

## James Durham – Sermon 1 on Jeremiah 50:4,5

This is the first of five sermons preached about the time of a communion; the first four within a very few days before it, the fifth after it. The text was Jeremiah 50:4,5:

*In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.*

The repairing and making up of a breach between God and a people is a matter of greatest moment and concern; and when men are serious in it, O how uptaking is it to them! Which is held out clearly in these words, that lay forth before us very clearly the frame and carriage of a people which formerly have dealt loosely and deceitfully in the matter of their covenant with God, when they come through his grace to be serious and in good earnest in the upmaking of it again.

As for the people spoken of here, they are *Israel* and *Judah*, the Lord's own covenanted people, who had dealt falsely and foully in the covenant, and had thereby procured sad strokes to themselves, and had divided and separated themselves from God, and one of them from another; which division and separation continued lamentably long. They are both here represented as coming home together, seriously endeavouring to amend and make up the breach between God and them, and among themselves.

As for the time that this relates to (*In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord*) it looks literally, and according to the cohesion, to Babylon's destruction, and the Lord's bringing down the Babylonish monarch by the Persian king Cyrus; in which time the people of God had some liberty to return to their own land. Yet, considering the great scope of the words, and that this liberty of the Jews is in a great part fulfilled in Christ, and that the union spoken of here is such as has in it the gathering together of all the tribes; and withal, that the covenant which they enter into with the Lord Christ is such as *shall never be forgotten*, we must extend the words to their *ingrafting again into their own olive, when all Israel shall be saved*, and they shall be grafted into their own root and stock from off which they were broken.

As for the scope, it is partly to encourage the Jews; this being not only a promise of their return, but also (and mainly) of their repentance, and of

their friendship and reconciliation with God and with one another. *In those days*, they that had been far from him, and busy vexing one another, *shall come, and come together*. Their work and business in coming is *to seek the Lord*; and the manner of it is *going and weeping*, praying and repenting. And, although the way be somewhat dark, and not so discernible to them; yet they go on, *asking the way to Zion with their faces thitherward*. They ask how they may come to him, worship God again aright, and perform the duties of a people in church to and in covenant with him; and (as it were) from one post or town to another, they ask the way, and get direction from one day to another, and from one duty to another.

And their design in all is, *Come*, say they on the matter; we were once in covenant with God and with one another; but we have been unfaithful in both; now let us amend and make up the breach in both. *Let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, never to be forgotten*. Let us renew our covenant with God, and let it be done firmly and surely, so as it may not be broken again.

This looks and has respect to Jeremiah 31, verses 31, 32, 39 and 40, where the Lord promises to *make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*, which is cited by the apostle, Heb. 8. And it is called, in Jeremiah 32, *an everlasting covenant*; which is not so much to be understood of mere external covenanting, as of saving sharing in, and partaking of Christ's righteousness for the pardon of sin; and of their engaging to God, in his own strength, to be forthcoming in the fruits of saving grace and holiness in their practice. This is in sum the way and course which they take; and is a short directory for what should be a people's carriage when they would make up the breach of a broken covenant with God.

As for the particular scope of this place as it relates to Israel and Judah their returning together, we shall not insist in it. Yet from these words we may see:

*First*, That *there is good ground for us to expect the Lord's bringing back his scattered people the Jews and their ingrafting again into their own olive*. The same God that persuaded Japhet to dwell in the tents of Shem can persuade Shem to dwell in the tents of Japhet. As they minded us Gentiles as a little sister, and were holily solicitous what they might do for us (Song of Solomon 8:8), we ought in gratitude to mind them as the elder sister, that they may turn again to the Lord; who has given us his faithful word for it, which cannot fail, but must be fulfilled.

*Second, we see that heart-melting towards God and and seriousness to make up the breach of a broken covenant between a people and him, conduce natively to make the hearts of those that have been divided and set at variance from one another, in much warmness of love to unite and sweetly to join together. It is from this, that Israel and Judah become one stick in the Lord's hand, in Ezekiel 37. This makes them as melted metal to run close together, as it were, into one lump. Though it was a long continued schism and had much bitterness attending it, yet, when their hearts are touched with a sense of sin and of a broken covenant, their former differences and animosities vanish. Softness of heart, in the sense of bygone sin, would silence many things among us, that all disputings, writings and printings will not be able to do. Pray for this for the land, as the most effectual mean and way of curing our divisions and of uniting us in the Lord. It joins Judah and Israel together, whose breach was much greater and of far longer continuance than ours.*

