

Jeremiah 31:7-14

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[0 : 01] I wonder if you've ever asked yourself the question, how did I get here? Perhaps you've come from humble beginnings. You've achieved a measure of success in the world.

You've got a nice house, you've got a nice car, you get nice holidays, you've got a wonderful family. And you pinch yourself sometimes and say, how did I get here?

Now, occasionally I tune into the World Service of the BBC, and some of you may say, how boring is that? But actually, sometimes it's quite interesting to listen to some of the programs on BBC World Service.

And I came across this program just recently that caught my attention. It discussed a song that resonated with so many people over the years.

Now, I'd heard of the band Talking Heads. They were apparently one of the most critically acclaimed bands of the 1980s.

[1 : 02] But I really knew nothing of them. I still don't know very much about them, apart from what I heard on the program about one of their songs. The song was a 1981 song, before some of the people here were born.

Once in a lifetime, it was called. And that was the program's focus. And a couple of verses from it says, And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack.

And you may find yourself in another part of the world. And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile. And you may find yourself in a beautiful house with a beautiful wife. And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?

And there's a chorus that says, Now, it's said that the writer of the song was diagnosed with Asperger's later on in life.

And he was observing the world, maybe slightly differently from what other people observed the world. And the way the song is sung, the presenter said, was mimicking an evangelical preacher.

[2 : 18] Now, I don't know what an evangelical preacher is like. Do you? I think it's more about the maybe American Southern Gospel kind of preacher.

But the song mimics that of an evangelical preacher. Kind of asking questions about life and giving an answer. And a sense of awe and wonderment.

How did I get here? Well, I could ask myself the question as well. And so could many of you. It's as if the author has arrived somehow.

And he says, you may ask yourself, what is that beautiful house? You may ask yourself, where is the highway we go to? And you may ask yourself, am I right? Am I wrong?

And you may ask yourself, my God, what have I done? You've arrived. You've arrived. One of the program's participants, guys who were discussing the song, started off with no job, no hope, no prospect, no money.

[3 : 29] But he found a job in an A&E; department in a hospital. But he was unhappy. He didn't like it. So he moved across to the United States. And years back, he looks back and he remembers the words of the song.

And you may ask yourself, how did I get here? For him, the hopes that he had had somehow become a reality.

And yet he's wondering, how did I get here? Having endured the worldwide COVID-19 epidemic, we've crossed the threshold into a new year.

And we may be asking, how did we get here? How did we get through these last two awful years? Because they were awful for so many people.

Some of us are lost very dear friends through the COVID. John Copper, a pastor, a good friend of mine from a church in Bucky, lost his life through COVID.

[4 : 33] He was going to join us on the Israel tour in May. Really looking forward to it. But he's gone to be with the Lord. He caught COVID on the 18th of November and died.

He was just 64. I felt that a great loss because John was a good friend. People's plans have changed, cancelled.

And there has been among people a sense of hopelessness. They felt that their freedoms have been taken away. Now, for others, it was almost COVID was almost a blessing because they were able to step back and relax a wee bit.

They found time. Time they thought had gone forever. Time to slow down a bit. It was good to drive on the roads with hardly any cars, wasn't it? In the first days of lockdown.

So in a sense, we could say, well, even although things had changed, we enjoyed some parts of the lockdown. In 2020, Tokyo Olympics didn't take place until 2021.

[5 : 44] And even when it did take place, the athletes competed in countless new stadiums with nobody to applaud them, lacking the deafening support of those who were cheering them on and cheering the winners.

But then there are people who feel just as empty as those stadiums. And life makes little sense to them. They've lost hope in the future, in life.

Is that you? Are you disillusioned? Discouraged? That's not how the Lord meant it to be.

And if you're going through times of difficulty, the Lord has plans for you. God wants you to know the fullness of life, of purpose, of hope.

He wants you to experience a blessing here now in preparation for the hope, for all that is to come, the hope of eternity with Christ. That's a great hope we have as we move into a new year, into 2022.

