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A Light in the Darkness

Jeremiah 23 v 1-8

Introduction

Poem

The night is black, the moon is hidden,
Rain lashes down on our ship, angry waves heave,
The storm tosses us to and fro,
A break in the wind, we hear a sound,
That chills the heart, the breakers pound
On an unseen shore.
Which way to steer? No way to tell!
Our doom seems close at hand,
Then suddenly a light pierces the night,
A warning,
A guide,
A safe passage home.

Last week we read one of the shining beacons of God's word, Isaiah 53. It was great news. We even read the verse that tells us how lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.

But what if you're not the one who brings good news? What if you're the bad news guy? How lovely are your feet then? The author of today's passage was just such a person.

Jeremiah lived through the reign of the last 5 kings of the southern kingdom of Israel, called Judah. The northern kingdom had been conquered and its people carried away by the Assyrians. Judah is steeped in idolatry. King Josiah tried to turn things around and get the nation following God again, but he was only partially successful. As soon as he's gone the subsequent kings and the people turn back to their idols of wood, stone and metal. And Jeremiah prophesies to them. His message is that the judgement of God will befall them. In chapter 21 king Zedekiah enquires of his prophets what is going to happen with the Babylonians at the gates. They all prophecy peace except for Jeremiah. He says war is coming. The king suggests that maybe God will fight for them, but Jeremiah says the opposite

will happen: God is actually going to fight against them. In chapter 22 he lists the kings after Josiah and says for each what their end will be. And it's not pleasant. In fact Jeremiah's prophecies are so full of doom and gloom he is known as the weeping prophet.

But that's not the whole story. When we read his words they may be dark and desperate, but there is always a light at the centre. Amazingly in the midst of the Lord's judgement we find grace. In fact last week we finished with a song, "Great is thy Faithfulness", which is one of those lights in the darkness. The book of Lamentations documents the horrors that Jeremiah is witness to as Jerusalem is besieged. It is traumatic to read. And yet right in the middle of the book we find these words:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. [Lam 3 : 22-23]

And so tonight's passage is one of those lights in the darkness. Israel is going to be judged, besieged, destroyed, scattered, enslaved. And yet Jeremiah has a ray of light. He wants to tell the Israelites about a new Shepherd, a new David, and a new Exodus.

A New Shepherd

Verse 1-4 - Jeremiah uses the phrase "the sheep of my pasture". The people will recognise it as it is used in the psalms to refer to Israel. Psalm 74 and 79 both use the phrase "the sheep of your pasture" and Psalm 79 says "Your people". The shepherds are those who are given the job to guide and feed the sheep; the prophets and religious leaders. But they haven't been doing their job, and God's judgement is going to fall on them.

The people will be scattered but one day God will gather them together again. He will give them good shepherds to watch over them and of course we know the Good Shepherd himself will ultimately lead them. Notice the word "remnant". Time and again we read this word used to describe the few that will be saved. Right from the beginning, in Genesis, Joseph says he was sent before his brothers into Egypt to preserve a remnant. In 2 Kings 19 v 31 Isaiah says:

out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant,
and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

The picture is consistent throughout scripture. The nation of Israel will be judged, and only a few: the faithful, the righteous, will be saved. But for those the future is bright.

v4 says they will:

fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing.

God will send new shepherds, who will take care of his people.

A New David

Verse 5-6 - if the first verses give a hint of the Messiah, these 2 are full-on messianic. This Branch of David has been mentioned before in scripture. Isaiah 4v2 talks of the branch of the Lord. The picture is of one of David's descendants coming to rule forever. This shouldn't be possible as God has said that no child of Jeconiah will sit in the throne. But God will find a way. In Matthew we learn that Joseph is of the line of David, through Jeconiah. This means Jesus has the right of the throne. But he isn't of the bloodline of Jeconiah, so he doesn't inherit the curse.

This is the new David, the Branch, the promised king, Messiah. Better than the favoured king of Israel, David. Jeremiah says he will:

- Reign as king
- deal wisely
- execute justice and righteousness

He will be a king and a judge. In his days:

- Judah will be saved
- Israel will dwell securely

He will be called Jehovah Tsidkenu, the Lord is our Righteousness.

A New Exodus

Verse 7-8 - until this point when the Jews remembered God this is where they would start. He was the God that led them out of Egypt. What could be better than that? Well these "days to come" that Jeremiah talks about, they're going to be so amazing, God is going to do such great things, that Israel will forget about the Exodus from Egypt. There will be a new Exodus to talk about, as God takes this remnant out of the lands where he has scattered them, and brings them back to their own land, to dwell in peace.

Then they shall dwell in their own land

The implication here is that not only will the Jews return to the land God has promised them, but they will own it, will live there permanently, and peacefully. There is a finality to it: all wars will be over, and they will have settled there for good.

Conclusion

So what do we make of this passage, this light in the dark? For the Jews who read it at the time it meant that they shouldn't despair at their current hard times. God was going to save the remnant, he was going to send the Messiah, to reign forever. To bring Israel back after their scattering and make them live in peace.

Has it come to pass? Well, partially, but also more than they could have imagined.

The Messiah has come, he called himself the Good Shepherd, not just of the lost lambs of Israel but from all nations. He gave his life for these sheep and by his death all who believe will be saved. And yet there's more to come. We believe he will come again. And in a future day we shall fear no more, nor be dismayed as we spend eternity under his care.

When Jesus came he came as the rightful king, of royal descent and hailed by wise men from the east as the promised king. He was the new David, but better than David. He was perfect, lived a sinless life, and instituted a spiritual kingdom. All who follow him are part of this kingdom. And yet he will come again to claim the earth as his physical kingdom. He will reign and he will judge, just as Jeremiah said.

The Jews have their land back but they are not all returned to it. They don't have assurance of peace and in fact are constantly prepared for war, with enemies on every side. But the Bible has much to say about their future. Eventually God will gather all of them to their land. They will turn to Jesus as a nation. And they shall dwell in peace.

These things will happen because God's promise is reliable. Jeremiah's message to the people was that they had failed, and they would be judged, but in the midst of judgement there was grace, like a light in the darkness. God will keep his promises.

How does it affect us? Well, know that when you are facing dark times, there is always a light to warn of danger, to guide our steps and lead us to shelter. Keep your face towards Jesus and trust in him.