Promises of Restoration

Throughout our study of the book of Jeremiah we certainly have taken time to look at the prophets’ messages of judgment but we’ve also had an opportunity near the end of the course here to talk more about the positive aspects of Jeremiah’s message of restoration. The key passage in Jeremiah 30 – 33, of course, is the promise of the new covenant. This is the new covenant that God is going to make that really bridges the story of salvation in the Old Testament over into the fulfillment of all that God is designing and intending to do in Christ. As we look at the promise sections of the Old Testament prophets, they’re basically four key promises that are central to what they understand, the future restoration of Israel, the kingdom of God, what that will look like? Number One, they talk about a return to the land and God bringing his people back from exile. Number two, they talk about a rebuilding of the cities (in Judah and particularly), a rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. That aspect is definitely present in the book of Jeremiah, although emphasis on the rebuilding of the temple is not really there. There is the coming of the future messiah as the third important element. And then, fourthly, this promise is not just for Israel - ultimately the blessings of restoration, the kingdom, will include the nations as well.

Aspects of Restoration Fulfillment: Near and Far

So, those are the key promises that we’re looking at in the book of restoration. I want us to think about, in a couple of sessions, as we apply this message in light of all of Scripture, when does this restoration occur? How do we understand the fulfillment of these promises of restoration, the new covenant, and coming kingdom? How do we understand their fulfillment? There’s a key concept that is going to run through this session and the next one. It’s the idea that the promises of restoration are both now and not yet. In terms of Israel’s history, there is an aspect of this restoration in Jeremiah’s
perspective that is near and far. There is going to be a restoration that takes place in seventy years when God brings his people back from exile, but that restoration really looks forward to a further restoration, a return that is going to bring the kingdom of God to earth, and that’s something that, in the prophets, have been spoken about being in the last days.

The prophets did not always see the difference between the near and the far restorations, but as we see the unfolding of salvation’s history, as we’re given the additional perspective of New Testament revelation, we understand that these prophecies about the last days, the restoration, the new covenant, the return to the land, and the Kingdom of God, are fulfilled in stages.

Three Stages of Restoration

I would like us to think about this from the perspective of the promises of restoration being fulfilled in three distinct stages. First of all, stage number one, and this is definitely part of the perspective of Jeremiah, is that there is a restoration that comes about as the people return from the exile and return to the land that took place in history in 536 BC. Remember, Jeremiah prophesies the exile is going to last for seventy years, and if we imagine 605 BC being the beginning of the exile and 538 BC being the end of that, we have sixty-seven years. If we have a slightly different date – if we date that from 586 to 538 BC, but there’s basically seven years used as a round number to talk about the time of exile. The generation that went down into exile is not going to be the generation that returns. There’s going to be an entire lifetime when the people of Israel will be in the land, but when Babylon falls to the Persians and to Cyrus in 538 BC, Cyrus issues the decree in 536 BC that allows the Jews to return to the promise land. That is the first stage of the fulfillment of the promises of Jeremiah and the other prophets regarding the return to the land. But that return to the land was really only stage one of the fulfillment. It did not completely fulfill all of the promises that Isaiah or Jeremiah or the other of the Old Testament prophets make about the restoration. In fact, if that is the only fulfillment of those promises, Isaiah and Jeremiah seem to have missed things by a wide margin. Sometimes we see things that are advertised for us. Maybe we find a hotel on
www.expedia.com and when we get there we find out that maybe the people advertising this shot it with an interesting angle or some different pictures than what we’re really seeing. If the return from exile that occurred in history, if that’s all that the prophets were talking about, their language is incredibly idealistic.

So there seems to be a fulfillment that has to extend beyond that. There has to be a return that will go beyond the return. There has to be a restoration beyond what was experienced in history. I think we come to an understanding through the rest of Revelation and even in the history of the Old Testament from Jeremiah to the return to the land, the exile, in some sense, is not ended simply by the people coming back to the land.