*Thirdly, we see here, That a people's joining and running together in serious seeking of the Lord is very commendable and lovely, and a good token and evidence to them of their turning to God and of God's accepting of them; even as bitterness and division is exceeding displeasing to God, and prejudicial to themselves, and to the work of grace in them. This is a happy-like, hopeful and promising day of repentance and turning to God, that bodes much, unspeakably much good to a land and people.*

But we come to consider the words as they do direct unto and chalk out the way for a people returning to make up a broken covenant with God, which is the scope. And we may take it up in these three:

1. As it respects the **frame** of their hearts. And O what a tender, humble, warm and mournful frame are they represented to be in! *They shall come, and go together, exciting one another, going and weeping, with their faces towards Zion.*

2. As it respects and holds forth the great **design** they have, and that is to renew and make sure the covenant between God and them. Though it was now broken and they do not lack challenges for it; yet they do not say, We will never enter in it again, because we brake it the last time we made it; but, *Come* (say they) let us make it the more firm and stable.

3. As it respects and holds out their **posture**, and the way which they take in pursuing this design: There is a going and weeping; a praying to, and seeking of the Lord; in a word, they seek and endeavour to renew their

covenant with God, seriously, diligently and humbly. And thus they pursue their design.

*First* then, if we look to their frame, we will find implied in it: 1. A guilty condition; 2. A challenging and convinced condition. 3. A repenting condition; they are kindly affected with the wrongs done to God, and desire and use means to have them righted.

We shall name two or three general doctrines from this first consideration of the word, though in effect it will fall in with the last.

1. The *first* whereof is this, ***That God's covenanted people may deal foully and falsely in his covenant.*** For their coming to renew the covenant supposes that they had broken it; and it is also implied in their mourning and weeping, and saying, *Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, never to be forgotten.* This needs no further proof than the history of God's people in their dealing with him; which holds out clearly and convincingly the strong propensity and bent of heart that is naturally in them to backslide, and like a deceitful bow to turn aside and to prove unsteadfast in his covenant.

2. *Secondly*, there is here implied a distance between God and them, following on the breach of covenant. Their going to seek the Lord says that he is to be sought. This is very sad, yet most true, ***That sin and unfaithful dealing in God's covenant will make a separation between him and a people in covenant with him.*** Thus it is said in Isaiah 59:1,2, *The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God.* It is very likely that many do not believe this, that sin has such influence in making separation between God and sinners. But in that day when an eternal separation shall be made between God and them, it will be undeniably made known and manifest, when many of you that now throng to the ordinances will, if grace prevent not, meet with that sentence (O dreadful sentence!) *Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity; I never knew you.*

3. *Thirdly*, There is here their sensibleness of both these, 1. That they had broken covenant. 2. That God had separated himself and withdrawn his presence from them for their breach of covenant. Though sin be very evil, and the want of God's presence very sad, yet they had this good, that they were kindly sensible of both. Whence we may observe, ***That conviction of bygone wrongs done to God, and kindly resenting of his absence, are the first rises and springs of repentance and turning to God;*** or, they

are *the first steps of conversion*.

What is it, I pray, that all this business and stir among this people flows from? Here it is, *first*, they apprehend a quarrel between God and them; and, *next*, they apprehend a distance. And this puts them seriously to mind turning to God with weeping and supplications, and to renew their covenant, for recovering of God's presence. This same is the Spirit's method, John 16. *I will* (says the Lord Christ) *send the Spirit*, and the first thing he does is this, *He convinceth the world of sin*. So Acts 2:37, the first thing that ever (to speak so) turned the chase in Peter's hearers was that *they were pricked in their hearts* for sin; and this put them to an advisement and to cry out, *Men and brethren, what shall we do?*

And indeed there is a necessity of this, considering the Lord's way of administering his grace. For, so long as persons are not convinced of their sin, they are not apprehensive of a quarrel; but conviction of sin makes them apprehensive of it, and to think that they would be obliged to any who would relieve them out of that sad condition. And while God is absent and not missed, they sleep on; and though he be absent, yet they know it not, as Samson knew not that God had left him, till he went out to shake himself. But when God's departure becomes sensible, it will make a wicked Saul to howl, and will make a gracious tender soul to take the alarm hot; as we see in Song of Solmon 3:5, where the Bride, missing Christ, is put to seeking; and, still missing him, her heart is kept fluttering and on wing in pursuing after his presence, till she recover and find it.

As the *Use* of the point, we would *exhort* you to let this truth sink in your hearts. There is a necessity of the conviction of these two, 1. Of the wrongs done to God, 2. Of God's absence, before you can be serious in the exercise of repentance and turning to God. What is the cause that many lie still in deep security with much debt upon their score, and lie down and rise up without God's company? Even this, that they never had it, and were never troubled for the want of it. They were never convinced and made sensible of their sin.

