

Grace Amidst the Fall of Jerusalem
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Our study theme this year has been a very simple one. As we go through this school year we have consistently focused on one major goal. We put it in this way—to know the story and see the grace. It's the idea that in order to really see the wonder, the mystery, and the glory of the grace we find in Jesus Christ we need to see the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of the story behind that grace. And so we've devoted ourselves this school year to looking at that story of God's redemptive grace as it works its way out in history, in the pages of scripture, so that we can grow in our appreciation, our understanding, in such a way that it grips our soul...the grace we find in Jesus.

Today we come to, I believe, one of the darkest episodes in that story. At the same time, as we come to that very, very dark episode we are going to see, I believe, one of the brightest promises of grace in all of scripture, a promise of grace that is shaping our lives right now. The episode is found, the story of it is found in a couple different places in scripture. We're gonna look at the record of it found in 2 Chronicles 36. And in just a minute I'm gonna read us through that passage, a short section of about ten verses.

And let me set the stage for you as you find that and you go back into your Old Testament pages and you find that book...2 Chronicles, go to the very end of it. You're going back almost 586 years before Jesus, 586 years before Christ. It is a very desperate time in Israel's history. The once great nation made up of twelve tribes following the great leader King David has become simply two small, struggling tribes trying to hang on for its very existence, caught up in the power plays in the middle east, being trampled once by the Egyptians, then the Babylonians, then the Egyptians, then the Babylonians. They're like a ping-pong ball that keeps getting batted back and forth. At this time they had been beaten into submission by the great Babylonian empire three times. And they are now a client kingdom under its protection...only it wasn't protection. It was under their enslavement. And Babylonians demanded exorbitant taxes and they made life very oppressive on this poor Israelite nation, struggling for its existence.

The leader of Israel at this time is a descendant of David named Zedekiah. He had a Jewish name, but the king of Babylon, when he had beaten Israel into submission once again and had established this man as king, he changed his name. It was a way to demonstrate the Babylonian power, that they could even name the king of Israel. Zedekiah was an indecisive young man. He couldn't make up his mind what to do. He would be one time persuaded by the authorities of his country, and the leaders and the nobles; and the next time he would be persuaded by what was happening on the international scene. And he had a tough time deciding which direction to go and what to do under this Babylonian oppression.

During these years there was a prophet who was very central to the story, a prophet by the name of Jeremiah. By this time he is an old man. Throughout these years, for four decades, Jeremiah had preached in Israel. And he had preached over and over again the message of God, and he had made it very clear to the people of Israel that the problem was not political; the problem with their nation was not economic; the problem with their nation was deeply spiritual. And the question wasn't their alliances with Egypt or Babylon; the question was their allegiance to their God.

That sets the stage. Read with me in 2 Chronicles as we follow what happens. Picking up the reading at verse 11. It says

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; and he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar [the king of Babylon] who had made him swear by God. But he stiffened his neck and he hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nation; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem.

They actually set up pagan idols in the temple for God in Jerusalem.

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; and they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of God arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 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, and 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 he burned the house of God and he broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and he burned all its fortified buildings with fire and he destroyed all its valuable articles. Those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia.

The chronicler puts it in pretty straightforward terms. He's just writing down the details. The picture is dramatic. For two years—588 BC to 586 BC—the Babylonians kept the inhabitants of Jerusalem trapped within its walls...two years. Within those walls as the months went by there was famine, there was pestilence, and for all those who tried to escape out of the walls there was the sword. All the horrors you can imagine in such a situation took place. In the end the Israelites were eating each other. When they fell and the walls gave way the Babylonian approach to warfare was highly psychological. They wanted to make sure that when a city resisted it would be punished extensively and in such a way that no other city would want to try...*dare* try to do what they had done. And they did that when they tore Jerusalem apart brick by brick. Think of the worst warfare atrocities and understand they took place in Jerusalem when it fell.

