**REFLECTIONS ON OUR ONE YEAR BUILDING ANNIVERSARY**

**JEREMIAH 30:18 - 31:6**

**INTRODUCTION**

Throughout Scripture, God calls his people to be a people who remember. Israel was to remember the Exodus. They were to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. They were to remember the wisdom of the Scriptures and bind it around their necks and write it on the tablets of their hearts.

We as the church are called to remember that we were far from God, dead in our trespasses and sins and strangers to God’s covenant. We are to remember one another, giving thanks to God always our work of faith, our labour of love, and our steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. And when we gather, we are to remember the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that he gave for our salvation.

God’s people are to be a people who remember. We are to be a people who are rooted firmly in history, because it is what God has done in the past that defines who we are today and determines who we will be in the future.

We must remember to remember, especially in a time like this when we’re in the middle of a pandemic and we’re tempted to focus exclusively on what’s coming next. “When are schools reopening? When will churches be able to gather? When will we receive the vaccine? When will we be able to see our family and friends?” Those are all important questions, but we can’t fix our attention on the immediate future. Our minds need to reach much farther forward, and much farther back: back to the wondrous works of Christ, and forward to the glorious future that he has secured for us.

That is what we are going to do today as we celebrate one year since our church moved to Bradford and into our new building. The prophet Jeremiah will be our guide. He will help us look back at the work of Christ, and look forward to our glorious future. As we do so, we will also have the opportunity to look at what God has done among us as well since he moved us to this place.

Jeremiah is known as “The Weeping Prophet” because he wept his way through the writing of his prophecies. That’s because he prophesied judgment. He prophesied judgment on Israel, judgment on Judah, and judgment on the surrounding nations. Specifically, he prophesied that God would bring destruction upon Jerusalem because of their idolatry and unrepentant sin, which is precisely what happened.

But in the midst of all these prophecies of judgment lies an oasis of hope that centers on Jeremiah 30 and 31. Like the golden rays of light piercing through a dark sky, Jeremiah writes of a time when God will no longer judge his people, but save them. He will no longer scatter his people, but gather them back to one another and to himself. He will no longer set his hand against them in pestilence, famine, and war, but restore their fortunes and bring them back to Jerusalem.

These prophecies find their partial fulfillment in the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra restored God’s people to God’s law, and Nehemiah, restored God’s people to God’s land and to God’s City. But as we will see, these prophecies weren’t completely fulfilled until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was through his life, death, and resurrection that he would not only restore God’s law, but write it on our hearts. He would not only bring us to a physical city on earth, but a spiritual city in heaven.

That’s what these verses are about. They’re not about our church *per se*, so we need to be careful not to over-apply these verses to our situation. Nevertheless, we can still hear echoes of these verses in what the Lord has done among us here at Sovereign Grace Church. My hope is that these verses would help us to more clearly see the great works that God has done in our church over the past year.

I’m going to begin by walking through the text before giving us some reflections.

Jeremiah is writing these verses at a time when Judah was already in exile. We know that because Jeremiah 29:1 tells us that these words were given for “the surviving elders of the exiles” and “all the people…taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Many of us are familiar with Jeremiah 29 because of verse 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.”

But if we are to understand this verse in its proper context, we must not forget the verse that comes before it in 29:10:

“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”

Seventy years of captivity before they would know the blessing of verse 11. Seventy years before they would prosper and return to the promised land.

We need to remember this the next time we’re tempted to believe that Jeremiah 29:11 only prophesies blessing and prosperity, because sometimes, God’s people need to wait for his blessings. We may even have to wait seventy years, which means that those blessings may not come to us in our lifetime but in our children’s lifetime. But God’s plans are still good. His promises are still true.

It’s in the midst of these seventy years of captivity that these verses are written. Jeremiah’s writing as their city lies in ruins, their Temple is destroyed, their young people have been massacred, their king has had his eyes plucked out and his sons have been slaughtered, and the vast majority of the people of Judah live under the yoke of yet another cruel tyrant.

But in verse 18, he writes:

18 “Thus says the Lord:
Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob
    and have compassion on his dwellings;
the city shall be rebuilt on its mound,
    and the palace shall stand where it used to be.

