

The Law Within

The Consolation Prize

I just watched a funny movie called Nacho Libre. Jack Black plays Ignacio, a brother at Mexican orphanage run by monks. The orphanage is very poor. He's the cook. But their so poor all they ever get to eat is beans and taco chips. He's grown up in this orphanage himself and he has always dreamed of being a wrestler. So one day it dawns on him that if he could win a wrestling match, he'd get some money and then he could serve the children something better like salad. So teams up with a skinny beggar he meets and they secretly train in the desert as wrestlers.

Finally, the big night comes, and they show up at the wrestling ring in the village square in old sweat pants and T shirts and square off with the other team clad in stretchy pants and masks. And they get totally whipped. But after the match as they sit dejectedly in the make-shift change room, wiping the sweat off their brows, a man comes in and tosses them an envelope. It's money! Just a few pesos, but the man says, "Hey, everybody gets a little money. And besides, the people like you."

Sure, it's just the consolation prize, but it's enough to get them back into the ring. The portion of the Book of Jeremiah we are looking at today is known as "the Book of *Consolations*." These writings of Jeremiah are being read by a defeated and exiled people. And this book-within-a-book contains a collection of short oracles of Jeremiah the prophet that will give the exiles the hope and encouragement they need to get back in the ring and fight once more. With just a bit of consolation and encouragement, they will realize how much they have lost and take up again the battle of spiritual life. Like Jacob who wrestled with God, they will not let go until they KNOW the LORD. Even though they just a bush league bunch of powerless exiles, they are given, by the prophet, the very words of God:

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel says. . . "

In exile, this prophecy is the consolation prize – the hope not only for the restoration of both urban and rural life in their own land, a life focused on worship in Jerusalem. But something much greater is in the works. A salvation so complete. For they had been . . .

Caught in the Cycle of History

The exile proved once and for all that the spiritual life of the Hebrew people needed to undergo a transformation. The undergirding their life a nation had always been a *covenant* originally established with God at Mount Sinai. There, they were given the *Torah*, the "Law-instruction," the commandments by which God expected them to live. However in the land of Canaan, the allurements of pagan worship was so enticing that time and time again it wooed them away from the worship of Israel's God. And this had always resulted in defeat by their enemies and humbling. And only then would they again sincerely call out to God, who would then forgive them and deliver them from their enemies and renew the covenant. But all too soon, they cycle would begin to repeat itself over and over and over again.

And furthermore, every time they went through this cycle, Israelite and Canaanite practices became more swirled together so that eventually what appeared to be the orthodox worship of Israel's God was in fact, largely superficial. For just behind the scenes, pervasive among the Israelites, was an steady appetite for the immoral rituals of the Canaanite gods. The Israelites could no longer make the distinction between the sexual abuse involved in Baal worship

and the strict ethical demands of holiness with Israel's God. It was, "whatever god works for *ME*, that's my god. Why? It is a well-observed fact of religious life, that each generation simply assumes that what was acceptable for its forebears is acceptable for them also. Something was needed to *break the historic* cycle. That began with . . .

One man's vision in the night.

There's a statement tucked in between these great oracles that we easily miss (26) Jeremiah awakes *refreshed*. This is unusual for him because for many years he has borne a heavy burden as a prophet of Israel's god. He has never been able to rest easy. For one thing, more than anyone else in his day Jeremiah has understood the *futility* of this endless cycle. God's purpose was always for his people to be *saved* from complete destruction. But, now, in Jeremiah's day, the cycle had come to a grinding halt. That destruction has already come, and he laments over the ruins of his city.

When earlier prophets like Moses interceded for the people, God had always intervened and rescued them. But Jeremiah lived with a terrible burden: God had actually *forbidden* him to pray for this people.

Examine for a moment Rembrandt's masterpiece entitled, "*Jeremiah Lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem*". His head is in his hand. His face is etched with grief. (11:14). He has tossed and turned on in his bed countless nights knowing the covenant with the LORD has been irrevocably broken.

