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God's Promises to Pilgrims--Part 2--"God's Roadmap to Renewal" (Jeremiah 29:12-14)

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1/19/2014

Last week, we began to consider the precious promises that God makes to the captive remnant of Judah in verses 10-14 of this chapter. The first promise He makes to them concerns their future. He assures them that their time in exile will be of limited duration. They will not be in Babylon forever; the time of their captivity will come to an end. After a prolonged period of seventy years, God will act on their behalf to settle them once again in the land of promise. "I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place." The word "visit" is often used in Scripture to describe occasions of divine intervention, when God manifests His power for good or ill in acts of righteous judgment or redeeming grace. As an example of God visitation in judgment, we think of Isaiah's question to the rebellious Jews, "What will you do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help?" (Isaiah 10:3). As an example of God's visitation in grace, we think of what the Bible says God did for Sarah, "And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceive and bore Abraham a son in his old age. . ." (Genesis 21:1-2). Through Jeremiah, God promised to visit the Jews in grace to restore them to the land eventually. First, however, they must pass through a period of chastisement.

The second promise God makes to the remnant of Judah in this passage concerns His present attitude toward them. He promises that His thoughts toward them are now and will always be loving thoughts, and He assures them such thoughts are the source of all His dealings with them in providence. At times, they may be tempted to believe that God has abandoned them completely, that He has become their enemy and will never visit them again in blessing; but He assures them that that is not the case. Though they were suffering severely in Babylon, yet even God's chastening rod was evidence of His love for them; for He had sent them into exile to wean them from their idols and to show them the evil of sin, so that they would turn to Him in repentance. They must not doubt for a moment, therefore, that His thoughts toward them are loving thoughts, "thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11).

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That brings us to the third promise God makes to His people in this passage, and it concerns once again, His future dealings with them in grace. In verses 12-14, He promises to work in His people and to work for them in such a way, that seemingly miraculous results will be obtained. They will be spiritually revived as they seek the Lord earnestly through prayer, and as a consequence, they will be gathered from all the lands where God has scattered them, replanted in their own land, and their national life will be restored. All that must have appeared to the Jews too good to be true. But God assures them that is just what He will do. He will work both in them and for them, and as a result, they will be greatly blessed, both in their spiritual lives and in their national fortunes.

I. What God Promises to Do In His People (vs.12-14a)-- Let's begin by looking first at what God promises to do in His people. The basic promise that He gives the Jews is that, in the future, He will turn their hearts to Himself, and as a result of that divine work, they will call on the Lord, pray to Him, and seek Him with their whole hearts. Let's consider these three verbs used here to describe how the people will manifest a change of heart toward God.

A. They will call upon Him-- The first thing they will do is call upon the Lord. "Then you will call upon Me," we read in verse 12. We run into this idea of "calling upon God" for the first time in Genesis 4. After the birth of Adam and Eve's third son, Enosh, we read, "Then men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:26). This verse seems to be speaking of the beginning of corporate worship. It was in the days of Enosh that men began to gather publicly as a worshipping community to call upon the Lord in a corporate manner. The idea of "calling on" God is that of crying out to Him from the depths of one's being, drawing near to Him for the purpose of communicating with Him.

The Jews had gone into captivity because of their failure to call upon the Lord. Prior to the exile, they had tried to mix the worship of God with the worship of idols, and as a result, very few remained in the land of Judah who called upon the Lord from a sincere heart. Because the people were given over to the service of idols, and participated with gusto in the sensual practices of pagan peoples who surrounded them, few remained in Judah who knew what it was to call upon the Lord truly. The only worship the people offered to God consisted in empty rituals that turned God's stomach. But now, God tells the people, as a result of their going into captivity that was going to change. No longer would they honor God with their lips, while continuing to serve idols in their hearts. No longer would they engage in the performance of cold,

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mechanical, lifeless ceremonies with which they hoped to placate God. Instead, they would be moved to call upon God from the depths of their hearts. Multitudes would be moved to cry out to Him in earnest prayer.

B. They will pray to Him-- That leads us to consider the second verb used here to describe the change that God will work in the people. Not only will they call upon Him; they will also pray to Him. "Then you will call upon Me, and go and pray to Me."

What is the difference between calling on God and praying to Him? Of course, the two words are virtually identical in meaning, but there is a shade of difference between them. The verb "call upon" is more general, and describes the crying out of the heart to God. The verb "pray," on the other hand, is more specific in meaning and conveys the idea of intercession. When God say to the Jews that they will "go and pray to Him," the idea seems to be that after God first turns their hearts to Himself and they begin to cry out to Him like new born babes crying out to their mother, they will then go on to develop a full-orbed life of prayer involving continual intercession and petition. A spirit of prayer will be restored to the community in exile-- something that was totally lacking while they were in the land of promise. As one writer puts it, "From calling they would go on to intercede, earnestly to plead for themselves and others."