That is a remarkable promise, not only for what it covers, but who it covers. The “what” is Jerusalem itself. The city shall be rebuilt on its mound. They won’t have to find a new city elsewhere. Jerusalem will rise from the ashes.

The “who” is all of God’s people. God’s promise of blessing starts with the “tents of Jacob”, then escalates to the “dwellings”, then “the city”, then culminates in “the palace”. In other words, the Lord is making promises to the rich and the poor. He will restore the fortunes of all his people, whether they were kings living in palaces or they were shepherds dwelling in tents. When the Lord moves, he moves with steadfast love and faithfulness for all his people, because all of them are precious in his sight.

19 Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving,
    and the voices of those who celebrate.
I will multiply them, and they shall not be few;
    I will make them honored, and they shall not be small.

God will not only give them a place to live but a reason to rejoice. Verse 19 says that the sound of mourning in the streets will be replaced with “songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate”. That’s no surprise, because verse 20 also says that he will multiply them. God will cause them to be fruitful and multiply so that the city would be filled, and Judah would be honoured among the nations once again.

20 Their children shall be as they were of old,
    and their congregation shall be established before me,
    and I will punish all who oppress them.

Verse 20 says, “Their children shall be as they were of old”, not starving in the streets, or sick with disease, or barely surviving as orphans because their parents were killed in war, but happy and healthy, safe and able to thrive. “Their congregation shall be established before me” as the Lord restores public worship and the people of God gather once again to hear God’s law and to follow God’s will. And anyone who dares to oppress them will be punished by God himself.

Jeremiah mentions God’s divine justice again in verses 23-24. Jeremiah had written much about God’s wrath against his own people, but in this new season of blessing and prosperity, that wrath would be directed once again at their enemies.

21 Their prince shall be one of themselves;
    their ruler shall come out from their midst;
I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me,
    for who would dare of himself to approach me?
declares the Lord.

Verse 21 says, “Their prince shall be one of themselves”. It wouldn’t be a foreign king who reigned over them, but one of their own, not a ruler that came from a far away land, but one that “shall come out from their midst”. They would be their own people with their own sovereign king. And unlike all the kings who did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshipped idols, this king would walk with the Lord. “I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me, for who would dare of himself to approach me?” declares the Lord.

No one could approach God but the priests, and only at prescribed times. If someone approached God on their own terms they would die. But this king would be welcomed into God’s presence. He would not only represent God to God’s people as a king, but represent God’s people to God as a priest. He would be their Priest-King by God’s gracious invitation.

The problem here is that no king reigned over Judah after the Babylonian captivity. Zedekiah was the last king of Judah. The only man who could fit this description was Jesus himself. Jesus was the prince who was one of their own, born as a Jew under the law. He was a ruler who came out of their midst from Bethlehem, the City of David. He was the one whom the Father drew near to himself, because he was his beloved Son.

This is a Messianic prophecy, and Jesus is the Priest-King foretold in this verse, the one who would not only reign over us as our King, but intercede for us as our Priest. He would enter the place where no one dared to approach, the Holy of Holies, and bring all who are united to him by faith with him.

Who would dare of himself to approach God? No one. But those who are in Christ can dare to approach him. Indeed, the Scriptures say that we can boldly approach his throne, because the death of Christ on the cross satisfied God’s wrath against us so that there is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Sinful man can approach Holy God because our Saviour sacrificed himself.

It is this sacrifice that makes verse 22 possible:

22 And you shall be my people,
    and I will be your God.”

This is the promise of the New Covenant which Jeremiah writes about in Chapter 31:33:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

In his commentary on Jeremiah, Philip Ryken writes:

“This is God’s promise of the covenant. It contains everything you have ever longed for and everything you could ever hope for. God will be your God, and you will belong to him. Everything you could ever need or desire in the whole universe is wrapped up in that one promise.” – Philip Ryken

There is no better news for unworthy, broken, sinners like us, that God would be our God, and we would be his people. This is the promise for the Christian, that God will not cast us away. God will not punish us in his justice. God will not forsake us as we have forsaken him, but will welcome us as his covenant people both now and forevermore.