Now, this conviction is not simply to know that we have sin, as many take it to be, who think it enough that they know that they are sinners; but it is such a conviction as arrests the sinner before God, and puts him to answer for his sins. It is like an officer coming with an order to put a man in prison for debt; he may go confidently and stoutly enough up and down the street, under the knowledge of his debt; but when he is arrested for it by the officer, it affects him, and touches him in the quick. So is it

with a soul thoroughly convinced of sin. Men may know that they are sinners, but the conscience for a time may not much trouble them, and they may take on more to a long day, and shift challenges and convictions. But when the conscience awakes, and the law arrests them, the matter sinks deeper on them.

Would you then know what is a suitable frame for fasting and communicating? We would commend this to you, even to study a thoroughness of the conviction of sin, and to be sensible of the distance that is between God and you, and narrowly to observe whether he be present or absent. It is very sad, and much to be lamented, that many who are ignorant of the way of God should be so strongly persuaded of the goodness of their condition, that there is no access for any word so much as once to bear upon them.

If we should ask many of you, Whether are you thoroughly convinced of your wrongs done to God, and sensible of the distance between him and you?, you would readily answer, That you never wanted nor missed him; he hath been always your God, and you have been always his people. Not from any strength of faith, but from ignorance, stupidity and carnal presumption. Yea, many of you have not so much knowledge as to cover your ignorance and hypocrisy; neither can any gain the least ground of you, to make you sensible that your faith and communion with God are unsound and delusory, because they have not had a right rise from conviction of sin and of distance from God, putting you on to repentance and covenanting with him.

But because several persons will be ready to think and say that they have convictions of sin; as indeed there is much ground and reason for them, I shall point at some convictions for which there is just ground, and whereby you may know if your convictions have been thorough and sound; most whereof, if not all of them, may be gathered from the words.

1. There is a conviction of *the want of faith*. The Holy Spirit's first work, John 16:9. is to *convince the world of sin, because they believe not on him*. Were you ever convinced of your unbelief? Many will be convinced of sabbath-breaking, of cursing, swearing, lying, drunkenness, etc., to be sins, who were never convinced of the sin of the want of faith; for they always had it, as they think. And what, I pray, can such as you do at a fast or humiliation for sin, when this is your great sin, and you cannot by any means be brought to take with it; though you take with other sins; but can come boldly to the table of the Lord as believers and such as have no just reason to doubt of the soundness of your faith, while, in the meantime,

all the faith that you have is but rotten presumption. This is a most fearful condition, for so long as you think that you have faith, you cannot think yourselves to be lost; neither can you cast yourselves down with a stopped mouth before God, nor is there access for any word from him to do you good.

2. A second conviction or challenge is of, or for *the want of a new nature*. Were you ever convinced of this? not only of this and that and the other particular sin, but that you were in a sinful and unrenewed state?

Nicodemus, in John 3, comes to Christ, and speaks him fair; but the Lord lets him know that fair words, a great profession, and some, yea, much knowledge, will not do the turn; he must necessarily have somewhat else, even a new nature; he must *be born again, else he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven*. He is very unwilling and lothe to digest that doctrine; but the Lord tells him, that, *That which is born of the flesh is flesh*. It were good that many of you had that word from your heart in your mouth, which is, Jer. 31:18. *Turn thou me, and I shall be turned*. Convictions of a natural state, alas! are very rare; if any of you have had such convictions, try what became of them, and what followed on them.

3. A third conviction or challenge is of, or for *former breaches of covenant, for gospel-sins, and the sin of dealing unfaithfully in God's covenant*. And, can any of you shift this challenge, considering what you were tied to in baptism, and by other vows and engagements which you have come under since that time, especially at the Lord's supper? How few of these have been kept? Or rather, have they not been as so many ropes of sand? And who are suitably challenged for, and convinced of such breaches, as it is implied here, that these people are?

4. A fourth conviction is of *the want of God's presence*, insinuated in their *going to seek the Lord*, which imports an absence of God, and that sinfully procured by them, for which they weep and are kindly affected. The absence of God, simply considered, is no ground of challenge, it being an act of sovereignty; but absence procured through our sin is a great ground of challenge. Alas! the most part know not, neither are acquainted with any such challenge. They think God is always with them, however the Lord is absent. And it would well become us to search out diligently that which has procured his absence; for whatever may be God's end in it, there is abundant ground of just challenge that we may get against ourselves in it.

