

Hope for a Difference

Jeremiah 33:14-22; Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36



We anticipate many things this time of year. We look ahead with the hope of family and friends gathering in celebration. We look forward to decorations and displays of cheer amid bleak wintry surroundings. We hope for a break from work, school, and the stress of preparing for coming celebrations. Do we yearn for any real difference in the world? How can our faith offer hope for a change worthy of our efforts and celebrations?

Jeremiah's words sent a mixed message to a struggling nation. His words were both comforting and distressing. The people liked the parts about *Yahweh's* protection and coming reign. They did not like the part about exile and laying down their strategies of resistance against rising Babylonian power. The nation who had rebelled against *Yahweh* to the point of offering their children to Molech was in need of desperate change. Could there be hope of restoration as *Yahweh's* covenant people? Jeremiah's words offered hope, but not the kind of hope many desired.

With the demise of the Assyrian Empire, Judah was experiencing growth in status, power, and wealth. They were hoping for a great change in their national standing. The power vacuum had given Judah the freedom to exert herself and enjoy greater economic prosperity. Many placed their hope in a drive for independence from nations striving toward imperial dominance. Jeremiah's words decry the futility of this hope. He called Judah to renew its hope in *Yahweh's* coming deliverance, instead.

During our ministry in Mexico, we ran into national leaders who believed we would be the answer to their problems if we would simply channel them money. We found the same concept among believers in Brazil. The seminary where I taught was struggling to pay bills, the Baptist School faced financial crisis, as did the state convention. "Money will solve our crises," was the claim. I have heard churches and pastors in Virginia making the same claim. Like Judah of old, we look to the measurable resources at hand and the visible sources of aid in the crises of life. Our hope and yearning all too often do not mirror God's concerns. While God's concerns are eternal, ours tend toward physical comfort. What difference do we yearn for in this world? What kind of change are we living to accomplish?

While Judah was concerned with national and international politics, Jeremiah called them back to align their lives in covenant with *Yahweh*. Jeremiah foretold a day when justice and righteousness would reign, but this day depended on the nation returning to covenant responsibilities, not military or economic measures. It was dependence and faith that would impact the world around them. They looked at their own welfare. God focused on the welfare of the entire world. Jeremiah called the people to allow faith in *Yahweh* to make a real change, not only in their lives, but throughout the world.

For years we have relied on the institutions of faith to do the work of changing the world. These very institutions are under attack today for failing to measure up even to the standard expectations of non-believers. Bill Gates, Elton John, and other celebrity voices have publicly denounced institutional religion specifically for failing to accomplish change in the world. These are people who desire change—a change our institutions should be accomplishing, but aren't. We have too long relied on institutions to impact the world on our behalf. While God uses institutions, God is more interested in using our lives. How does our faith impact the world to make significant difference?

Jeremiah spoke of a future hope. He spoke in anticipation of what God would accomplish. He spoke of restoration, justice, righteousness, and God being known for righteousness. He spoke of God's faithfulness to fulfill this hope and bring it to fruition. He challenged Judah to renounce misplaced hopes, hoping instead in what *Yahweh* desired and would accomplish. Like the psalmist praying for guidance and deliverance, Jeremiah expressed confidence that *Yahweh* would deliver—a real hope for a real world.

For generations Baptists have talked about being missions-minded. We prided ourselves in the extent and successes of our missionary endeavors and cooperative giving. Reality says that while our missions programs have grown, our giving has not kept pace with our receiving. We are collecting our offering for Global Missions. We heard the challenge of sharing of what we spend on personal luxuries to offer real hope to the truly hurting. Trusting God's provision frees us to engage more of our resources to offer hope to others. It frees us to live the hope of the gospel ourselves, with a message of hope to share. How can we shift from being missions minded to being on mission? How can we live so as to impact a world in need of our hope?

When Jesus spoke of preparation for his coming, his words offered hope. He mentioned war, fear, distress, and confusion. These are not words to describe believers, however. To believers, Jesus says, "Raise up your heads, for your redemption is at hand!" Hope—hope in the midst of all sorts of ills and difficulties raging around the world. Jesus speaks confidence to a people empowered to fulfill a mission. Amid the world's desperate need for hope, we have a compelling hope to live and to share. The question is whether we are prepared to live and share the hope we claim.

While our nation focuses its energies and resources on purchasing of gifts for people who really don't need them, the Philippines has just suffered great devastation from a typhoon, from which possibly thousands have died. People need hope. Genocide in Sudan continues. People need hope. AIDS continues ravaging populations in Africa. People need hope. A bridge collapse in India has killed dozens. People need hope. What are we doing to share hope with a needy world?

Jesus reminds us to raise our heads in the midst of distress and calamity. It is in the suffering of the world that our hope can shine the brightest. In the face caring for family with Alzheimer's, cancer, deteriorating health, financial burdens, divorce, death, and tragedies of various kinds, we have a hope by which to live. We have a hope to share.

In this season of Advent, we prepare our lives for celebrating the hope in Christ Jesus' birth. We will give our offerings to Global Missions. We will celebrate the stories and meaning of Christmas. We will decorate our homes and bodies with the symbols of our hope. We will purchase gifts to signify our love for one another. How does God want our lives to impact the lives of others?

I personally may not be able to stop the AIDS epidemic in Africa or halt the genocide in Sudan. We can all, however, make a difference in the world around us as we impact the lives of friends, relatives, and strangers right around us. We have a hope to share. We have a hope to live. We have a calling to allow our hope in Christ to make a difference in how we interact in the world. As we live out the reality of our hope, we must share hope's meaning with a world in need. Who is waiting on us to make a difference in their lives?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*