

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 31:27–34

<sup>27</sup> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. <sup>28</sup> And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. <sup>29</sup> In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

<sup>30</sup> But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

### A New Covenant

<sup>31</sup> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, [a] says the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## MESSAGE – The days are surely coming

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

What a curious phrase this is – it’s very visceral isn’t it? When I hear this I can feel that sharp hardness – that acid bite of sourness. Kind of a harsher version of that old Welch’s grape juice ad with the little girl who said ‘You can feel it in your cheeks.’

What exactly does this mean? Is this a story about super grapes? Are they so sour that they actually have intergenerational effects? That would be pretty impressive – wine that can give your kids a hangover.

And that’s not far off from what Jeremiah was talking about, but the grapes are only a symbol. What Jeremiah was really getting at is that we tend to blame a lot of our problems on the generation before us. This is very true of the folks that Jeremiah was writing to – the Judeans who were living in exile in Babylon – specifically the younger ones – the 1.5 or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation exiles. Those who were either children when the exile occurred, or who were actually born in Babylon to exiled parents.

As they grew and learned about the promised land of milk and honey that was their birthright and then looked around at their lives in captivity they rather predictably grew bitter. ‘What have we done that we are doomed to a life of servitude in a foreign land,’ they thought. ‘Was is

not our parents that sinned and angered God? Why do we suffer the sins of our fathers? Why are we reaping what they have sown – why must we live the sourness of their decisions?’

Good questions, I think. Is it fair that the sins of previous are born by the present one? No, it’s not. It’s not fair. Then again, sin has never been about what is fair. Sin is a perversion of fairness. The problem with sin is that it has unavoidable consequences, and those consequences affect more than the sinners themselves. The effects of sin are felt throughout creation.

If I gamble away Noah’s college fund, then he will be the one who suffers for it. Is it fair? No. But when we sin we introduce something into God’s creation that was never intended to be here, and human beings don’t have the ability to erase those sins that we create. We can cover them up for a spell, we can turn our backs and pretend not to see, but sin and its effects remain.

What is more, sin is cumulative. Because the effects of sin cannot be eradicated they persist like plastics in the environment. They build up over time. Every sin of greed, hate, slander, and oppression still remain as part of our environment. They are the backdrop to our lives.

That is not to say that there isn’t good and beauty as well – there is much good in the world, much that is Godly. But the good does not make the bad go away. The bad abides.

This cumulative nature of sin is what Christian theologians call the depravity of man. If that sounds extreme, that’s because it is. We humans began with simple disobedience to God; what I want, not what you want. In short order that led to murder; retaliation became a thing and Cain’s seven-fold vengeance quickly ballooned to Lamech’s seventy-seven-fold vengeance.

Individual murders led to wars, intertribal conflicts slaughtered dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, and finally in the last century - millions.

Our violence is not limited to ourselves. Recent studies suggest that humans have driven half the species on earth to extinction. Oceans are filling with garbage while sea levels rise. Deserts grow while rain forests shrink, glaciers retreat. Our past sins are making their presence known – they cannot stay hidden, all eventually comes to light.

And so our current generations mimic the generations surrounding Jeremiah – we look around at our circumstances and we blame those who have gone before us. Certainly this is obvious in the campaign of young people led by Greta Thunburg who are protesting our current environmental policies.

‘Your sins have robbed us of our childhoods, and our future.’ This sentence could be uttered by both Greta as well as any young Jew growing up a servant in Babylon instead of a free citizen of Israel. And they are not wrong.

Since the effects of sin accumulate and are not destroyed, the sins of the mothers and fathers are indeed visited upon their offspring, even down to the fourth and fifth generations.

There is an interesting social dynamic that plays out alongside this increasing degradation. As each generation is born and the total weight of sin gets greater, each generation has more to complain about – more to blame on their elders. And as we put more and more blame on preceding generations we become ever more convinced of our own self-righteousness.

This process seems to have accelerated, or at least been given a powerful voice, with the advent of social media. While at first the internet was predominantly cat videos and nudie pictures, these days the internet, including professional journalistic media, is dominated by strident voices denouncing people of the past and present who have been convicted in the court of popular opinion.

This is the age of removing statues, and renaming schools. We look back to key figures of the past and judge them according to our present standards, then label them racists, sexists, haters, and oppressors.

I'm not saying that these descriptors are untrue, but in our haste to signal our own virtue we reduce these people of the past to two dimensional caricatures so that we may tear them down. We don't gain our sense of self worth from our own accomplishments, but rather by disparaging and belittling those who came before us.

