

Can God Change the Human Heart?  
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January 17, 2010

The young king silenced the old prophet by putting him under palace guard. I think he would have just as well preferred to have put him to death, but out of respect for Jeremiah's role in the past in Israel, and his roll with the king's father, he simply put him under palace arrest. See, the king and leaders of the time were making a lot of decisions that the prophet was criticizing. And the prophet was coming continually and saying, 'That's not what you should do. God says "Don't do that!"' And the king and his fellow leaders were tired of the prophet saying such things, and they wanted him to be quiet. In fact, they were starting to accuse him of being treasonous. They finally put him under guard and said, 'There!'

It wasn't a good place to be if you were a prophet wanting to speak God's word to the people. But then, in Jerusalem at that time there really was no good place to be. See the king, Zedekiah, and his nobles had decided to rebel against the power and the authority of the great Babylonian empire that had brought them to submission some decades before; and they had refused to pay taxes. They had refused to respond to the king of Babylon and they thumbed their nose at him in rebellion. And he responded by sending one of the most brutal, powerful armies in all of history against Jerusalem. And they set up a siege around that city. They would let no one in and no one out, and they kept it that way for two years. Within the city there was disease, there was starvation, there was disarray, and there was death. Outside the city was the brutal sword of the Babylonians. This was the worst of times in Jerusalem whether you were in the prison or whether you were walking the streets.

Strange thing happens, though. Someone comes to visit Jeremiah in the prison and offers him a strange arrangement, considering the situation. He comes and offers to sell Jeremiah a field, a piece of property! The real estate market was not good. But strangely prodded by God, Jeremiah goes ahead and agrees to the purchase. And he pays the price and he goes through all the legal steps. He makes sure that the deed is witnessed and signed, and it's put in a safe place. And he does everything that's required for a property transfer at that time, legally and culturally. But then, when he's done with that purchase and he gets alone, he just begins to pray to God, 'cause this is a strange thing to have God prompt you to buy property in a city that is falling.

And so he starts out his prayer. It's found in Jeremiah 32, and he starts out his prayer and he says

*"Ah LORD God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm!"*

'God, I know You're the Creator, You're the sustainer!' And then he follows that up with the conclusion 'There is nothing too difficult for You. You can do anything and everything You choose to do,' Jeremiah says. And then he goes on in the verses that follow and just describes the history of God's working in that nation of Israel. And by the time he's done with the prayer you've heard him, almost like someone whistling in the dark, saying 'God, I know You can do anything. I know You can!' But there's an implied question. He never puts it in a question, but the implication is there... "Why would You have me buy property in a city that is gonna die? Why?"

God's response, and it comes a little later in the passage when Jeremiah's done praying, at verse 27...the LORD responds to Jeremiah and He says 'I am the LORD God of hosts; I am the One of all flesh who's created all.' And He says

*"Is anything too difficult for Me?"*

'Jeremiah, I hear some question in your voice. Is anything really too difficult for Me?' And God goes on and He says, 'Yes, this city is going to die. It is gonna be devastated. The Babylonians are gonna break in; they're gonna burn it to the ground; they're gonna take all the treasures; and even more so, they're gonna take the people and they're gonna leave this a desolate, burned-over place. This city is going to die. It's gonna happen. But,' God goes on, and He says this, 'I will...' In verse 37 of that chapter He says 'I will gather them; I will bring them back to this place; and they shall be My people and I will be their God. We will once again be here in Jerusalem. It will happen.' And He goes on at the end of that chapter. He says,

*“Fields will be bought in this place of which you say 'It is desolation, without man or beast; it is given into the hand of the Chaldeans [the Babylonians].”*

The final statement is *“I will restore their fortunes.”* 'I will restore their lands,' is God's promise. 'Yes, Jeremiah, go ahead and buy property because someday it may be sold again in this land.' Not only does He promise that, He adds to the promise. Not only does He say, 'I will bring 'em back, and they will once again have their city, they will once again buy and sell and prosper.' He goes on and He makes this statement. It's powerful! A little earlier, when He responds, He says in verse 39...He says *“I will give them...”* When He brings them back He says 'I'm gonna give them one heart and one way.' He speaks of it in that same passage, that same verse, as an everlasting covenant, what is later called a new covenant. He says, 'You know what? I'm not gonna do what I did simply at the old covenant at Mount Sinai, thundering my commands from the top of the mountain. He says, 'With this thing, this new covenant, what I am going to do as I bring them back, I am going to give them a new heart. And instead of writing My laws and My desires and My priorities and everything else on tablets of stone, I'm gonna write My law on their hearts. I'm gonna change 'em on the inside.' It's called the new covenant, and it is so very needed for Israel.

