

## ***Hope Can Be Found Even in the Most Boring Bible Passage***

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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

*“Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”*

The passage for today is boring. Don't get me wrong, not all Bible passages are boring. The Bible is a wonderful book, full of many amazing, exciting and captivating stories. These are stories that ignite the imagination and capture the creativity of the mind. From the *Ten Commandments* to *David* to many of the stories of Jesus, film producers, writers and directors have seen a vibrant power in the Bible stories and translated those stories to film. The Bible is a wonderful book, full of many, many amazing, inspiring, and powerful stories.

Yet that is not the entire Bible, is it? Not the entire Bible contains the exciting, swashbuckling stories we watch on the silver screen. When you read of so-and-so begetting so-and-so, and the color of the curtains of the temple, and what to do when an ox falls in a hole, you are reading the not-so-exciting material of the Bible. This is not the riveting material that movie producers are looking for, but this type of writing makes up a substantial part of the Holy Scriptures.

The passage that we are engaging today fits this genre of Biblical literature – legalistic, highly detailed, and honestly boring. In this passage, we are privy to Jeremiah performing the exciting prophetic act of . . . buying land. We read the excruciating detail of Jeremiah's legal actions; from the witnesses, to the scrolls, to the order of the legal actions. In at least two other places in the Bible can we read about a land purchase – Genesis 23 and in the fourth chapter of Ruth. In both, we are given a good idea how the transaction took place, but nothing to this level of detail. Reading this passage reminded me of my experience filling out all of the paperwork when we were closing on our house. The person in charge of the ritual made it her crusade to avoid any semblance of joy, excitement, or even the slightest bit of curiosity. When I encountered a word I didn't understand, indemnity, (protection or security against a damage or a loss) I thought it might be interesting to find out what this word meant. She quickly told me to focus on signing the papers, and showed no interest in discovering the meaning of this mysterious word, or of the joy in the search. If you haven't had the experience of selling or buying a house, perhaps you have enjoyed the rush of filling out taxes, rewriting church by-laws, listening to James Earl Jones read the book of Leviticus, or attending a lecture on the subtle differences between micro and macro economics in the suburban area from 1940 to 1963. Have I painted a picture for you yet?

Do you see why I consider this to be a boring Bible passage? It is not a heroic, exciting, death-defying risk that Jeremiah was partaking, but one of tedium and legality. And for this event we are given the fine details. Jeremiah could have said, “I bought some land. . . . Thus says the Lord” But instead we are given the high level of excitement that we would find if we were to spend an evening sipping herbal tea and watching the linoleum peel. Biblical scholars writing of the book of Jeremiah all agree on one point – this is a passage that is high in detail, and passages high in detail tend to be rather dull. The passage for today is indeed boring.

If you were to place this passage in the greater literary and historical context, the passage would move from the category of boring to the category of absurd. Read the beginning of the text, Jerusalem was under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Already, the northern tribes, Israel and others, had fallen to Babylon's power, and Judah in the south, the last tribe left, was growing weaker and weaker. The Babylonians have placed a siege upon Jerusalem; they have surrounded it and are planning to overthrow the great city. The doom of Jerusalem was impending and inevitable. The walls were weak, the enemy was slipping in, and the end was but a year away. And this was exactly what Jeremiah predicted. This was partly the reason why he was held prisoner, because when Jeremiah predicted that Jerusalem would fall into the hands of the Babylonians, his speech was seen as treasonous against the King and the country. Jeremiah predicted the Day of the Lord, and that was to be a day of doom and destruction. Well it was here, Jeremiah was right after all, so what should he do? Buy some land.