It is a dramatic, dramatic difference from the way things had been shortly before. I mean, go back 400 years when David was the first king of the Davidic line. And the nation of Israel was gathered in Jerusalem, the new capital, and they were celebrating the wonder and the glory of God making them a people and giving them a king like David. And God made a promise to David, a tremendous promise that David's line, his descendants, would rule on the throne of Israel forever, and that someday there would be a great and glorious king upon the throne of David, and He would make all things right—not just in Jerusalem, but in the world! And now it's a mere 400 years later, and the last descendant of David to sit on the throne of David, Zedekiah, is captured as he scrambles out of the walls of his ruined city. He is dragged before Nebuchadnezzar, and the last thing he's allowed to see are his sons being put to death. And then his eyes are gouged out and he's drug off the Babylon like a captured dog.

You go 'What happened?' It's a pattern we've seen as we go through the Old Testament, repeated where we'll see works of God's grace. If you try to plot the story line of the Old Testament you'll see sin, but you'll see God respond with grace; and then you'll see another sin that follows up. And it just seems like every act of grace is followed with sin. We began with the rebellion, that very first one when Adam and Eve rejected the rule of God, and all of humanity said, 'No God, You are not going to rule us!' And God responds with grace, amazing grace. He gives a promise to Abraham that in him He would bless him with a nation, He would bless him with a people, and ultimately through a descendant of Abraham He would bless the entire world, the world that rejected God! God promises them 'Someday you'll be blessed through a descendant of this man, Abraham.'

And we look for that grace to flow, and instead we find the nation, the people, the descendants of Abraham living as slaves in Egypt and we say, 'What happened?' And then God brings them out of Egypt; and He brings them out and he forms them into a nation. He meets this people that had started out as just a man and a woman—Abraham and Sarah—and now they had become a great people. And He brings them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, out to Mount Sinai, and there He enters into a covenant with them, and He makes them into His people. They come to exist as a nation, a great and wondrous nation, the only pure theocracy to ever have existed. And we say, 'Now the blessings are gonna flow.' But instead they turn their back on God, and they wander in the wilderness. But God, in His grace, brings 'em into the Promised Land, and He gives them the land flowing with milk and honey. And we say, 'Now...now maybe.' And instead we watch the nation disintegrate into the chaos of the judges, into the anarchy where every man simply did what he wanted to do. And then He raised up that great king, David, the king after God's own heart. And He promised David that 'Someday there'll be a king, a descendant of yours, that will rule on your throne forever and establish justice and righteousness forever.' And we finally say, 'Now we have a solution,' and we end up with the exile. It's a pattern that's become so repetitive. We wonder what is going on.

In Jeremiah, that ancient prophet who prophesys that Jerusalem fell, God spoke through him and God very clearly explained what was happening. In Jeremiah chapter 2, Jeremiah is speaking for God and he says this. He says God says

"For My people have committed two evils..."

There's two things My people do, and they consistently do it. There's two things goin' on here. Number one...'

"They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters..."

It's a powerful word picture here. He says

"They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." Jeremiah 2:13

God's sayin' 'My people keep turning away from Me, flowing with life for them, and they go over and they dig into the rocks and they form these little troughs, hoping to catch rainwater.' That's what keeps happening. We see it over and over again. The people want security. The people want satisfaction. They want success. They want significance and things we all want. But instead of finding them in the relationship with God, instead of finding those wondrous things and the reality of who God is and all that He is, they keep turning and trying to find it in other things, in other relationships. They keep trying to build these cisterns that won't hold water. That's what's happening...over and over again in Israel's history. And as we see it repeated so many times we start getting' tired of it. It's kinda like 'Larry, do we got another verse of the same thing?' We begin to ask, 'Why? Why does it keep happening like that?' I mean, think about it. Israel was a privileged people. There is no group of people in all of human history that have experienced God the way Israel experienced God as a people. They experienced His miraculous deliverance as a people led out of Egypt across the Red Sea, fed from manna from heaven, water from a rock in the wilderness—God, there, delivering them.

