

02-04-14a Ecclesiastes

The Word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and the spirit and of the joints and the marrow, and is a critic of the thoughts and intents of the heart. All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be mature, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. Be diligent to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Those are the words that have opened many a lesson that we have heard in the past. It is a healthy reminder of the fact that when we assemble to study the Word of God, it is nourishment for our souls. It is the essential fuel on which our spiritual life runs.

The refueling, of course, is not, in fact, running the race. It is the preparation for the race. It is easy to measure ourselves and say, Well, I am studying the Word of God.

Therefore, I am making progress in my spiritual maturity and in my walk with the Lord and in my ability to express faith and hope and love. But it is not the pit stops that we make where we have our tanks topped off and our tires changed and our deficiencies noted and hopefully remedied. It is being out on the track.

It is heading toward the finish line that really counts. So as we take a moment here to prepare ourselves for the study of the Word of God, it is, I think, healthy for us to put our lives and the study of God's Word in perspective that there is nothing more important than for us to apprise ourselves of the content of the Word of God. But it is what we do with what we get here this morning that is essential.

So we'll pause and take a moment to ask God's blessing on us as we study and to clear our minds and prepare our hearts for the ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Father, we thank you for this day. We thank you that in our land there is freedom to assemble and to worship.

We thank you for our government and our form of government that was established on the foundation of your Word by godly men whose faithfulness persists as a blessing down to the present day in spite of attacks and distortions and attempts by many to twist and to erode away the biblical perspective and the freedom that is our heritage from our founding fathers. We thank you for the privilege we have of gathering this morning and studying your Word. We pray that we will find the truths therein illuminated by your Spirit, that they will stick with us and become the grist on which our meditations will dwell in the hours and days ahead and that we will find in it the strength, the perspective, and the power to fulfill your purpose for us in this life.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Our scripture reading this morning comes from Jeremiah chapter 33.

Jeremiah chapter 33. We remind ourselves frequently that the record of the history of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament was preserved for our instruction because the purpose and the end of the ages have come upon us. The age in which we live by the grace of God and by the foreknowledge and predestination of God, God decided to bring us into being and to live our lives in this culminating age that brings together everything that Jesus died on the cross to accomplish.

Saints who lived in the Old Testament age availed themselves of God's grace in prospect. They looked forward to the cross. It was foreshadowed in the law and in the rituals and in the feasts and in the history itself of the nation of Israel and those patriarchs who were in the line of faith from which that nation sprang.

We look at the completed work of Christ on the cross. We reap kingdom blessings and kingdom benefits that have not yet been granted to those who died in faith, not having received the promises. We have, as the song says, a foretaste of glory divine.

By the way, that assurance, that is hope, isn't it? It's looking ahead. What a foretaste of glory divine. We are heirs of salvation.

We are the beneficiaries of God's goodness and his love, as that song goes on to say. So it's fascinating as we see God's word expressed to Israelites in the Old Testament age because in the promises to the nation of Israel we find application for our individual daily walk through this life. We also have great curiosity about exactly what's going to happen when Jesus returns.

The popular notion is that we either die and go to heaven or Jesus comes back and we're raptured and we're with him and we're in heaven and we're walking streets of gold. We can see the pearly gates and there are angels and everyone is glad to be there and it's just a wonderful eternity of bliss in the light of God's presence. There's nothing particularly wrong with that view, but it is very incomplete and it leaves a lot of things out because we don't go to dwell in heaven.

We're going to be resurrected, we're going to be judged at the judgment seat of Christ, we're going to spend seven years as it's pictured in the scriptures, a honeymoon as the Church, the Bride of Christ, is united with the groom and then there is going to be a great celebratory feast at the inception of the Millennial Kingdom when the Old Testament saints are raised and all of the Old Testament promises to them are fulfilled. We are the bride to the groom. We are in any throne room, you look at all of the Knights of the Round Table days and going back into the dark mists of history, what do you see in a throne room? You have the king sitting on his throne and often you have the queen.

Whether it's Esther or Guinevere or anyone you want to think of in history or in myth, there is the queen that sits with the king in the throne room when it's appropriate and enjoys all the benefits of the royal court, often advises the king. We have this saying, behind every successful man there is a woman, and in parenthesis, telling him he's wrong. But often the queens were the real power in

the government.

You think of Cleopatra and Herodias and many of the other women in history who actually were sort of, think of Jezebel as a negative example. At any rate, all of this is good background for our scripture reading this morning and you'll see that there is a connection between this and the study that we are engaged in with the content of Ecclesiastes chapter 10. So let's read Jeremiah 33.

