

Adult Teaching Resources

October 20, 2019



Season After Pentecost (June 16-November 24)

Choices That Matter

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4 (RCL 1:1-4, 2:1-4) – Faith for Hard Days

Jeremiah 29:1-9 (RCL 1, 4-7) – An Unlikely Garden

Jeremiah 31:27-34 – A Surprising New Start

Joel 2:23-32 – A Harvest to Remember

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A Surprising New Start

Jeremiah 31:27-34

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“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.” Jeremiah 31:33

One of the many unwritten “rules” of living is very clear, and one we have understood since we were born—when we do something wrong, we get in trouble. We get scolded, spanked, grounded, lose our job, lose possessions, or have something happen to us that is in direct response to the bad thing we did. We just know to expect consequences when we mess up.

In today’s passage, we spend time with God’s people, who knew what to expect—punishment. Instead, they were surprised and received God’s grace—a new start, and a push for them to live and be better.

Opening

After everyone arrives, have everyone find a partner. Ask each person to think of a time in their life when they did something wrong, and instead of receiving punishment, they received unexpected grace.

As our Lesson Writer explains, “most of us have known the sinking feeling of getting caught in some transgression. We fear what the repercussions will be and steel ourselves for a heated scolding or a cold shoulder – but it doesn’t come.

For some reason, the teacher or friend or spouse we have offended chooses not to yell or turn away, but to forgive. We know where we went wrong and the other person knows it, too, yet they give us another chance.”

Give each partnership time to think and have conversation about their experience.

What did you do wrong?

Whom did you offend or do wrong?

What kind of punishment or repercussion were you expecting?

What happened instead?

Opening *continued*

How did you feel about what happened?

How did this experience change your future behaviors?

Reading the Bible

What will happen in the days coming? (the Lord will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals)

What has the Lord watched over them to do? (pluck up, break down, overthrow, destroy, and bring evil)

What will the Lord watch over them to do? (build and plant)

What had been said in those days? (The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge)

What will happen to everyone who eats sour grapes? (they shall be set on edge)

What is the new covenant not going to be like? (the old covenant, when God took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though God was their husband)

What will the new covenant be like? (God will put God's law within them, and God will write it on their hearts; and God will be their God, and they shall be God's people)

What will be the people's relationship with God? (they will know God, from the least of them to the greatest)

What will God do with their sin? (God will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more)

Making Connections

Our Lesson Writer explains, "The prophets Isaiah and Amos and Micah had warned that Israel would fall because of the people's poor ethics and idolatrous worship, and it did. Jeremiah predicted the same fate for the people of Judah, and he was right, too." Do you think we have reason to be concerned for our choice of ethics and worship? Are we on the right track, or do you think we are facing a similar fate? Why do you say that?

Do you feel you are paying the price for the sins of your ancestors? What did they do? How are you being held accountable for their actions?

What is your first memory of being held accountable for your own wrong-doing? How old were you? What did you do? What was your punishment or accountability? What did you learn from that experience?

Do you lean more toward judgment or grace? Explain your answer.

Making Connections *continued*

What is your definition of grace? What roles does grace play in your life? How do you extend grace to others?

When have you received grace instead of punishment? What did you do? Looking back, did you receive what you deserved?

Our Lesson Writer says, “Everyone could know God, Jeremiah said, from the inside out. God’s law would be accompanied by an internal assurance that God would “forgive their sin and remember their iniquity no more.” How can we know God from the inside out? How do we know we have received the internal assurance from God?

Think of a time when an agreement (or covenant) in your life has been changed midway through its duration. Was the change for the better? How were you affected? What did the change say about the one in charge of the covenant? What did the change say about you?

How does God’s indwelling Spirit in your life affect the way you live, the actions you make, the words you say, the decisions you make, and the world you hope for? What are you specifically doing to make all of those a reality?

So What?

Ask everyone to find their partner from the beginning of the lesson. Read to them these words from our Lesson Writer:

“Jesus made it very clear that Christians were to follow a new law, a law of love that is not written in a book, but in our hearts. The decisions we make, the actions we take, are not determined by a manual of rules, but by a heart that is ruled by God.

We love God because God first loved us. When we come to understand Christ’s love and to experience the Spirit’s presence, it changes our lives.”

Ask each partnership to discuss these questions:

As people who follow laws, what laws of love—not written in a book, but on our hearts—are you following?

