

“IF”

Jeremiah 5:20-29

(sermon idea from Walter Brueggemann’s commentary on Jeremiah)

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After sixty years of divine silence, there appeared in Jerusalem a prophet of the Lord. He was a young man, though his body was cadaverous and his skull so domed that he looked ravaged. He had a coarse thicket of hair, and his voice was a whining reed which no one could shut out. Suddenly this man was standing in the Potsherd Gate, facing into Jerusalem, delivering an oracle of the Lord in a nasal wail:

**“What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went so far from me?
“I brought you to a plentiful land, to enjoy its fruits, but when you came you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination!”**

The people of Jerusalem said, “Who is this? What does he know about heritage and survival and history and reality?”

And even while they murmured against him, they gathered in the gate and listened. (Walter Wangerin, Jr., “Jeremiah” in *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel*, p. 461-462)

Jeremiah was called by God to be the voice of God. To speak the word of God to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. To blast the trumpet of God and declare that the enemy would prevail. The enemy’s military power would be the very judgment of God upon His people.

The call of God comes to Jeremiah in 627 B.C., when he is just a youth – probably in his late teens. And he tells the people what they do not want to hear. He declares to the leaders what they have tried to deny. Jeremiah calls Jerusalem to radical obedience of the commandments of God.

It shouldn’t have all that much power. It’s just a two-letter word. A tiny word – but once it begins a sentence, it controls everything else that follows.

The word is “if.” - I-F. If. Its power is all out of proportion.

Sometimes we just ignore it. We’re really good at the “then” part. But we disconnect it from the “if” part. You know, English 101 – a conditional clause. “If...then.” We read the “if” throughout the book of Genesis. We read it throughout the prophets, the psalter, the minor prophets – into the gospels, into the epistles. But we just ignore the big “if.”

The problem is, as Jeremiah reminds God's people, that even if we forget the "if," God doesn't.

If.

God will do what He has promised if.... Conditional and dependent upon you and upon me.

Look at Genesis 4. Yes, the "ifs" go that far back. It's the story of Cain and Abel. Adam and Eve have two sons. Abel is a keeper of the flocks, and Cain was a gardener. They were both bringing offerings to the Lord. As the smoke of Abel's sacrifice ascended to heaven, you could tell God was breathing in his sacrifice and was so pleased. But when Cain lit his sacrifice, the smoke just stayed on the ground. He coughed and choked and realized that God has refused his offering.

The Lord asked him what was wrong with him, why was he angry? He was jealous – that's what was wrong. God told him in verse 7 of Genesis 4, "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin – *we would know murder* – is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

God warned him. Even after God refused his sacrifice, God loved him enough to warn him. He told him things would get better if...if he'd do his part. But if he didn't, sin was going to overtake him.

Next, it's Moses's words in Exodus 19:5. "Therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." You see, the covenant itself proposes a serious condition. "*If* you obey my voice...*if* you keep my commands...*then* you are my special people." The conditions of the covenant are a part of God's blessing.

It's amazing how selectively we read the Old Testament, how we read the New Testament. We read the "then," but we miss the big "if."

Or in Deuteronomy 7:12.

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep His covenant of love with you, as He swore to your forefathers (NIV).

You feel the message? "If you are obedient."

Or 1 Kings 2:4.

If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all of their heart and with all their life, then there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.

But it's implied if they don't....

Or 1 Kings 9:4-5.

And as for you, if you will walk before Me as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, then... – [*you see, if...then*] –

I will establish a royal throne forever.... There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.

Or 1 Kings 9:6-7.

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you...then I will cut Israel off from the land that I gave them....

Or 2 Chronicles 7:14.

If my people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

When we miss the “if,” we miss the emphasis on being obedient to the commands of God. The fabric of our faith must be woven together not only with God’s grace, but with the resulting obedience. He commands and we do.

We don’t really want it to be that way. We want God’s promises to be absolutely unconditional. We want to read scripture from Genesis to Revelation, ignoring the big “if.” But the big “if” is there, seemingly on almost every page and every paragraph. If. If we are obedient to God... then we are His people.

In our passage in Jeremiah 5, Jerusalem is abuzz with the news of God’s unconditional promises. Jeremiah brings a new point of reference – the point of reference of Moses. It’s hard. It’s demanding. But it’s the truth. There is the big “if.” The “if” uttered by God – a God who refused to be tamed, a God who refused to be controlled by people. It’s an “if” that reflects God’s freedom and God’s power and His sovereignty, God’s absolute demand for our obedience. God will not be mocked. He will not give in to an easy faith. He says “if.” It’s the Mosaic “if.” It’s the “if” of Jeremiah. It’s the “if” of God.

Even though Jerusalem is scared of a foreign enemy, scared of failing kings and invading armies, that’s not the real problem. The real problem for their continued freedom, the real issue that is going to lead them into captivity is not kings and kingdoms. The real problem is the “if” of God – that terrible, huge “IF.”

