

Scriptures

Jeremiah 31:27-34 (GNT)

27 “I, the Lord, say that the time is coming when I will fill the land of Israel and Judah with people and animals. **28** And just as I took care to uproot, to pull down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to demolish them, so I will take care to plant them and to build them up. **29** When that time comes, people will no longer say,

‘The parents ate the sour grapes,
But the children got the sour taste.’

30 Instead, those who eat sour grapes will have their own teeth set on edge; and everyone will die because of their own sin.”

31 The Lord says, “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. **32** It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. **33** The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **34** None of them will have to teach a neighbor to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Psalms 119:97-106 (GNT)

⁹⁷ How I love your law!

I think about it all day long.

⁹⁸ Your commandment is with me all the time
and makes me wiser than my enemies.

⁹⁹ I understand more than all my teachers,
because I meditate on your instructions.

¹⁰⁰ I have greater wisdom than those who are old,
because I obey your commands.

¹⁰¹ I have avoided all evil conduct,
because I want to obey your word.

¹⁰² I have not neglected your instructions,
because you yourself are my teacher.

¹⁰³ How sweet is the taste of your instructions—
sweeter even than honey!

¹⁰⁴ I gain wisdom from your laws,
and so I hate all bad conduct.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to guide me
and a light for my path.

¹⁰⁶ I will keep my solemn promise
to obey your just instructions.

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5 (GNT)

14 But as for you, continue in the truths that you were taught and firmly believe. You know who your teachers were, **15** and you remember that ever since you were a child, you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **16** All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, **17** so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and because he is coming to rule as King, I solemnly urge you 2 to preach the message, to insist upon proclaiming it (whether the time is right or not), to convince, reproach, and encourage, as you teach with all patience. 3 The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear. 4 They will turn away from listening to the truth and give their attention to legends. 5 But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances; endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the Good News, and perform your whole duty as a servant of God.

I've been really enjoying this time with Jeremiah, I haven't read this book in a while. When we left Jeremiah last week he was telling God's people to get settled in, that they would be in Babylon for some time. He continued to talk about how those left in Jerusalem would be further crushed and that the exiles in Babylon were not the ones being punished, but in fact were the faithful remnant who would eventually be going home to rebuild Jerusalem. In this reading, Jeremiah is talking about the future that God has planned for his people.

As I was reading earlier this week I was struck by the sour grapes phrase in Jeremiah. This isn't the sour grapes expression we commonly use about a sore loser. That expression comes from one of Aesop's fables in which a fox tries to get some plump juicy grapes, and when he can't reach them determines that they must have been sour anyway and not worth having.

This sour grapes phrase is more obscure, and is wonderfully evocative: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' It's not common, but it is very descriptive – the image and the implication comes across pretty clearly.

The parents take an action – and the children take the consequence. In this particular case the consequence is almost comical; a parent bites a sour grape and the kids face screws up in reaction. But the way it plays out in practice, this idea is not comical at all.

None of us wants to pay the price for another's behavior, and certainly not for that of our parents. I may decide to take on the consequences of my wife's choices – after all, I chose to be married to her. But I did not choose my parents. And though I chose to have children, I didn't get to choose who those children would be. Having my fate yoked to the actions of others that are just arbitrarily in my life is an onerous burden. It doesn't seem fair.

Indeed, in this passage, God is telling the people through Jeremiah to stop using this phrase. The reason is that people were using it as an excuse. Many of the people in exile in Babylon were using it to excuse themselves from any responsibility for their plight. The reason we are being destroyed, they would say, is because our ancestors sinned and now we, as innocent people, must bear the burden of that sin.

God's response to this is 'Yes, your ancestors did sin. But look at yourselves - you are still sinning – there is plenty of blame to go around here so stop blaming your problems on your parents.' Why do you think the exile was to last 70 years as we heard last week? For the same reason that the trip from Egypt to the Promised land took 40 years – there were problems that had to be worked out along the way. The earlier Israelites weren't ready to enter their promised land because they were still a proud, stiff-necked, grumbling, murmuring people. These exiles were not ready to return home for exactly the same reasons.

But, God did promise them that there would come a time when they would return to their Promised Land with his blessing and under his providence. And one of the signs of this happening is that people would no longer be blaming their problems on their parents.

Are we there yet? Certainly in fulfillment of prophesy King Cyrus began the return of the Israelites to their land. It took place in a few waves of migrations that actually covered the reign of four kings, but it did happen. People and animals were once again in Jerusalem as Jeremiah wrote.

However, this wasn't a full restoration. The Israelites returned to a much smaller territory that wasn't really independent – it remained the province of a foreign king. Over the following centuries the land was controlled by the Hellenists, then the Romans of Jesus' day. Israel never again had a king like David or Solomon. They hadn't returned in power and glory yet.

The modern state of Israel was created after the Second World war – many saw this as marking the fulfillment of many of these end time prophesies. It may mark some kind of beginning, but certainly the modern secular state of Israel is not the fulfillment of prophesy in which justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Those days that God promised are surely coming don't seem to be here yet. They have begun perhaps, but they are not completed. Which leaves us in an interesting position – we're living in in-between times, the time of already and not yet. God has declared his intentions. He will watch over us to build and to plant. And he is making a new covenant. It has begun.

We couldn't abide by the old covenant – the covenant of law was death to us. That's in part because the law was external – it was a code given by God to the people through Moses. And the people couldn't even begin to keep it. It's not as though it was tricky or complicated – 10 simple rules really – but people couldn't abide by it.