Let me give us a few passages that I think help us to see this. In the book of Jeremiah – in Jeremiah 29, the prophet himself is going to talk about God’s plans for the people that are living in exile: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, to give you a hope and a future….” Here’s what that future entails in Jeremiah 29:12-15: “You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and you will find me. When you seek me with all of your heart, I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes.” The key expression that is used in 30-33, “And I will gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD and I will bring you back.” Jeremiah says God has committed himself to bring about the restoration and to work toward Israel’s future through the exiles. But this is not simply an automatic guarantee of their future blessing, they will be found by or they will come to experience these things when they seek the Lord. When they seek the Lord will all of their heart then they will experience the full blessings of restoration.

The reality as we look at the historical return from exile that occurred in 538 to 536 BC is that the people return to the land, or as least many of them did, but they changed their geography without really changing their spiritual condition and their heart for God. Their full restoration would depend upon them seeking God with all of their heart. So there’s a balance in all of this between God’s saving initiatives to restore his
people and the responses that they would have to those saving initiatives that God would bring. We see that in the book of Daniel as well.

We talked about this passage previously. Daniel, based on the promises of Jeremiah that the exile would last for seventy years. In Daniel chapter nine is praying for God to fulfill his promises. He’s confessing his sin, he’s confessing the sin of the people, and he’s praying on the basis of God’s promises that the restoration would come about. God is going to give an additional revelation to Daniel in response to that prayer that clarifies for us in some degree the message of Jeremiah. God is going to say to Daniel, “Yes, Jeremiah prophesied that within 70 years the people would return to the land.” But in Daniel 9:24-27 we receive the additional revelation that the full restoration of Israel, “making a full,” the full restoration of the covenant relationship, the reestablishment of the temple, Israel being securely established in the land, will not happen for 70 weeks of seven years. Whether we take that as a literal 490 year period, or looking at the way dates and time periods are used in apocalyptic literature (simply a reference to a long time,) we have the reality here that the full restoration is not going to occur simply when the people come back to the land as a result of Cyrus’ decree.

We have an interesting prayer from Nehemiah, who is one of the civil leaders of the people of Israel as they come back to the land. I just want to read the prayer in Nehemiah 9:36-37. The people have already come back to the land, they're beginning to experience the blessing of return that Jeremiah prophesied about. In fact, Nehemiah's leading one of the later waves of that return, and here’s what he says: “Behold, we are slaves this day, in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we’re slaves. And its rich yield goes to kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.” Now the people have been in the land for basically a hundred years – the first return occurred in the previous century – but Nehemiah, as he's looking at this, is saying that we're still in bondage and in slavery. All of the promises of deliverance and the yoke being broken; we're still under foreign oppression. So the return from exile that began with Cyrus' decree is not the complete fulfillment of the promises that God made
to Jeremiah about the return and restoration of the people of Israel.

Post-exilic Prophets and the Return

We start looking at the message of the post-exilic prophets, and we see that in a clearer way. The prophet Joel, who appears to be, from certain clues and indicators we get in the book, a post-exilic prophet, talks about a locust invasion that God has brought against the people that severely devastated the land, and the locust plague was specifically brought against them for their sins. Joel warns them that if they don't listen to what God has done or pay attention to the judgment that God has brought against them, that the Lord is going to bring an army against them that is going to bring even greater devastation than the locust plague. Joel, as a prophet of judgment, is going to say the same thing that the prophets said before the exile, “Beware the day of the Lord is coming.” Now fortunately it seems that the people, as we read Joel 2, responded to those warnings and repented, but the reality is that even in the post-exilic period there are further warnings of judgment because the people have not fully come back to God.

Another post-exilic prophet, Zechariah, who encouraged the people in the rebuilding of the temple (and may have come before the time of Joel) – he's going to talk about a return that is still future to the return that has already been experienced. He says the Lord is again going to bring the people of Israel from all the far and distant lands to which they had been exiled. So the return that had begun before the time of Zechariah, did not exhaust the promises that were given by prophets like Jeremiah. In fact, Zechariah, at the end of his book as he has visions about Israel's future, he envisions, another exile, and another invasion and judgment of the people of Israel that is going to look in many ways like the judgment that was experienced in the days of Jeremiah. Listen to this vision that Zechariah gives about the future of Israel. This whole scenario, of unfaithfulness, disobedience to God, covenant curses, judgment, military invasion, exile, defeat and death – all this is going to come again, because the people have not come back to God. Zechariah says [14:1-2], “Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women
raped.” So, the terrible things that Judah experienced in the days of Jeremiah, Zechariah, as a prophet of the post-exilic period says, this is going to happen all over again! It says half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as when he fights on a day of battle. So there is going to be a judgment. God will ultimately intervene, he will restore his people, and the survivors of both Israel and the nation will come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. But there is an exile, return, restoration, deliverance that goes beyond what was experienced in the return that took place in the post-exilic period.

