

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Against the Flow

(studies in Jeremiah)

Hope

(Jeremiah 32)

Study #7

Introduction: Ridiculous and impractical...

How much time do you spend in the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes?¹ We refer to these books as “Wisdom Literature” and by and large, the point of these books is to instruct us in the fine art of wise living.

I personally love the wisdom books. Getting along in life is the theme. In Proverbs, for example, you find common sense advice like this: ***[Proverbs 15:27] He who profits illicitly troubles his own house, But he who hates bribes will live.***

Good point. Or this:

[Proverbs 26:18-19] Like a madman who throws Firebrands, arrows and death, [19] So is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, “Was I not joking?”

We like that. Good, practical stuff.

Proverbs is filled with wise sayings, good advice and sound counsel. Follow the advice of Solomon and you get a graduate degree in how to live well.

But, if you restrict yourself to wisdom couplets, and don’t expose yourself to other parts of the Bible, you could easily get the idea that a walk with God consists of doing things that make good sense and that conform to generally accepted standards of behavior.

It would be a shame to come to that conclusion, though, because a walk with God consists of so much more than exercising good sense.

Of course, the Christian life does often require us to exercise good sense. When that happens, others may see what we are doing and commend us for a reasonable faith.

But sometimes our life with Christ requires that we act in ways that conform to *unseen realities*. (We could call that exercising “UNcommon sense.”)

Common good sense alone, for instance, would never direct us to spend long hours in prayer, engage in fasting, or give vast amounts of money to help people we’ve never met.

When we act in such a way that our behavior conforms to realities that we cannot see - but which we fervently believe! - others may scratch their heads and wonder what in the world Christianity is all about. They may think that we are odd ducks.

This morning we are going to watch a man whose life conformed to unseen realities and was, no doubt, elevated to “odd duck” status by his contemporaries.

Throughout much of his life, the prophet Jeremiah was considered by many people something of an odd duck. He was all about God in a land that had all but forgotten Him. He stuck out like a sore thumb.

Now, of course, we believe that Jeremiah was a model of sanity in a world gone nutty. But there was one episode that occurred rather late in the story of his life that may have had even his strongest supporters wondering if he had finally “lost it.”

¹ Some people include the Song of Solomon.

Today, we are going to watch as Jeremiah does something that was probably thought by most of his contemporaries to have been the most impractical action imaginable. We find this action recorded for us in Jeremiah, chapter 32.

Calamity: T - Minus “0”

“Destruction/Judgment is Coming!”

By the time we come to chapter 32², Jeremiah had been preaching “doom and gloom” for decades. He began fulfilling his God-appointed role as the Lord’s prophet when he was in his teens and never backed down from saying what God told him to say (no, the people never did listen...).

He is now in his fifties (still a VERY young man!). And, for the longest time he has been telling his fellow Jews that destruction is coming. Judgment is on its way.

After years and years of prophesying and warning, though, the message finally changes. It is no longer, “*Judgment is coming!*” Now, it is, “*Judgment has arrived!*”

“Destruction/Judgment is Here!” (32:1-2)

[1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. [2] Now at that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard, which was in the house of the king of Judah...

Babylon’s “pre-invasion”

The armies of Babylon were surrounding Jerusalem. But, we should understand that the city came to be surrounded by stages.

About ten years prior to the events recorded in Jeremiah 32, the Babylonian armies captured the Jewish capitol and took the leaders of the people into exile.³

Over the next decade the citizens of Jerusalem enjoyed a certain measure of freedom. BUT, they were subject to Babylon.

And after ten long years of being a vassal state, the Jews decided that they had had enough. They weren’t going to pay taxes to Babylon one more day. They were no longer going to do what Nebuchadnezzar told them to do any more. Nosirree!

They were going to claim their independence. They were going to stand up to Babylonian might. They were going to take strong action!

And what, exactly, was it that they were going to do? They were going to form an alliance with - Egypt!?

