

Savior of the Nations Come

Jeremiah 33:14-16

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Begin by recognizing our need.

Picture this prophet Jeremiah, whom Luther describes as “a sad and troubled prophet [who] lived in miserably evil days.”¹ This prophet also wrote the book of Lamentations, weeping about the state of Israel in bondage. The first twenty chapters of this prophet’s book is all about the evils and idolatries of the wicked Israel. But lest they all simply despair in their shame after the punishment Jeremiah foretold would come upon them, he offered them also the promises of God, showing that their suffering would not last forever, but would have an end.

How does this apply to us? Wasn’t Jeremiah speaking to the Old Testament nation of Israel? It’s true, he was, but as we see numerous times in his prophecies as well as in the prophecies all over the Old Testament, there was a partial fulfillment to the prophecy (in this case when Israel was returned to their land and their temple after something like fifty years in bondage). Beyond this, there is a greater fulfillment. And this is where we consider the final meaning of Jeremiah’s prophecy, when the “righteous Branch” would mean the redemption not just of their bodies and their land, but of their souls, and when “Judah” and “Jerusalem” would mean more than the physical nation, but the spiritual nation of God’s people. With the lamenting prophet

¹ LW 35:280.

Jeremiah, and with the wicked and bound nation of Israel, let us examine our poor state, in the bondage of sin, wicked in our own right and condemned in the sight of God. Examine the state of life in this dark world: we live in fear of war, we see loved ones die, we hear of tragedy in the news, we have our own aches and pains and sorrows. It is for this reason that we sing, as we are taught by the lamenting prophet, by King David, and by the whole Scriptures, pleading: **“Savior of the Nations, Come”!**

I. Promises Will Be Fulfilled

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” These are wonderful words! As we plead for deliverance, so it is answered, and we are certain of the answer because it comes as a “promise” made by God. The promise (literally the “good word”) will be fulfilled! But what is that promise?

God says that it was the good word he spoke for “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” We see such a promise made for this nation in Deuteronomy 28:

[T]he LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.... And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. (Deut. 28:1-10)

Here we speak of the “old covenant,” which assured the people of Israel of God’s blessings, if they would keep his commandments. But by Jeremiah’s time, Israel and Judah had disobeyed those commandments over and over, and as punishment they were being taken away from their promised land, separated from the temple where

they were connected with their God. This is the terrible situation which confronted them. However, Jeremiah communicates that this promise will still be fulfilled, and the sign of its fulfillment he says: "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David." This "Branch" image we often think of in reference to Christmas time from the prophecy of Isaiah: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (Is. 11:1). Isaiah described how, even though the tree of Jesse (think of a family tree, with King David being the son of Jesse), even as it is cut down, its stump will sprout, and the line of the kings will be maintained. This was and is understood to refer to the Messiah, who would be the king like David only greater. That Jeremiah uses this image as well should immediately direct our minds to the same sort of promise fulfilled: the Messiah will come as King for God's people.

And here where we read it is actually the second time Jeremiah says these things.

In the twenty-third chapter the prophet utters:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' (Jer. 23:5-6)

Notice how similar this earlier passage is to that on which we meditate now. The first reason for this similarity is that the promise is worth repeating. It is a glorious promise! See how this righteous Branch, this Messiah, will be a wise king, causing justice and righteousness to come into the land. Justice means that the evil is punished and the good rewarded. Righteousness is his own innate quality which he shares and makes

available to the land, so that his justice might see their righteousness and reward them. This is what it means that God's people, "Judah" and "Israel," "will be saved, and...dwell securely."

This promise's fulfillment, which is all the work of the Messiah provided by God, is summarized in the name which is recorded here for him: the Messiah will be called, "יהוה צדקנו" – "The LORD – our righteousness"! Do you understand? The Messiah is called יהוה, the name of God. And he is "our righteousness." It is by the Messiah that this righteousness is ours.

II. Righteousness Will Be Ours

There are a couple of key differences between Jeremiah chapter 23, which I just read, and chapter 33, which is our study now. Both concern the fulfillment of God's promise to his people. Both describe a Branch, and both provide the name *Yahweh'sidqenu*. But there are a few linguistic nuances that vary between the two, which are largely lost in translation. It might be a stretch to make too much of those differences if there wasn't something clear to define the obscure. So look first at that name.

