

Jeremiah 32:9-15 (The Message); 33:14-16 (NRSV)

[God tells Jeremiah to buy some land near Jerusalem at a time when it has become clear to all that the Babylonians would soon overrun the entire country.]

“So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales. Then I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy that contained the contract and its conditions and also the open copy—and gave them to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah. All this took place in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and the witnesses who had signed the deed, as the Jews who were at the jail that day looked on.

“Then, in front of all of them, I told Baruch, ‘These are orders from GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel: Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar. For GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel, says, “Life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Romans 3:21-24

from the NRSV

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^a for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, . . .

^aor *through the faith of Jesus Christ* [This footnoted translation is now dominant among North American Pauline scholars, including Grieb, Keck, Hays, and many others as well, including N. T. Wright. I believe that this “faith of Jesus Christ” translation is one of the keys to a truer and more meaningful reading of Romans].

from *The Message*

But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah and Paul. One brings word that God makes promises and is then willing to bet that God will keep them. The other brings word that, in the arrival of Jesus, God has kept his promises . . . all of them. Such is the promise of Advent.

Betting on a promise-keeping God

We know Jeremiah better than we do any other of the Old Testament prophets. The other prophets’ work consisted largely of bringing God’s messages to the people. The prophets were speakers of God’s words. But with Jeremiah, God went further. Jeremiah

not only brought God's messages, he was told to enact God's messages in dramatic demonstrations. For example, God tells Jeremiah to stand in front of the temple and

"All the families of the earth"

Genesis 12:3

Underlying all God's promises made, is the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, perhaps more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the OT, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

Abraham is not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. Jesus' disciples were not chosen for their sake alone but for the sake of the whole world. The same is true for you and me. We have been saved for a purpose larger than ourselves.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. . . . But it all began with that promise to Abraham.

proclaim judgment upon the temple (ch. 7). Jeremiah is told to wear a loincloth and then bury it in some rocks, where it is ruined, symbolizing the relationship between the people and God – once as close as we wear clothing and now in ruins (ch. 13). Jeremiah is not to take a wife, for God has been cheated upon by his "wife," his people (ch. 16). Jeremiah is sent to a potter's house to see pottery destroyed (ch. 18). He smashes an earthenware jug, just as Judah is about to be smashed (ch. 19).

After all this and more, we are relieved when we get to chapters 30-33, for these are often called Jeremiah's little book of consolation. These four chapters express a message of hope and restoration. That after all the destruction and exile, God will restore the people to their own land and to freedom. God had made certain promises, beginning with one made to Abraham long before, and God would keep those promises no matter how much it looked like God had totally abandoned his people.¹

In today's passage, Jeremiah is given another symbolic action to accomplish.² With the Babylonian army arrayed outside the walls of Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to go out and buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Don't you wonder what was going through Jeremiah's mind? This must have seemed as idiotic to him as it would to anyone else. The death of Israel is at hand and Jeremiah is supposed to go make a land investment. Five times in this brief passage, Jeremiah makes it clear that

this is God's doing, saying "Thus says the LORD." Based on all the other stuff God had told him to do, Jeremiah probably figured that the land would be lost, just as the loincloth was ruined and the earthenware jug broken.

But instead, v. 15 makes clear that this time, the action is not an enactment of loss but of hope. God is having Jeremiah buy the land for the future, the day when the Israelites would return to Judah. Jeremiah was going to make a profit on this field of hope.

¹It is promises such as these that create so much tension by Jesus' day. For by then, the Jews, though back on the land, would have spent centuries trading one foreign oppressor after another. Thus, many first-century Jews asked when God would finally keep all these promises. When would the true exile end? For Christians, Jesus is the fulfillment of these promises and the bringer of the new covenant promised by God in Jeremiah 31:31-33. This is a covenant written on the heart, not on tablets of stone.

²Anthony Saldarini's reflections on this passage are very helpful. His commentary is part of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, the twelve volume set that is part of the St. Andrew library.

Thus, we read God's words from Jeremiah 33 in a fresh light. Yes, God will one day restore his people, and through them restore the whole world. God keeps God's promises, even if his people can't imagine how.

Promises Kept – the best Christmas gift of all

Why Christmas? Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself, taking on a full-blooded humanity? If your answer to these questions is "to save us," you are right so far as it goes. But God's rescue involves far more than just ourselves. It is the keeping of promises that God made long before.

Seeing Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection as the demonstration that God not only makes promises but keeps them is the key theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written in the scroll of Jeremiah, "I [God] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

But they had waited a long time and it was natural for some to wonder if God's promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren't really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn't really love God and neighbor every day.

