

There is Hope
Clairemont SDA Church
Sermon by: Pastor John Anderson
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Our passage of Scripture today is a beautiful one, containing the title of the sermon, but it is drawn from the context of horror and tragedy. That's why it's special and relevant to us today. The text is a glorious rose of God's grace, but it's grown in the soil of strife and bloodshed, confusion and calamity. Disaster was all around. Is there anyone here whose life is like that? We need to hear the message God's Word has for us today, a message of hope within discouraging circumstances.

Please turn with me to Jeremiah 31:16, 17, where we read these words. "Thus says the LORD: 'Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded,' says the LORD, 'And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. *There is hope* in your future,' says the LORD, 'that your children shall come back to their own border.'"

This is a wonderful passage, but it comes from the worst of settings. To get the full meaning of this message of hope, we have to review its historical context, though I warn you that it isn't a pretty picture. It's because the setting was so dismal that the message of hope is so special. The point is that if there was reason for "hope" in these most horrific of circumstances, then there is hope for whatever life is bringing to us.

Let's go back about 2500 years ago or so, to the land of Judah in the times of Jeremiah. Israel had been brought into the Promised Land nearly 1,000 years before this. Try to grasp the immense length of this period of time of nearly a millennium, because it bears on the tolerance and patience of God's forbearance and mercy; His reluctance to execute judgment. Israel had been promised that if they obeyed and served the Lord, He would bless and protect them. But they disobeyed Him and served the gods of wood and stone, even going beyond what their pagan neighbors had done before them.

Time after time God had sent His servants the prophets to warn them, to appeal to them to return to Him, but they "beat one, killed one, and stoned another." Matthew 21:35. They despised His Word and rejected His warnings. The appeals became more earnest, the warnings more specific. If they refused to repent, the Lord would

remove His gracious hand of protection and that would allow the enemy opportunity to come and destroy.

Sometimes the Lord asked His messengers, the prophets, to do strange things to illustrate what it would be like when the invasion came. The prophet gave his message through words, and sometimes through actions, strange as they might seem. In Isaiah chapter 20 you read that the prophet was told to walk naked through the land, to show how they would be humiliated by the enemy or have to leave so fast they were unclothed. Amos refers to that in his book when he says, "The most courageous men of might shall flee naked in that day." Amos 2:16. Ezekiel was told to lie on his side for a long period of time to portray the restraint they would suffer, not being able to go and move about when the enemy bottled them up. He was told to eat his food in rations to show the depletion of their food supplies during the siege. Despite the warnings given in love, the people persisted in wickedness and the prophesied assaults came.

In 722 BC Sennacherib brought his army from Assyria and attacked the northern kingdom which fell. His army advanced against Judah as well, but King Hezekiah prayed to his God, and Isaiah the prophet interceded and the Lord mercifully extended His hand of protection and sent the Assyrian king back to his own land, an angel having smitten 185,000 of his soldiers.

But now, in the days of Jeremiah, about another century and a half have elapsed, and King Hezekiah has long since passed to his rest. King Josiah, another of Judah's "good kings" has also exited the stage. Now wicked kings have joined with wicked priests and wicked prophets to lead the people into aggressive apostasy.

Because they pushed Him away, the Lord removed His protecting hand from His people, and Satan was more than glad to inspire the enemy into attacking. He well knew, just as he had inspired the renegade prophet Balaam to suggest to King Balak, that if God's people turned their back on Him, the Lord would exercise His "wrath," which is to give them up to the consequences of their own choices. Thus the book of Daniel opens with this insightful comment. The Lord gave Jehoiakim the king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel 1:2.

The enemy was on the march. The "snorting of his horses was heard in Dan," one of Israel's northernmost cities. Without the shielding presence of God's mercy, Judah would become vulnerable to

Babylon's forces just as her northern sister Samaria had to those of Assyria. God wanted to protect them as a mother hen protects her chicks, but they "would not," and the enemy came.

Warfare back then was beyond description. It was brutal, barbaric and beastly. It was sadistic, savage and satanically cruel. There were no rules. There was no "Geneva Convention." There were no "rules of engagement." It was "anything goes." If an enemy soldier decided to rape a woman in a city they conquered, it was not considered evil; it was merely the "spoils of war."

The horrors and atrocities exceed the descriptions of any language. There was slaughter without mercy or discrimination, by the sword, by the spear or by the dagger. If the enemy chose to take you back to his homeland as a captive and enslave you, you might be led in a forced march over hundreds of miles to that foreign land. You might be prodded by his weapon or dragged by a hook through your nose, as Scripture mentions in Isaiah 37:29 and Amos 4:2. If you couldn't keep up, that was too bad; you were killed on the spot.

Even before the march began, there would be an unholy triage, a "distribution center," separating those too old, too young, too weak, or otherwise deemed a wasted investment of their time to take with them. Young children would be taken by the heels and slammed into a large stone to murder them before the distraught and tearful eyes of their parents. "Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished." Isaiah 13:16. "O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy shall be he who repays you as you have served us! Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock." Psalm 137:9. Sometimes the bodies of parents were used as the very weapon of destruction. Hosea speaks of "a mother dashed in pieces upon her children." Hosea 10:14.