But then one night, he receives a vision. And as he awakes, it's a beautiful dawn! He begins to understand the astounding implications of what God is now saying to his people. This morning he awakes refreshed because he knows by one powerful act of divine mercy God will make them "God and people" once again. And he addresses to his people four words of hope:

"The Days are coming."

The prophet foresees a day, as he puts it when, "people will no longer say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge"

My teethe were on edge the other day. I had just picked up Korleen at the High School, and we drove a block over to 20th St. I stopped at the stop sign and there was this lady in one of these huge swanky SUV. And you know, they don't know how to drive these things. I mean, this thing is a tank. It's massive enough for mountain expedition, but far too nice to get dirty, and she's not turning. So finally I start turning and Korleen freaks and grabs my arm as right at that moment, some high schoolers in a pick up come barreling down the hill from Paul's Superette. And there's this moment. This *BLINK*. And I'm blaming this lady in the SUV for not turning, the guys in the pick up and blaming me for almost creaming them. The lady in the SUV's blaming me for not seeing the pick up.

Everybody teethe are on edge. But in that blink, it really doesn't matter who's to blame, the *only thing that matters is that everybody gets home safely*.

There was an undertone among the Babylonian exiles that they had somehow been treated unjustly. This wasn't their fault. Why were they being punished for the historic wrongs, some of which were done before they were even born. The South blamed the north. Everything was fine until those people up there started messing with idols. The priests blame the people, the people blame the priests. Everyone blamed the Babylonians. But "The days are coming," declares the

LORD. . So it's time to . . .

Loose the Labels

Because "I will make a new covenant *with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*. This is a significant statement because for far too long they had been a divided kingdom. Everyone blaming the other person. And this is why the Old Covenant hadn't worked. "No one was ever willing to "die for their own sin." But the days were coming when an amazing act of God would reunite the divided house of Israel in . . .

A New Covenant

"It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD."

For us, this New Covenant in Jesus is where we live. He died for our sins. No one has to die for their own sins. There's no more blame shifting. It's a done deal. Finished. The cycle broken once and for all. But for Jeremiah and his people, Christ is still a long way over the horizon, just a pink glow on the pre-dawn sky. They could only understand this astounding promise in terms of the old covenant.

[Show Niska Treaty]

The biblical idea of *covenant* bore many similarities to a treaty between nations. Many scholars, in fact, see the Law, especially as expressed in the Book of Deuteronomy, as a document structured along the lines of a treaty between the King of a great Empire and his vassal state. And we all know that treaties only can express the ideal relationship between two parties, and that treaties are never kept in full. So spelled out in every treaty are always consequences should it be broken. The exiles understood their original treaty with God had been irrevocably broken.

Jeremiah also compares it to a marriage that's gone on the rocks. A broken relationship.

But the *new* covenant, he says, will be *different* from the old. A break with the past. And that, after all, is what a covenant is all about. For at the very root of the Hebrew word translated *covenant* in English is the Hebrew word "to cut". In a covenant, you cut a deal. Literally.

Father Abraham, when he entered into covenant with God, took a heifer, a goat, a ram a dove and a pigeon and *cut* them each in half and laid out the bleeding pieces of the carcasses on the ground. And God and Abraham walked together through that bloody path. It seems to us like a strange, bloody mess, but this was an important visual representation of the work God had to do to break the cycle of human sin. In a covenant there is discontinuity with the past. In a covenant, at one point in history, there is a break. We must be cut off from what has gone before.

(This is also why the Hebrew people in circumcision cut off a piece of their body to show they had made a covenant with the LORD.)

But the endless cycles of sin had proven that the Old Covenant was just not able to deal conclusively with human sin. What was needed was a new covenant unlike the old. And this one would be . . .

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"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. I will put my law in their *minds* and write it on their *hearts*. I will be their God, and they will be my

people.”