Yet God had made the promise. And, for Paul, God is righteous and had kept the promises he had made – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. In a sense, Jesus was the "righteousness of God" in the flesh. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus' own faithfulness all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the promise maker, but the promise keeper. In Christ, God's covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

To reiterate, God's righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe.

The truth of Christmas

Our Christmas claim is this: God's saving justice, his covenant faithfulness, was unveiled in the person of Jesus Christ. For all the attention paid to Christmas, it is hard for many people to accept Paul's claim that the climax of human history was 2,000 years ago. Yet, that is exactly what we anticipate in Advent and celebrate at Christmas: God himself coming to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves, thereby restoring us to a right relationship with God.

Last week, we considered the darkness and fear that threaten to crush our hope in Christ. Yet, Advent is an ever-present reminder that our hope is not misplaced. The story that seems to have begun on Christmas, actually began with God's creation of the cosmos and continued with God's relentless determination to see that his people would enjoy all its beauty and love and joy and, most importantly, everlasting fellowship with God. Jesus is the fulfillment of promises made long before.

The truth of Christmas is the truth of a promise kept.

“The Righteousness of God”

In his letters, Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God” eight times, of which seven are in Romans. What does Paul mean and what does it mean for us? Romans 3:21-22a are pivotal in this letter: “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ² for all who believe.” “Righteousness” is a virtue, the quality of doing what is just and right. In the Old and New Testaments, the “righteousness of God” carries two complementary meanings.

First, it refers to God’s covenant faithfulness. God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper – he keeps his promises. Thus, Paul is saying that God has kept his promises to Israel, as revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ! Because God is the great covenant-keeper, we can rely on his promises.² The story of God’s relationship with his people will end well, because he has promised that it will (see Revelation 21!). Indeed, the truth is that God’s complete victory over sin and death has already been won, though not yet.³

Second, “the righteousness of God” refers to God being a fair and impartial judge. In ancient Israel, law courts worked differently than in our day. Rather than using public prosecutors and juries, there were three parties – a judge, the plaintiff and the defendant. A judge was a good judge (a righteous judge) if he tried the case according to the law, if he was impartial, if he punished sin, and if he protected the weak and defenseless. Thus, as the righteous judge, God has been true to his word and he has judged impartially, for Jew and Gentile alike. Through the faithfulness of Jesus, God has dealt with sin and vindicated the helpless. He has declared innocent (“justified”) those who have “have faith in Jesus Christ (v.26).

¹Though this phrase has traditionally been rendered as “faith in Jesus Christ,” the increasingly preferred translation is “the faith of Jesus Christ,” emphasizing the faithfulness of Jesus, just as chapter 4 emphasizes the faithfulness of Abraham.

²Be careful here. Too often, Christians find, in the Bible, promises from God that aren’t really there. God does promise us that the story for us and for all of creation will end well. He does not promise us a life free of pain, turmoil, trouble, or poverty.

³It is impossible to overstate the importance of this already/not yet perspective to a proper reading of the New Testament. The June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study gives an overview of this “between the times” perspective, with pictures. It can be downloaded at www.thebibleacademy.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How often have you thought of Christmas as a promise kept? What would it mean if you thought of God as the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper? What are our responsibilities as God’s covenant partners, even now?
2. Much is made of God’s promises. I have several books devoted only to listing such promises. What would make your “top ten” list of God’s promises? Do you think that we sometimes create such “promises of God” ourselves? Around what topics? Health? Prosperity? What do you really think God has promised you? What has he given you?
3. What sorts of risks do you think God asks us to take? What does it really mean to trust God in all things? Jeremiah’s choice to use his money to buy the plot of land was surely a smart one – he could trust God’s promises of restoration. But still, Jeremiah never reaped any financial gain from his investment. When exiles began returning to Jerusalem, they found it in the same shape as when they left, a ruined, burned out mess. It would take them many decades to scrape enough money together to being rebuilding the city walls and the temple. How do you think Jeremiah would have characterized his “investment?” Perhaps this is the question – is there gain in doing as God hopes we will do, even if we have difficulty seeing the payoff we expected?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 12:3 & 17 God makes a promise to Abraham and then gives him a sign of the promise that God has made.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Amos 9:13-15 Amos was the first of the “writing prophets.” Here is a brief portrait of God’s promise kept.</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 1:1-7 What in this opening of Paul’s letter would lead you to see Jesus as the “culmination” of God’s restorative work, not the beginning?</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 4 Our Romans passage for today is focused on the faithfulness of Jesus. Romans 4 is about the faithfulness of Abraham, not merely as an example, but to demonstrate that with God, it has <i>always</i> been about faithfulness.</p>	<p>Saturday, Matthew 1:1-18 A Jewish genealogy is not just a genealogy. What might be a connection between this passage and today’s passage from Romans 3?</p>