Judah’s Egyptian alliance

Now, we could debate all day long whether it was simply **wrong** to seek a protective alliance with Egypt or whether it was **wrong AND stupid**. What is undeniable, though, is that it absolutely didn’t work.

The Jewish king, Zedekiah, thought that Egypt would be a great support in time of need. What a miscalculation!

After forming the alliance, the Egyptians quickly saw that they couldn’t get any benefit from this unequal partnership and abandoned the Jews. This left Israel to stand all alone against Nebuchadnezzar’s army. And now Nebuchadnezzar is mad.

That is the setting for Jeremiah 32. The siege against Jerusalem has already begun.⁴

The invasion actually begins

We are only a few short months away from the final breach of the walls around the city. The noose is tightening. The city is cut off and will soon be food-deprived and plague-ravaged.

⁴ Jeremiah 52:4-5 tells us that the siege against Jerusalem began in the tenth month of Zedekiah’s 9th year. Therefore, by the tenth year (Jeremiah 32), the siege is underway.

² The passage is in prose, not poetry. It is story-telling.

³ That would have been about 598 BC.

We are to imagine the episode we read about in this chapter taking place while the Babylonian armies are camped all around.⁵

Eugene Peterson writes about this season and says, “*This was the darkest time in Israel’s history. Doomsday was just around the corner... There was absolutely no hope at all.*”

At this time, Jeremiah was in prison. It was probably more of a house arrest, where he had freedom to walk about. But he was confined in a heavily guarded area called “*the court of the guard.*”⁶

While stuck in this prison setting, Jeremiah received a visitor. His cousin, Hanamel, from Anathoth, has come to see him.

Drama in the Prison House

Hanamel’s Proposal (32:8)

Jeremiah’s hometown “fans”

[8a] Then Hanamel my uncle’s son came to me in the court of the guard according to the word of the Lord...

The fact that Hanamel hailed from Jeremiah’s hometown of Anathoth doesn’t necessarily warm the cockles of our hearts. Normally, you would think that a visit from a hometown family member would be a welcome thing. But Jeremiah has been the victim of at least one plot against his life by friends and family from Anathoth.

And, while we don’t know if Hanamel was one of the ones who conspired to kill him or not, our guard is up. There was certainly a history of fractured relationships with the good people of Anathoth.

⁵ Date given - 10th year of Zedekiah’s reign; 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign = 588/587.

⁶ Thompson believes that this story actually belongs with chapters 37-38. There was a brief period of time when the Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem to deal with a threat from Egypt. At that time, Jeremiah left Jerusalem to take care of a real estate deal (actually mentioned in chapter 37). But he was apprehended, arrested, and placed under house arrest at that time, suspected of collaborating with the enemy. With the Babylonian army encamped in Anathoth, Jeremiah’s prophesying that King Zedekiah should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar was considered seditious.

It turns out that Hanamel’s visit was not social. He had a business deal to propose to Jeremiah.

Hanamel’s proposal

[8b]... ‘Buy my field, please, that is at Anathoth, which is in the land of Benjamin; for you have the right of possession and the redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.’⁷

So, there is a piece of property in Anathoth that Hanamel is looking to ~~unload~~ sell. Jeremiah is just the one to take it off his hands.

We aren’t told any details about this property.

What’s the land like? How many acres? Is it farmland? Does it have water on it? Are there trees and vineyards already in place? Is there a house? Outbuildings?

We aren’t even told why Hanamel wanted to sell. All we know is that he doesn’t want it and he wants Jeremiah to “redeem” it.

The basis of his offer

Hanamel’s use of the word “redeem” is telling. It lets us know that this is a situation that was envisioned under the Mosaic Law.

In ancient Israel when a man needed to sell part of his inheritance (in most cases because he has fallen on hard times), he would approach family members first, to ensure that the property would remain within the ancestral tribe. Then, when the seller got back on his feet, he could buy it back from the relative.