This is true for anyone who would repent and believe in Christ. God will forgive you of your sins. God will welcome you into his presence. God will bring you to his heavenly home, if you would turn away from your sins and look to Christ. He’s the only way that anyone can draw near to God. You can’t approach God on the basis of your own merit. You can only approach him on the basis of Christ’s merit. So come, look to Christ and find life in him.

Jeremiah repeats the New Covenant promise in 31:1:

1 “At that time, declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people.”

Here the emphasis is on New Covenant unity, that the twelve tribes of Israel would be one people of God. They would be united as one people under one God.

Jeremiah concludes this section of the prophecy by turning their minds to the past:

2 Thus says the Lord:
“The people who survived the sword
    found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,

In verse 2 he reminds them of God’s grace in the wilderness after the Exodus. That was another time when they didn’t have a home, a time when they had just come out of their captivity in Egypt. Jeremiah reminds them that even there they found grace. God’s grace was with them then, and it will be with them now. There is grace to be found in the wilderness. Why? Because of verse 3:

3     the Lord appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
    therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

This is why the grace of God finds his people in the wilderness. This is why it comes to those who survived the sword. It’s because he has loved them with an everlasting love, a love without end, a love that stretches on for eternity. That is why God continues being faithful to his stubborn, sinful people. That is why God keeps his promises. He has set his everlasting love upon his people to prosper them, bless them, and bring them back to himself, no matter how much they’ve sinned or how far they’ve strayed.

And so, Judah can look forward to verses 4-6:

4 Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
    O virgin Israel!
Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines
    and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
5 Again you shall plant vineyards
    on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant
    and shall enjoy the fruit.
6 For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
    in the hill country of Ephraim:
‘Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
    to the Lord our God.’”

Verse 6 is especially powerful, because what do watchmen do? They watch out for enemies. But what are these watchmen doing? They’re calling one another to worship. They’re leaving their watch towers behind and going up to Zion to worship the Lord their God.

This is yet another sign that this is a prophecy that didn’t find its complete fulfillment in the return of the exiles or the rebuilding of the Temple, because Judah had plenty of enemies after they returned to Jerusalem. In fact, they would later fall into subjection to the Roman Empire and the Temple would be destroyed again. Therefore, these verses must foretell a time that has not yet come, a time when Christ returns and the watchmen can finally leave their posts, because all our enemies – sin, Satan, and death – will finally be defeated.

What does a text like this have to say to us today? More specifically, how does it help us reflect on our one-year anniversary since moving into the building? In some ways, the parallels are striking. This building was like an abandoned city, but now it’s being spiritually rebuilt. This sanctuary was silent, but now it’s full of songs of thanksgiving. Most of God’s people were scattered from this place, but now they’re returning to gather in God’s presence once more.

Our church isn’t the ultimate fulfillment of these verses, of course. Christ and the church universal are the fulfillment of these verses. But we can hear echoes of God’s promised work in what he has done here at Sovereign Grace over the past year.

With the remainder of our time, I want to highlight three of them:

(1) **GOD IS MAKING A DIVERSE PEOPLE**

This is one of the promises that God makes in these verses. He is making a diverse people. They are to be diverse in status and come from different socio-economic backgrounds. It’s not just those who live in palaces who will find a home, but those who dwell in tents, because God’s everlasting love and faithfulness is set on all who belong to him, no matter who they are, what they do, or how much they possess.

Hasn’t the Lord done that among us? We aren’t a church of professionals. Nor are we a church of tradespeople. We are a church of lawyers and farmers, engineers and bakers, IT professionals and flower shop owners. We are a church of seniors and babies, married couples and singles, students and stay-at-home moms. We are a church of builders and carpenters, business owners and retail workers, accountants and musicians, teachers and nurses. God has brought us all together into this place to be one spiritual community, one church, one witness to a watching world, and it is wonderful to behold.