The final prophet that we see in the Old Testament (the Old Testament closes with the prophet): Malachi. Malachi definitely envisions that there is a broken spiritual relationship between God and his people in the post-exilic period. In many ways the spiritual condition of the people in his day looks very similar to what we see during the time of Jeremiah. In fact, the book of Malachi is built around a series of disputes, between God and his people, where the Lord is indicting them for not paying there tithes, not loving him, not obeying him, not following his covenant dictates. At one place, the prophet gives a word of the Lord where the Lord says to the people, “I have loved you,” and it talks about God's covenant love for Israel. The people's response to that is, “How have you loved us?” So obviously there's a definite problem with the spiritual condition of Israel in the post-exilic period. Malachi’s final promise is that in the last days, the Lord is going to raise up a prophet in the prophet Elijah. The purpose of this eschatological Elijah, which we understand from the New Testament that's fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, will be to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord and back to covenant faithfulness to him. So Jeremiah was calling upon the people to shuv, to return to God. The Lord promises in the restoration that he is going to shuv to restore the fortunes of the people, but Malachi is still talking about the fact that there is a need for the people hearts to turn back to God. So this restoration that Jeremiah is prophesying, as we start to look at how it unfolds, it becomes kind of messy.

Unending Exile in Jeremiah

As we look at what's going on in the immediate aftermath of exile, and the
continued disobedience that we talked about and narrated in chapters 40-43. There's a theology of unending exile even in the book of Jeremiah itself. The last episode and story in the book of Jeremiah is this appendix in chapter 52, about the fall of Jerusalem and the fact that the kings of Judah are in exile. There's this glimmer of hope with the release of Jehoiachin from prison, but the conditions of exile, that's the final word that we see at the end of Jeremiah 52.

Transformed Heart Envisioned

Now remember that in the new covenant, the promise that God gives to Israel is that he is going to circumcise their hearts. That's what Deuteronomy 30 says. Jeremiah says that God is going to write the law on the people's hearts, and Ezekiel says that the Lord is going to give Israel a new heart. I think those three images are basically saying the same thing: God is going to transform the heart of his people. So, as we come to the end of the Old Testament era, we understand that there has been a partial return, but it is not the full return that God envisioned. Stage one has taken place, but if we’re going to take the promises of the prophets seriously, there has to be something beyond this.

New Testament and the Continued Exile: Matthew

So we’re going to fast-forward through the Intertestamental Period, and we’re going to come to the New Testament era and the time of Jesus. N. T. Wright and a number of other scholars have developed this important idea, we’ve seen this in Nehemiah’s prayer during the time of the post-exilic period in the Old Testament, that in Jesus’ day, there was still the idea that even though Israel was in the land, they were still living in exile, and they were still in bondage, and they were in bondage to the Romans. They were still as much under foreign oppression as they were back in the days of Nehemiah. So, the ongoing conditions of exile are still there, even though they’re back in the land, even though for a little while they enjoy a period of independence and then the Romans take that away; they’re still living under the conditions of exile.

There is a New Testament use of the book of Jeremiah in the Gospels that I think reflects this idea of continuing exile. Remember back in Jeremiah 31:15, as Jeremiah describes the conditions of exile, it’s a time of weeping and mourning. In fact, he says in
chapter 31:15, “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children.” In light of the death and the exile, Rachel, the mother of many of the tribes, is grieving over what has happened to her people. That describes the conditions of exile. Remember that Jeremiah’s message is that when the return comes about, their weeping is going to be turned into rejoicing. That’s the reversal that God is planning to bring.

