

The Pioneers is a book by David McCullough that chronicles the acquisition of the Northwest Territories in the early days of this country. That territory interestingly includes the Midwest states around the Great Lakes. Who would have thought that such a land deal would include so vast a swath of land? The Louisiana Purchase was also one of the greatest land deals in history. By contrast, one historian comments on the property purchase in Jeremiah 32 by calling it “the worst land deal in history.” Well, that’s true if we look only at the historical context. But it’s not true, if we believe the promises of God.

After 29 chapters of doom and gloom with only an occasional glimmer of hope, we have come to what is called Jeremiah’s *Book of Consolation* in chapters 30-33 in which a few words of hope brighten the darkness of the present and the future. And here in this passage, the words of hope become a deed of promise.

It’s as though Jeremiah is told by God to *put his money where his mouth is!* Anyone can promise good things as a way of propping up hope. Talk is cheap. But this symbolic action by Jeremiah wasn’t cheap—by any stretch of the imagination. God had once promised Israel a future and here God sealed that promise with a commercial transaction that involved a piece of real estate and a fairly large sum of money. To fully appreciate this story and hear it as good news for today, we must first see how *unexpected* and how *unbelievable* it was.

Anyone reading Jeremiah from cover to cover will be surprised by the sudden emergence of the *Book of Consolation*. Again, and again God has said, in effect, I’ve had it. I’ve put up with your sin for generations, but now and it’s clear that you are not going to repent. So now I’m going to punish you for your endless, stubborn sin. There’s no going back. It’s the last hour. Prepare to meet your doom!

Indeed, Judah’s doom is at the doorstep. All the outposts of Israel’s military defenses have been conquered. The army of Babylon has surrounded Jerusalem and the siege is in its second year. Conditions in Jerusalem are *horrific* with

disease and despair everywhere, even to the point of starvation breeding cannibalism. In just a few months, the gates will be battered down, the walls will be breached, the army defeated, the civic leaders killed, the city sacked and the temple burned to the ground. The people will be deported to Babylon and the Land of Promise will be empty and desolate. It's now the eleventh hour. It's nearly over.

But at this point, here in the *Book of Consolation*, God offers his people comfort and hope. It's almost enough to make one accuse God of being fickle. I mean, after all these thundering warnings about the imminence of disaster, why would God all of a sudden speak any hopeful words? Is God like a leader who every day sends out contradictory press messages? Is God changing his mind on a whim?

No. God is still very angry and he will carry out his threatened punishment for the good of his people. But he is always loving and committed to the welfare of his chosen people and the world he will bless through those people. Even when he punishes his covenant people, his lovingkindness never fails. So, although these words of hope are unexpected given the situation in Israel, they are thoroughly consistent with God's faithfulness to his covenant promises.

Yet we have to admit that God's word to Jeremiah here sounds nearly unbelievable, even irrational. I mean, the city is under siege and Jeremiah himself is in prison for preaching a negative gospel. Soon the city will be in ruins. Jeremiah knows that. Indeed, his constant proclamation of ruin is what landed him in jail. So, he's not going anywhere and soon Jerusalem and its environs will be nowhere. Thus, God's command to buy land in Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth makes no sense whatsoever, not commercially and not personally.

It looks like a good deal only for Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel. The Scripture doesn't say this, but is Hanamel selling out so he can have the cash to flee to Egypt (which is exactly what many of the Israelites did, including Jeremiah, albeit a bit unwillingly)? Is this a fire sale? It doesn't seem to be. The price

Jeremiah paid, while not exorbitant, was not exactly cheap either. Almost any way we look at this deal, it's a bad deal for Jeremiah.

When the land is in ruins and the people are gone, what will Jeremiah do with his new purchase? It will be worthless. But of course, this real estate transaction isn't a personal investment for Jeremiah. It is a promise from God, a vivid way of saying, "There is hope for my land and for these people. And here's a sign of what is to come." As verse 15 says, "*Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.*" God uses an everyday thing, as God so often does (think of bread and wine), to make a stunning promise for the future. God anchors that promise in the pedestrian details of an ancient real estate deal. What a fascinating insight into the way they did business back then! And what a fascinating way to demonstrate that God's promise of a normal future is as real as the normalcy of selling a piece of real estate. There will be life on the land again, however impossible that may seem in this moment.