Moreover, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time while he was still shut up in the court of the prison, saying, Thus says the Lord who made it, the Lord who formed it to establish it. The Lord is his name. Call to me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know.

For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah, which have been pulled down to fortify against the siege mounds and the sword. They come to fight with the Chaldeans, but only to fill their places with the dead bodies of men whom I will slay in my anger and my fury, all for whose wickedness I have hidden my face from this city. You remember the background of Jeremiah.

The northern kingdom has already gone out under the final national discipline that God promised back in Deuteronomy 26, I think it is, where the five phases or cycles of God's discipline on a disobedient and apathetic nation are detailed. The southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin is all that remains, and it, by failing to heed the example of its northern neighbor, is about to suffer the same fate. The Chaldeans, of course, are the Babylonians.

This is the Babylonian captivity of Azariah, Mishael, and Hananiah, the three friends of Daniel and Daniel himself. This is Nebuchadnezzar coming down and attacking the city, the city making feeble attempts to defend itself, but they have sealed their fate by failing to heed the prophets that God sent time and time again to warn. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, why is he the weeping prophet? Why does he have the book of Lament? Because when he tries to communicate the Word of God to the people of God, he gets thrown in prison for it.

They do not heed, they do not listen. There is only a tiny remnant such as the family of Daniel and the family of those three who were taken with him, popularly known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So God is talking about that, and He says, you know what? They're fighting in vain.

They're going to fill up. They're breaking down their houses to try to build up the fortifications. They're tearing down their dwelling places to try to protect, and it's vain because God has already told them that this scourge is coming, that discipline is there.

They might as well just surrender. In fact, that is the counsel of Jeremiah. He says, from the Lord, you need to go ahead and submit.

Don't try to fight. You're just wreaking further havoc on yourself. This is discipline from the Lord.

You are going into captivity, so don't fight it. Learn to live with it. Live through it.

Learn its lesson. You are not going to be delivered out of it. The only future you have is to let God deliver you through it.

And this is a lesson that is lost on modern-day Christianity. Nobody wants to be delivered through trial and adversity. They want to be delivered out of it.

God, take it away. We don't learn the lesson of the thorn in the flesh of Paul. We don't learn the lesson of the diaspora, the scattered Jews to whom Peter writes in 1 and 2 Peter.

He says, you have been scattered. It's a part of the discipline on the nation of Israel as a result of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, look at what God can do through this trial rather than taking it away.

What can He do through it? Well, that's what's going on here. So in verse 5, again, they come to fight with the Chaldeans, but only to fill their places with the dead bodies of men whom I will slay in my anger and my fury, all for whose wickedness I have hidden my face from this city. What does it mean that God has hidden His face? The promises of national protection and deliverance, the promise to hear and heed people's prayers has been suspended.

And you can reach the place where God will suspend fulfillment of His promises. Many a young person at a youth camp or in a Sunday school class has memorized Jeremiah 33. Call to me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know.

Completely disregarding the context because those who are faithful and those who remember the place of God in their lives are going to call and He's going to answer. But notice, He's going to show them great and mighty things which they do not know. Anyone can imagine turning back the Chaldeans and averting the national disaster that everyone can see coming and that Jeremiah has been predicting throughout his first 32 chapters, the record of his prophetic ministry.

But God says, call to me and I will answer you. I'm hiding my face from the city. The city is going to be taken.

You're going to be enslaved. But call to me and I will answer you and I'll show you some things that you haven't even thought about. Great and mighty things that you don't know.

Look at verse 6. Behold, I will bring health and healing. I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth. God is going to bring health and healing to the inhabitants of Jerusalem even as they are captured, even as they are enslaved, even as their houses are broken down and destroyed.

Behold, I will bring it health and healing. And take special note of those words, health and healing, because they're going to occur again in Ecclesiastes chapter 10. I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth.

And I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return. At the point that Jeremiah is communicating this, they have not been captured yet. But God is already speaking in terms of finality.

He says, it's a done deal. You're going to be captives. But I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel.

Now the captives of Israel have already been taken away as a nation a couple hundred years earlier. 721 BC, if memory serves, is when the Assyrians took the northern ten tribes out. This is 586 is when Nebuchadnezzar takes out the southern kingdom.

So 721 to 586, do the math, that's how long the northern ten tribes have been captives. But God says, I am going to bring back the captivity. I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return and will rebuild those places as at the first.

I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned and by which they have transgressed against Me. Then it shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise, and an honor before all nations of the earth who shall hear all the good that I do to them. They, the nations, shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and all the prosperity that I provide for it.