In Matthew chapter 2, in that horrible incident where Matthew tells us about Herod putting to death the children and the infants in and around Bethlehem because he’s trying to remove Jesus as a rival to the throne, Matthew says that what took place there, as the people in Jesus’ day grieved over the death of the innocents, he says, “This was to fulfill what was written in Jeremiah 31:15.” Rachel again is weeping for her children. Now, Matthew has a very interesting use of the Old Testament there. If you go back to the context of Jeremiah chapter 31, you say, “I don’t see this being a prediction of something that’s going to happen in Jesus’ day.” Well, the idea here of fulfillment is not necessarily one of prediction. Matthew is speaking about a pattern, a pattern that was true in the days of Jeremiah: Rachel was weeping over her children, and the death, and the destruction, and the exile, and all of the catastrophes that went along with that. What Matthew is saying is that that pattern continues and is ultimately reaching its culmination in the life and ministry of Jesus. But, the conditions of exile are still there because Rachel is still weeping for her children, and the people of Israel are still living under foreign bondage where an oppressive evil king is killing their children. That’s exactly what was going on in Jeremiah’s day. It continues and carries over into the time of Jesus so the conditions of exile are still there.

The Continued Exile: Luke

Now a couple of passages in the New Testament make this more explicit are some of infancy and birth narratives that are found in the gospel of Luke. And I want to read a couple of these passages. Why was Jesus born? What did he come to do? The message I think Luke is going to introduce right at the front of his gospel is Jesus came to deliver the people of Israel from their exile. That deliverance did not come about simply by their
return when Cyrus issued the decree. They are still under bondage; they are under oppression; even more importantly their still under the bondage to their own sins. The Lord comes to bring the worlds ends and Jesus is Israel’s messiah to bring about their full deliverance. So here is what Luke chapter 1, verse 68 says. This is Zechariah the father of John the baptizer, his response to the coming and what God is doing through John and Jesus: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.”

And he is even using some of the same terminology that’s used to talk about the return in the book of Jeremiah. “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” He’s going to fulfill the covenant promises to David as part of this, “as he spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear.”

So he says look the reason that Jesus is coming is to fulfill all of those covenant promises to Israel. God is not finished with Israel in spite of all the things that have happened in their history. God has not set aside the covenant promises that he has given to Israel. The Lord ultimately makes those promises a reality is going to have to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. The real, full return from exile still has to happen.

Now in the next chapter of Luke, Anna this prophetess that the Lord allows to live long enough to see the coming of Jesus, she celebrates and rejoices in the coming of Jesus because she understands that all of those promises about restoration and kingdom and last days, Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises. Here is the reaction and the response that Anna is going to have. It says in Luke chapter 2, verse in 36 that there was a prophetess named Anna, who was advanced in years and lived with her husband for seven years from when she was a virgin and then a widow until she is eighty-four. She did not leave the temple and is worshiping with fasting and prayer day and night. And because of her devotion to God, God gives this wonderful blessing of seeing the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. It says this, “And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the
redemption of Jerusalem.” You know what she was waiting for? She was waiting for the fulfillment of the promises that Jeremiah said when he promised that the Lord would, *shuv*, restore the fortunes of his people.

So we come to the time of Jesus and the first coming of Jesus to be Israel’s savior is stage two of the fulfillment of those promises that Jeremiah made about the kingdom, the restoration, a new David, the blessing of Jerusalem – all of those things. One of the things that Scott McKnight has reminded us of in his book *The King Jesus Gospel* is that Jesus came earth to do a lot more than simply to die on the cross and pay for my sins and give me a ticket to go to heaven. Now that’s a wonderful thing and that personal salvation we experience is a great blessing. But Jesus ultimately came at his first coming to bring about the restoration of Israel and through that to fulfill the last day’s kingdom promises that God had made to the people of Israel through the Old Testament prophets. Then ultimately, through all of that, to bring about what the Bible refers to as the “restoration of all things” that would come about when the Kingdom of God came to earth. So our personal salvation, and Jesus as my savior is an important thing, and it’s changed my life, but Jesus came to do much more than be my personal savor; he came to be the restorer of Israel. He came to bring about the promises of new covenant and writing on the hearts of his people and creating this people of God that would be finally faithful him. That’s all part of what Jesus is doing in his first coming.