So, it could be that Hanamel was in debt and in danger of losing the land to a creditor. In that case, Jeremiah is being asked to help bail him out.

⁷ Hanamel sets forth the offer as Jeremiah’s right - almost as his duty. (cf. Ruth and the offer of the land to the kinsman-redeemer, which Boaz eventually bought, along with the right to marry Ruth!). As the nearest relative to Hanamel, Jeremiah is expected to perform the function of the redeemer. (cf. Leviticus 25:23-25)

Or, it could be that he just didn't want the land any more and wanted to give Jeremiah the "right of first refusal."⁸

But here's the deal. Hanamel has visited his cousin Jeremiah in prison with an offer he hoped Jeremiah would not refuse. Hmmm...

The insensitivity of his offer

Does this sound somewhat INSENSITIVE??!! It sure does to me.

First off, he hasn't at all come to offer Jeremiah comfort for being in prison. And second, in a time of invasion he is seeking to unload a plot of ground that nobody in their right mind would want to buy!

Was he joking? Was his offer an attempt to mock Jeremiah's plight? Surely he wasn't serious.

If you had been in Jeremiah's sandals, would YOU buy the land?

I would not have blamed Jeremiah one bit if he had responded to his cousin's visit with anger. But, surprisingly, there is no anger at all. Hanamel made his offer - and Jeremiah bit.

Jeremiah's Response

His immediate response

He negotiated a purchase price

[9] "I bought the field which was at Anathoth from Hanamel my uncle's son, and I weighed out the silver for him, seventeen shekels of silver."

I won't tell you that Jeremiah paid the going rate or that he got a good deal. We really don't know what the going rate for land was in those days.

Seventeen shekels of silver was approximately seven ounces of silver. It's not a lot of money. But then, maybe it wasn't a lot of land. The point to note is that Jeremiah negotiated for a purchase price and he paid it.

And he also made sure that everybody knew that he was making this purchase. He did it all publicly. He and Hanamel abided by all of the regulations governing the sale of property in those days to a "T".

He obeyed the day's MLS rules

[10] "I signed and sealed the deed, and called in witnesses, and weighed out the silver on the scales. [11] "Then I took the deeds of purchase, both the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions and the open copy; [12] and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the sight of Hanamel my uncle's son and in the sight of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, before all the Jews who were sitting in the court of the guard."

Real estate procedure in the sixth century BC in Palestine required having witnesses to a transaction, making duplicate copies (sealed and unsealed) of the deed, and having signatures.

Jeremiah followed every stipulation scrupulously.

He weighed out seventeen shekels of silver, got the required witnesses, and then had the deeds (both copies) signed and sealed.

He then told his good friend, Baruch, to place the deeds in a pottery jar to preserve them, with these words, **[14] 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Take these deeds, this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last a long time.'**⁹

At the beginning, I suggested that the action Jeremiah took in this case would have been seen as impractical. Let's explore that.

⁸ Did Hanamel actually "pressure" Jeremiah to buy the field? His words (v. 8) could be read that way.

⁹ As an example of hiding/storing documents in earthenware jars, see the Dead Sea Scrolls, which lasted well over a thousand years before being discovered in 1947.

His (seemingly) impractical response

When Hanamel came to Jeremiah with his business deal, Babylonian soldiers were almost certainly encamped on the property in question, Jeremiah was in prison with no prospects for getting out, and the enemy was battering the city walls.

At that precise moment, Jeremiah bought a field on which he would never plant a tree, prune a vine or build a house. He would probably never even see it.

Was there anything going on in the world at this time that made this deal look like a “good deal”?

No!

People watching him make this purchase probably thought he was a nut. He himself knew that buying the field looked impractical.

But appearances can be deceiving. Things are not always what they appear.