When the armies of Nebuchadnezzar came against Judah, it was in a three-fold assault, with attacks about 10 years apart. Daniel and his friends, representing the royalty of Judah, were taken in the first invasion, in 606 BC. Then in 597 Ezekiel and 10,000 craftsmen were removed. Finally in 586 the final siege took place, depleting the land of its population, with the exception of a few stragglers left behind, among whom was Jeremiah.

Terrible scenes of carnage were witnessed at Riblah, the place of judgment and decisions, as we're told in II Kings 25. How ironic it was

that this place was originally designed to be the northern border of God's territory, according to Numbers 34:11. Now it was the place where the enemy exercised his cruel control. Riblah (meaning "fruitful"), nearly 200 miles north of Jerusalem, was strategically placed along one of the major caravan routes leading from Mesopotamia to Egypt, as well as the dividing point for several minor routes. It boasted rich resources of water and grain fields nearby. It was here at Riblah that Pharaoh Necho of Egypt set up his headquarters after defeating King Josiah of Judah at Megiddo.

Now Riblah became the place where the "sorting out" occurred. Young children were separated from their parents to be killed before their eyes. Keep in mind that this was not what God wanted. For nearly 1,000 years He had been appealing for them to return and repent, but they had refused to listen. Now His gracious hand of mercy was withdrawn, and the destroyer was given opportunity. Know that the tears of those mothers were mingled with the tears of a gracious God Who had wanted to protect them from this painful experience. Oh, how great is His mercy! How patient is His longsuffering! People misread the Old Testament and miss the picture of this loving God. But the God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament. Read properly we can see that the same God Who walked the paths of Palestine, fed the multitudes and healed the sick, is the same God Who reigned in Old Testament times.

But they had transgressed the covenant. They had pushed the limits of divine forbearance. Now the nation which had refused to listen to the Voice of mercy would hear the Voice of judgment. But it was only with great reluctance. So it was, with the terrible scenes of the destruction of infants in mind, Jeremiah wrote, "Thus says the LORD: 'A voice was heard in Ramah (a place nearby), lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel (who was she? She was the wife of Jacob, also known as Israel. In this case Rachel represents all the wives of Israel, all the mothers in Israel.) Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.'"

Oh, the inexpressible grief of these mothers, witnessing the inhumane treatment of their precious children. Already their homes had been destroyed. Already their possessions had been looted. Already they had been forced to leave their homeland for a place unknown, a future undetermined. And now at Riblah, the place of judgment, the place of the organizing and sorting out of the booty, there were scenes of indescribable horror; mothers, sheltering their precious little ones, only to have them ripped from their arms and

dashed to death against a stone! Can you fathom the agony that pierced their souls? Can you imagine the hopelessness and despair that swept like a tsunami over their hearts?

It was a dark day indeed. What was the point of going on in life? The future was a gloomy fog of anguish and sorrow. This same sorrow and anguish was felt about 5 centuries later when the wicked Herod sent his soldiers to Bethlehem in search of the Child King Jesus. When the Magi, following the mysterious illumination in heaven, visited Jerusalem and inquired, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews," the curiosity and jealousy of King Herod was aroused. Not wishing to disclose his true purpose, he asked them to locate this new King, then come and report back to him where He was, that he might go also and worship Him, although he had evil on his mind.

Warned by an angel, the magi went back another way and didn't tell Herod where Jesus was. When Herod realized that the wise men were not coming back to him, in rage and brutality he commissioned his forces to go and kill all the male babies 2 years and younger. Bethlehem became Riblah. Soldiers wrested precious babies from their mothers' arms and killed them before their eyes. What grief! What horror! What hopelessness!

Matthew, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was led to quote this passage of Jeremiah and apply it to the Bethlehem slaughter by Herod. Thus we read, "Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they were no more.'" Matthew 2:16-18.

By the way, we're led to believe that the days of persecution, bloodshed and brutality are not over. Prophecy tells us that, doesn't it. We're told about difficult times before the return of Jesus. The arm of the state will be raised against those who follow Jesus and keep His commandments. Some will be called to martyrs for the Lord, to give their testimony through their blood. As strange and incomprehensible as it might seem today, liberty of conscience will be removed within our fair land, and throughout the world, as Satan inspires his followers to persecute those who are faithful to God. There will be "travail"

before there is "deliverance." Those days may be upon us sooner than we think! The anguish and agony of Riblah will be experienced again.

Thank God that the passage doesn't end there! Let's read it again. "Thus says the LORD: 'a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.' Thus says the LORD: 'Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded,' says the LORD, 'and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future,' says the LORD, 'that your children shall come back to their own border.'" Jeremiah 31:15-17.

Let's think of what this passage meant to them, and what it means to us. There's a reason why we study this ancient Book. It's because its message is timely and relevant to us today! There's a message for us in Clairemont in 2014 from what happened and what was written 2500 years ago. What was the message back then? God was telling His people that, despite the fact that they had made many mistakes; despite the fact that it was their own sinful wickedness that had brought about this disaster, He had not forgotten them. He had not entirely left them. He loved them desperately!