So what all of this means, and this hugely important as we think about the prophets and eschatology and understanding how the Old Testament and New Testament work together. I remember in seminary beginning to come to an understanding of this and it began to unlock for me how do the Old and New Testament work together. It is simply this idea: the last days. When the prophets speak about in “the last days,” in “the days that are coming,” remember it’s an indistinct time table. But in the last days the kingdom of God is the eschatological era of blessing. Whatever we want to call this, that time that the prophets in the Old Testament were prophesying about and when Jeremiah is speaking about restoration and the last days and the kingdom of God and the eschaton that time period began at first coming of Jesus. It is not just something that relates to the
second coming.

Already but Not Yet

So the Kingdom of God is not just the future, the kingdom of God that the prophets were looking forward is not just about the second coming of Jesus. It is something that began to be realized in its initial stages at the first coming of Jesus. So the way that we look, the future kingdom of God that Jeremiah saw in the future, the future kingdom and all these blessing that Isaiah and other prophets saw in the Old Testament, that time was inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus. It will be consummated at his second coming. For me, coming to understand that, I think it really revolutionized my understanding of how the Old and New Testament really relate to each other.

People often ask the question “Are we living in the last days?” and there we ask about, “Do you believe Jesus is coming back soon?” But really the biblical answer to that is that we are indeed living in the last days. The last days began with the first coming of Jesus to earth. John says in 1 John 2:18 “Children it is now the last hour.” Those last days that Isaiah and Jeremiah saw, those began with the first coming of Jesus. We have been living in the last days for more than two thousand years.

Kingdom in the Old Testament

Maybe you’re a little skeptical about that and you wonder: can you really prove that? Is there any way you can demonstrate that? Is that just a theological system? Can you really demonstrate that? Let’s go back to some Old Testament passages and let’s look at some places where the prophets are talking about the kingdom and God coming to rule and reign and the deliverance and the blessing that he’s going to bring to Israel. First of all, Isaiah 52:7-10: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publish salvation, who says to Zion ‘Your God reigns.’” God is King! And beyond the idea that simply God is the eternal and everlasting king and he’s always been there, in a new way, God is beginning to reign by defeating his enemies, by bringing Israel home, by fulfilling these covenant promises.

What’s the promise that John and Jesus and the announcement that John and Jesus
begin their ministry with? “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” So, the beautiful messengers that are blessed in Isaiah 52 for saying “Your God reigns,” – John and Jesus are those messengers.

Isaiah 61, verse 1, talking about the time of Israel’s restoration says this: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted to proclaim, liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” So God is sending a prophetic herald to announce the coming of the Kingdom and the deliverance from exile. Isaiah, in a sense, was the first fulfillment of this. But in Luke 4 at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and he reads out of the scroll of Isaiah and the passage that he reads is the one that we just read here in Isaiah 61 and Jesus closes the reading by saying: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your midst.” You know what Isaiah was talking about, when he was talking about God’s future restoration and the deliverance from exile and the release of the captives in the year of God’s favor? I’m announcing to you that I’m the beginning of that. The era of the kingdom that the prophets talked about, the time when God would bring about the restoration the Jeremiah was promising; that begins with the first coming of Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost when God pours out the Spirit on the disciples, Peter says “This is to fulfill what was prophesized by Joel who said ‘in the last days the Lord would pour out the spirit on all flesh.’” In Jesus’ ministry when John is in prison and he’s really discouraged and disappointed because things haven’t exactly turned out the way he thought they would and he sends messengers to Jesus to say, “Are you the one that’s promised? Are you the messiah? Are you going to bring back the restoration or should we wait for someone else?” Jesus tells those messengers to go back to John, and he quotes Isaiah 35:5-6, they talk about the kingdom and the restoration and he says: “Go back to John and report the report the eyes of the blind are being opened. The ears of the deaf are being unstopped. The lame are leaping like deer. The blessings of the kingdom the prophets promised are beginning. The last days have arrived.”
Now, as we think about stage two, the kingdom’s blessings have come, the time of the kingdom announced by the prophets has come. But Jesus would ultimately bring about this restoration from exile for the people of Israel by dying for their sins. Ultimately, there had to be a sacrifice for their sins.

