

Light in Darkness – Prevenient Grace

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Back in the old days, I used to like to listen to Billy Joel. I liked many of his songs and two of them were “Honesty” and “A Matter of Trust”. The last song talks about how trust is important in a relationship. The other song is about how hard it is to find honesty in this world. If you have a hard time finding an honest person, you’re going to have a hard time trusting people. We have trust issues with people. We trust a groundhog, a rodent, more than the weather man. If a politician shakes your hand, you have to go home and take a shower so you can be clean again. You go to a car lot knowing you’re going to get ripped off. I’ve seen so many of the “Balance of Nature” commercials on TV that I have no trust in their product. We now have a hard time trusting anyone in the medical field anymore. Going to the hospital or doctors’ office feels worse than going to a funeral home. Let’s not even mention our court system here in America or our government. In other words, who can we trust today? There is so much evil everywhere. Take a moment and think about all the people you really trust. Who would you trust your life if your life was in their hands? I’m guessing not many. We live in a dark world and people can be very dangerous and evil. It’s sometimes hard to find some type of light in the middle of darkness. This was how the Old Testament days were. We had talked about how the Holy Spirit was given to only a few people and they were usually leaders to the Israel nation. God knew they needed help with people who were usually disobedient. We talked about how they were part of the old covenant. We are now living in the new covenant times where we enjoy the Spirit of God living with us or we should say those who have allowed Jesus into their hearts can enjoy the Spirit of God living in their hearts. How does this new covenant that we now enjoy help us to be confident in dark times? Let’s take a look at some Scripture.

We had looked at Jeremiah last week about the new covenant and we’ll continue with Jeremiah today. Let’s turn to Jeremiah 17: 5 – 14 where we read this, “This is what the Lord says, ‘Cursed are those who put their trust in mere

humans and turn their hearts away from the Lord. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, on the salty flats where no one lives. But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit. The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I know! I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.' Like a bird that hatches eggs she has not laid, so are those who get their wealth by unjust means. Sooner or later they will lose their riches, and, at the end of their lives, will become poor old fools. But we worship at your throne – eternal, high, and glorious! O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who turn away from you will be disgraced and shamed. They will be buried in a dry and dusty grave, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water. O Lord, you alone can heal me; you alone can save. My praises are for you alone! (NLT, 1142)”

Some say that true darkness started to form over Israel when they decided to change from being led by God and to wanting to be led by a human king like the pagan nations around them. God warns Israel what will happen if they follow a human king in 1 Samuel 8 and we read this from the people of Israel in verse 20, “We want to be like the nations around us. Our king will govern us and lead us into battle. (NLT, 419)” So, God allowed them to make the choice. Israel had many evil kings during the Old Testament period. Israel had put their trust in man which let them astray. This had caused them to be punished by God for disobedience and God sent Babylon to conquer them. So, God reminds them in verse 5 of Jeremiah that cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans and turn their hearts away from the Lord. They were the cause of the darkness that they were living in. Israel had put their trust in human kings instead of God. We can say that Israel got what they deserved, but we have to be careful here. How many times during a week or month we put our trust in mere humans than in the Lord? We can see just how great our own government is at handling bad

situations when they happen. Their decisions usually cause us more problems than good. When we put trust in mere humans, it draws our trust away from God. I'm learning to trust God more in the medical profession than the doctors themselves. Not all doctors are bad, but when you put all your trust in a doctor, when they fail, you fall hard. There is a true reason why we shouldn't put our trust in mere humans instead of God.

One of the great pieces of Old Testament Scripture can be found in Jeremiah 17: 9, "The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I know! I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve. (NLT, 1143)" The bad part about the days of the Old Testament was that the Holy Spirit only lived inside a few people. Most people had a deceitful heart and were wicked. In Hebrew, the English term "deceitful" can also mean "polluted". The human heart is polluted with sin. Look at King Soul. He had the Holy Spirit within him, but his heart had become so wicked, the Spirit left King Soul and entered King David. The Lord knows how wicked the human heart really is. In the world we live in today, we have watered down how wicked and polluted the human heart really is and how it needs a total transformation and cleansing that can come only through Jesus and His blood. We need this transformation and cleansing just like Israel did in the Old Testament. However, it was so hard for Israel to not to be depended on mere humans or to remain good by following the laws of God. Their heart was still wicked. We would have the same problem today if it wasn't for Jesus and what He did at the cross. What do I mean by this?