We see an example of this type of prayer in the ninth chapter of the book of Daniel. In this chapter, as Daniel perceived that the period of the people's captivity in Babylon was drawing to a close, He was moved to intercede with great earnestness, not only for himself and his Jewish kinsmen, but also for the advancement of God's kingdom in the world. In the latter part of his prayer, after confessing his sin and the sins of the people, he pleads earnestly that the city and the temple might soon rebuilt, so that their pagan captors would no longer have any cause to reproach them. Notice the passion with which Daniel prays (read Daniel 9:16-19).

Do you see how Daniel's prayer is fueled by a passionate desire to see God's name glorified? Whenever God restores a spirit of true prayer to His people, one of the clearest proofs will be that our prayers will not focus exclusively on ourselves and our temporal needs, but on the work of God in the world at large. We will have a fervent desire to see God's name glorified among men, and that passion will fuel our intercessions. We see that in the prophet Daniel; we see that, as well, it in the early church, where the persecuted believers prayed fervently that God would glorify His name through them.

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Wherever the habit of earnest, God-centered prayer is established in a community, there we see the evidence of Spirit-wrought revival taking place.

C. They will seek Him-- The third verb God uses to describe the change He will work in the people is the word "seek." In verse 13, God says, "And you will seek Me and you will find Me, when you search for Me with all your hearts."

What does it mean to seek God? To seek God is to pursue Him, to go after Him, to be looking for Him as a person might look with eager expectation to find the face of a loved one in a large crowd of people.

Have you ever gone to the airport to pick up a beloved friend or family member you haven't seen in years, who is flying in to see you? I have done that many times throughout my life, and it is always a joyful occasion. What excitement one feels standing outside the exit door of the baggage claim area, watching expectantly as an endless stream of arriving passengers pours through that door into the lobby area where you are waiting. Any moment, you think, I will see the dear face of my beloved friend or family member. Then suddenly, he or she appears, and the smiles and laughter and the hugs that take place are worth all the effort it took to fight the traffic and endure any delays that may have occurred in waiting for your loved one's flight to arrive.

That is what God wants us to know about seeking Him. It takes effort to seek Him--patient, persevering effort. But we are to seek Him joyfully and expectantly, because we have the promise of finding Him if we will only seek Him.

How does God want us to seek Him? Well, we are to seek Him by every means at our disposal: through prayer, fasting, Christian fellowship, the study of Scripture, and participation in worship. In the context, however, it is clear that God is thinking principally of prayer. He wants us to pray perseveringly for His presence to be manifested in our lives, without ever giving up or fainting. Jesus conveyed the same truth in the gospels when he told his disciples, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened." The problem we often face in prayer is that we give up too easily when we do not receive an immediate answer to our prayers. We stop praying, because we think God is not listening to us. In fact, He is listening, but He often wants to work in us certain graces like patience and

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perseverance, before granting our request; that is why does not answer us immediately.

Calvin points out that God exhorted the Jews to seek Him with their whole hearts in order to emphasize the need for having a right motive in our praying. It is not enough simply to go through the motions of prayer. The Jews did that before they went into exile. The Muslims go through a ritual of prayer five times a day, but ritualistic prayer is not what God asks for; he asks for a seeking heart, and it is only prayer that flow from a seeking heart that He will hear. The prayers of hypocrites and religious people who reject Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are offered in vain. Why? Because God wants us to come to Him with our whole hearts, and that means with a felt sense of our dependence on His grace alone as the source of every blessing we enjoy. Those who refuse to come to God through Christ thereby show they have no sense of their total dependence on God's grace. When God speaks of coming to Him with a "whole heart," therefore, he is not speaking of coming with a sinless heart, but with a gracious heart that is keenly aware of its sin and need of cleansing through the blood of Christ. The prayers of such hearts will always be heard by God. Were the effectiveness of our prayers depended on coming to God with a sinless heart, we could never pray effectively, for the fact is, our hearts are never entirely free of the taint of sin. What God means by a "whole heart," therefore, is an undivided heart, a single heart, a heart of integrity. He is talking about approaching Him with integrity instead of hypocrisy. To those who come to Him in that way, God makes this wonderful promise: "I will be found by you." The seeker will be rewarded with finding God.

So here are three words that describe what God will do in His people. After they have suffered under His chastening rod for a prolonged of time, He will visit them in His grace and turn their hearts to Himself; and the evidence that He has done so is that they will not only call upon the Lord in their great need, but also pray perseveringly for themselves and others, and seek the Lord with wholehearted devotion by every means available, until they find Him.