Jesus and the New Covenant

So Jeremiah had promised that in the last days God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. In Luke 22:20 at the time of the last supper as Jesus is preparing to die, he says: “This cup that is being poured out for you represents the blood of the covenant from the Jeremiah promises.” How is the new covenant, how are the blessings of the new covenant going to be fulfilled, and how are the promises of the kingdom going to be brought about? They are brought about through the death of the one who is the king himself. That is the irony of just how God works out salvation’s history. The one who comes to bring in this kingdom is ultimately going to have to die so that his people can experience all of these blessings.

What that means is, that we had stage one when the people returned from exile by the decree of Cyrus, seventy years after the beginning. We had a stage two with the coming of Jesus at his first coming. The kingdom is inaugurated at that time but the king actually has to die. There will need to be a stage three associated with the second coming of Jesus when those kingdom and those restoration promises are going to be consummated. All the promises that Jeremiah said, why have they not been realized, why has the kingdom still not fully achieved everything that the prophets promised? Well because there is a stage three. That stage three is going to occur at the second coming of Jesus. So, have the prophecies and have the promises of Jeremiah been fulfilled? Yes, and no. They are now and not yet. The blessings of the new covenant had been brought into effect by the death of Christ, but the full experience and the restoration of all men that God promised to his people, Israel, have not been realized.

Jesus and Unbelief

Part of the reason why there is a need for stage three is that Jesus as he came at his first coming to bring about the fulfillment of the blessings of the kingdom, to announce
that a time of God’s favor had come – even as Jesus has come to announce that and to announce the blessings of the kingdom he’s bringing – his ministry is met with rejection and unbelief. So, the people of Israel in Jesus’ day, Jeremiah announced the blessings of the new covenant, five to six hundred years before the time of Jesus, they are still living in exile, waiting for deliverance from oppression, waiting for deliverance from their sin. But as Jesus comes to announce, “I’m the one who’s the fulfillment of that,” his ministry is met with rejection and unbelief. You know you don’t look like the kind of king we were anticipating. How can you be the one who is bringing about this glorious restoration that’s promised by an Isaiah and Jeremiah? So Jesus is met with opposition. Stage two has arrived, but it’s only going to be a partial fulfillment of what was promised because of that unbelief. The response of rejection and unbelief that Israel has toward the ministry of Jesus means that all that the new covenant had promised and all that was envisioned for the restoration of Israel by the prophets was not going to be fully realized in the first coming of Jesus. As a result of that unbelief, Jesus is going to play another roll for the people of Israel, and this is where the book of Jeremiah again comes to play in all of this.

Sometimes in New Testament studies, Jeremiah is treated as the lesser cousin of the book of Isaiah, and I understand why, because of how much Isaiah has influenced the message of the New Testament, and how much the restoration, as it’s portrayed in the New Testament, is done from the perspective of Isaiah. But I think we need to give Jeremiah his due as well; the role of Jeremiah in how salvation history is working out. Jeremiah plays a significant role as well.

Jesus and Jeremiah

And what happens in the ministry of Jesus as he confronts this unbelief and we deal with the reality that the people of Israel are not going to respond to his message in faith. Is that Jesus becomes a Jeremiah-like prophet in confronting the unbelief of the people of Israel. In the Matthew version of the episode where Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” The disciples say, “Some of them are saying that you're one of the prophets or you're Jeremiah.” As you look at the ministry of Jesus, there's an
obvious reason why the people of Israel may have associated Jesus with a prophet like Jeremiah. He is like Jeremiah, because of the unbelief of his people. Remember Jesus come to be your savior your messiah, but he is also going to become a prophet because of their unbelief who announces that God is going to destroy Jerusalem and the temple just like Jeremiah did.

In Mark 11 we have the story where near the end of his ministry Jesus goes in, cleanses the temple, and takes the money changers out. Looking at this from the perspective of the Old Testament, I would say Jesus is a prophet performing a sign act -- depicting what God is getting ready to do with his people because of the corruption of their worship. As Jesus performs this sign act and announces to the people God's judgment on Jerusalem and the temple, he actually borrows some of Jeremiah's old material. Remember Jeremiah preached the Temple Sermon announcing the destruction of the temple. That's a pretty good sermon! So Jesus uses that expression that Jeremiah had used to describe the people in his day and said, “You have turned God's house into a den of robbers.” Jesus took that expression directly from the Old Testament, directly from the book of Jeremiah. What it shows us is that the same judgment that came on Judah in 586; this judgment of exile because of their unbelief, this judgment of exile because of their rejection of God's messenger – they're going to experience that all over again. There is going to be another exile.