[7 : 03] The hope we have in Christ. Despite all the hardships there has been across the world, God is still at work through our nations.

God is calling a people to himself across the nations of the world. I get an email and I sometimes get their magazines, an organization called Elam.

Elam.org, I think it is. They've got great stuff on their website about what God is doing in the nation of Iran, which we hear a lot about. And it's often bad news because they are causing mayhem in other countries by supplying weapons.

And they're now at the stage of developing the nuclear bomb for themselves. But there's another side to that nation of Iran. And apparently, the Christian population is growing at a phenomenal rate. The gospel is being proclaimed. Iranians are being saved. And Christians have been eagerly sharing the joy of the Christmas gift.

[8 : 22] One lady, the latest email I got said, Armita shared Christ with a local Iranian businessman, a Muslim. And he asked her to share the gospel with his 60 workers, with 60 employees.

A local pastor was ministering to refugees. 400 Afghans to attend a Christmas outreach hosted by his church.

There is hope, you know. There is hope in the world, even although all around us there seems to be spiritual darkness. And in this chapter we read in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31, we find that there is a hopelessness in the nation at that time, in Judah at that time.

There is much suffering amongst the children of Israel. Jeremiah, God's prophet, God's spokesman, whose name is something like, means something like, the Lord throws.

In a sense, Jeremiah has been thrown into a hostile world, into the service that God wants of him.

[9 : 45] Prophesying around six centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, he is called by God and he's told not to marry or to raise children. Why? Because God is coming in judgment over Judah.

It was a dark time in the days in the Middle East and the people who had been chosen by God. Jeremiah 16 and 2 says, Do not get married or have children in this place, for this is what the Lord says about the children born here in this city and about their mothers and their fathers.

They will die from terrible diseases. This is what the Lord says, Do not go to funerals or mourn or show sympathy for those people, for I have removed my protection and peace from them.

I have taken away my unfailing love and my mercy. And sometimes it feels like that in our own nation today, that God has withdrawn from us. But he hasn't fully withdrawn.

So Jeremiah is to prophesy to a people under judgment. Now, it seems that Jeremiah was quite a timid man. He was prone to worry.

[10:56] A man that we often know as a weeping prophet. How could he cope with the responsibilities God was placing on his shoulders? Only because God would be with him every step of the way and gave him that wonderful assurance that he would be given strength and courage.

Get up and prepare for action. Go and tell them everything I tell you to say. Do not be afraid of them or I will make you look foolish in front of them. For see, today I have made you strong like a fortified city that cannot be captured.

Like an iron pillar or a bronze wall, you will stand against the whole land, the kings, officials, priests, people of Israel. Oh, that we might have the strength to do that in our nation today against all we see that stands against God.

They will fight you but they will fail for I am with you and I will take care of you. I, the Lord, have spoken. Does he say anything different to us today as we stand up against evil in the world? I think this is a word for us today on the first Lord's Day of this new year. Stand up for what is right like Jeremiah had done in his day.

[12:16] Despite the hopelessness of the day, we're to be fearless because the Lord, our God, is with us. Jeremiah became, this timid Jeremiah, became a fearless and faithful servant to God.

And through Jeremiah, God promises that he is going to show his love to Israel, to Judah. Oh, my dear friends here, God is pouring out his love on you and on me day by day.

We have to prove our faithfulness to God. But here, the people of Judah had to first pay for their unfaithfulness.

At this point in their history, unfaithful Israel had gone, Judah was just about to go, confused, they confused the worship of God with the worship of idols, and they were warned, they were being warned by Jeremiah of the cost of doing this.

And Jeremiah chapter 3 says that Judah is gradually sliding away. They're backsliding. They're losing any of their godly spirituality.

[13:40] And they didn't notice their sliding until one day dawns. How did I get here? How did I get here?

I hope and pray it doesn't apply to anyone here today after being distracted by the world's offerings and there are many offerings out there. Not that it is wrong in itself.

but maybe some of what the world offers has invited you to turn away from your first love.

Just like Judah were doing in the days of Jeremiah. Maybe you failed to meet with the Lord's people as often as you once did because something else has become more important to you.