The first covenant was written on tablets of stone by God himself and then conveyed by Moses to the people. But soon it was copied onto paper to read aloud to the people – constantly for centuries. But tablets of stone can be broken. Books lost or burnt or worst of all *ignored*. But what can be never lost or *totally* ignored is the voice of the Living God within the human heart.

Why did people who had it all down on paper in black and white continue to struggle in their spiritual lives and constantly need to be restored? Why the stubborn cycle? Well, the relationship between the Old and New Covenant is complex discussion, something we can tackle in one sermon. (The apostle Paul had to write a whole book about it called “The Book of Romans”) and it may be an oversimplification, but the Old covenant didn’t work because the people became *slaves to paper*. In seeking to obey the *letter* of the Law, they lost touch with *it’s Spirit* (See Romans 2:14-15) It had left them . . .

Empty within

Can we not all identify patterns in our lives that also seem to run in cycles much like the life of Israel? Can we not also become slaves to *paper*: mortgage papers, fashion papers, the paper your teacher expects on his desk tomorrow. . . In a million ways our world presses upon us expectations for our careers, our families, roles in society. All those expectation “look good on paper,” as celebrities and advertiser show us how it’s done. Promise us a dream. And we try so hard to meet those expectations.

We may not see this as a form of idolatry. We may not even see it coming. We may even be applauded by others as successful and even saintly in all that we accomplish. But insurance companies tell us that stress-related illness has reached an epidemic as people stress at not meeting the *expectations* of others. One day we can wake up and find ourselves empty.

We may end up with all the paperwork that says we should be happy and blessed. But there’s nothing written within, it’s like the walls of our hearts is scrawled with illegible spray-can graffiti. We can’t read it, we can’t make sense of it anymore. Because when we over-work ourselves, when live with unreal expectations of ourselves, when it’s all about the image we project, *something is going to happen*.

And when it does, the balance between the our outward lives and our spiritual lives needs to be restored. Whenever we reach that point of grinding to a halt it’s because there are things wrong in the interior life. We need a new covenant. Because what the rat race gives us is a cycle that spirals downward when what we really need is a . . .

An Ongoing Process that lifts us up

“I will put my law in their *minds* and write it on their *hearts*. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

We understand this in the light of the ministry of Christ. In Luke 22: 19,20 Jesus, “. . . took bread, *blessed* it and *broke* it, and *gave* it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant* in my blood . . .”

In this one simple act Jesus enacted the new covenant. He sets into motion the ongoing action of God in the human heart. It’s a four-fold pattern: he takes, blesses, breaks and then gives. First he *takes* us exactly as we are, demands nothing of us that we cannot give. And he blesses

that. We are loved. Unconditionally. Blessed because we are merely human. But then he *breaks*: this is the hard one. We may know depression, disappointment, criticism. And there's no way around it. Sometimes we give the impression in triumphalism of our evangelical worship that we can avoid those breaking experiences, from God. But we can't. Yet through them, and in them, we are transformed and then only then we are able to GIVE.

Jeremiah say of the people who go through this process:

"No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,'" declares the LORD.

The Cross of Jesus is the turning point of human history with God. The TORAH (law instruction) which never could be kept by fleshly effort is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The New Covenant in his blood. A personal knowledge of Christ as Lord and Saviour would be the starting point. The Cross would be the moment we realize that . . .

The Whole Law is Love

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

The love that we have for others is an answering love. It is the answer that you and I give to the love shown us at the cross.

Certainly, we live in the midst of idolatrous populations. Yet true faith . . . is not eliminating competing beliefs and their foreign deities, or even in placing more and more punitive sanctions on them but in holding fast in faith to the one who is Lord of All. The test of our trust in the Lord is therefore whether we can hold fast to his will and his presence in the face of the temptations to find the source and sustenance of our life from other false deities that seek out our loyalty whether they be man-made, natural, or supernatural.

(E. Achetemeir, Preaching the hard texts p. 51)