5. A fifth ground of challenge is in respect of *their own stupidity and*

*ignorance, which have incapacitated them to take up the way how to come to God for making up the breach.* Therefore they *ask the way to Zion.* And this may be another sad challenge to many, who, through their ignorance, senselessness and stupidity, have utterly indisposed and unfitted themselves to make their peace with God, and are without knowledge of the way how to vent their desires to him.

6. A sixth challenge implied is *the want of love to one another.* And a challenge for seen distance between God and them helps to bear in on them this challenge for distance between one another. Therefore, now they say, *Come and let us join ourselves.* This is another challenge which we should not shift. It is too evident, whatever our professions be, that we are much cooled and fallen behind in our love to another.

7. A seventh challenge is *lying long under a seen evil condition, without being suitably affected with it.* Therefore these people go now with the more tenderness about the work of turning to God and of their renewing covenant with him, that they were so long a falling to it. I suppose many of you who never knew what repentance was, and others also who have been more serious than now they are, may have this challenge.

It is no strange nor uncouth thing that is called for from us to fit and prepare us for fasts and communions; it is even seriousness in these most plain, common and obvious things. And if you can hold up your faces and say that these concern you not, nor the present occasion, you may wave and lay them aside. But if they be such things as your consciences convince you of, it is most necessary that you take time to think upon them and lay them to heart, and that you study through grace to be humbled for them before the Lord.

But the observation that we intend mainly to speak a word to at this time is this, *That there is no amending or righting of an ill condition but by making sure and fast the covenant between God and us.* What is the remedy of this people's ill condition here, when they find themselves so far wrong? *Come* (say they) *and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, never to be forgotten.*

When I speak here of covenanting as that on which the quieting of our consciences and the remedy of things wrong in our condition doth so much depend, it is not to be understood of a bare promise only to right and amend things that are wrong and amiss, but it is to be understood of a real covenanting with God, of a real and cordial accepting of the offer of Jesus Christ made to us in the gospel, whereby a union between God



and us through him as Mediator is made up. Wherein there is God's offer and promise, on the one side; and our faith, accepting of and submitting to the terms and conditions on which the offer is made, on the other side. Whereupon there follows a mutual closed bargain between God and us, or the very bargain is thus made up.

And so, whatever way we look upon and consider our condition as evil or sad, whether in respect of challenges for and convictions of sin and of wrongs done to God, or in respect of darkness, uncleanness and confusion, or in respect of crosses and afflictions; this is the way to win at the remedy thereof. Thus David, in 2 Samuel 23:5, when he is drawing near to death, and has many challenges for things that had been wrong in his personal walk and in his house which had brought on it much affliction and trouble; and when he finds himself very infirm and under the want of much of that lively sense he had wont to have, he betakes himself to this: *Although (says he) my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow.*

And if we look on the prodigal in Luke 15, when he is under a conviction of his sin and misery, what resolves he upon as a remedy? I will go (says he) to my father and I will say, Father, I have sinned, etc. The first thing he betakes himself to and resolves upon is to catch hold of the covenant-relation between his father and him. And there is a necessity of this on a threefold account:

1. Because *there can be no solid ground for extricating and bringing one out of an evil condition but by covenanting with God.* For what else, I pray, can silence a challenge, or quiet and calm the conscience in respect of guilt, when it says to the person, Thou hast sinned and art liable to the curse. There is no way to get sin and the curse removed, but by fleeing to Jesus Christ and closing with God's offer of pardon upon the account of his satisfaction rested on by faith.

Therefore faith is compared to a *shield whereby we may quench the fiery darts of the devil.* It is true, says the soul accused of enmity against and wrongs done to God; I was an enemy to him and greatly wronged him; I was liable to his curse and wrath for sin. But he offered me pardon and reconciliation through the Mediator, and I have accepted of his offer, and do rest upon Christ's satisfaction for pardon; therefore I am justified, and shall not come into condemnation.

2. Because *there can be no peace to the soul until there be some thorough evidence that the covenant is fixed and made sure*. For this is the way that God has laid down for making peace. As the quarrel and curse are founded on the breach of one covenant, so our peace arises upon our engaging with God in another covenant. Hence are all those promises, Jeremiah 30:31,32,33 and Hebrews 8, which are so often repeated, *I will pardon their iniquities, I will remember their sins no more*, etc. All which promises being privileges of a covenanter with God. whoever would look for the performance of the promises, there is a necessity of their being in covenant with him, ere they can expect the performance of them and attain to peace.

3. Because *all that are without the covenant of grace are under the curse, being liable to the breach of the first covenant*. Therefore in Ephesians 2 these two are put together, *strangers from the covenant of promise; and having no hope, being without God and Christ in the world*. And so, to be without the covenant, is to be without hope and without God, and without Christ.