How much of those laws are based on scripture and the teachings of Jesus?

How much of those laws are based on culture and societal expectations?

What do you do when the Jesus laws conflict with the societal laws?

Give each group time to share with each other, then open the floor for larger discussion.

How does the love of God change us and make us new, even when we’ve been loving God all our lives?

The Challenge

This week, sing or recite the first verse of Amazing Grace every day as a part of your daily prayers.

*Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see*

Prayer

Loving God, we are a people who live by laws. They keep us in line and help inform how we are to live. You are a God of love, whose laws are written on our hearts. Open our hearts to receive your love and laws and grace so that we might be more of what you desire in this world for your kingdom. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Jeremiah—Jeremiah’s ministry began, according to Jer. 1:1-3, in the 13th year of King Josiah’s reign (about 627 BCE), and extended until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah’s reign (about 586 BCE). Thus, his work began in the hopeful years of young King Josiah’s religious reforms, and it extended through the aborted reign of Jehoahaz (609) and the rule of the foolish king Jehoiakim (609-598), who disdained and persecuted prophets who predicted bad news. It was Jehoiakim who listened to the writings of Jeremiah being read – the first “autographs” of scripture that we know of – then cut the scroll into strips and burned it (Jer. 36:1-5).

Jeremiah was still active when the Babylonians conquered Judah in 597 and took captive Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiakin (598), replacing him with his uncle Mattaniah, whom they renamed Zedekiah (598-587). Jeremiah urged Zedekiah to submit to Babylon, but the king refused to heed his advice. Zedekiah joined Egypt in rebelling against the Babylonians, who returned and destroyed Jerusalem. Jeremiah survived the attack, and he was among a number of refugees who fled to Egypt, where he continued to preach for some time and to communicate through letters with exiles who lived in Babylon.

Much of Jeremiah’s preaching echoes the retributive theology found in the Book of Deuteronomy and the narrative books that scholars call the “Deuteronomistic History” (Joshua – 2 Kings, with the exception of Ruth). Some scholars, in fact, believe Jeremiah and his scribe friend Baruch may have been responsible for writing much of it. The Deuteronomistic theology taught, in short, that people got what they deserved: those who obeyed God’s law would prosper, while the disobedient would be punished.

Fortunately, however, Jeremiah’s prophetic insight also looked past punishment to a day of hope.

The “Book of Consolation”—The most hopeful part of Jeremiah’s prophesy is found in Jeremiah 30-33. Coming after many chapters of conflict and condemnation, it is often called the “Book of Consolation.” Some scholars prefer to limit the “Book of Consolation” to chapters 30-31 only.

A notable text—The four short verses of Jer. 31:31-34 have a significance that goes beyond their length. J. Leo Green called this text the earliest and the closest approach to the New Testament faith to be found in the Old Testament (“Jeremiah,” in the *Broadman Bible Commentary* [Broadman, 1971], 152). John Bright described it as “one of the profoundest and most moving passages in the entire Bible, (*Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 21 [Doubleday, 1965], 287). We could find and cite similar observations, but we don’t need academics to tell us how amazing this text is: we have only to read it.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Context—It is helpful to read the amazing promise of Jer. 31:31-34 in the context of the entire chapter, which consists mainly of various salvation oracles that have been cobbled together because the book's compiler saw a connection between them.

Jeremiah declared that Israel might be hapless, but not hopeless, for God would show grace in their wilderness (v. 2), express an everlasting love for the people (v. 3), and rebuild the nation (vv. 4-6), so they would celebrate with joyous songs (vv. 7-9). God would gather the people again “like a watered garden” so all would rejoice (vv. 10-14).

Though the people were lamenting and bemoaning their fate, God had promised a return to their homeland for the faithful (vv. 15-22). Upon returning, the people would speak blessings to one another (vv. 23-26) and flourish in the land as people who learned to be responsible for their own behavior (vv. 27-30).

It is in this context that we read of a new covenant, in which God's law would reside in the people's hearts.

A new covenant—What did Jeremiah mean by a “new covenant”? Apparently, Jeremiah considered the covenant God had made with Israel after delivering the people from Egypt to be the “old covenant.” It was a covenant based on law and entered at Sinai (v. 32a), in which God promised to bless Israel so long as the people remained faithful to God and lived rightly with each other.

Israel, however, proved either uninterested or incapable of following the law and keeping the covenant. Thus, Jeremiah quotes God as speaking of “my covenant which they broke” (v. 32b).