Think about this for a moment. Why would anyone, in his right mind purchase some land from a besieged country? Wouldn't one rather stock up on supplies, purchase some form of transportation, (like a van, or a fast car) or try to figure out some other way to prepare for impending doom by building a bomb shelter or stocking up on duct tape? No, instead Jeremiah makes a move that demands a long-term commitment; he buys a plot of land. This really has to be one of the most absurd things one could do in the face of oncoming threat and disaster. It is like going into battle, and worrying if your shirts are well pressed and your hair is combed. Or in the HBO series *Six Feet Under* when the mother of the family learns that her husband had just died, she throws everything in the kitchen on the floor. When her son asks her what was wrong, she replies, "Your father is dead and I have ruined the roast." One would think that at that moment, the roast would be the last concern on her mind. Jeremiah is partaking of an absurd action in an impending crisis.

This focusing on the absurd is something that theologians are particularly good at doing. We tend to focus on the ways in which we can strain out the gnat and ignore all of the other things that are going through. Dr. Horace Russell, the lead pastor at Saints Memorial Baptist Church and seminary professor told me that in one of the meetings of the World Council of Churches, a number of different theologians from a number of different denominational backgrounds were gathered. In this meeting they were fighting, arguing, and yelling at each other about one thing or another. Then Wolfhart Pannenberg, a highly esteemed theologian, stood up and shouted, "Don't you remember what we are supposed to do? We are supposed to help people get to heaven, and pray that we get there as well."

Shouldn't Jeremiah be hearing those words as well? What are you doing, buying a plot of land? Are you crazy? Shouldn't you be more concerned about the people here in Jerusalem? They are scared, they are waiting for the end, they are wondering where God is. Shouldn't you be worried about ministering to them, and pray that you are ministered to as well. Your actions make no sense and border on insane. When we realize all that is going on, we see how the passage no longer becomes boring, but instead becomes absurd.

What we are witnessing in this passage is a small mundane action in the wake of an overwhelming hopelessness. This is an act that goes against all reason, all rationality, and all sense. Maybe you have seen or experienced this yourself. When you are faced

with a crisis and you respond with what may seem to be an insignificant action. It is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, the task keeps us busy, but the end in sight makes the tasks worthless. Let's consider this idea with the church. Churches are in decline, membership overall is dropping and mainline churches in America are seeming becoming more and more insignificant to the world. Our denomination is suffering financial woes, leadership woes, theological woes and a lack of focus, purpose and vision, and staying true to its Baptist heritage is afflicted by strife and conflict. Some may describe our denomination, and denominations overall as Titanic – sinking fast with no hope. Some may make the connection with Jerusalem, under siege and soon to fall. Look at the individual church. This church has gone through conflict after conflict after conflict and still has a lot of work to do. But this church isn't alone. Do you know that one of the reasons many younger people don't go to church is because they see the church as a hypercritical institution that judges, fights, and pays little to no attention to the Gospel. Hence I hear things like, "I think Jesus is great, it is the church which I have a problem with." Again, this is not just LMBC, but churches overall which carry this burden (you aren't responsible for all of the negative press of Christianity – you didn't organize the crusades, or the Spanish Inquisition). I have been warned to run away from the ministry – it isn't feasible, it isn't rational, it isn't a realistic vocation to pursue. I have been told that I have walked onto a sinking ship, and it will take the hand of God to change things around. You would think that I would spend my time aggressively bringing in new people in any way possible, or trying to figure out a way to become financially independent. Yet instead I worry about small things like the print and presentation of your monthly newsletter and order of worship. I worry about small things like the weekly sermons and construction of the weekly worship service. Some may look at my actions and say, if you are going to be a part of this institution, the church, then you really should be saving up your resources, preparing for alternative forms of ministry, and getting ready for the end. Instead, I engage in the mundane, the simple, and the absurd.

I had a friend in high school who would pray before school in the courtyard every day. People would laugh, people would scratch their heads, and people would just walk by. Some of his other Christian friends rebuked him, saying he wasn't converting anyone with his actions, only alienating people from Christianity because he was seen as weird. His simple, basic, absurd actions were irrational. Why pray every day, what did it accomplish? Yet he continued to perform his basic actions, praying every day in the courtyard.