Richard Bauckham says that the destruction of the Jerusalem that's going to occur in 70 AD as you understand it from a biblical perspective is a second stage of the exile that occurred already in 586. So Jeremiah had preached the destruction of the temple, Jesus does exactly the same thing. In the message of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had said, think about Shiloh, and remember how God had judged Shiloh in the past. If God has judged Shiloh in the past, then he can judge Jerusalem in the present. I think Jesus is doing something very similar as he chases the temple money changers out, and then talks about the den of robbers from Jeremiah 7. He said, “Remember what happened in 586 BC, remember the fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah, the same thing is about to happen to you in 70 AD.
In the account of the cleansing and the taking of the money changers and the cleansing of the temple in Mark 11 in that particular account, the cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between other events. It's where Jesus curses the fig tree. As you read the story in Mark 11 it kind of follows this progression: Jesus sees this barren fig tree; he curses it; he goes to the temple; and he performs the sign act there. Then, after that's over he explains to his disciples the significance of “why did you curse this tree?” We get the explanation from Jesus that this fig tree is representative of the spiritual barrenness of the people of Israel. If they had been rightly related to God, they would have rightly responded to God's message. Throughout Israel's history God has looked for the right kind of fruit from his people and the story of Jesus and how Israel responded to him is basically the same as the story of how Israel responded to God throughout the Old Testament.

It's interesting that he makes reference and he uses as his visual image of that fig tree, because we go back to Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 8 which again comes after Jeremiah 7. What’s in Jeremiah chapter 7? It's the Temple Sermon. It's the place where Jeremiah accuses them of turning the temple into a den of robbers. This is exactly what Jesus had said and here's the statement that Jeremiah makes in 8:13: “When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.” So Jeremiah had to announce the coming destruction of the temple because of the unbelief, the disobedience, and the fruitlessness of the people. Jesus comes to bring the fulfillment of the covenant promises that Jeremiah had promised. Yet he is born to pronounce a curse on Israel as well because they reflect the same spiritual condition that Jeremiah had encountered.

So as a result of this, Jesus who had been sent by God as the herald of salvation, has to become the prophet announcing God's judgment before that restoration can occur. Jesus begins to preach the destruction of the temple in the same way that Jeremiah did in his ministry. He tells the disciples in Matthew 24 as they look at the temple, “Not one stone that belongs to this place will be left standing.” Jesus preaches his own “Temple Sermon.” And Jesus, just like Jeremiah, becomes a weeping prophet. He weeps and
laments the destruction of Jerusalem and the people that are there. In Luke 13:34, he says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem that kills the prophets that God has repeatedly sent to you.” You can't read that verse without hearing, after all that we studied about Jeremiah, without hearing Jeremiah said, “O that my head were a fountain of tears. That I can weep over the destruction of my people.” You can't hear that passage where Jesus says, “You have repeatedly killed the prophets that I sent to you,” without hearing Jeremiah 7. The Lord says, “I have repeatedly, recurrently, sent my servants the prophets to you yet you have not listened.”

Understanding the Promise of Restoration

How do we understand the promises of restoration, the promises of kingdom, the promises of the last days, the promises of the new covenant that are found in Jeremiah in light of the New Testament. Those promises are now and not yet. And as followers of Jesus Christ because of his death for us, we experience the transformative blessings of that new covenant. Remember what they are. We have forgiveness for our past sins. We have enablement for the present and the future to live as God designs us to be.

But as God is working out salvation history there is a not yet component and we look forward to that as we think of the second coming of Jesus. We live in a time of already [now] but not yet. The new covenant blessings – what Jeremiah promised in this restoration – we are experiencing as God's people. But we're looking forward to the final restoration; we're looking forward to the time that God will complete everything that he promised to Jeremiah, to the people of Israel. We do that anticipating that the Lord will keep his promises that he will be faithful to what he's promised to his people. And we know that because of what God has already done for us in Christ in the ways that we have presently already begun to enjoy what Jeremiah promised when he spoke this new covenant that God provided for his people.