Back in 1803, the United States bought some property out west from France. Thomas Jefferson thought the purchase was necessary to have control of the port of New Orleans, so he negotiated with Napoleon to buy the property for \$15,000,000. At the time, critics condemned it as unconstitutional and foolhardy. But today, the purchase of the 828,000 square miles of the Louisiana Territory looks like a steal.

Sixty five years later, The US wanted to buy more land, so they spent \$7,000,000 on what was called Seward’s Folly (or Seward’s IceBox) and bought Alaska from Russia (that’s 1.9 cents per acre). I’m of the opinion that the acquisition of Alaska was a great deal!

And I believe that Jeremiah’s decision to buy the field at Anathoth was without question the best use he could have possibly given to seventeen shekels of silver.

Not that he would have been naturally drawn to make the deal. He had help, some prodding!, that had nothing to do with his cousin’s pressure tactics.

Hopeful Action

Why Did Jeremiah Buy the Field?

At the end of verse 8, which records Hanamel’s offer to Jeremiah, we find these words, [8]... *Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.*

So how did Jeremiah know that this offer to buy the field at Anathoth was what God wanted him to do? Easy. Listen as I read the two verses right before it.

[6] And Jeremiah said, “The word of the Lord came to me, saying, [7] ‘Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle is coming to you, saying, “Buy for yourself my field which is at Anathoth, for you have the right of redemption to buy it.”’¹⁰

Jeremiah had been prompted by God to expect Hanamel’s offer.

The purchase was against political sense, against history, against reason, and against public opinion. But he bought the field. Not because a broker was telling him, “*It’s a buyer’s market!*” (No broker is that optimistic!) He bought the field on the basis of the word of God to him.

And this purchase would have been hugely important to the Jewish people. It would have validated something that Jeremiah had actually been preaching for some time.

What the Purchase Communicated

Judgment will fall

Let’s first be sure we see what the purchase of the land DID NOT mean.

¹⁰ Maybe the Lord gave him this word as he was traveling to Anathoth to visit about this very matter when he was arrested and brought back to Jerusalem? (chapter 37)

It did not mean “everything will be OK.” Jeremiah had had that thought and he asked God about it in a prayer found in the second half of chapter 32.

But God assured him that judgment would fall. There would be no last second reprieve as there had been in the days of King Hezekiah when the entire Assyrian army was struck dead outside Jerusalem’s walls on the night before the scheduled invasion.¹¹

No, Jerusalem would be sacked. But the command to purchase the property was a guarantee that while judgment was coming, judgment was not the final word. Hope is the final word.

HOPE, not judgment, is the last word

[15] ‘For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”’

Evidence to validate prophecy

Again, let’s review Jeremiah’s career.

For years, he had been preaching judgment to the nation of Israel. Nobody ever listened.

Everything was going just fine, thank you. There was prosperity, most prophets were saying, “*Peace, peace!*”, and besides, the Jews were God’s people. Surely God wouldn’t let anything bad happen to them!

When things were going reasonably well, the Jews thought that nothing could happen that would upset the apple cart of their prosperity - not even their sin. This is what they thought despite Jeremiah’s words about destruction and judgment.

They didn’t take seriously the mere WORDS of Jeremiah about coming calamity because there was no tangible evidence to validate the coming destruction he was predicting.

Then, the Babylonians came onto the scene.

An initial pre-invasion left the city decimated. Worse things looked inevitable. It appeared that Jeremiah had been right all along. Wow. Who woulda thunk it?

Well, it was at this point - the point when things looked the darkest - that Jeremiah changed his message and started to speak about a time of great blessing that would come AFTER the carnage.¹²

While the Babylonian army was outside Jerusalem’s walls, Jeremiah spoke words of comfort and hope. Scattered throughout chapters 29, 30, and 31¹³ we find wonderful promises of God’s blessing on His people that would come AFTER the judgment. Promises like these:

[29:10] “For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. [11] ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. [12] ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. [13] ‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. [14] ‘I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

[30:10] ‘Fear not, O Jacob My servant,’ declares the Lord, ‘And do not be dismayed, O Israel; For behold, I will save you from afar And your offspring from the land of their captivity. And Jacob will return and will be quiet and at ease, And no one will make him afraid.

