that things can only get worse. The lamentation, the grief, stopped her from seeing anything positive.
- She could only receive and see the negatives. In her visible world, there is nothing to encourage her and the promise of God is not fulfilled.
- And you may be praying today for your family, for your children, for your loved ones. And in your heart, you're crying before God.
- And nobody can see your tears today, but you're crying before God because nothing is happening. Because your family don't know the Lord Jesus. Because they may be far distant from where they should be and far distant from coming to know that Lord Jesus as their Savior.
- [9 : 53] And no matter what anybody says to you, you refuse to be comforted. And no matter how people try to encourage you, your response is, but what about such and such?
- What about such and such situation? Refusing to be comforted. And the encouragement begins from this passage in knowing that God is looking down and that God sees and that God is hearing.
- And you may be downcast in your heart. You may be lamenting because of what God is not doing and thinking that God doesn't care or God doesn't know.
- But it was God that heard a voice in drama. And today it is God who hears the voice that arises from your heart. Even in the silence of the worship of God, there is that message that arises and that God himself hears.
- And the encouragement is because God interrupts. Isn't God a gracious God? God interrupts.
- [11 : 11] God interrupts. Keep your voice from weeping. Stop the crying. Just hold back what you're doing and stop and listen to me.
- There is, he says, a reward for your work. In other words, God is hearing your prayer and the time will come when God is going to answer that prayer.
- As he said to Abraham in Genesis 15 when he told Abraham, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward. To the faith community at Ramah, there is the interruption that tells them there is a reward for your prayers.
- God is taking note. God is going to answer. And how is God going to answer? God is going to answer with this great promise in verse 16.
- They shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future. There is going to be a homecoming.
- [12 : 23] The masses are gathered hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem where we think of the presence of God in the Old Testament and the reign of God and the palace of God's king.
- They are hundreds of miles away. And the geographical distance reflects their spiritual distance from God. But here is the promise. Here is why the prayer needs to be interrupted.
- Here is why the lament has to stop. The promise of God is they are coming home to where they belong. In other words, the absolute reversal of the thing that Rachel thought could never be reversed.
- That in her mind and in her thinking, the invisible people that were, the people that were carried away that were invisible visible in her location, that God will make them present and visible in that very place where they were absent.

And that's encouragement for you and for me today. The invitation to stop listening to our own voice.

[13 : 41] And that's difficult. Especially in that crisis. Stop listening to our own voice and listen to the voice of God who tells us that he will fulfill his promise.

That he will save his people. And that he will bring his people home. And as you pray today, don't lose sight.

And perhaps allow God to do the interrupting. Because we can lose sight of God himself in our lamenting.

Allow God to interrupt you today and to come with your promise that he will save, that he will bring back. And that there will be this great homecoming of the people of God from their scattering in the rebellion to come back to be the faith community.

Those who trust in the Lord Jesus. Those who gather around him. Those who come to sit at the Lord's table because of their love for the Lord Jesus and because of the everlasting love that we read of at the beginning of the chapter.

[14 : 57] There is the crisis and there is the encouragement. Secondly, there is the crisis and the engagement.

It is certainly through today that there are loads of things happening and loads of stuff going on that we know nothing about. It's obvious and perhaps doesn't need to be said.

but for this woman here and for this community of faith here in this case they needed to hear about what they didn't realize was happening and the only person who can do so is God himself and the God who is hearing the prayers of Rachel the faith community representative is also the God who is seeing Ephraim in the scattering where he is found in Babylon and the surrounding area.

He hears Rachel praying and he sees Ephraim in Babylon and when he sees Ephraim he brings a report to the people of God and the report is I have heard Ephraim grieving.

In verse number 18 here is Ephraim one of the northern tribes Manasi and Ephraim the northern tribes here is Ephraim representing the people of God in that northern tribe and I hear Ephraim grieving.

