

“Invested”
Jeremiah 32:1-15; I Timothy 6:6-21

I Timothy 6:6-21

[An older pastor writes to the young minister, Timothy:]

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

²⁰Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; ²¹by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you. ■

Historical Setting

About 1000 years before Jesus was born, King David reigned over a golden age of a unified and thriving Israel.

It wasn't too long after David that cracks started appearing and the kingdom began to fall apart, eventually splitting into two kingdoms and never again knowing the prosperity and security of those golden years.

The northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

The southern kingdom, Judah, struggled on for another century and a half, but by 587 BCE, Jerusalem was on the verge of being overthrown by the conquering Babylonians.

The Babylonians already occupied the countryside around Jerusalem,ⁱ including a town just to the north called Anathoth, which is where the prophet Jeremiah came from, and now they were ready to come in and level the capital city and home of the Temple, Jerusalem.

In the words of a Bible scholar named R.E. Clements, at this point, “militarily and politically the situation had reached a point where no human resources of hope remained credible.”ⁱⁱ

In Jerusalem, the Jewish king, Zedekiah, is keeping Jeremiah under something like house arrestⁱⁱⁱ for something like treason—for having done his job, in other words, which was to be a prophet of his own time and place.

Prophets aren't around to help you overlook the flaws of your society and its institutions, but to cast an unblinking eye on the distance between what God says is good and right and true and what your country is actually up to. And in Bible times they had an uncanny knack for letting kings know when they were in trouble, and as ever, kings will happily blame the messenger if they don't like the sound of the message they're getting.

Jeremiah 32:1-15

^{32:1}The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar [of Babylon].

²At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, ³where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

[King] Zedekiah had said [to Jeremiah], “Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; ⁴King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape..., but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; ⁵and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the LORD; though you fight against [them], you shall not succeed?”

⁶Jeremiah said,

The word of the LORD came to me [and said]: ⁷Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.”

⁸Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.”

Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

⁹And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. ¹⁰I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. ¹¹Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; ¹²and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

¹³In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, ¹⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time.

¹⁵For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Introduction

So God has said that disaster is coming, and the country’s capital is just about to fall.

But God has also told Jeremiah to buy, in the most transparent, customary, legally binding way, the property of his extended family,

and to keep the records safely sealed, in duplicate, to make sure that the record of that purchase survives for a long, long time.

Because, says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel:

I'm going to allow this corrupt kingdom, with its heartless disregard for the poor and powerless, and its shoulders permanently shrugged in apathetic helplessness, to fall.

But some day, at some time beyond the far horizons of our wildest dreams and most optimistic hopes, houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

And in a place where “militarily and politically the situation had reached a point where no human resources of hope remained credible,”^{iv}

Jeremiah is being given what looks on its face to be the worst investment advice I've heard since my former financial advisor said, “Yeah, keep it in Krispy Kreme; they're gonna keep doing GREAT!”

Prayer

Judge of our past,
 Guide of our present,
 Only Hope of our future,
 God of our moments and our years,
 All-Wise and All-Seeing:

Righteous Judge of our past,

Now that we have infiltrated your awesome and delicate creation
 with rampant, thriving chemical technology
 that enhances the lives of some
 and poisons the bodies and the food supplies of many;

Now that we have settled into a constant state of war,
with a young and idealistic generation
who have no memory of not being a country at war,
and those of us who profit most
are asked for little or no personal sacrifice for the cause;

Now that the level of our national discourse
makes the most disappointing imprudence of the political past
sound quaint in retrospect,

Judge us as you will,
and hear our remorseful prayer for mercy.

Wounded, Transcendent God,
Guide of our living,

As the exploited, stolen and violated bodies of women and children
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony is not heard;
As the emaciated bodies of starved human beings on every continent
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony is not heard;
As the pierced bodies of black men and boys bleeding out
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony is not heard,

the credibility of our human resources of hope is strained to the point of
breaking.

We confess that without you, we are lost.

But you have given us tremendous resources of wisdom,
storehouses of knowledge and wellsprings of ingenuity;
and you have placed levers of power to improve human lives
within our reach;

and above all, you have given us the capacity to love.
There is a power at work within us,

and through us, you are able to accomplish abundantly
far more than all we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20).

Guide us, with your light that the darkness did not overcome,
into a living that is demonstrably, actively unsatisfied
with “collateral damage”
and “acceptable levels” of human suffering.

Strong, Immortal God, Only Hope of our future,

In the face of overwhelming odds,
Where too much money is at stake
to make it possible to think we can change corrupted systems,
where barbaric ingenuity recruits new killers
from too much poverty and unfairness and pain,

where political complications
prevent the saving of underprivileged lives, foreign and domestic,
and too much misinformation and too many lies are floating around
for new understanding
to penetrate human hearts
and change made-up minds,

where complex global macroeconomics
produce a bounteous but unnatural food supply;
where brutal history and ongoing cruelty
make even the most reasonable among us salivate for blood justice:

Please do not write us off
when we want to give in to our inner lament that we can do nothing;

Do not, we humbly pray, agree with us
when in our lowest times we throw up our hands
and surrender to hopelessness,
as if any problem on earth could ever be larger than you.

Thwart our sense of uselessness, our faithlessness, our hopelessness,
with the Beautiful Truth that is You,
and the Promise that is the Eternal Divine Love,
against which there is no such thing as too much of anything else
in heaven or on earth.