Just like Israel, we are born with a deceitful and polluted heart that is filled with sin because of original sin that started from Adam and Eve's disobedience against God in the Garden. If our heart is so wicked and polluted with sin, how in the world can we turn to God? How in the world can we make a choice to turn to God? Martin Luther, the German Theologian, would say that the human heart is held in bondage of sin. The bondage is so great; there is no way you can make that choice on your own. Before one knows Jesus, you are held in deep bondage to sin. Your actions and thoughts are held under bondage of sin. Your mind is held under bondage of sin. We live in the new covenant and because of what

Jesus Christ did at the cross, we now have hope to get out of this bondage that held so many people in bondage in the Old Testament. Now, because of the work of Jesus, His Spirit even can help us when we are under bondage or under siege of sin. The Lord knows our helplessness with sin and He knows we can't make a decision for Him unless we have help. So, now under the new covenant we are part of, the Lord now gives us grace to help us to make a choice. His grace gives us a moment where we can make a choice for Him or not. We call this in Wesleyan theology, prevenient grace. In Latin, it means "to come before" (Global Wesleyan, 429). Before we come to know Jesus, we need His grace to help us to be able to get to the point where we can make a choice. Without that help, the bondage of sin we are under would not allow us to be able to make just a choice. It's like for a brief moment, God's grace gives us a moment where we are able to make a choice for Him or not. This may happen during a revival service or on the death bed where God's grace allows an opening where we are free to make a choice for Him. However, the moment is only a moment. This is why we continue to pray for our lost friends and relatives so that by God's grace, another opening can happen where they are free to make that choice again. Again, we have to remember, God's grace provides this great opportunity. We can't take credit for it. Jesus, the Son of God, tells us this in John 6: 44, "For people can't come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and at the last day I will raise them from the dead. (NLT, 1635)" Jesus also states this in John 12: 32, "And when I am lifted up on the cross (Greek – lifted up from the earth), I will draw everyone to myself. (NLT, 1652)" We don't see the term "prevenient grace" in Scripture, but we do see that we can't allow Jesus into our heart without His help in Scripture. We can't be raised from the dead by just doing good deeds or doing social justice stuff. The only way we can be made right with Jesus is by making a choice to allow Jesus into our hearts by asking Him to forgive our sins. That prevenient grace makes us feel guilty about our sins against the Lord. We call that conviction. God's grace is all righteous and holy and when that grace enters in, that Godly righteousness goes against our sin and we feel guilty. We then have a choice to ask forgiveness of that sin or continue on sinning. Again, we can't make that choice on our own because of how sin pollutes our hearts and minds

against the Lord. Even with that help, many reject Jesus even when they have that free moment (moment made by the grace of God) to make a choice for Jesus.

If we go back to Jeremiah 17, we read in verse 13 that Jeremiah calls God – the spring of living water after the Lord talks about the evil human heart. Then Jeremiah prays, “Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise. (NIV).” Jeremiah realizes his sinfulness against God and he feels wounded. He asks for healing because he knows from God that He is the only one who can heal him – He is the spring of living water. In Hebrew, the term “heal” also means: made whole; cause to be thoroughly healed (Strong’s Concordance). When the Lord gives us the opportunity to want Jesus to come into our hearts, we can’t waste that opportunity. We need to be healed or made whole through the blood of Jesus by having our past sins washed away. I like how Jeremiah then tells us that for God is the one I praise. He praises God for being healed. Have you been healed for your past sins? Have you allowed Jesus into your heart when you felt guilty for your sin? For when you do, that guilt is taken away by Jesus. You can’t wash away that guilt and sin from doing good deeds. It can only be done through Jesus by the power of His Spirit. Doesn’t that bring light into a dark world? If you’re still are living in darkness, ask Jesus into your heart and ask Him to forgive your sins and tell Him you give your life over to Him. Then you will be reborn and enjoy a new life through Jesus Christ.

Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology. Beacon Hill Press: Kansas City, 2013

NLT Life Application Study Bible. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc: Wheaton, 1996

The Strongest Strong’s Concordance. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2001.