

# When the Foundations Are Destroyed

## *Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8*

What we saw last week was that, for more than a thousand years in Israel, God's people learned and lived out patterns and disciplines, rituals and sacrifices, walking through a complicated liturgical dance in ornate, handmade sanctuaries, their priests wearing costumes that spoke of a glory and a beauty that no fallen human priest could ever possess of his own devices.

And yet on it went year after year, century after century, priests washing their hands and slaughtering sacrifices and burning them on the altar and proclaiming mercy and forgiveness from God before washing their hands and starting all over again. And I said last week that all that sacred theater was given and enacted and repeated, generation after generation, to teach God's people three things about Christ.

*First* that the Christ when he came would be a Savior, *exalted above the heavens*," Hebrews says about him. As God the Son in human flesh, Jesus would possess a power that with a single word spoken to a lifeless corpse would turn a funeral into a reunion, a wake into a celebration. "*What are all these people crying about?*" Jesus would ask, "*Can't they see that the child is about to wake up?*"

Jesus would stand in a tossing boat in a howling wind squall and with a word command the wind and waves to a silence and a stillness that was more terrifying than the storm itself. Jesus would transform a bleak, desert mountainside into a busy and happy lawn fete, food enough for thousands drawn out of a single rucksack. The Bible is book full of miracles, everyone of them designed to teach that God's Son has the power to save should anyone of us ever trust him.

*Second*, the patterns and disciplines and rituals and sacrifices of Israel were designed to teach us that the Christ would be a sacrifice. Only God the Son in human flesh would have shoulders broad enough to bear God's terrible wrath against all the insane wickedness that has been acted out in human history, all of us guilty in some measure, None of us worthy to enter God's presence or to bask in his blessing. But Jesus bore the judgment we had coming so that we could enjoy the affection and blessing from his Father that rightfully belonged to Christ.

That story began to be told in the days of Abraham, who left everything he knew and gave everything he had because God had promised him that he and Sarah would have a son. And God was late keeping the promise as you and I and Abraham count time. God made Abraham wait forever, years and years, before the boy was finally born. And no sooner does Isaac grow up but God says to him, "*I want the boy. Offer the boy to me as a sacrifice.*" So off Abraham and Isaac trudge to Mt. Moriah, where Abraham built an altar and lay Isaac on a stack of wood.

"I know this looks a little strange," Abraham said to the boy, "but don't worry! *God will provide the sacrifice.*" And at the moment the boy was supposed to die, that is exactly what God did.

The angel spoke and Abraham lifted his eyes to the brush and there was a ram, a perfect sacrifice, with its head caught in the thorns. The message of the story? The boy was guilty. Isaac, as beautiful as he was, great as he became, deserved to die. But Isaac didn't die, Isaac lived out a brilliant life story, one of the fathers of all who believe. But he would never have gotten there unless Someone else's beautiful boy paid for our sins, his head wrapped in thorns. Only Christ could bear our sins and be our sacrifice because he was "*unstained*", not guilty.

Finally, *third*, all those patterns and rituals and sacrifices were given to teach us that Christ would be our Priest. This is a difficult one for modern Protestants to grasp because we don't have much experience with the patterns and rituals built around forgiveness and mercy in the Bible. We understand that our Savior is both wonderfully kind and immensely powerful as the miracles of Jesus make plain. To the extent we learn a sense of how holy is God and how dreadful is sin, we know that justice requires a Sacrifice, that Someone pay the price for the all the damage and injury caused that our sins cause.

But built into the Old Testament forgiveness ritual was this strange costumed man, a priest with a knife in one hand and absolution, mercy, in the other. And the point of his being there was to teach that none of us will enter the sanctuary of God alone and unaided. We enter the presence of God with a priest God ordained to teach us something of the fear that holiness should evoke and of the gratitude and joy that should accompany mercy and forgiveness.

I told the stories last week of Jesus, who in John's gospel confronted Peter after the resurrection and made him deal with the fact that he had denied Christ three times. Why? Because Jesus was still really ticked off and wanted to make sure Peter was good and sorry. I don't think so. I think it was because if you won't face what you've done and where you've been wrong, you won't have the joy and confidence that grows from being really and explicitly forgiven.