Thus says the Lord, again there shall be heard in this place of which you say it is desolate without man and without beast, in the cities of Judah, in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. When do you think this is going to be fulfilled? In the immediate context, they're thinking, well, that's just the voice of joy. There's celebrations and feasting whenever someone gets married.

But in the prophetic overtones, what is this talking about? This is going to be fulfilled when the groom with a capital G and the bride with a capital B are living in the restored city of Jerusalem. The voice of those who will say, Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endures forever. And of those who will bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord, for I will cause the captives of the land to return as at the first, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, in this place which is desolate, without man and without beast, and in all its cities, there shall again be a dwelling place of shepherds causing their flocks to lie down. In the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the lowland, in the cities of the south, in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem and in the cities of Judah, the flocks shall again pass under the hands of Him who counts them, says the Lord. Isn't that a stirring promise? Because

who are the sheep who pass under the rod and are counted? What did Jesus say? My sheep hear my voice.

I know them. They respond when they are called. There are other prophetic passages that talk about the Old Testament saints as the sheep of God passing under the rod.

This is one of the common metaphors for both Old Testament and New Testament saints. Psalm 100. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture.

And Old Testament saints and New Testament saints are both pictured as sheep, cared for by the shepherd. Who is the great shepherd? It goes without saying. So what does it mean that the sheep are going to pass under the rod and be counted by Him who owns them and cares for them? These are the faithful who have been granted the privilege of access into the city.

These are those who are not outside in the darkness, who are not out there weeping and wailing because they missed their opportunity. They have heard and they have heeded. Even in this time of disaster, there are remnant believers like Daniel, and I suspect Daniel's family, and like the three friends of Daniel and others who are preserved through rather than delivered out of this time of trial.

And God says, treat that hope as real. Here is the promise. Did Daniel see this promise fulfilled? Did he return to Jerusalem and hear the voice of joy? Not yet.

Did Hananiah and Mishael and Azariah hear the voice of joy and travel the streets of Jerusalem hearing the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride? Not yet, but they will. Behold, the days are coming, verse 14, says the Lord that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. Remember, Israel has been written off as a conquered land for 150 years.

In those days and at that time, I will cause to grow up to David a branch of righteousness. He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days, Judah will be delivered and Jerusalem will dwell safely.

And this is the name by which she will be called, the Lord our righteousness. We talked Friday night in our Luke study about righteousness by faith. The theme of the book of Romans, the chapter 4 of Romans, where Abraham, as an example of living faith by a believer, believed God when he promised Him a son in his old age, and it was credited to him for righteousness.

What is going to be the song? What is going to be the rejoicing cry that is heard in the streets of Jerusalem? Why are those people there? Why will we, Lord willing, be there? Because the Lord is our righteousness. Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us by the washing of water and the renewing of the Holy Ghost, as it says in the good old King James. Verse 17, For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on

the throne of the house of Israel, nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually.

There is going to be a perpetual ruler and perpetual priesthood. When is that going to take place? Who is the prophet, priest, and king of Israel? It's the Lord Jesus Christ. Who has been made a kingdom of priests forever according to the order of Melchizedek? You and me.

What a great sustaining thought. This is a firm promise from God. Israel has been a blessing to us.

In some cases, sort of a blessing by being a bad example. But the record of the nation of Israel, we are blessed through Israel. The Word of God was preserved by Israelites.

It was recorded by inspired men who came from the nation of Israel. Virtually everything we have here, even the epistles of Paul and Peter and John, were any of them Gentiles? How many Gentile authors are there in the Bible? I can only think of one. And that's Luke.

He was a Greek. Everything else we have in the Word of God, 64 out of the 66 books as far as I know, came to us through Jewish or Israelite authors. But we are going to get the chance to return the favor.

We are going to get the chance to be a blessing to the Israelites who have been a blessing to us in the kingdom, because we are a kingdom of priests and God has promised that there will lack no priest, no Levite. And this is symbolic. We are not of the tribe of Levi per se, but he's talking about the priesthood.

The Levites were the people who accomplished the tasks that supported the worship life of Israel. The priests and the Levites will not lack a man to offer burnt offerings before me, to kindle grain offerings. What are those sacrifices back in verse 11? Those who will bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord.

Well, that will happen continually. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, verse 19, saying, Thus says the Lord, If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, in other words, if you can make the sun stand still, then my covenant may also be broken with David my servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levites, the priests, my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured, so will I multiply the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister to me.