What is it about these small, seemingly absurd actions in the midst of a crisis that we may find to be hopeful? When one is threatened, in danger, or at an end and he or she prays, mutters scripture, or invokes God's name. Do such actions make sense? From a secular point of view, one would say it would be better to run or fight. But there is something about those basic, simple and irrational actions that we cannot just turn away from. What is it about the mundane actions in the midst of hopelessness that can offer some hope?

I suggest to you that the actions connect beyond the surface level. Look at Jeremiah's actions again. Judah is under siege, the people have abandoned hope, and Jeremiah buys a plot of land. The actions of Jeremiah seem foolish, they seem absurd, but they also at the same time point to a greater promise, a greater hope than Jeremiah could ever preach – the hope and promise that God has not left them. Why is it that we pray

when we are in danger? Because we believe that God is with us, and such absurd actions attest to our belief. Why do we continue to go to church every week when many would consider it to be a waste of time? Why do I concern myself with the minutia of the worship? Because I believe and we believe that God is still with us and worship is the time in the life of the church that we celebrate God's grace and experience God's presence as a community. Our actions become like a sacrament – they point to the greater hope, the grace of God's presence, and the promise of God's future. On one level Jeremiah is just buying land... nothing more. On a deeper level, Jeremiah is evoking God's promise to be with us in the darkest hour of the siege. After all, this passage is considered to be a part of the Book of Consolation in Jeremiah's writings, and is not the hope of the Lord consoling? Do you see how our actions can connect beyond the surface to a greater hope, a greater truth, to our God?

But I want to throw a wrench in this idea. What if Jeremiah himself did not believe in his own actions? What if Jeremiah was merely acting because God had commended it but thought his own actions were absurd? After all, in the following verses in this passage, Jeremiah prays to God for deliverance, suggesting that he did not believe Judah was going to be saved. In that prayer, Jeremiah expresses his doubts for Jerusalem's future. Did he have those doubts when he bought the land? What if we are praying just because that is our natural response, because that is what we think we should do? What if we are going to church out of pure obligation, but wonder if there is any hope at all for the church and the world. Month after month we take communion and you may find yourself wondering why. Obligation, routine, and encouragement from the community lead you to take, to act, to participate, but you wonder if there is a purpose. But, I offer to you the idea that the dull, mundane, routine of worship is your salvation. John Wesley argued that people should take Eucharist often, because it has evangelical implications – the actions will lead to belief. Do you know the Divine Wager by Blasé Pascal? He argues that you should make the bet that God does exist, and live as if God does. The actions of your life will lead to your faith. For the actions still have their sacramental significance – they still point to a truth deeper than you and I. All we have to do is open ourselves to that truth. Now, before you all stand up and brand me a Catholic, let me explain. I am not arguing for sacraments in the catholic, orthodox sense, but for a sacramental understanding. An understanding that our actions (the sign) point towards a greater reality (the grace). Isn't that what is happening in worship? When we worship, our actions become greater than us, we are no longer just a group of people gathered in a building. Instead we are connected with the greater Christian movement, with the body of Christ, and our worship connects with all the saints before us, and alongside of us. Stop for a moment in worship and try to be aware of God's presence and the greater presence of the community. Stop for a moment during a hymn and notice the gathered people praising God with one voice. Stop for a moment during a scripture reading, responsive reading, unison reading and notice the power of the prayer carrying all of us closer to God. But this awareness of God isn't something that we must regulate just to worship, but in all aspects of our life. Jeremiah was not just buying a plot of land, Jeremiah was invoking God's promise in a deep and profound way through a mundane action. Notice how God is a part of the details, the small things, the minutia. Notice how God is with you through all activities in your life – notice the ways you have been touched and visited by God. And there you will find your hope.

You will find your hope that God loves you and is with you. You will find your hope the God will take care of you. In the banality of our board meetings we will find the hope that God is still with our church and is guiding it through to a new time, a new land! In the simplicity of our worship actions we find the hope that God is with this community, and connects with us through worship. Even the very simple action of baptism points to the profound promise of life that God has offered to all of us. God is working through our lives, in our lives, and will change our lives. Open your eyes and experience the hope that the dull, the routine has to offer.

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