The second story was years later in the book of Acts when the risen Christ blinded and terrified the errant rabbi Saul. Because Saul was really bad and Jesus was really rippen'? Again, I don't think so. I think it was because lightening and thunder and terror was what Saul the rabbi needed to set him on the path to becoming Paul the apostle. Both stories end with Jesus absolving Peter and Paul of their sins and setting them on a path toward duty.

The Scripture Lesson I read this morning pictures Jesus, a human priest in a heavenly sanctuary, standing ready to hear of our troubles, to forgive us our failures and to teach us our duty, usually not in a vision involving cloud and swirl and angels, usually in our ordinary daily prayers as we voice those heartbreaks and question that might take us down if Christ weren't there to forgive us and help us and guide to those passages in Scripture, those people in church who, like us, need guidance and help and company to find our way.

The title I gave for this sermon in your bulletins was "*When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?*" It's a verse from Psalm 11 which is a prayer David offered on one of those nights when events in his life swirled past the point where he could do anything to save

himself. *what can the righteous do?* And the irony of the psalm is that David never answered the question. He can't think of a thing the righteous can do!

But in the very next verse David sees something like what we were shown in Hebrews. *"The LORD is in his holy temple...in heaven. His eyelids test the children of man..."* The point being that David doesn't need an action plan. He needs the sort of protection and forgiveness and wisdom and power that can only be found in that invisible sanctuary where God offers forgiveness and help to those who pray.

Like I said, what David saw and sang about in his night of trouble is very similar to what the author to the Hebrews wants to teach us today. Christ is that Man in heaven, a Priest we can approach, when our sins tangle us and trouble finds us and no one else is willing to forgive and help. Christ is in heaven waiting to hear our troubles and forgive our sins and teach us our duties in a way that no mere mortal could manage. The old priests in the old temple with the old ritual were a charade by comparison.

Our passage goes on to quote a prophecy from Jeremiah, who had the misfortune to have to speak for God at the very worst moment of Israel long history in the centuries before Christ. The king was out to lunch, the priests were corrupt and heartless. The people were worse than the priests. The whole country was a train wreck during the years Jeremiah taught the Word of God. Most of the time, only his butler was listening. To the extent anybody else heard him, Jeremiah was laughed at, or ignored, or persecuted as the food ran out and the walls started to crumble.

And, as is often the case when we're in trouble, God commanded Jeremiah to look past the wreckage all around him and to see a future that no one there and then would have thought possible:

*"Behold the days are coming declares the Lord,  
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and ... Judah,  
not like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand  
and let them out of the land of Egypt.  
They did not abide in my covenant and I abhorred them, declares the Lord.*

*For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, I  
will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts and I will be a God to them and  
they will be a people to me...*

*For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,  
and I will remember their sins no more."*

Well, there's a lot there, but we'll start by saying this. Ironically, nothing that Jeremiah promised in the new covenant that is ours today was unavailable to the people of his generation. I believe that it was as possible for Old Testament believers to have the law of God in their minds and hearts back then as it is for us today. I believe that the forgiveness and mercy and guidance

and power of God was as available to Old Testament believers back then as it is to us right now.

So the point here is not that old Israel was trapped in some sort of Catch 22 arrangement where they couldn't know God and couldn't be saved. Many, many of them knew God better and followed him more faithfully than most so called Christians today. The principal advantage we enjoy over believers back in Jeremiah's day is that Christ has made clear and personal and immediate truths that were only hinted at and foreshadowed under the old arrangement.

But there is a phrase from Jeremiah here that bears more attention and that is when he says about the New Covenant, "...they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord!' For they shall all know me from the least to the greatest." What does it mean that believers in our age would not have to be taught to know the Lord? We'll look at this passage and those questions next time. But for now it's enough to say that that Jesus being a Priest at the right hand of the Majesty has brought forgiveness closer and made it more personal than it ever could have been seeing a priest 6 times a year in old Israel.