¹² Isaiah did the same thing. As soon as he discovered that Hezekiah had shown the representatives from Babylon all the treasure of the Temple (guaranteeing a Babylonian appetite for conquest), he knew that destruction was inevitable and began preaching a message of hope and future great blessing (chapters 40 and following).

¹³ Often referred to as The Letter to the Exiles (29) and The Book of Consolation (30-31).

¹¹ Story found in Isaiah 37 and 1 Kings 19.

[11] ‘For I am with you,’ declares the Lord, ‘to save you; For I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, Only I will not destroy you completely. But I will chasten you justly And will by no means leave you unpunished.’

[31:31] “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, [32] not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. [33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. [34] “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

With the Babylonian soldiers threatening at the gates and hourly reports coming in about the condition of the walls, Jeremiah preached hope.

These are beautiful words. Comforting words.

But that message of hope was no more believed than was his earlier message of judgment - and for the same reason. In that day as in our own, anything that isn't corroborated by hard-boiled facts, by tangible evidence, is dismissed as impractical.

What was needed to drive home the truth of a coming blessing was action. Action like the **PURCHASE** of a field at Anathoth.

Invest to validate prophecy

For Jeremiah to buy land that was at that time overrun by the armies of the world's most powerful kingdom was, in the most literal sense, to put his money where his mouth was.

The purchase was a statement as solid as the silver that paid for it that God was going to bring His people back to the land. He took costly, hopeful action to show his confidence in the WORD he was preaching.

The whole idea of a future after the destruction was so counter-intuitive, so hard to believe, that it took a bold and courageous ACT of HOPE for the message to sink in.

By the purchase he is saying that there is more going on than a bunch of Babylonians threatening them at the city gates. He is saying, “God is in it. This is not the end. Judgment is not the last word.¹⁴ Hope is the last word.”

People who engage in courageous acts of hope expose themselves to ridicule. Such acts seem wholly impractical. But acts of hope are like putting our money where our mouth is. Or, maybe putting feet to our faith.

Conclusion:

One of my favorite quotes comes from the British author G. K. Chesterton:

“As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery and platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable.”

- Hope - BIBLICAL hope - is *buying into* what we believe in.
- Hope doesn't turn away in despair.
- Hope doesn't throw up its hands in disgust.
- Hope doesn't write him/her off as incorrigible.
- Hope doesn't withdraw from a complex world that is too much for us.

And it may be that God is calling you, today, to an act of hope as outrageously courageous as that to which he called Jeremiah.

¹⁴ Judgment is necessary because of hard-headedness and it works to soften us to God's ways better than anything else. This alone puts us in line to receive God's healing mercies.

Is it possible that in your home life, the Lord Jesus is calling you to hope, at a time when things look pretty hopeless? If so, it will mean taking strong action, an investment of time and energy to act for a God-honoring future.

Can you see yourself putting the strength of hopeful action to work at your job? What a difference in attitude, productivity, relationships, and creativity it would make if you brought hope to work with you!

Or have you come close to losing hope in your witness? The Lord Jesus wants us to share our faith with those who have not yet come to know Him? Have you lost hope that the person with whom you have shared the Gospel so many times will ever respond? Or do you have little hope that the person you want to share the Gospel with will respond positively? Hope is all about acting on the basis of the word of God - regardless of what the situation looks like. Bring hope to your witness and speak boldly to your friend!

It is far easier to languish in despair than to live in hope. When we live in despair we don't have to do anything or risk anything. It is fashionable to espouse the latest cynicism. If we live in hope, though, we join Jeremiah in walking with God and going against the flow.

As our memory verse for the month makes clear, hope is always in style.

[Jeremiah 29:11] For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

So, where will you invest your seventeen shekels of hope this week?