So God put us on notice in this passage of Jeremiah that something new is coming. A new covenant in which God's law is not external, written on tablets of stone – but internal, written on our very hearts. We think of hearts today as the center for our emotions, but the people Jeremiah was writing to understood the heart as the location of will and intelligence. The heart controlled the being, and the law was to be written on that heart. This changes the law from an external thing that we can argue about and debate to an internal matter where we simply know what is right.

Now, God says, the law is in you. What this means is that we become responsible for our actions. If the law is external, then I can be led astray by crafty no-goodniks, I can be swayed by smooth talkers. But if the knowledge is within me – no longer can I claim ignorance. I have within me a knowledge of the will of God.

The psalmist tells us to meditate on this knowledge all day long; it makes us wise and understanding, and keeps us from walking in the ways of the wicked. Meditation upon the law written upon our hearts will bring us life.

It will also set us free from the sour grapes inherited from our ancestors. Now – to be clear – the effects of sin will be felt through generations. An alcoholic and abusive parent will leave scars on their children

and spouse. The truth is that sin is present in our world, and until the final judgement it will continue to burden creation.

What writing the law on our hearts has accomplished is not to stop the consequence of sin, but to slow the propagation of sin. We all bear scars, and we all inflict scars. But we no longer have an excuse for doing so.

While the law remained external, we could find ways around it. We can fall back on the way we were raised as our excuse for poor behavior. But with God's will in our hearts, although we can attempt to justify being hurtful to others because that's what we saw, deep inside we know that it's wrong. We now have individual responsibility before God.

We can't blame our shortcomings on family or society. Surely, we all get dealt a different hand in life – some people will have a very hard life with incredible challenges. When we compare the lot of a child growing up in the Syrian conflict to a North American child from a privileged family we quickly see that some people are inheriting almost unbearable burdens.

But God is not judging us on final outcomes in the way the world does. God will judge each of us by what we do with what we've been given. To those who have received much, much will be expected. This new covenant of God, of writing his law upon our hearts, gives us much more responsibility, but it gives us a greater freedom. No matter what difficult circumstances we live in, we now have direct access to God through this law on our hearts and through the Holy Spirit which was sent by Jesus.

This doesn't mean that all is finally well and resolved in creation though. Though the psalmist writes of his joy in meditating upon the law of God, there is another group of people who reject this law. These are the people with itchy ears.

These people don't want to hear truth – they will look around for teachers to suit their own desires. Basically they will look for people who tell them whatever they want to hear. Typically the kind of messages people like this seek go along the lines of 'The universe is here to serve you. Visualize your desires and they will manifest themselves. There is no right or wrong, only what you feel. You deserve.....whatever.' This kind of thinking is so very prevalent in our culture these days.

We can be on guard against this kind of seeking – against pursuing this bottom-feeding kind of affirmation. We'll know we're sucking up garbage if the message that we're receiving makes us feel good *and* requires nothing of us. Reality isn't like that. Reality is not infinitely malleable by our feelings. Reality exists whether we approve of it or not – it has soft parts, but also hard edges.

We can try to avoid reality by seeking out sycophantic advisors and counsellors – many people do this. But the law of God written upon our hearts means that even as we try to avoid reality it keeps coming back to us. Those who chase false teachings know deep down that they are false. The relativistic feel good philosophies and the driven success-achieving philosophies both leave us empty; we remain unfulfilled. We may get distracted for a time, but the word of God prevails. We know better.

Now, it may seem that God has kind of done an end run around our defenses – by giving us an internal law instead of external he has taken away any excuses we may come up with. We have been saddled with a responsibility that we didn't ask for. I don't see it that way.

If we go back to the beginning of the sermon and the fulfilment of prophecy we remember that while there is evidence that some aspects of prophesy are being fulfilled, it is not yet complete. The story is far from over at this point.

Some centuries after Jeremiah we encounter Jesus – God himself. Jesus declared the presence of the Kingdom of God – the incarnation itself was the inbreaking of God into creation. This kingdom began tiny and insignificant. As tiny and insignificant as a baby born in a cattle stall in a backwater village.

This kingdom, Jesus tells us, is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree, or yeast that spreads throughout a batch of dough. It is like a hidden treasure, buried in a field. This kingdom of God is something that is growing in and among the world, transforming it – even transcending it. The world today is like a wheat field seeded with weeds – God’s kingdom and the kingdom of the world are intermixed, overlapped.

When God began the new covenant, when he wrote his law upon our hearts, he gave us a choice. This new kingdom is present. It is here, it is growing. It leads to life because it comes from God and leads back to God. If we follow the law of our hearts, not only do we become part of this kingdom, we become ambassadors – we become agents of change.

This grand remaking of the world is what we have been invited into. We haven’t been tricked into some kind of slavish obedience – that’s what the world does to us with its empty promises. We have instead been called to become freedom fighters.

Not just fighting for freedom, though that is what we do; we seek to liberate creation from the bondage of sin. But more than freedom fighters – we are free fighters. What I mean by that is that we are not fighting for an ideology that we have been taught. We are not fighting for a government. Our peaceful struggle to liberate all of the world from the tyranny of evil comes from within, from our hearts. Our effort is the purest expression of our selves – it is our very nature. Fulfilling the law is the same thing as fulfilling ourselves, our deepest desires.

An external law is our antagonist – but this internal law is not an external judge or something we need to live up to, it is the inspiration to a new way of life, loving justice and walking humbly in relationship with God.

God has placed his mark upon you. Your heart is inscribed with the name of his son. No more teeth on edge, no more itchy ears. Only a fullness of joy that finds its expression in acts of love that declare the presence of Emmanuel, God among us.

Amen.