Jeremiah goes through with the deal in spite of the fact that he sees the folly of it. He does that for one reason and one reason only. Verses 8&9 put it simply: "*I knew that this was the word of the LORD; so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver.*" Five times we read that the "*Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, or the LORD says...*" He could see the situation for the disaster it was, but he heard the word of the Lord and believed it. Jeremiah walked by faith, not by sight.

This is the challenge for all of us in this Scripture—to look at the hopeless situation in which we find ourselves—under siege and in prison—and yet to walk by faith in the word of God. Keep walking by faith, even when it seems there is *no hope* of God's word coming true. Jeremiah knew it would take a long time for the promise to come true. That's why he had Baruch seal up the deed in a clay jar for safe keeping. Remember that the Dead Sea Scrolls were kept safe for 2000 years in just such clay jars. Jeremiah was under no illusion that life was going to return to normal any time soon. But he bet his money, his

property, and his life on God's faithfulness to his word. That's our challenge in any of the most difficult days of our lives.

But this story is not just about the challenge to live by faith. It is, even more, about God's ability to do what seems impossible. It's no accident that Jeremiah concludes this transaction with a prayer (if we read on to verse 17) in which the key line is: "*Nothing is too hard for you.*" But also notice that God responds with a summary of Israel's sin and a promise of his even greater mercy, which begins with a statement and a rhetorical question in verse 27, "*I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*"

Those oft repeated words in Scripture give us a direct connection to God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ for this story in Jeremiah. At a time when the world was under siege by the powers of darkness and all of humanity was in a prison of sin, God came to a humble Jewish maiden living in a forgotten corner of the Land. God promised that she, though a virgin, would bear a Son who would fulfill all of God's distant promises. When she asked how this could happen, since she never had relations with a man, the angel's response was the familiar, "*For nothing will be impossible with God*" (Luke 1:37, ESV).

The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest sign of hope for a world bent on self-destruction. "*For all the promises of God find their Yes in him*" (2 Corinthians 1:20), says Paul. When it seems as though there is no hope for you, or our nation, or for the world, remember that God put his money where his mouth is, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. God "bought the farm" so that we could have a place in the new heaven and the new earth!

What I'm talking about is tangible HOPE: The kind of hope that would sustain God's people through an agonizing time of exile and the painful realization of their failure to keep the covenant the Lord had made with them. Therefore, their historic belief that God would provide rescue, redemption and restoration requires more than nice words. Platitudes can only do so much to buoy our

hope. A sturdier hope is one that is built on God's actions, on God's character, and particularly on God's faithfulness.

The *Interpretation* commentary refers to this transaction as a *sacrament* (i.e. a tangible sacred sign of a heavenly reality.) It is, indeed, remarkable that Jeremiah, who has been forecasting the imminent demise of Judah, would purchase land there. The deed would likely be defunct in about a year's time. "This passage is couched in readily discernible Levitical language and fills out the picture of hope first proclaimed so dramatically at such a seemingly hopeless time. The message is all the more striking because it came when militarily and politically the situation had reached a point where no human hope remained. **In history and yet, grounded in a God who reigns above history, there was finally a reason for hope.**"

Jeremiah does what God says, he fulfills the righteousness demanded by the covenant and this becomes a sign of hope to all those watching. Again, the *Interpretation* commentary says: "Jeremiah took a step of faith in believing that there would be a return to normal commercial and social life in the land, making his land acquisition beneficial to him. In doing so, he perceived that his action took on a *sacramental significance* as a sign more widely relevant concerning God's future intentions for his people (v. 15). The profound nature of the sign is nearly masked by its simplicity as a straightforward commercial transaction." **So, what is the bottom line of this story? Is there any good news?**

The good news is that the bad news of our time or Jeremiah's time is fertile ground for the best news of all. **Even Jeremiah found hope! So can we!** Because (and you know this headline) in the end God wins and Jesus reigns!

Like the writer of Psalm 91, let us say of the Lord: "***He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.***"

God bless us and keep us that we may always put our **hope** in him! Amen.