You see, the reason things had gotten so bad there was their hearts continually kept wandering away from God. As God, speaking through Jeremiah, told 'em...as He looked at the whole situation and He gave His summary explanation as to why this nation had wandered so far after God had done so much for them, why they had wandered so far that God had finally had to come to the point that He had to take the city down...God's statement is this, that

*“The heart is more deceitful than all else, it is desperately sick; who can understand it?  
Jeremiah 17:9*

We make such foolish choices with respect to God and we wander so far from Him, going our way and ignoring His way, and we say 'Why do we do that?' And God's response is it's because our hearts...deep within there's a chronic problem, and it's called sin. And the promise God made to Jeremiah is not only would they come and rebuild the land; He says, 'I will change their hearts.' Tremendous promise. And God did bring 'em back to the land.

You go to 2 Chronicles 36, and I'll read a portion of that in just a moment. We have a passage we looked at last week, and it describes the fall of Jerusalem in kind of a chronicler's straightforward language. Doesn't get into the high drama of it. He just simply says 'this is what happened' and he describes how the nation turned against God, how God brought the Babylonians against them, and then he finally comes to the point where he describes how, yes, God brought them back. And I wanna read that portion for you once again. And we'll start with the fall. It's only about six or seven verses that I'll read here but it'll give you the flow of the events, and it'll affirm that yes, God did bring that people back. It says in verse 17 of 2 Chronicles 36, after God had sent messengers to His people, after He'd tried to turn them around and change their direction, and they'd steadfastly refused to really honor God and follow Him, it says in verse 17

*Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans [the Babylonians] who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. And then they burned the house of God, they broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and they burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him [the king of Babylon] and his sons until the rule of the king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land enjoyed its sabbaths [its rests]. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath...*

...in other words, for this entire time the land just lay there, as it were, resting...

*...until seventy years were completed.*

And Jeremiah had said that in another prophecy—'It's gonna be seventy years that we're out of the land.'

And then, verse 22, we're told

*Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah—the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,*

*“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!’”*

It's an amazing process, and you look back at the political international tides that came and went at that time, and it's fascinating! The Babylonians had come in, they'd laid siege, they'd conquered Jerusalem, and they took the Israelites out of the city. It was their policy, when they conquered peoples, to distribute, to take them away, take them captive. They deported 'em. They sent 'em out into dispersion so that they lost their roots and they no longer had a homeland. That was Babylon's policy, set by their kings. But then they were eclipsed; the tide changed and Persia became the world power of the day, especially under Cyrus who rose up, one of the greatest leaders of all time. And he had a completely different policy with respect to conquered peoples. He sent them back to their lands! And so the king of Persia, Cyrus, began to send people back to their lands, and among them were the people of Judah. And as he often did, he wrote well of the people's God, he sent them with money to help them finance it, and he let the people of Israel go back to Jerusalem and he financed the rebuilding of that city.

Now, you could look at it and say, 'Oh man, what a coincidental flow of political history! That just as Jeremiah is saying 'We are gonna go into captivity and we are gonna be dispersed, and seventy years later we're gonna be brought back', that international powers switch and policies change, and it happens right down to the year, seventy years...what a historical coincidence!' The Bible won't let us call it a coincidence. When the writer writes in Chronicles and he speaks of it in that verse that we read, he says 'Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet', it says “The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.” God did that. He moved the hearts of the kings of the world to accomplish His purposes with Israel. It's astounding. And what a time in Israel's history—this is one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament. We don't talk about it much, but I rank this right up there with the crossing of the Red Sea, God thundering from Mount Sinai, the fire coming down at Mount Carmel. I would put this right there, even greater. This was an astounding work of grace.