Moreover, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, Have you not considered what these people have spoken, saying, The two families which the Lord has chosen, he has also cast them off. Thus they have despised my people as if they should no more be a nation before them. Thus says the Lord, If my covenant is not with the day and night, and if I have not appointed the

ordinances of heaven and earth, how old are these covenants by the way? Go back to Genesis chapter 1. When did God ordain the day and the night? It's at the beginning of human history.

And it has been happening without a break ever since. There has never been a day that was not followed by night. There's never been a day when the sun did not rise.

Sun got delayed a time or two. Night came during the day a time or two. But day and night have been following each other inexorably without a break ever since God first said, Let there be light.

The evening and the morning were the first day when God spoke this planet and this universe into existence. Day started following night. And it has been absolutely, surely predictable ever since.

And God says, That's how firm this promise is. The Lord Jesus Christ is going to sit on the throne of His Father David. And we who recognize the veracity and the firmness of God's promises are going to rule and reign with Him, are going to minister as priests with Him.

If My covenant is not with the day and night, if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will cast away the descendants of Jacob and David My servant, so that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will cause their captives to return, and I will have mercy on them. We have seen in Ecclesiastes the imagery of the rising of the sun and the setting of the sun as marking the boundaries of our human life.

We have the daytime of our life. We have the nighttime when the sun sets of our death. Is there going to be another sunrise for us? Is there going to be a resurrection? Is there going to be a fulfillment of God's promises? Just watch tomorrow morning and see if the sun comes up.

If it does, that's how certain our future with Christ and our resurrection is. This message, of course, is aimed primarily at the Old Testament saints who were alive and listening when Jeremiah prophesied just before the conquest of the southern kingdom by the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar. But there are embedded seeds of prophecy and of promise for us as well, because when you see those who rule and those who minister, we are united with Christ.

We share His sonship. We share His status as an heir of the Father. We share His priesthood.

We share His destiny. We have been united with Him in the likeness of His death so that we can be united with Him in His resurrection. That's our promise package.

That's our destiny in the age to come. So how important is it for us to be aware and to not be those who fall back unto perdition, but those who by faith and patience inherit the promises? There is no other purpose for us to be here. That's why we are here.

Everything else that we accomplish, everything else we set our sights on in this life is pointless. It is hopeless. It is useless.

If this is not the background and the context, any day that we forget these truths is a day wasted. It is a talent from God that we buried in the ground and we didn't redeem. We didn't exploit.

Every day that we forget our calling is a day that we miss out on everything God promises and states in Romans 8, 28, 29, and 30. All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose, not the called according to our purpose. You know, I want God on my side so that I can accomplish my purposes.

We have been called by God to fulfill and accomplish His purposes. This is a wonderful picture of God's purpose. It is foreshadowed in Israel.

It is going to be summed up in Israel, the great chiastic nature of human history. God began with Israel. God brought Christ.

God created us. And He's going to go back to Israel and everything is going to be fulfilled. We, accompanying the Lord Jesus Christ, are going to be the means of fulfilling the prophecies and the promises to the Old Testament saints.

And when you... I heard somebody down at work. I guess there was a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young concert here in town recently and somebody went down. Somebody wanted to have a witty thing to say to one of their friends and they came rushing up.

I was in the middle of a technical conversation about computers and somebody rushed up and said, quick, give me some lyrics from a Crosby, Stills, and Nash song. And, you know, you have to pull yourself out of one mode of thought and think about something else because I know their songs. They did Teach Your Children and Four and Twenty Years.

I know a lot of their songs. But one of the ones that always crops up in my mind is way back in the Vietnam War days, Stephen Stills sang a song about how we've got to get back to the garden. And he has this picture of soldiers standing there with their weapons and people coming up and putting, they launch their rockets and their artillery shells and they turn into butterflies in the sky because we're getting back to the garden.

You know, if we can just stop war and have peace, then we'll get back to the garden. Well, poor Steve, I'm afraid he's probably not a believer and who knows where the rest of the group is going to end up. We will get back to the garden as the lyrics of that song say, but it's going to be in the kingdom of the Father.

That's when the, you know, actually all the things that we like to think about with the golden streets and the lamb is the light and all that, people think that's going to happen as soon as we're

resurrected. They just don't know their Scriptures. We've got a thousand year period where God is fulfilling all of the national promises to Israel before the pearly gates and the golden streets and the lamb is the light and the river coming out from the throne and the trees growing on each side and the privilege of access to the heavenly Jerusalem.

That's a thousand and seven years after our resurrection. Anyway, that's why I like Jeremiah chapter 33 so much because you can see the threads of promise to us in Christ. Everything we have is in Christ.