This is not to say that grace was not involved: if not for the patient longsuffering and grace of God, the old covenant would have called for Israel to have been punished into extinction many times over (see Deuteronomy 28 for a detailed list of promised blessings and cursings). Time and again, through Spirit-empowered judges like Ehud and Deborah, through spiritual leaders like Samuel and Elijah, through reform-minded kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, through prophets like Amos and Hosea and Micah and Isaiah, God called Israel to repent and begin anew.

There was always grace, but there was also always the law. Jeremiah seems to have believed that God reached a point of deciding that keeping the covenant was beyond the reach of most people.

Thus, Jeremiah declared that God would bring about a new covenant. This covenant would not be based on obedience to an external law written on stone tablets that could be lost, forgotten, or ignored, but the living out of a dynamic message written on the heart.

Notice Jeremiah's use of first-person speech as he speaks for God: “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” (v. 33b).

Digging Deeper *continued*

The initiation of relationship would come from God, who would be willing to reside within the heart – a Hebrew euphemism for the seat of both emotions and thinking – so that people could move beyond a rational knowledge of the law to a relational knowledge of God’s person.

The reference to “knowing the LORD” in v. 34 speaks of knowing God personally. “The LORD,” in all upper-case letters, translates Yahweh, God’s self-revealed, personal name. The people could *know* Yahweh, not just Yahweh’s requirements.

The Hebrew verb *yadah*, used here and traditionally translated as “know,” implies heart knowledge rather than head knowledge, an intimacy that comes through experience. It is the same word sometimes used to describe sexual intercourse, as in Gen. 4:1, perhaps the most intimate personal experience that humans can have.

Jeremiah’s prophecy claims that God will initiate a new covenant in which people would no longer seek to follow a code of law, but would follow their hearts, motivated by a personal knowledge of God’s presence that leads them to fulfill the law of love. In the New Testament story of incarnation and gospel through Christ, Jeremiah’s vision of a new covenant became not just promise, but reality.

Concrete thinking—We teach our children that God lives in their hearts, and they believe it. I remember one evening, long ago, when my daughter Bethany was four years old. At the supper table, I asked her to say the blessing. Bethany’s blessings rarely had anything to do with food. As she prayed, she said “*Thank you God for being in my heart. Don’t go away now! Back and forth, back and forth . . .*” A peek showed that Bethany was rocking back and forth in the chair, giggling. She was checking to see if God could keep up with her when she rocked back and forth, that he didn’t leave her heart when she moved.

A lesson from *Les Miserables*—The struggle to understand grace is an impressive feature of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, which most of us know as a Broadway musical. As the play begins, a man named Jean Valjean is working on the chain gang. He has been unjustly imprisoned for 19 years after stealing a loaf of bread for the sake of his sister and her child.

Finally, Valjean’s sentence is up, and the constable Javert comes to announce his parole and give him a yellow card that he is obliged to show wherever he goes. The card identifies him as an ex-convict, and because he bears it, no one will show him hospitality or give him work. Finally, he comes across a kindly bishop who invites him into his home, feeds him well, and offers him a place to spend the night. But, Valjean’s mind has become so bitter from the unfair treatment he has received that he waits until the bishop has gone to bed, then steals the silver table service before running away.

The local police soon catch Valjean, who claims that the bishop had given it to him. Surprisingly, when the police drag him back to the bishop’s home to confirm the crime, the cleric looks at Valjean with a kind of compassion that can only be inspired by God. He sees a man who is broken and in need of someone to show him kindness. Instead of accusing Valjean, he agrees that he had given him the silver, then adds two silver candlesticks to his

Digging Deeper *continued*

bag. After dismissing the police, the bishop gives his blessing to Valjean and claims his soul for Christ.

Valjean is so overcome by the love shown in the bishop's actions that he does in fact become a new man. He changes his name, gets an honest job, and rises to become the owner of a factory and the mayor of his city. He devotes himself to caring for others, including the little daughter of an unmarried factory worker who had died in despair. Valjean raises Cosette as if she were his own daughter and shares his growing wealth with the poor and the oppressed.

Valjean's past comes back to haunt him, though. The constable Javert has never stopped looking for him since he broke parole, and one day he accuses another man of being Valjean and drags him before the judge to be imprisoned. Even though it means losing his own freedom, Valjean steps forward and identifies himself so the innocent man can go free. He escapes, but Javert pledges to track him down again. Javert is a man of law and order. In his mind, Valjean's changed life and the good deeds do not matter – only the law. Javert swears to God that he will put Valjean back into prison if only he can catch him again.