It is true that this passage does not explicitly attribute this change in the people to God's working in their hearts, but that is clearly implied by the fact that God is foretelling here what He Himself will do for His people in the future. So even if it is not explicitly stated, it is clear that the people's seeking of God will result from God seeking them and working in their hearts. As Augustine says, "God would in vain promise what is in the power of man to do; and this is the promise, 'you will pray'"; it then follows, "that we do not pray through the

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impulse of our own flesh, but when the Holy Spirit directs our hearts, and in a manner prays in us.”

The fact that no one naturally seeks God apart from God's grace at work in the heart is so clearly taught in the Bible, it hardly needs to be defended. Suffice it to say that the apostle Paul states this truth explicitly in Romans 3:10-11 when he describes the condition of the natural man--the fallen sinner who is without the Spirit of God: “There is none righteous, no, not one, there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.”

If men do not naturally seek after God, that means that no one will never call upon God or pray to God unless God moves him to do so. Many professing Christians in our day do not seem to grasp this fundamental biblical truth, but it is clearly taught in Scripture. Because by nature we are fallen and sinful and pursue nothing but the gratifying of our own sinful desires, no man will ever seek God until God turns his heart to Himself. God must work in the inner depth of our being and perform a work of 'heart surgery' on us; only then will we find arising within us a longing and desire to know our Creator and to seek His favor.

C. H. Spurgeon tells us how this truth dawned on him one day as he was considering the circumstances of his own conversion: “When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul . . . One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, How did you come to be a Christian? I sought the Lord. But how did you come to seek the Lord? The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, 'I ascribe my change wholly to God.'”

Spurgeon understood that God was the author of his conversion, and that he was moved to call upon the Lord, pray to Him, and seek His face only because

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God drew him to Himself. But if that was true of Spurgeon, it is true of all men. It was true of the Jews in Babylon as well. God promised to reveal Himself to them, but only after He first turned their hearts to Him by His grace so that they would call upon Him, pray to Him, and seek Him with their whole hearts.

The application of this truth to our own lives is very encouraging. God's way of spiritual revival is always the same. Before God manifests His glorious presence to us, He first works in us to turn our hearts to Himself. The evidence of that is earnest prayer. Consequently, if we long to enjoy the manifested presence of God in our lives, we must seek the Lord in prayer. We must call upon Him in our sinfulness and need, pray to Him in faith, and seek Him perseveringly with an undivided heart. Not because we hope to earn His blessing by the merit of our works, but because that is God's revealed path to revival. We can never merit anything before God, because we can "get ahead" of God, so to speak, and seek Him before He seeks us. No; our seeking Him will always be nothing but the response of His seeking us. Nevertheless, we must seek Him, and seek Him earnestly, because that is the appointed way to spiritual renewal.

This passage should be of encouragement to those who seek Him early and to those who seek Him late. It should be of encouragement to those who seek Him early, by that I mean, in their youth, because if there is one thing that this passage tells us about God, it is that He wants to be sought and that He delights to reveal Himself to hungry hearts. Whenever men truly call on God and pray to Him in earnest, trusting in His willingness to listen to their prayers through Jesus Christ, they can be sure that He will not wait long in revealing Himself to them. Just as a father delights to play "hide and seek" with His children, God delights to be found by His spiritual children who seek Him in prayer. What an encouragement that ought to be to young people. They do not have to wait until they are older to know God. They can know Him right now; they can enjoy fellowship with Him right now, if only they will call upon Him and seek Him with their whole hearts. As Philip Ryken affirms, "We do not need to wait to call upon God. He is available to us right now. Whenever we call, he will listen. Whenever we pray, he will answer. Whoever seeks will find."

This passage should also be of encouragement to those who seek Him late--that is, after many years of rebellion against the Lord. There are people who have heard God's Word proclaimed to them for years, but who have never responded to it. Instead, they have turned a deaf ear to it, hardening their hearts to God's voice that has called them countless times to repentance. As a result, they have suffered many blows in life, and they bear many painful scars--

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spiritually, emotionally, even physically--as a result of their stubbornness. But at long last, they come to see themselves as God has seen them all along-- as stiff-necked fools who are slow to learn, whose stubborn ways have landed them in a pit of misery. Yet, these latecomers should know that the way of salvation is open to them still, if only they will turn to the Lord in repentance, calling upon Him and seeking Him with their whole hearts. Calvin say in this regard that while men should never use God's patience as an excuse to go on sinning and putting off repentance, yet the fact remains that "there is still hope set before those who have been long torpid in their sins, that if they at length shall come, though late, they shall still come in time, and God will hear them." God will be gracious to the latecomer, pardoning his sins, and restoring the years that the locust has eaten, even as he did for the children of Israel who finally sought Him after seventy long years of exile.

II. What God Promises to Do For His People--

Having seen what God promises to do in His people, let us now look at what he does for His people, when they earnestly begin to seek the Lord in heartfelt repentance.