And when the people returned to the land Psalm 126 records the heart of the people, the rejoicing that went on. It's a powerful, emotional psalm. In fact, Joel started our prelude, our service, off with a song built on this psalm. It goes like this...the opening verse reads like this; it says 'When the LORD brought us back, when the LORD brought the captive ones of Zion,' when he brought them back out of that captivity, '...we were like those who dream.' They said it was just...it was like we were dreaming when we came back to the land. It seemed surreal that we could go back to Jerusalem.' And they go on, and it says 'Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with joyful shouting. And they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”’ It says, 'We were shouting, we were rejoicing, we were laughing, it was so grand and glorious! And people were looking at us and saying “Man, their God has really blessed them!”’ And they reply, they respond, they say, 'The LORD really has done great things for us. The LORD really has blessed us, and we are glad!' What a precious moment in Israel's history. And I mark it as one of the greatest miracles in scripture.

But I also pause with it, because while God brought them back to the land, it becomes apparent that their hearts haven't changed. They rejoice in the moment but even as Psalm 126 records, they began to look at the rebuilding that lies ahead and there was a lot of rebuilding to do. They had experienced God's grace, His mercy, in an amazing, powerful way; but they now had a devastated land to rebuild. And they set about doing it. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah which follow Chronicles tell us about that rebuilding process, and that reconstruction of the land. And they first of all began to set out to rebuild the city walls. And then they were gonna rebuild the temple. It took 'em almost...excuse me, the temple first. It took 'em almost twenty years to rebuild the temple. It was a small shadow of the great, wondrous, glorious temple that Solomon had, but it was still a temple devoted to the LORD God of Israel there in Jerusalem. And they had rebuilt it; it took about twenty years, but it got there.

It took 'em almost ninety years, under the leadership eventually of Nehemiah...it took 'em ninety years to rebuild the city walls. And it wasn't just that it was such a challenge, and wearisome, and weary. They became...there was a resistance. See, there were people that had moved into the land when they were out of it. And those people didn't wanna let them have their city back. And so there was constant pressure and resistance. And they would give up, and then they would pick up and go at it again. It took about ninety years, but eventually they had their temple again and they had their walls again. And there was glorious celebration as the bands and the people in chorus would march around the top of the walls singing “Glory to God!” and it's a great celebration.

And you think, "Yes, the nation is back, and the nation is new!" But as they rebuilt the nation they also had another challenge, and that was to renew their worship. And what we discover is it is not successful. They get their temple back. They make an affirmation of scripture. They begin to study again. They begin to do what they had failed to do before the fall. They begin to bring the sacrifices. They look like a renewed nation. And once the temple is in place and the wall is in place you're thinking, "Finally, it's all gonna work out!" We find that Nehemiah, who is a leader at the time, goes back to Babylon and he's gone for about thirteen years. And then he comes back to see how things are goin' in Jerusalem. He's been gone thirteen years, and he comes back to Jerusalem to see how things are going. And it's recorded in Nehemiah 13 what he finds when he returns. Now understand this is, in the narrative flow of the Old Testament, this is a record of the last narrative events of the Old Testament. It doesn't look that way when you look at the Bible and your table of contents, because you've still got Psalms and Proverbs and the prophets to read. But they all chronologically come before Nehemiah 13. This is the end of the story in the Old Testament.

And what Nehemiah finds when he returns to this people that God has brought back to the land, and he's only been gone thirteen years...he finds that the leaders have compromised. They've joined...actually not joined, they've allowed the resistance to join them. They have given one of the...the ones who fought the reform, who fought the rebuilding, they have given him an office in the temple! And not only that...they have let the temple go. They've forsaken it. They no longer bring their tithes and offerings to it, and it's becoming a run-down place. There's no more singers to sing. There's no more instruments to play. In thirteen years it's becoming a...just an empty building. And the Sabbath was being ignored, that day of rest that they were supposed to stop, and God-ward rest...they stopped keeping the Sabbath. And probably the most worrisome thing of all was the children were being lost. And this was a process that they had been so warned about, because it had caused such problems in their past history. But Nehemiah and Ezra and these other leaders had told 'em, 'Don't marry these other peoples. Stay within the faith when you marry.' And the men and women that had returned had begun to rebuild and reform had decided 'You know, that's not such a big deal. There's not a whole lotta choices around here among the returnees.' And so they began to marry outside the faith, and they began to have children. And as they married outside the faith they began to adopt the ways and the faith of their new husbands and spouses. So after thirteen years, when Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, he comes in and he notices something strange. There are kids...you know, the 'tweeners', the ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds, right in there, and he's around them and he listens to them, and they don't know how to speak Hebrew anymore! They're speaking the languages of the people. They can no longer pick up the scriptures and read it. They no longer worship the God of Israel. They're being assimilated into the culture around them. That's in thirteen years.