That is the curious thing about our human condition – that even as the generations continue and we get further from God and further mired in our accumulated sins, we consider that we are getting better and better. As we are able to assign more blame and point more fingers we feel that we are morally superior – that we are progressive modern people. We smugly judge those who have walked the path before us and in fact we are now so self-aware that we've had to make up a new word to describe ourselves. The new catchword is 'woke.' Previous generations were sleepwalking through life, but we are 'woke.' Apparently our new self-awareness doesn't extend to an awareness of grammar, but grammar after all is merely another expression of authoritarian oppression and so we can safely disregard it.

So we have two streams, two opposing pathways; culture informs us that we are ever more advanced, refined, and progressive – so much more civilized than any other generation. The bible informs us that we are sinking deeper into sin and that we are in desperate need of help.

So which is it? Are we getting better or worse? Are we woke, are we sleepwalking or living in a dream?

The answer to that depends who we listen to. In Jeremiah's time there were plenty of would-be prophets telling people that God had been angry with their parents and so took their land away, but would be restoring it very soon to the present generation of deserving do-gooders.

Likewise in Timothy's generation, six hundred years later, the people had itchy ears – they sought out for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, who would tell them the things they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

Nothing has changed. We too seek for ourselves teachers who will whisper sweet nothings into our ears and tell us how evolved, woke, and progressive we are; that the world has never been better, and likely never will be better than it is now with us at the helm.

We can safely turn away from the naysayers who would quote traditional wisdom to us, after all, since we've now determined that those giants of the past were merely slave-owning racists we can disregard everything else that they might stand for.

Since our society and our teachers tell us that we are clearly superior to all who preceded us, then we have a responsibility to blame all of our problems on them while we preen in our own woke glory. We burn down the institutions of the past to usher in a new anything-goes paradigm in which we are the only masters of our own domains.

But what if that is all a lie? What if we are not getting better and better but instead are labouring under a heavier and heavier burden of depravity? What if the accumulation of sin is pushing us farther and farther from God? What if our understanding is flawed, and our celebration of self is really a case of the emperor's new clothes?

Some see our elevation of the current modern progressive generations as a natural realization of physical and social evolution – but could it be that it is simply blind pride and folly? How would we know the difference?

There is something called the **Dunning-Kruger** Effect. What this refers to is the inability of incompetent people to recognize their own incompetence. We don't know how much we don't know – that's why terrible drivers think that they are great. They don't realize that their lack of accidents is not due to their skill – it's because everyone else on the road is working together to keep them alive and save them from their own mistakes.

Likewise, as we judge the generations before us we should consider that perhaps we aren't occupying the lofty moral perch that we assume – perhaps we are trying to put ourselves in a place properly reserved for God. Perhaps, instead of turning our critical focus to others we should examine ourselves with the same intensity.

Let's return to a fuller reading of my opening quote from Jeremiah.

In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children's teeth are set on edge.”

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

Jeremiah was foretelling a time in which people would no longer blame their parents for their troubles, but would be held to account for their own actions. All shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

Essentially Jeremiah was saying to the exiles ‘Yes, your parents sinned and so were exiled, but you’re no pure flower either. As you complain and blame and pass the buck you are earning your own exile through your own actions.’

Ain’t that the truth. As long as we point the finger at others we can remain willfully blind to our own shortcomings. In fact, keeping busy pointing the finger pretty much guarantees that we will never address our own sin. It’s always others who need to change. Not us.

But the days are surely coming, said God, when each of us will be called to account. It will do no good to be pointing at the speck in our brother’s eye while ignoring our own disfigurement.

We’ve got our own flaws – that’s where our responsibility lies. After all, we won’t be judged for other people’s sins – we’re making our own bed.

It’s not about other people – it’s about us.

We need to jettison the false teachers, those we like to listen to because they tell us that we are great just the way we are, that we don’t need to change – that the rest of the world does.

We need to embrace authentic teachers – the writer of Timothy tells us that scripture is just such a teacher – an inspired teacher that reproves and corrects.

We recoil against correction – we don’t like it. It reminds us of our flaws. That’s why we turn to the false teachers.

But the teacher of scripture has a miraculous message for us. God said ‘I will be their God, and they will be my people. They shall all know me; I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This forgiveness is freedom from the blame game. We don’t have to continue to shovel manure onto others to keep it off ourselves. This is good news indeed.

It seems that our present culture has things wrong. We surround ourselves with people who will affirm us and tell us how great we are, but what is the more hopeful message; that you are perfect the way you are, that you are your best self and need not improve in any way – or that you *are* much more that what you are now, and that God is busy clearing away the deadwood to reveal that more heavenly self?

I choose the latter – while there is some sting of reproof or correction in realizing my own sin, there is also hope and a future. When I vacate the judgement throne I find that God as a judge

is not interested in condemnation, but rather in grace and growth. God judges to correct, not to condemn.

As Jeremiah urged, so too do I. Turn away from false prophets who grease your ears with platitudes – turn instead to the God who seeks that you have life, and have it abundantly, who calls you to more than you are now, more than you can dream of being.