Do you understand the power of “if?” It can’t be out-voted by popular opinion. It can’t be outflanked by policy. Nothing can change the “if.” It’s God’s “if.” If we do what we’re supposed to do...then.

There is a fundamental mis-orientation in the life of Jerusalem at this point. And the prophet wants you to know that pardon, or forgiveness, is grace, but it’s not cheap. Forgiveness still requires coming to terms with God. And the people of God cannot see themselves as autonomous, apart from God. They must hear God’s call to be held accountable.

Look at Jeremiah 5:1

Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
And look now, and take note.
And seek in her open squares,
If you can find a man,
If there is one who does justice, who seeks truth,
Then I will pardon her.

There is no trace of obedience anywhere in the city of God. Forgiveness seems far away. Pardon seems impossible, because there is not even a trace of obedience that can be found. The people (v. 3) refuse to take the correction of God. They harden their faces like rocks. And (look at the end of verse 3), they refuse to repent.

At first he begins by looking among the poor folk, and he can't find any of them who are righteous. So, in verse 5, he looks among the rich folk, the powerful folk, the great folk, "for they know the way of the Lord." But look at the end of verse 5. "But they too, with one accord, have broken the yoke and burst the bonds." The world has become a wild jungle because the wrath of God is released. There is lion that is going to slay them. A wolf that is going to destroy them. A leopard watching in their cities. And they'll all be torn to pieces because (v. 6) "their sins are many."

In verse 7, God asks the question, "Why should I pardon you?" The people have been living under the lie that their actions didn't matter.

Look at verses 12-13
They have lied about the Lord
And said, "Not He;
Misfortune will not come on us;
And we will not see sword of famine.
And the prophets are as wind,
And the word is not in them.
Thus it will be done to them!

The false prophets have lied. They have misled the people. In this passage, we see God desperately looking for a way to forgive His people. He's ready, willing, and yearning to forgive. He looks for just one who has been obedient. But God will not engage in cheap grace. There must be repentance.

Verse 3 again. They refuse to repent.

Pastor, that's Old Testament. In the New Testament all has changed.

Has it really? The message of Jesus is a message of repentance. What did He preach? "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Back in the old covenant, God would not deal out cheap grace. And again, in the new, it is the same. Our relationship with God, as God's people, is dependent upon the big "if" – our

willingness to turn 180 degrees, our willingness to turn from our sins and repent. And only then can we welcome the power of the cross of Christ Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

Jerusalem has imagined that it is immune from God's governance or threat. Jerusalem has become a city with no reference to "Thus sayeth the Lord," the commandments of God.

You cannot make God a docile beggar or a helpless patron. God will be neither. The city of Jerusalem has lost its chance for forgiveness and now stands under the judgment of God. The dilemma is real for God. It is real for Jerusalem. God struggles between vengeance and forgiveness. And in that struggle hangs the destiny of Jerusalem.

So, in verse 15, an army is coming – a nation from afar. A nation whose language you do not know. It's Babylon, and, notice, they will eat, eat, eat, eat – devour. They will devour your harvest and your food. They will devour your sons and your daughters. They will devour your flocks and your herds. They will devour your vines and fig trees.

And yet God says not utter destruction (v. 18). It's not the death sentence (v. 19), but, rather, exile. They will serve as strangers in a land that is not theirs.

Look at the text in Jeremiah 5. They have forgotten about the "if."

Verse 21

O foolish and senseless people,
You have eyes, but do not see;
You have ears, but do not hear.

They've missed the "if."

Look at verse 22.

Do you not fear Me? Declares the Lord.
Do you not tremble in My presence?
For I have placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
An eternal decree, so it cannot cross over it.
Though the waves toss, yet they cannot prevail;
Though they roar, yet they cannot cross over it.

God is saying, "Aren't you afraid of me? I have tamed the chaos. I drew the line in the sand and said to the waters, 'You won't come any further.' And they have obeyed my voice. They toss. They pound. But they cannot cross the line that I've drawn, because I am God. I am Creator. I am powerful. And you don't fear me? You've crossed My boundaries."

You see, the crowd in Jerusalem was self-convinced, self-absorbed, self-sufficient. They're stubborn and rebellious.

Look at verse 23.

But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;

They have turned aside and departed.
They do not say in their heart,
“Let us now fear the Lord our God,
Who gives rain in its season,
Both the autumn rain and the spring rain,
Who keeps for us
The appointed weeks of the harvest.”

They haven't realized (v. 25) that their sin has turned away the good blessings of God. Look at verse 28. They are fat. They're sleek. They have deeds of wickedness. They don't take care of the orphan or the widow. They don't defend the rights of the poor. They trap men like others trap birds (v. 26). They have ignored the “if” of God.

They find out in 587 B.C. when their world comes crashing down. They realize that the promises of God are governed by the big “if.” Boundaries are real. Just as He laid boundaries for the sea, God laid boundaries for you and He laid boundaries for me. Every time we cross those boundaries, we bring destruction into our life, just like Jerusalem brought destruction into her life because she forgot the big “if.”