We are elect in Him before the foundation of the world. This is what that election is. We can be there or not be there based on our choice.

The Lord Jesus Christ is going to be there and there are going to be people who constitute the bride with Him and it's our choice whether we are inside or outside just as it was a choice for the Old Testament saints. Do you want to be an observer or a participant? Do you want to be on the outside looking in or do you want to be on the inside looking at the Lord Jesus Christ? Another thought that struck me this week was people just unconsciously in their conversation reveal where their priorities and what their viewpoint is and how much of the Word of God they know. And someone who is contemplating their imminent departure from this life and in conversation and things they talk about, well, I'm going to be seeing my loved ones really soon.

You have a lot of old gospel songs. I can see my loved ones on the other shore. You know, I'm standing on Jordan's stormy banks and I look across and I can see Mom and Dad and all the old saints that went before me and all the people I used to sing hymns in church with.

There are gospel songs that talk about how we used to make the rafters ring at the old country church. And now there's all these that have died, but I'm going to be joining them and singing forevermore like we did in that old country church. That's one of J.D. Sumner's songs.

But to me, what is the first thing you think about when you think about checking out of this life and into the next? The Lord Jesus Christ. You know, I'm not thinking about well, I'm going to die and see my relatives. I mean, I am and that's great, but I think we're going to be a whole lot more interested in the Lord Jesus Christ and in looking at Him than in looking at each other.

Unless we spend all our time in this life looking at each other, then we'll go over there and be looking at each other still and we're probably going to be doing it in Tunisia or South Africa or someplace instead of the land of promise. So what do we set our sights on? That's the thrust of this. But let's go back now to Ecclesiastes chapter 10.

We're not going to get very far before the break here, but there is a reason why we find ourselves in Jeremiah 33 with respect to this. You remember last time we kind of took a quick excursion on into this chapter without doing a lot of detailed exegesis. If I could spell Ecclesiastes, I could get there.

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment smell bad. And a little folly does the same to wisdom and honor. That's really sort of a continuation of the end of the previous chapter.

It only takes a small amount of foolishness to take away the savor and take away the glory and the weight of wisdom. We don't want to let a little leaven end up leavening the whole lump. A wise man's heart, and there's not even a verb there, a wise man's heart goes to the right hand, a fool's heart to the left.

Even when a fool walks along the way, he lacks wisdom, and literally it says here he says he is a fool. And this is sort of ambiguous. Is he saying everybody else is a fool, or is he saying he is a fool? I understand this as demonstrating that he is a fool.

We've seen this earlier in Ecclesiastes where the wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. He knows not at what he stumbles. And so he shows through his converse, through his path through life, that he is a fool.

He says, he declares that he is a fool. Now verse 4, it says, If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for conciliation pacifies great offenses. This is something we need to, because this really starts a fresh thought.

We've seen that foolishness can taint a great amount of wisdom. Moses did wonderful acts of leadership for Israel for 40 years, and yet the foolish act of striking the rock made it impossible for him to enter the land. So as we look ahead at the prospect of what God has promised for us, great and mighty things which we know not, eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love Him.

We want to examine ourselves in the light of God's Word and ensure that there is not some foolishness that is wreaking havoc with the wisdom and the weight of wisdom that we have spent time and attention trying to incorporate into our souls through the study of God's Word and meditating on God's Word. This is why it is important for us to be people of integrity. Integrity means that you're the same all the way through.

You're not 80% faithful and 20% unfaithful. Integrity means that you have self-consistency, that you are striving and pressing toward the mark of the high calling of God in every area and not succeeding in 8 areas out of 10, but there are 2 that you've just thrown up your hands and given up. Remember the lesson from Luke that faith as a grain of mustard seed is all that's necessary to do extraordinary things, pull up trees and plant them in the sea, move mountains.

It isn't faith in the sense of quantity, it's faith in the sense of is it present. If it's present at all, a speck of faith is all that is required because the power is not in faith, power is in the righteousness of God that comes by faith. I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness.

I will strengthen you. I will help you. It all comes through righteousness.

What is going to be the cry of joy in the streets of Jerusalem in the Millennial Kingdom? The Lord is our righteousness. His righteousness is what got us here. His righteousness is what qualified us to walk these streets and to offer the sacrifice of praise for a thousand years and beyond.

So it's an inspiring thought and it's a thought we're going to leave ourselves with as we pause here to take our break. When we come back, we're going to pick up in Ecclesiastes 10 and verse 4 and see a very interesting concept with regard to how to function under adverse authority.