They not only experienced His miraculous deliverance like no other people have ever experienced...they actually heard His voice. Gathered at the base of Mount Sinai, God thundered the great Ten Commandments to them. The mountain shook; there was clouds of dark smoke; there was lightning, there was thunder, and there was the actual voice of God. *They heard Him speak!* They had His instructions—clear, simple, concrete, direct. They knew exactly what He wanted and when He wanted it, and how He wanted it in a relationship with Him. There was no confusion. And they experienced God's faithfulness to His word. They experienced His blessings when they responded to it. They experienced the consequences of ignoring His warnings. It was clear; it was immediate. They had that sort of relationship with God. It was not confusing, it was not vague. They knew His patience, they knew His compassion. They knew His glorious presence in the temple in their midst, where they could speak to Him and He would answer, working in their nation for good. And yet they consistently...they consistently turned away from Him, the fountain of living water, and dug their own little cisterns looking for success, for satisfaction, for significance, for security, in pits they couldn't hold.

Question: why? Through Jeremiah answers that question. He goes right to the central issue. He puts it this way in Jeremiah 17. God, speaking through Jeremiah, says

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

You look at Israel's history and you can't understand it. And the reason you can't is because the human heart is that deceitful, it is that dark, it is that wayward. The human heart wants security; it wants satisfaction; it wants significance; it wants success; it wants all those things. But the deceptive thing about that is they really don't care who they get it from. The human heart wants those things more than the human heart wants God. And if they can have those things, if the human heart can have those things without God, they will seek it without God. In fact, they will persistently and consistently try to find those things without God, because that is what they want. That is what the human heart wants. The human heart does not want God. If you could have complete security...heaven...if you could have your heart's satisfaction of anything you want, you could have success in every endeavor you've undertaken including raising your family, and you could do somethin' that really matters...if you could have all that without God would you take it? The human heart says "yes".

That's the Christian position based upon what God has said. And that's how, when Israel fell, God explained it. And notice how He explains it. He said, 'The heart is more deceitful than all else; who can know it?' You can't even understand your own heart. But He says, 'the heart'; He doesn't say 'Israel's heart'. He doesn't say that Israel is just, you know, a poor choice among the peoples. Israel's heart is no different than our heart. In fact, they're representative of all our hearts. We don't want God...we do not want God.

But...and here's where the greatest promise of grace in all of scripture comes. It's found in Jeremiah 32, and I realize I'm gonna push us a little late today, and I'm gonna do it because I can't skip this chapter. Jeremiah 32...that's the chapter to mark in your Bible. It starts off like this in the very opening. We're told that the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah. If you go back and trace what that means, it means that the siege had already started, and that is indicated as you go on into verse 2. It says that the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem. In other words, this message came to Jeremiah right while the walls were encircled and people were dying of famine and pestilence, and the sword was outside. And they have Jeremiah, we're told, in prison, in their house arrest in the palace. The king was tired of hearing Jeremiah. He was tired of Jeremiah's saying, 'Listen, the Babylonians are gonna win unless you repent. Listen, give up.' He was tired of hearing Jeremiah, so he put him in prison and said, 'Be quiet!'

And there, under house arrest, an amazing sequence happens. Somebody comes, and God forewarns Jeremiah that it's gonna happen. And it comes...one of his relatives comes and offers to Jeremiah to sell him some real estate! Now I tell you what, when the siege has been goin' on for two years it's a buyers' market! And Jeremiah buys a piece of property in Jerusalem. And then he follows that up with a prayer, confused prayer in the middle part of the chapter, where he says to God, he says 'Why are you having me do this? This city is gonna die! People are gonna be torn apart! We're gonna go to pieces! Why in the world are You having me buy a piece of property, seal the deal, do out the paperwork, and hide it in a piece of earth? Why?' And God comes back with a glorious promise at the last part of that chapter. And He goes on and He tells to Jeremiah, He says, 'Listen, these people are goin' into captivity. This city is gonna fall. But I tell you what...I am going to bring them back.' And as He gives the promise of bringing them back, He comes near the end of that chapter, chapter 32... He says in verse 36, He says

"Now therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning this city of which you say, 'It is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine and by pestilence.' Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands which I have driven them to."

And He says this in verse 38. He says

"They shall be My people..."

'Someday again they will be My people...'

"...and I will be their God..."

...and then this is the line...

"...and I will give them one heart and one way..."

'I will give them one heart and one way.' He repeats that when He goes a little further, and He comes down towards the end of that in verse 40. He says

"I will make an everlasting covenant with them..."