He was telling them that although the situation looked hopeless and dismal, there was hope! Thus says the LORD: 'Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded,' says the LORD, 'and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future,' says the LORD, 'that your children shall come back to their own border.'"

Did they need a message of hope back then? Oh yes, they most certainly did! They needed to know that there was a reason to go on with life. They needed to know that there was a reason to put one foot in front of the other and continue for one more day. They needed something to hope for. They weren't alone. The feeling of hopelessness overshadowed our first parents when they transgressed, but God came with a message of hope.

The word "hope" appears 15 times in the book of Job, usually used to express his despondency. He says, "What strength do I have, that I should hope? And what is my end, that I should prolong my life?" Job 6:11. He writes, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope." Job 7:6. He asks, "Where then is my hope? As for my hope, who can see it?" Job 17:15. He complains,

"He (God) breaks me down on every side, and I am gone; my hope He has uprooted like a tree." Job 19:10. King David prayed as he gathered material for the temple, "For we are aliens and pilgrims before You, as were all our fathers; our days on earth are as a shadow, and without hope." I Chronicles 29:15. "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off.'"" Ezekiel 37:11. We all need hope!

The word "hope" appears 133 times in the Bible, with 44 in Old Testament and 89 in the New. The Bible is filled with a message of hope. The word "hope" in our language can mean something that is desired but uncertain. Not so in the language of the Bible. Hope is something that is certain but not yet realized. Our hope is made certain by the victory of Jesus. We have only to be patient and allow the fulfillment to come in God's time.

Here's how God's Word expressed the hope we have in Christ. "Be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the LORD." Psalm 31:24. "And now, Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in You." Psalm 39:7. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance." Psalm 42:5. "O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption, and He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." Psalm 130:7. "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11. "Return to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope." Zechariah 9:12. "By two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil." Hebrews 6:18.

Was there hope at Riblah? Was there hope in the face of utter destruction, heart-rending tragedy? Was there a reason to go on living even after seeing your children murdered before your eyes? God said there was. He said, "Thus says the LORD: 'Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded,' says the LORD, 'And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. *There is hope* in your future,' says the LORD, 'that your children shall come back to their own border.'"

For some of the mothers of ancient Judah whose children were not destroyed, the promise was fulfilled after the promised return. We know from the book of Haggai that there were some who came back from Babylon who had seen Solomon's temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. They came back from "the land of the enemy" in a literal way. But for many of the grieving mothers, that hope would have to be rooted in the great Day of restoration, the day of the resurrection, when angels will carry babies back to the waiting arms of their mothers. Then they will have come back from the "land of the enemy," the grave. Here's the main point God would have us see today. He doesn't promise that there won't be trials and sorrow, grief and tears. But He does promise that there is hope.

And what about the "Bethlehem babies," slaughtered at the time of Christ's birth. Matthew applied the message Jeremiah to them as well. Yes, what happened in Bethlehem was indeed a tragedy, but God held out a message of hope to the mothers from whose arms the infants were stolen and murdered. I am under conviction that those babies will not only be saved in the kingdom, but will belong to a special fraternity, a class by themselves. You'll be walking down Grace Avenue one day and someone will point out one of the redeemed and say, "Do you see him? He was one of those Herod murdered in Bethlehem." They will share a special association and be given special honor as martyrs for Jesus. There is hope for the "Riblah" at Bethlehem.

And there is hope for you and for me today. Our world is crumbling before our very eyes, teetering on the precipice of political, military, social, environmental and economic disaster. But there is hope! I don't know what your own personal "Riblah" may be. It may be a job situation or a health issue, but there is hope! It may be a relationship that is failing or broken, but there is hope! I may not be aware of what tragedy, agony, affliction or trial you may be going through, but there is hope. That's based on the sure promise of God, Who cannot lie. And you and I have the confidence that this glad day of restoration, the day when Jesus comes back in the sky, will be very soon. The message of the Three Angels is going around the world, sounding the warning given in love that God wants to wrap this up quickly. The Lord wants the world to know that He is coming soon and that we are now living in the solemn hour of His judgment. The Lord wants the world to know that we should honor His day, the true "Lord's Day," the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment. We obey not to be saved, but to show that we are saved by His grace and are loyal citizens of His kingdom. It's of vital importance to show by our lives

that we love Him and are willing to give our full allegiance to Him. The Lord has given this church the awesome role of announcing to the world His last day message.

Soon our blessed Lord will break the sky and rend the tombs and bring back from the land of the enemy those who have been laid to rest. Have you received Christ as your Savior and committed your life to Him? Are you rejoicing in the forgiveness that He gives through His grace and the hope that His Word provides? Are you praying that God will lead you to someone with whom you can share the Gospel? Are you waiting for that great day to come?

Have faith in God, His love the Book proclaims
Have faith in God, there's hope in Jesus' name
Have faith in God, forever He's the same
Have faith, dear friend, in God