In chapter 23 it states, "And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (23:6). But chapter 33 says, "And this is the name by which *it* will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" Here we begin to see the second reason for the similarities between these two texts. The first, in chapter 23, is speaking of the Messiah, the Christ. Our meditation now speaks of the people of the Messiah.

Yahweh'sidqenu, the name first appropriated to the Messiah, is applied also to his people, to "Judah" and "Jerusalem."

Yes, this is precisely what this prophecy is stating: the people of God will receive the name of the Messiah, which is itself the name of God. That name causes that people to reflect "the righteousness which is bestowed on her by the Messiah."² It allows her to hold the fullness of "what the Messiah will bring to the people."³ This is precisely the promise that God made to his people repeatedly. Remember from Deuteronomy, part of that good word was: "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are *called by the name of the LORD*, and they shall be afraid of you" (Deut. 28:10). Isaiah likewise prophesies the deliverance of "everyone who is *called by my name*, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Is. 43:7).

The same thing happens in the psalms. In Psalm 1 we read, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers" (Ps. 1:1). Who can be described this way? Who is it that has never fallen into evil company and adopted their ways? Only the Messiah, the Son of God. But then at the end of Psalm 2 we read, "Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 2:12). Those who submit themselves to, take shelter and trust in, become the people of this Messiah are called by the same descriptor that describes him, in this case, "blessed."

² Keil 303.

³ Ibid. 302.

St. Paul describes how the same thing occurs: “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all *sons of God*, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:25-27).

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came as the King in David’s line, that kingly succession which was broken and chopped down because of the wickedness of God’s people. He died on a tree, taking on his own body our wickedness and evil and the punishment that it deserved; at the same time placing on us his own righteousness, his own glorious birthright, his own name. Jesus became a son of Man, that men might become sons of God in him.

And so this promise on which we meditate today refers not to the Messiah, but *because of* the Messiah, it refers to the Messiah’s people, his Body, the Church. Because of what that Messiah has done and given to us, this prophecy of Jeremiah’s speaks of us. Examine with me some of the linguistic nuances of the Hebrew:

The “righteous Branch” in this second prophecy, as opposed to the first, is in Hebrew “a Branch *of* righteousness,” drawing its quality from an external righteousness, while the “righteous Branch” in the first prophecy has this righteousness in itself. In the same way, our righteousness comes from outside us, from our Messiah who had it as his own quality.

The ESV translates the first prophecy, “I will *raise up* for David a righteous Branch,” and the second prophecy, “I will *cause* a righteous Branch *to spring up* for David.” This translation notices that there is a difference between the two, but the nuance is significant. To “raise up” and to “cause to spring up” mean the same basic

thing, but the way the words are composed imply in the first case that God would “raise up” this Branch once, and in the second case that God would “cause” the branch “to spring up” continually, as an ongoing effect. In chapter 23, as we said, the “Branch” is the Messiah, who was raised up by God once. But because of what that Messiah has done and given to his people, God causes the “Branch” in chapter 33, the Church, to spring up continually. Hear in the book of Acts how this occurred: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7); “But the word of God increased and multiplied” (12:24); “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (19:20). Jesus declared that before the end of the world this very thing must occur: “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mark 13:10).

And aside from mere numbers, this “righteous Branch” of the Church, which is you and I, we are “saved,” that one-time occurrence which came about when the Son of God died on the cross, which was declared to the world when that same dead God rose to life, and which applied to us when the Word came to us in Baptism or in the Scriptures and created faith in our hearts; and likewise we “dwell securely,” because the Holy Spirit continues to sustain us in faith, to protect us from onslaught by the devil and the world, and to bring to us forgiveness for all our sins, so that our salvation is most sure. All this is ours because the Savior of the nations did come as a baby, conceived in Mary’s womb: so with confidence we call out for that Savior to come once again, at the end of the world, and at the end of our lives, so that in the secure arms of

that Savior we may be brought to the fullness of our salvation. In this Advent season, let this be your ongoing prayer, for if this Virgin's Son makes your heart his home, then his heavenly mansion is secured as your home.

Amen