[16 : 49] Suddenly this representative of those who are carried away because of their rebellion against God he is found in that place of rebellion and he is grieving in the sense that in the Old Testament sense of perhaps sitting or standing in a place and moving backwards and forward so overcome with grief and with sorrow that their whole beings and their whole bodies are shaken and are falling apart a shaking of the head a shaking of the body the whole self is taken up in sorrow and the sorrow we see is vocalized in version number 18 you have disciplined me and I was disciplined here is the prodigal son in the far country in the place of satisfying himself finding his joy and spending his resources where he was and here we see

God saying with regard to his alienated people that he is hearing them grieving and that he is hearing them grieving and acknowledging that this grief is because of God's engagement with them and God intervening in their lives and our own encouragement today is the very fact that that is what God always does and no matter how far today we see our families and our friends and those close to us that we pray for every day no matter how far away they are God has one way and one way only of bringing them back and that's engaging with them where they are intervening in the prosperity of life and bringing them to the place where they are broken and where they are grieving and where they give expression as we read on in verse number 18

I was disciplined like an untrained calf calf that follows the orders and the direction of the farmer and follows the right path here is Ephraim an untrained calf a disobedient rebellious person but now coming to acknowledge and to respect the fact the fact that the rebellion was not only the wrong thing to do but that it was sin against God after he says I turned away I relented turned his back upon God choosing to go in the opposite direction going along this path of being carried away by enemies into a foreign country and now coming to realize that the rebellion was so wrong that the action was so far removed from what he had done and it's similar to in

Genesis chapter 6 where God regretted that he had made man that there is that sense of regret now built up in the heart of Ephraim regret that they ever turned their backs upon God and so in the far off country of exile Ephraim his external circumstances have been turned upside down his heart's experience has been placed into turmoil and all of that taking place because God is engaged with a person who has disobeyed and gone into the far country and perhaps today you are in that very place of the far country you can sit in

God's house hearing God's word and in your mind and in your heart you're miles away from being the child of God and you will continue to be in that place until the moment comes in the plan of God when he will engage with you when he will intervene in your life and when he will change your whole life turn it upside down so that you will engage with him C.S.

[22 : 05] Lewis speaks about God's megaphone God whispers to us in our pleasures he speaks in our consciences but shouts in our pains it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world and I want you to think today of what is happening in your life I want you to think of any difficulties that you are facing any challenges of everyday life whether it's work or school or home or in the community or amongst friends what are the things that are making life difficult and I want you to think that where there are such things to think that God is putting his hand on your shoulder these things are not meaningless they are there in the purpose of God in order to awaken you to alert you to remember who God is to remember your sin against God and to remember your need to be at peace with God and the need for you to recognize that so that there is that movement of your whole being towards the only true and living God who sent the Son to be our

Savior here and we are encouraged much today by hearing of a so-called quiet revival a gentle movement towards God but I want to tell you that the quietness of the revival that God works is an external quietness that where there is a revival initiated by God in your heart and mind it's not quiet it's chaotic it turns life upside down it stirs us up it turns our whole beings into a place full of noise and full of voices and full of cries it's never quiet and that's why God is saying here that that he heard Ephraim groaning when God puts his hand on her shoulder there is this movement in God's direction there is a stirring up and there is the beginning of turning to God and Ephraim goes on and the

Lord goes on to speak about the way in which the whole purpose of this engagement is to stir up in Ephraim's heart and life a desire for God for after I had turned away I relented and after I was instructed I struck my thigh and at the end of verse 18 bring me back that I may be restored for you are the Lord my God the engagement brings about stirring up and chaos and crying the engagement produces a desire the engagement produces a desire and a longing for God and that's exactly how God works in your life and in mine for you are the Lord my God Ephraim is awoken at last to recognize who this

Lord is the Lord who has made covenant the Lord who has loved with an everlasting love it's recognizing who this Lord is and a desire a longing to come home God is calling Ephraim home and God is deciding to come home and there is that sense of embrace in this engagement so that they are both wanting the same thing and that's the matter of God's engagement and bringing us from death to life from a far country to be his own people from rejecting the Lord Jesus to loving the Lord Jesus that he plants the desire in our hearts and that then we long for the Lord Jesus and in this moment if that is your longing it is because of what God has done if it is your desire to know the