We hear of Sunday evening services being so low today when one time Sunday evening services were even bigger than Sunday morning services.

[14:48] Have we lost the desire to be among God's people under the hearing of the word? Maybe God is speaking to someone's heart here right now.

Every pang that reigns the heart the hymn writer says the man of sorrows had a part. You may be hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit the voice of Christ speaking to your own heart even at this time. Jesus the man of sorrows speaking to our hearts revealing to us that he doesn't want us to return to the world.

He wants us to return to the blessedness we once knew when first we saw the Lord. There is a way back just as there was in Jeremiah's time but he might have to let us go our own way for a while that we may as the saying goes today that we may find ourselves and we say to ourselves how did I get here?

How did I get here? Judah is about to be exiled to Babylon there seems to be no hope for them they're going to be taken away from their own people their own nation but even at the same time God is planning for for for a time after their punishment as it were the Lord appeared to us in the past saying I have loved you with an everlasting love I have drawn you with loving kindness I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt O virgin Israel so the picture is emerging in this chapter in Jeremiah chapter 21 of of being in a desert place the people who survived the sword will find favour in the desert I will come and give rest to Israel have you felt empty in these days?

[17:00] have you felt separated from God in some way in the desert place? the Lord wants a relationship with you again I will come he says to give you rest rest it's taken us back to the exodus story describing Israel's deliverance from Egypt and God's victory over the army of Pharaoh and God's grace being made manifest in the desert and God's grace is maybe being made manifest to someone here today as God wants you to return to a real fellowship with himself just like he

provided for his people so long ago I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt to a virgin Israel again you will take your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit there will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim come let us go up to

Sion to the Lord our God there will be rejoices in the village of Samaria the psalmist says unless the Lord builds a house the labour is in vain and God is saying here I will build I will build and again Judah is going to come back to the Lord like a virgin bride verse 13 says then the maidens will dance and be glad young men and old as well I will turn their mourning into dancing and will give him comfort and joy instead of sorrow Jeremiah declared that the hill country of Samaria in the north which was ravaged by the Assyrians sometime back in 733 722 they will be replanted with vineyards a gift of God to the lives of his people and the day would come when the nation would be united once again with Israes from the northern kingdom making pilgrimage to

Judah and the southern kingdom or Zion or Jerusalem yes Judah would be scattered to the four winds in 722 Israel the northern kingdom fell as you know and the southern kingdom of Judah needed to take heed in Jeremiah's day and history tells us that it too fell in 586 BC God was taking disobedient unfaithful people to task then and he's doing it today but he has got a hope for us for the future as God taking us to task in Britain and in North America and across the nations of the world through this present crisis and yet what we see is nations are trying to put their trust in their own powers and their own ability for answers and there's little or no repentance a reference to our loving God in a sense the voice of God is being silenced all over the world but the voice of God will not be silenced when did we last hear of our country being called to prayer oh yes I know we have prayer in the free church and other churches an annual day of prayer but when did governments call our nation to prayer during the world war the last world war what 70 80 years ago and since then we seem to have prospered beyond recognition we don't need God anymore do we oh yes we do progress made in technology in medicine in so many different areas of life sadly there's those who have been given brilliant minds and talents and they forget to pay homage to the God who made them and created them and give them all the strength and the talents they don't give God credit to the one creditless Jew and we know that

God has built up kingdoms in the past and he's brought kingdoms down where has the British empire gone which covered the whole the sun used to be said the sun never went down in the British empire who took it away but as people come to their senses as to who and what God is there can be hope and restoration Judah was to suffer they would lose everything in chapter 15 the remnant is described as all but vanquished but the Lord has not totally left them and a restored community would again come back and shout for joy but for now at that present moment they didn't know it they were lost this is what the