The last narrative scene we have in the Old Testament is Nehemiah, one of the greatest leaders Israel ever had, and he describes it this way. He says

*So I contended with them, and I cursed them, and I struck some of them, and I pulled out their hair, and I made them swear by God...*

...to change their ways. Their hearts hadn't changed. The hearts had not changed.

And so, when you finish the Old Testament, reading the story you are left with a question. And it's the same question that God raised to Jeremiah in that prison cell. Is there really anything too difficult for God? The God who created the heavens and earth? The God who separated the Red Sea? The God who thundered from the top of Mount Sinai, who sent lightning and thunder and rain from Mount Carmel? The God who moved among the nations of the world, steering the hearts of the great powers that be to take His people out and then bring them back? Is there really anything too difficult for that God? Yes, possibly, maybe when you finish the Old Testament you're wondering can that God really change the human heart. Given everything He did with Israel—nobody has experienced God the way that people experienced Him. Given everything He did with them, when you're done you're wondering, 'My goodness, is there anything God can't do?' Yes, maybe He really can't change the human heart. Can He really break through the defiance or the doubt, or more often simply the disinterest and the distraction that continually pushes into the background of our lives. Can He really push through all of that and give us hearts that are shaped by a desire for Him, and a loyalty and devotion to Him? Can God really do that with you and me? Look at everything He did with Israel, and recognize you're no different than them. At the end of the Old Testament they haven't changed. And you wonder, "Can He really change us that deeply down here?" Can He push through your defiance of His rule in your life? Can He get past all the doubts that keep popping up and causing you to hold back? Can He really get past your disinterest, when there are so many other things that are more attractive and visual in front of you, demanding your attention? Can God really touch you in such a way that you absolutely love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind? Can God touch you in such a way, in such a way that life with Him is not demand, it's delight? It's not duty, it's desire.

Now understand, I recognize God, He did it with Israel, He can cause us to be excited in dramatic moments. And I recognize that He can work in our lives in such a way that we will say the right things. And I understand that He can work in our ways and our lives in such a way that we will keep the rules. But can He make you love Him above any and everything else? Can He? That's the question at the end of the Old Testament. And there is an answer. It's the answer of the New Testament, and the answer is absolutely...yes. And our immediate question is "How?" And the reply to that question is the wonder, the glory, the mystery of Jesus.

I want you to follow closely. No overhead here, just simply statement and I want you to follow it absolutely carefully. Where there is faith in Jesus, a faith that will respond to His words, a faith that will rely on His work in us, through us, and for us, and a faith that recognizes the wonder and the glory and the mystery of His person...where there is faith hearts change. Where there is faith in Jesus hearts change. And as we respond to His words, as we rely upon His works, and we begin to see His wonder and His glory, it's amazing. We find that we put down our defiance, He fights through our doubts, He gets us past our disinterest. We end up putting down our distractions. And we live with a heart devoted to Him. It takes years, but He will do it.

Be careful. This is not about sitting in your seat and saying, "I've really gotta love God. I'm gonna love You, God. I'm gonna love You. I'm gonna devote my strength, my treasures, my heart...God, I'm going to love You. I'm really going to love You." And you start trying to make your heart love God. And you say, "I don't love You enough, but I really want to. I'm going to love You. God, I'm going to love you." Listen...you cannot make yourself love God! You can't. It is not in you. What you do is follow Jesus, admitting that you really don't love God the way He deserves to be loved. And you simply start to follow Jesus, responding to His word, relying on His work, and coming to see His wonder. And when He's done with you, without you making it happen, there will be a love for God above all else.

That's why, as a church, our number one core commitment when we're all together is the centrality of Jesus. And that's why, when we go into this community, our great desire is to speak His name, tell His story. So I'll ask you to stand with me.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, enjoy that grace. Amen.