The next time Javert sees Valjean, however, is during the French revolution. Youthful revolutionaries have captured Javert as a spy, and they offer Valjean the chance to execute him. Javert prepares himself to die bravely, but Valjean takes him to the edge of the camp and sets him free, firing into the air so that the others will think he has finished the execution.

Javert does not understand how Valjean can show such grace to him, for it calls into question his entire life, structured as it was by legalism. Soon after, Javert again confronts Valjean. Both Valjean and the young man whom Cosette loved were seriously wounded in the revolution. An injured Valjean is carrying Marius through the sewers in search of help when Javert appears and threatens to put him back in prison. Valjean pleads with Javert to allow him to carry Marius to safety, promising that he will return and turn himself in.

Javert is overcome by conflicting emotions. He allows Valjean to go, but in doing so he feels such a sense of betrayal to his life of legalism that he can no longer live with himself. Unable to accept the gift of grace, he jumps from a bridge and drowns.

The story involves two men, both confronted with the unexpected gift of amazing grace. Valjean accepts that grace. He takes it to heart, and it changes his life for good. He becomes a person who not only receives grace but offers it to others. Javert, on the other hand, remains bound to the law, and like a heavy weight tied to his feet, it drags him to destruction.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 a fulfillment of prophecy?

Many Orthodox Jews (especially the Ultra-Orthodox) and many conservative Christians (especially of the fundamental pre-millennial dispensationalist variety) believe the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is a fulfillment of prophecies such as this one declared by Jeremiah.

Is this the case?

First, we recognize that the modern state of Israel was created by the United Nations, largely as a response to an international sense of collective guilt for having allowed Hitler and his white-supremacist Nazi party to murder more than six million Jews during the holocaust. This required the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinian natives from land their families had occupied for many generations. About 1.5 million of them and their descendants continue to live in refugee camps.

The new country was officially established as a secular state. Today, most of the Jews in Israel are either completely secular (especially in Tel Aviv and the coastal area), or traditionally Jewish but not fully practicing. About 20 percent of the population, the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox, are devoted to keeping every aspect of the complex Jewish law as expanded by the rabbis in the Talmud and practiced in Eastern Europe during the 19th century.

While the Israeli government is designed to be secular, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews have gained a disproportional measure of influence. To cultivate their support, various prime ministers have caved to their demands for special treatment. The Orthodox are not required to serve in the military, as all other Israeli citizens must do (both men and women). In addition, the government pays the men to study Torah rather than working, basing the amount on how many children they have. This has led to much resentment among secular Jews.

The Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox are also the primary force behind the continuing – and illegal – expansion of Jewish settlements in the small amount of Palestinian territory remaining in the occupied West Bank, carving it into ever smaller pieces divided by secure roads the Palestinians can't cross – even if it goes through their orchards – making life increasingly difficult for Palestinians.

The Israeli government also uses biblical promises for political purposes. All tour guides, who are required to be trained and licensed by the state, are taught to tell their groups that “God gave us this land, and no one can take it away from us,” tracing the promise all the way back to Abraham. Not all guides follow the script, but many do.

The Hardest Question *continued*

The same line is promoted by fundamentalist Christians in America who insist that America must always support Israel because God's promise to Abraham included a promise to bless those who blessed him, and curse those who cursed him (Gen. 12:1-3).

Several Israeli government-supported organizations promote "birthright" tours for American Jews, offering them a free two-week tour packed with pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian propaganda that speaks of modern Israel as the fulfillment of prophecy.

Claiming biblical promises for political gain is questionable, at best. It is important that responsible and informed Christians should recognize that "Israeli" and "Israelite" are not equivalent terms. In the first place, about 21 percent of the Israeli population consists of Arabs who are predominantly Muslim, though most of the few remaining Christians in Israel are also Arab. They are full Israeli citizens, but certainly not Israelites.

In the second place, as noted above, modern Israel as a political reality came into being as a secular state, not a religious one. While Jeremiah spoke of a time when the law would be written on the hearts of the house of Judah and the house of Israel, that is certainly not an apt description of a country in which most people are not very religious, and in which the most religious people are the most zealous in stealing more land from people whose families have lived there for centuries.