We have already seen that when people begin to seek the Lord in earnest, He promises to listen to them and to reveal Himself to them in such a way they will know without any doubt that God has responded to their prayers. They will come out of the gloom and darkness in which they have long dwelt into the light of God's felt presence.

But God goes on to speak in verse 14 of a further blessing that He will give to the spiritually revived community of exiles--a blessing that must have seemed to many of them like an impossible dream, for they could think of no human means by which it could ever be fulfilled--and that was the complete restoration of their national life. "I will bring you back from your captivity" God tells them, "I will gather you from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you to the place from which I caused you to be carried away captive."

When God sent the Jews into exile, they were dispersed to many locations--they did not all end up in the capital city of the empire. They were scattered in all direction, like a pile of dry leaves blown by the wind. From a human perspective, therefore, it seemed no more possible to re-gather them and plant them once again in their own land than it would be to re-gather the

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scattered pieces of a broken pane of glass, so that it is made whole again. Yet that is what God promised to do for them--something that seemed incredible. How in the world could God do such a thing? How could a people so scattered be collected together and restored as one body in their own homeland after so long a time--seventy years? What the Jews had to learn is that nothing is impossible with God. For the Creator of heaven and earth, the restoration of a nation to its former state of prosperity presents no difficulty. God has ways and means of accomplishing His will of which we are entirely unaware. He has solutions up His sleeve that are beyond our understanding. As Paul said that "His ways are past our finding out." God is well able to move on the heart of a pagan emperor and use him to advance His own divine purposes--and that is just what God did with the emperor Cyrus. It was Cyrus who issued the decree permitting the Jews to return to Palestine. Cyrus thought he owned the world, but in fact, he was a mere tool in God's hand to advance the building of God's own kingdom.

What we learn from this is the importance of living always in a state of joyful expectancy with respect to the kingdom purposes of God. When the cause of God in this world looks unpromising and the future of Christ's church in the world looks bleak; when the love of evil seems to be triumphing in a nation and the love of righteousness and truth seem to be in decline; when things look doubtful for the advancement of Christ's kingdom, because the tide of faith is receding and the forces of unbelief and lawlessness are coming in like a flood--at such times we need to remember who is really in charge of history. We need to remember the immutable nature of God's purpose, the absolute certainty of His promises, and the irresistible character of His sovereign power and will. The God who re-gathered the children of Israel after seventy years in exile is still alive and still at work in the world. He can work wonders far beyond our imagining. Even when it looks as if He had abandoned His people; He is steadily working out His purpose for their lives. Even when it looks as if He had vanished from the stage of history, He is busily at work behind the scenes, bringing to pass His perfect plan in a way that we cannot understand. That's why the Bible describes God as a God who hides Himself, a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are not our ways.

To the Jews in exile, it must have looked from a human perspective, as if their nation was doomed to extinction; but in fact, it was destined for renewal, for God had promised David that his throne would be established forever, and so it would be. The exile represented only a bump in the road as far as the establishment of God's kingdom was concerned. Even that statement is not

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quite accurate; however, for the exile was not just a bump in the road, but a milestone in the advancement of God's kingdom purposes, for through the exile many positive ends were achieved. For one thing, the knowledge of the true and living God was thereby spread throughout the ancient world. The synagogue came into existence during the exile, as a place where Jews could meet to worship God and hear His law read. Moreover, the Jews were cured of their flagrant idolatry by means of the exile. Never again do we read of them worshipping the pagan idols of the nations around them. So God had his own purposes to accomplish through this very dark chapter in Israel's history. How important it is to remember that in our day, when the forces of darkness and confusion seem to be working overtime to blot out the light of God's truth. Do we think that the future of our nation is in the hand of the godless men and women who are currently leading us down the path of destruction. Not at all. The future is always firmly in God's hands.

So let us seek the Lord diligently with our whole hearts, in season and out of season, in the joyful assurance that if we seek Him patiently and prayerfully, without fainting, we will surely find Him, and in finding Him, we will lay hold of blessings far beyond all that we can ask or even think. That is the path of spiritual blessing that God has marked out for us is Scripture; and it is valid for us both as individuals and as a church. A congregation of worshippers who make it their top priority to call upon God and pray to Him and seek Him wholeheartedly has no reason whatsoever to fear for its future, for God will never abandon such a congregation. He will continue to pour out on it abundant blessing, as long as the members continue to seek Him with all their hearts. For that is His promise to all who seek Him--whoever seeks, finds. We needn't worry, therefore, about God's faithfulness to bless us; our only concern should be with regard to ourselves. Are we seeking the Lord's blessing? Where there is no seeking, there can be no expectation of blessing. But to the one who seeks, perseveringly and faithfully, abundant blessing is assured. May God make us all faithful seekers. Amen.