'I'm gonna make a new promise, a new covenant, with this group of people. And My promise and My commitment to them is...'

"...that I will not turn away from them, to do them good..."

'I will never again turn away from them. I will be there for them.' And then He adds this statement. He says,

"I will put the fear of Me..."

'...the reverence of Me, the honor of Me...'

"...in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me."

'I'm gonna change their hearts. I'm gonna go beyond miracles; I'm gonna go beyond speaking from heaven; I'm gonna go beyond giving them prophets that speak; I'm gonna go beyond answering their prayers; I'm gonna go beyond blessing them; and I'm gonna go beyond cursing them. I am going to give them new hearts.'

One of the last prophecies Jeremiah gave came to this same statement. It actually comes earlier in the sequence of prophecies in Jeremiah, but they're not put in chronological order. If you go to chapter 31 you'll find this same promise repeated. This is near the end, one of the last prophecies Jeremiah gave. He says, speaking for God, 'I will make a new covenant with this people.'

"I will put My law within them, and on their hearts I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people... They will know me from the least of them to the greatest of them...and I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

God says, 'I will change the deceitful heart of My people.' That's a promise of grace. It goes beyond promise now. It is a reality.

Another dark night. Jesus is with His disciples in a small room, and He has told them that He is going to leave. The next day He's going to be arrested, and He's gonna be crucified. And He tells His disciples that that is what is gonna happen. And they are panicked. They don't know what to do. They're all disturbed. And as He calms them, as He tries to give them perspective, as He tries to settle them, He does something amazing. He gives them some bread. And as they share the bread He says, 'Eat this and remember Me. Remember My body that is given for you.' And then He gives them to drink of a cup, and He says, 'And as you drink this remember Me, My blood being shed for you.' And what He's doing, He's instituting what we call the Lord's Supper, Communion, in which throughout the generations God's people have always gone back and they eat of that bread, and they drink of that cup, as we do the first Sunday of every month. And it's Jesus' way of saying, 'Remember Me as the One who died for you. My body was given for you. My blood was shed for you. Remember Me that way after this happens. Remember Me as the One who died for you.' In the middle of that He makes an amazing statement. As He gives them the cup He says this to 'em. He says, 'This cup which is poured out for you today is the new covenant in My blood.'

You know the story. You need to see the grace. What Jesus is saying is 'My blood, shed on that cross, is gonna inaugurate that covenant, that promise made so long ago as the walls of Jerusalem fell apart...the promise that someday God would change hearts.' What He's sayin' is 'With My death there'll be a grace released in this world that will change people's hearts towards God.' With His death there'll be a grace released that causes people to love God. The new covenant was being established by Jesus. That's what the cross was about, and it's ours to experience. Generations after the prophet in the prison cell was given the promise, we can now enter into it because of Jesus. It's simple—we simply follow His words, by faith, to the fountain of living water. And there in our relationship with God find our security, find our satisfaction, find our definition and our measure of success, and find whatever significance we have. And the amazing wonder and glory of it is we follow His words by faith with the promise of a new heart that will love God.

One of my favorite writers, a pastor by the name of John Piper, has a sentence that is embedded in my mind. And he talks about the Christian conversion, and he says the Christian conversion, the Christian heart does not just find new duties. It finds a new desire. It not only finds new delights...I mean, excuse me, new deeds, it finds a new delight. In Christian conversion the heart not only finds new tasks, it finds a new treasure. A couple weeks ago we put it this way...Jesus says when He is done with us we will be done with sin. The flip side of that in the new covenant is Jesus says when He is done with us we will love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind.

There is only one person that can cause your heart to love God. His name is Jesus. And when He went to that cross He became the One who released the grace of that covenant.

I ask you to stand with me. My voice is so bad today I'm glad Joel had us pray this prayer earlier. I'm just gonna lead us in a different prayer at this time. I'll ask you to bow with me.

Our Father in heaven,

We come before You and we have one prayer as a people. My prayer for us, Father, is that You would renew us in the reality of Jesus to such a degree, knowing His glory, His mystery, and His wonder, that Father, our hearts would cherish nothing aside from You.

In His name we pray, amen.