

The Righteous Branch Comes

14 “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. 15 “‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a text where it’s helpful to know a little of the story that came before so that we understand what’s happening and being said here, in Jeremiah chapter 33. It was only a few months before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. This would be remembered as the last full year that there was a kingdom of Judah ruled by a king from David’s line.

The enemy was already in the land. Fort by fort, city by city, Judah was crumbling like a dry biscuit. The siege towers were already up against the walls of the City of David. And it was now, when no one except secret messengers could get in or out of the city, that the Lord God commanded Jeremiah the prophet to buy a field!

Since Jeremiah’s message didn’t always appeal to people, he had plenty of opponents; court officials and perhaps some temple priests who complained about his prophecies and his preaching, which always seemed to contradict logic and always went contrary to what everyone thought the king should do. In the uproar that Jeremiah’s message was stirring up, he was arrested-- not for the first time. Locked up in a lonely place, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah about the days ahead.

He begins with the “good” or “gracious promise.” What was this? This was the promise the Lord made through Jeremiah in chapter 29, that the captivity they were about to be taken into would come to an end. It would not be forever. Almost two hundred years before, the Assyrians had come and had deported most of the northern ten tribes. And now as the bicentennial of that terrible loss approached, the Babylonians were at their gates, and Jeremiah kept telling them to lay down their weapons and go ahead and be taken captive to Babylon. But unlike the captivity if the north, their captivity would end in 70 years.

Now, Jeremiah adds, after the return from Babylon, the Righteous Branch will come. He doesn’t say how soon, but the Righteous Branch would come. What does “righteous” mean? For you 7th

and 8th graders who are taking notes, this is the key question I want to learn today, because, first of all, the dictionary doesn't go far enough with its definition, and also, the correct answer has two parts. Righteousness is more than being "morally right or justifiable."

Both kinds of righteousness are found in God. The first righteousness is the perfect, holy righteousness of God, who Moses said is "a faithful God who does no wrong" (Dt. 32:4). But there is another righteousness, where in the Psalms we hear about "the Lord who is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made" (Ps. 145:17).

But a perfect God who punishes sin and imperfection and a loving God who is righteous yet compassionate don't seem to go together. When God demands our righteousness, he terrifies us. But the Bible, especially the Epistles, the New Testament letters, teach us that at the same time that God demands righteousness from us, he also offers his righteousness to us, and gives it through Christ. We apprehend that righteousness through faith. And Jeremiah foretold that the righteous Branch was coming.

A branch is an arm of a tree. Trees have lots of branches, but there was one branch on its way; not just any old branch or arm, but a certain, special one. Over the centuries, beginning with the promise to Eve in the Garden of Eden, the location of this coming Branch was narrowed down. To Eve, it would come from her descendants. The Branch would be a human being, a son. Abraham was told it would be through his line, his son Isaac. Isaac was told it would be through his family, too—and then his son Jacob was told it would come from him. In Moses' time, Israel was told that the Branch, who would also be a King, was still a long way off. But then we learn that he would come from the tribe of Judah, and the line of David.

Now, Jeremiah said, the Branch would come after their return from Babylon. And therefore David's line would remain intact. God fulfills his promises even when humanity can't comprehend how that could be possible.

Our failure to comprehend. Our unrighteousness. Our opposition to God's prophets and ministers, to God's inspired word, to his doctrines, to his teachings, and to his mandates.^a We are empty of God's righteousness, and we are spattered with the guilt of our sin.

And God says, through Jeremiah and others, you are in for a hard time. Following God's will is not an easy path. There will be days, months and even years where following God is not easy.

We want to follow the hard path of being a Christian in a world that is opposed to Christianity. One of the hardest paths we walk is when our country does what it is famous for. A Democracy truly works best through compromise. In a government, compromise means that on the one hand,

^a Psalm 119:96; John 13:34

nobody will ever be completely happy, but on the other hand, nobody, at least in theory, needs to be left out. When compromise broke down in the early 1860s, our nation ended up in a Civil War. If our political arena does not find a way to move away from its current lack of compromise, then the Troubles we are seeing will continue, and will grow worse.

But while this is going on, government both local and national begins to think that the Church should be an instrument of compromise as well. That doctrine should be able to be revisited and even changed, based on compromise. That means that pressure, through threats and legal action can be attempted to make changes happen. This is the tough walk we face, that we live with. And sometimes we're going to make mistakes. Individual Christians can end up throwing accusations at one another because we get politically polarized and forget the mandate of Jesus Christ to love one another (John 13:34). How can we help but make mistakes in this arena, in our culture, in this sinful world?

And for all of these sins and for all this filth that stains our lives and weighs down on our poor consciences, there is an answer. There is a solution. **“In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.”** That “saved” doesn't just mean the rescue from Babylon, the “get out of jail free” card that Cyrus the Great gave to Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai and the others. No, no, it means that our errors of judgment are overlooked by our gracious God. Our meandering path with all of its pitfalls in the political quagmire that we live in are gently shown in the light of gracious Christian intention, and God forgives what should be forgiven and God understands when we have chosen to champion one issue over another. God will even explain to us that a man's desire to champion **orphans** does not mean that he hates **widows** or **lepers** or **war victims**, it only means that he has chosen one good deed and done was he could.

Advent is the regular season when we look for the coming of Christ. When he came the first time, it was (1) to fill up our blank record of righteousness and good deeds, empty on our part because of our sin and because the sinful person is unable to please God. (2) Second, it was to pay the price for our sins on the cross.

Without the cross, we would have no salvation. We would still be in our sins, even if we didn't know about them; even if we took a legal attitude about them all and tried to reason our way, point by point, backward through the long record of mistakes and sins that trails after us like a long, long bill that we owe. Except that through faith in Christ, the bill is paid up, paid in full.

Put your faith in Jesus, the Righteous Branch who makes us righteous. He has done what is right, and he has saved us from our sins. Live with your uncompromising faith in our troubled world of disappointing compromises, but know that God has not and will not back down when it comes to you. You are his child, you are a member of his church. And you have a place with him forever. Amen.