[22 : 17] Lord says sing with joy for Jacob shout for the foremost of the nations make your praises heard and say oh Lord save your people the remnant of Israel when a person is given freedom from pain or from illness or from addiction from any difficult situation it leads to a rejoicing heart so the redeemed of the Lord will dance again with joy have you ever felt like dancing before the Lord like David did oh no not just an HM reel but dancing with joy dancing just out out of the worship of your heart I'm not saying you've done it but you felt like it the prophecy to a weak and fragile people has to be trusted and the nation of Judah and Israel are being brought back by the

Lord so I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth among them will be the blind the lame expecting mothers and women in labour a great throng will return and they will come with weeping they will pray as I bring them back I will lead them beside still water streams of water on a level path and they will not stumble because I am Israel's father and Ephraim is my firstborn son in Psalm 126 those who are weeping are filled with joy again at the Lord's provision and the return the prospective return from captivity Israel too were familiar with the idea of God as father but it was not until the teaching of Jesus Christ that the phrase took on importance and we understand it in our lives today a redeemed forgiven people can but rejoice and although this was in the days of

Jeremiah it may have seemed impossible that they will rejoice again but they won't and there will be praise and glory given to God hear the word of the Lord O nations proclaim it in the distant lands he who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd for the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than thee they will come and shout for joy in the heights of Zion they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord the grain the new wine

and the oil the young and the flocks and herds they will be a well watered garden and they will sorrow no more you know even if people were to lose everything through a crisis those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength they shall be able to work again they shall be able to cultivate the ground and rejoice in the bounteous provisions of the

Lord friends there is hope for our nation and for our nations as we enter 2022 all we have to do is look again look in the eye in a sense to our maker and sustainer and he will provide for us and build us up again Jeremiah prophesies that God would restore a repentant people to himself the returning restored people would rejoice in God as would the leaders of the people it says in verse 14 I will satisfy the priests with abundance and my people will be filled with my bounty declares the Lord priests were never meant to be paupers neither were they meant to abuse their power before God moved in judgment they had been rich and powerful as the leaders of the people but they were far away from

God but now they too had been humbled I will satisfy the priests with abundance people will be filled with my bounty Jeremiah here speaking prophetically to the people and he gives the troubled people hope in dark days beyond facing the oppression of exile and captivity he has given them hope again we may have been captivated by the world in some way and have drifted far away from God just as far as those who have been exiled away in that that day but God is reaching out to us again with a hope and with a promise now we look back to the time for our saviour has come to save his people from sin and we have been reasonably celebrating that fact and so we have the hope of

[27 : 53] Christ in our hearts and souls we can have the hope of Christ for the coming year and as we walk with him our hope is in eternal life with him later on later on in Jeremiah 31 and 33 we see the foretelling of the new covenant this is the new covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time declares the Lord I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts I will be their God can you say that today that God is your God that you are counted as his people I will be their God and they will be my people no longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother saying know the Lord because they will all know me from the least to the greatest because

God has come into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that came at Pentecost and I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more the new covenant has come to us they were looking forward to it then we are looking back to that time it came to us in and through Jesus whose birth we've been celebrating recently and whose death we shall be remembering in just a few weeks time like every year this year has had its ups and downs the person of faith understands that sometimes the downs are ups in disguise because the downs make us depend more upon him upon our God the person of faith can know a season of adversity and it seems like

God has been silent and been distant away from us and then God's hand comes as it were to rescue us to give us hope hope for the future hope on himself Israel's national anthem is called Hatikvah which means hope our hope will not be lost the hope of 2000 years to be a free nation in our land the land of Zion and Jerusalem and the call to Israel and the nations is unchanged O Israel put your hope in the Lord O people of Bonacord put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption he himself he himself will redeem Israel and you us from all our sins

Amen and may the Lord bless to us these thoughts from his holy and inspired Lord let's pray O loving heavenly father as we come into a new year on mercy's ground we thank you that you have been with us through thick and thin through the past years and throughout our lives and Lord we trust in you to go forward with us as we trust in you as we put our hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters so Lord come and lead us through whatever is before us in the year 2022 and bring us blessings and great joy as we see your kingdom being built up all around us and all around the world in Jesus name we pray amen blah and all and and privilege for to you