Lord Jesus to love the Lord Jesus to live your life for the Lord Jesus then that's because God has worked and God has created that desire in your heart God has given to you that new heart which longs to be at peace with him the engagement we thank God that he does not leave us go your own direction but that his hand will come on our shoulder and his hand will come into our providence when we least expect it to arrest us to turn us around and to remember rebellion against him and to seek him with all of our hearts and thirdly and much more briefly there is the crisis and the endearment what is the great message of God to the community of faith in the days of

[28 : 05] Jeremiah it's not the great message about what God is going to do in them it's a great message of why he is doing that and we read on from verse 20 these questions and these statements is Ephraim my dear son is he my darling child for as often as I speak against him I do remember him still there is an insight in this verse into the turmoil in the heart of God if you can describe it like that not turmoil in the sense of confusion but a stirring up in the heart of God because of his relationship with Ephraim that moves him and that leads him to reach out to Ephraim where he is to intervene in his life and to bring him back to himself!

It's an insight into the character and the personality of our God who sent his son into the world to be our saviour this is why he is doing everything because his people are his dear children because his people are his darling children those in whom he delights those who are precious to him those whom he loves and even though he speaks against him I do remember him still and the speaking against is what brings the pain to Ephraim the speaking against it is what left Ephraim crying and grieving the speaking against is what left Ephraim broken hearted the speaking against is what left Ephraim desiring God but all of that is because

God was remembering him and God's remembering is a remembering that's completely in his covenant relationship with his people it's God's remembering his promise and when God remembers it's not a remembering that finishes with reflection which you remembering our minds so often is it's a remembering that brings action the action through which he will fulfill his promises and the action through which in remembering his covenant he remembers all those who are his people who are scattered across our communities and who still do not know the Lord Jesus he remembers those who are his chosen people who sit and hear the gospel and still are not saved he remembers and even when you and I forget him as we do in our disobedience and in our turning away from him he remembers his heart is moved and in accordance with his purposes and his plans and his timetable there is a date of birth and that date of birth is when you and I are born into the kingdom of God and God's remembering of his promise to save his covenant people is realized in that moment when you and I are born into the family of

God become his children because this father never forgets what he said and this father never fails to do what he has promised he would do and today we are here as the children of God because of what God has done the endearment behind everything is the everlasting love of God that we read of at the beginning of this chapter and that should speak encouragement and assurance into the hearts and lives of the community to which Jeremiah was writing and speaking and that speaks encouragement and assurance to ourselves today let's not give up on our praying let's be thankful that God engages with those who are disengaged and let's be thankful that God's love never fails and that he will bring all of his people home may God bless his word let us pray most gracious

God we do rejoice in you as the God who never forgets as a God who never stops loving as a God who never stops giving and we pray that you will bless us in our hearts here today that we may all love you individually and personally and love you together as a great God and saviour that you are and that we may all have in our hearts that desire for you that desire for the Lord Jesus as our saviour and that desire to live our lives for you as your children here in this world in preparation for at last that great home calling and home coming when you will gather your people into the everlasting home you have prepared for them so hear our prayer accept your thanks we ask for Jesus sake Amen the closing psalm is psalm number 28 in the Scottish Psalter it's on page 238 psalm 28 and we're singing at verse number 6 forever blessed be the

[33 : 52] Lord for graciously he heard the voice of my petitions and prayers did regard we will be further encouraged as we sing from verse 6 to the end of the psalm to God's praise forever blessed be the Lord for graciously he heard the voice of my petitions!

the my strength and shield my heart upon him did rely!

and! I am! help hence my heart to joy exceedingly!

and with my song I will!

to their and! He also is the saving strength of this anointed one!

[35 : 44] one! O thy own people do!

thou save! grace of the lord jesus christ the love of god the father and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with you all now and forevermore amen you