We are diverse in what we do, but we are also diverse in who we are. The God of all the clans of Israel is also the God of the nations, and he has called people from every nation so that he would be our God and we would be his people. Don’t we see that in our church? When I look out at our church, I see a diverse people. I see people who look very different from one another. People with light skin and dark skin. People with big eyes and narrow eyes. People who speak with a Canadian accent and people who speak with a foreign accent. People who grew up here and people who have only recently arrived.

That’s the power of the gospel. That’s the will of the Lord: to establish a new community in the New Covenant of his Son with people from every people, language and nation. And as we move forward, it is our prayer that our church would grow in its diversity. That different people from different places would all find a home at Sovereign Grace.

That’s one of the best ways we can put the gospel on display, that the things that typically divide people – language, culture, social status – would all give way to the uniting power of the gospel.

(2) **GOD IS MAKING A JOYFUL PEOPLE**

Second, God is making a joyful people. Jeremiah wrote that “Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate.” We are to be a diverse people filled with a common joy in the Lord that can only be expressed through song. The Christian faith is a singing faith. Our homes and our churches are meant to be filled with song as we celebrate all that God has done for us and through us.

And that is certainly true of this building. This building is meant to resound with God’s praises from God’s people. This sanctuary is meant to be filled with beautiful music that declares the saving work of Christ, the redemption that we have by his blood, and the hope of eternal life. We are meant to sing in worship to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit for the covenant that our Triune God has made with sinners like us.

And this joy is meant to produce thanksgiving. The thankful songs that we sing are meant to come from thankful hearts. That is a radical thing in our culture today. We live in an angry culture. We live in a discontent culture. We live in a complaining culture. But in the church, we have the opportunity to show the world a thankful culture, because if anyone should be thankful, it’s us. We who deserve God’s wrath have received God’s mercy. We who were far from God have been brought near by the blood of his Son. We who were without God and without hope in the world can look forward to a glorious future that has been secured for us by Christ.

By God’s grace, this has been our experience since moving into this building. I can’t count the number of times that people have expressed their gratitude and joy for the work that the Lord has done in bringing our church to this building. People from our church, people from Springdale, and people who have no connection to this building whatsoever. You have been a joyful people, and a grateful people.

My prayer is that this would continue to characterize our church, that our instinct as a church would increasingly be to thank God and thank others, and that our delight together as a church would be to sing songs of thanksgiving who has brought us together to this place.

(3) **GOD IS MAKING A FRUITFUL PEOPLE**

Lastly, God is making us a fruitful people. It is the Lord’s will for his people to reap a spiritual harvest. Or as he says in verse 19, “I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will make them honoured, and they shall not be small.” This doesn’t mean that the bigger the church, the bigger the blessings. There are many big churches that aren’t faithful, just as there are many small churches that aren’t faithful. But the reality remains that churches are to grow as the gospel goes out to our children, to our friends, to our neighbours, and to our coworkers.

We have always been a small church. Our average Sunday attendance over the past several years was probably about 80 people, and we were content with that. We were content to be a small church that was mighty in prayer, strong in discipleship, and serious about sanctification. But since moving into the building last year, our numbers have nearly tripled. That is a remarkable statistic in any time, let alone in the middle of a pandemic!

There is no earthly explanation for it. We didn’t do any promotion. We didn’t come with a five-year strategic plan on how to inflate our numbers. We just came and functioned as the same church we’ve always been, and the Lord has multiplied us. That’s the only possible explanation. This is the Lord’s work, and I stand just as amazed as many of you.

Our focus now is on training up leaders. Lord willing, some of them will become pastors. Others will be deployed in different ways. Some will remain with us. Some will go out and plant churches. Whatever it is that the Lord brings to us, our desire and prayer is to multiply and increase so that God would receive the glory. God would receive the praise. God would receive the songs of thanksgiving, both now and forevermore.

All of this was made possible because of the faith and faithfulness of a small group of men on the Council of Springdale Christian Reformed Church, their wives who supported them, and the majority of Springdale’s membership that remained here. On behalf of our leadership, and on behalf of our church, we want to thank you for giving us this building, and for giving us the opportunity to see all that the Lord has done through your gift.

May the Lord take the seeds that you have sown in us and multiply them thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold what was sown, so that a faithful gospel witness would remain here and abroad for generations to come.