A man and his family were going camping. They came across a sign that said, “Road Closed. Do Not Enter.” The man just drove around the sign because he was sure it would save them time on their journey. His wife was resistant to going around that sign. She was cautious. She was wise. But there was no turning back this persistent road warrior. After a few miles of successful navigation, now quite happy with his decision to ignore the boundary, he began to boast of his gift of discernment. He knew there wasn't anything wrong with the road. Someone just put that sign there. Whatever it was, it was nothing big enough to stop him.

It wasn't long before he came to a humble sweat as he looked up ahead at a washed out bridge. He turned the car around and retraced his tracks back to the main road. He didn't save time. He lost time. When they arrived at the original warning sign he was greeted by large block letters on the back side of the sign, hand-painted. His wife and three children all read the hand-painted sign out loud. “Welcome back, stupid!” (*Executive Speechwriter Newsletter*, 12/3)

That's the way it is with God's commandments. God's word tells us how to live. When we cross over those commandments, when we go our own way, we find ourselves headed toward absolute ruin and destruction.

Terrible things happen when we go places we should not go.

There is no cheap grace available for the people of God in antiquity. And there is no cheap grace available for the people of God in modernity. Neither then, nor now, will God be the dispenser of cheap grace.

In a classic definition of cheap grace, the Lutheran pastor and World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, **“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”** (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

Richard A. Schmidt of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Daphne, Alabama, was quoted in *The Methodist Reporter* (10/8/93, p. 2) as saying “God is less interested, I suspect, in our acts of obedience than in the pleasure of our company.” That’s completely wrong. That ignores both the Old and New Testament texts. God desires the obedience of His people. Your mere presence is no wonderful gift to God. It is your obedience that is the pleasing sacrifice to Him.

W. C. Fields is quoted as having said, “I spent a lot of time searching through the Bible for loopholes.” Haven’t we all. But today we see the absolutely necessity of confronting our failures, foibles and follies, and confessing our sins before God. We want the promises of God without the premises of God, without His boundaries.

A pastor friend of mine says that every time he sees the Book of God’s Promises laying on top of his wife’s night stand, he declares in his soul, “Someday I’m going to write a book about the promises of God.”

The promises of God are not possible without the premises of God.

Some of you say this morning, “Pastor, you’re reading out of the Old Testament. We’re a New Testament church. In the Old Testament, God is a God of law. But in the New Testament, God is a God of grace. Unconditional Grace. The big ‘if’ is absent from the New Testament.”

Are you sure? Have you just read past the passages? Have you forgotten the preaching of Jesus is “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand?” In fact, when we turn to the New Testament it is Jesus Himself, who continues the big “if” of Yahweh in the Old Testament.

If we obey His commandments, then we know we are His.

In John 14:15, Jesus says
If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Or verses 23-24

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone – *another big “if”* – if anyone loves me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me.”

Or John 15:10

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in His love.

Not convinced yet?

In 1 John 5:3, we read

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

They ask Paul: May we keep sinning that grace may abound? In Romans 6, Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?” They are saying, “Paul, if God give us this free grace because Jesus died on the cross, shouldn’t we just keep sinning and let God give us more and more grace?”

“May it never be!” (Romans 6:2). “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”

We died with Christ on the cross. We died to sin. We live now in the likeness of His resurrection.

“May it never be” is a kind translation for “Heck no. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

In an article entitled, “God Lite,” theologian James R. Edwards traces how the more we obey God, the more real God becomes to us and the greater our love grows. And the more we love God, the more we become like God. Obedience is not a penalty levied on faith. It is the strength of faith. The Bible absolutely will not separate faith and obedience, as though obedience were some kind of inheritance tax that God levies on the free gift of salvation. God cannot separate them and still offer salvation. There is something about love that is no longer love apart from obedience. Only those who obey can believe, and only those who believe can obey. (*Christianity Today*, 4/29/91)

A parishioner complained about the pastor’s constant harping on the theme of drawing close to God. She confessed that she really didn’t want to be that close to God. “I just want to sneak into heaven quietly,” she said. “I don’t want to be a saint. I just don’t want to go to hell.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” the pastor said.

“I can explain it,” she said calmly. “When I started the ninth grade, I set my heart on finishing high school with straight C’s. And I did. You see, if you fail you have to repeat, and I didn’t want that. But if you start making A’s, people begin to expect things of you.”

“It’s exactly like that with God,” she continued. “If you’re too bad, you’ll go to hell, and I don’t want that. But if you’re too good, he’ll send you to India, and I don’t want that either.” (Mark Rutland, *The Finger of God: Reuniting Power and Holiness in the Church*, p. 16-17)

Quite apart from her obvious misunderstanding of salvation based upon her good deeds, her description of C-class Christianity unfortunately depicts where many of us live. We want His promises, but we don’t want His premises. We want His salvation, but we don’t want any

expectation. The problem, of course, with that form of Christianity is that is foreign to the teaching of Jesus, the preaching of Peter, or the writing of Paul.

The message is this: Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Receive His salvation and, in gratitude and in grace, keep His word.