In the face of our personal bafflement
and our vehemently conflicting ideas
over what in the world you would have us do,
Please tell us again what you have already told us
when we look to the skies or look in the mirror
and ask again: Is it even worth it?

Investing God, you have poured everything into us,
asking only that we re-invest the inexhaustible resource
of your constant love
into the workings of this world,
which was made for beauty,
but sometimes has such a difficult time believing it.

In the indomitable name of Christ our Savior, Amen.

The Sermon

What memory from your lifetime—whether you were there to witness it
in person or not—what memory from your lifetime has the most to do
with what you believe in regarding what the future may bring?

A childhood birthday, a wedding engagement, a family Christmas? The
birth of a child?

A national tragedy? The first moon landing? The advent of the internet?
Michael Jordan playing basketball?

For my grandparents, it was the Great Depression. Their experience of that event in the 1930's had everything to do with how they looked at the future—namely, “be ready in case it ever happens again”—as they lived into the 1990s and into their own late 90s.

We probably still have grandma's strip of tin foil somewhere.

What is a formative event or situation that has taken place since you were born, that you are old enough to have witnessed or lived through, whether you participated in it or not, that shaped your thoughts and dreams about the future—your future, or humanity's future, or the future of the universe?

For my generation, in our adolescence, our whole world seemed saturated with the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. Most of us for whom those were our formative years lived with a sense that somehow, at some point, something would trigger a nuclear war, and that would be the end of the world as we knew it.

That nihilistic suspicion lurking in the back of our minds shaped our habits, and escapism was the name of the game when I was a teenager, and the cultural refuse from that time—mountains of dumb movies and vapid music—is the testimony. I take my hat off to the churches that somehow managed to instill some hope for the future in us, in that context.

Macro or micro: is there some event you've been alive to witness that has shaped or seriously impacted the way you look at life and the world, what you believe and how you think about the future?

The older pastor writing to Timothy was old enough to remember—it hadn't been *that* long ago—that a man who had spread a dangerous message of unconditional love, who moved in the world bringing feeding and healing, and in his wake left praise and hope and life,

had been brought into Jerusalem to cheers, and days later was brutally silenced in a state-sanctioned, religious-establishment-endorsed execution.

But that wasn't the event that shaped his view of the future.

It was that when Jesus's friends went to get the body, they found only an empty tomb. And then the stories of new life started coming from all over.

He wasn't there to see it, but it had happened in his lifetime, and it shaped everything he believed in about the future: his own future, the world's future, the future of the whole cosmos.

He committed his life to the knowledge that God's good future for humankind is always greater than our present moment.

And that now-older pastor assured a youthful, new pastor named Timothy that always there would be worries for the future; always there would be temptations for people to waste their time on small controversies, and define themselves by how much they could accumulate, rather than the amazing everyday things they could do with the life God had given them;

but our lives were never meant to be that small.

God is far too invested in us for us to live lives that small and hopeless.

Timothy, he said, take hold of the life that really is life.

Which may have been another way of saying:

Invest in this life, in this world, with, as Max Ehrmann said in the poem *Desiderata*, "all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams"—remembering that the next line is, "It is still a beautiful world."^v

Because God is invested in it, and in us, and in our future.

So, when the body that used to be able to see and hear and run and remember and stand up straight and strong, like a tree planted by a river, falters and brings you aches and frustration, Jesus says: I am entirely invested in you.

Will you trust me enough to invest your future in mine?

When the bills and the responsibilities are stacking up, when the hours get longer and lonelier, when frustration and futility creep into your bedroom just when you're trying to get to sleep, Jesus says: I am invested in you. Will you invest your future in me?

When cities are bleeding, and ignorance and arrogance have become the order of the day, and poverty is growing, and tension is mounting, and innocent people are dying and being left to die, Jesus says: I am invested in this world. Will you invest in it with me?

When the situation has reached a point where no human resources of hope remain credible,^{vi} God says, I am 100%, entirely, invested in you.

Will you invest in the future that I promise, even if you can't yet see any sign of it?

Which is a generous and gracious invitation, because God's future will come whether you or I invest in it or not.

God isn't go under without our investment. God can be God just fine without us, but for reasons that sometimes defy reason, God has chosen to invite us to join in the life that really is life and lay down our money and our reputations and our privileges and say, "Sign me up."

Only God gets to decide about our salvation, about the redemption of the world, the future of the cosmos.

But in the words of Psalm 115: “The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth God has given to human beings.”

God will handle the ultimate questions. But we are surrounded by a world of penultimate questions.

The question Jesus is asking us is: Who is going to join me in investing in a world where hunger, war, hatred and terror are rampant?

If it’s the same world that God loved enough to send God’s only son, then I am reminded that God’s good future for humankind is always greater than what we see in our present moment.

God has entrusted us to invest our lives in the future of the world that God made and in which God is fully invested.

What does your deepest longing want to do, today, to invest in the world for which God has such profound hope, such astonishing love?

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
September 29, 2019

ⁱ Herbert Marks, ed., *The English Bible: King James Version, Volume One: The Old Testament* (Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 1373

ⁱⁱ R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 193

ⁱⁱⁱ Clements, *Jeremiah*, 194

^{iv} Clements, *Jeremiah*, 193

^v Max Ehrmann, “Desiderata,” in Ehrmann, *The Desiderata of Faith* (New York: Crown, 1996)

^{vi} Clements, *Jeremiah*, 193