*Use 1.* Lay this for an unquestionable ground, that, if ever you be well, it must be by this covenant with God. Is there any conviction of sin, of violating bygone engagements to God and of wrongs done to him? Take it for a certain truth, that things must be thus adjusted, and thus secured between God and you; that you must have pardon and peace by entering into and making sure the new covenant with God on the grounds of his own grace.

That is, when God is treating with you, and declaring that he is content to close with you, on condition that you will take with your sin, renounce your own righteousness and submit to Christ's, and be content to live to him all the days of your life that are behind; step to and close with him on his own terms. For the heart's yielding consent to God is the making of the covenant; and that entitles to all the good that is in the Bible. In sum, it is this, *If you* (says the Lord) *accept of my offering myself to be your God, and consent to give up yourselves to me, if you will quit your own righteousness and embrace Christ's, I will pardon your sin, I will be forthcoming to you for happiness, and will sanctify you and make you fit to be partakers of it.*

And your making of the covenant sure is your yielding to be happy on these terms, even to be content to take justification and pardon of sin freely by virtue of Christ's satisfaction; and to give up yourselves to be his, to be for him, and to live to him and not to yourselves. As you get

God engaged to be yours, so you engage and subscribe to be God's, and to walk suitably, according to your engagement, in his strength. To *be for him, and for no other*, as the word is in Hosea 3, or as it is in Isaiah 44:5, *One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel*. He shall, as it were, write down his name, *I am God's*.

This in short is covenanting with God; which may be done in hearing the word, in praying, in meditating and in communicating, when faith is distinctly, at least really and truly, exercised on God's offer and promise; and when, upon deliberation, there is a sincere resolving with the person's self, I will take God as he offers himself to me, and will give up and away myself to him; and when, according to this resolution, there is actually a yielding to God.

*Use 2.* Seeing this is the only way to right and unravel an evil and ravelled condition, let me exhort you to pitch on this as your great work, and to aim at it as your great scope, these days that are before you, that a good understanding may be gotten between God and you, and all quarrels removed and taken away, by declaring and acknowledging your iniquities before him, and by covenanting with him on his own terms.

This would make much kindly heart-melting, and would make the communion to be cheering and refreshful, when, after a secretly closed bargain with God, we should come to receive his seal, and to append and put to ours. And whatever tossings and difficulties there may be to get ourselves made right here, yet we would seriously endeavour to get our hearts brought up, sincerely to say with the Psalmist in Psalm 16, *My soul hath said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord*; and to win at a settled deliberate yielding to God, so as there may be quietness in it for the time to come.

*Use 3.* There is here sad ground of expostulation with and reproof to many. I know not what many of you are doing; most part, I suppose, are taken up about the outward ordinances, but as to the main thing of making up a covenant with God, as it is held forth in the gospel, I fear that is much neglected and misunderstood. Yet let me say it, though you should pray and weep all these days, without this it is impossible that you can have peace or win to have a good understanding between God and you.

Put yourselves therefore to the trial and see if the frame of your spirits be

such as holds any tolerable proportion to the frame and posture that Israel and Judah are represented to be in here. They are *going*, we are sitting still. They are *weeping*, our eyes are dry and our hearts hard. The humble mournful way of religion, alas! is much gone from among us. Again, they are renewing the covenant, but, ah, what can we say, as to the securing of things between God and us? Are not the most part as well satisfied with their state and condition as if there were nothing wrong nor amiss in it? Alas! shall we slubber and scruf over religion, and veil ourselves from ourselves and from others, when in the meantime our hearts and consciences might, if awake, tell us that we are not in covenant with God?

I know many of you will be ready to say you are friends with God; but let me ask such, Did you ever know and believe the enmity? Did you ever apprehend yourselves to be strangers to God, and without the covenant? Did you ever experimentally know any good that his word did to you, as to the bringing of you under the bond of the covenant? Has any gracious change followed upon it?

The truth is, many of you think that you may go to heaven without the word and the saving effects of it on your hearts. You found them (as you fancy) always inclined to love God; you suppose that you were always in friendship with him; which, though there were nothing else to prove it, is a manifest evidence that you were never really in friendship with him.

But let me ask yet further, Did you ever know what it was, to make use of Christ's mediation in the making up of a covenant between God and you? It is likely you will say, you prayed; but you might have done that, though Christ had never come into the world, and though there had been no ground for your acceptance on his account. But I say again, What use made you of his mediation and sufferings? I fear you know little or nothing at all of this; but you come to him, because you imagine that he bears a goodwill to all sinners, and is very easy to be dealt with, and that God the Father is more inexorable and a harder Party to deal with than he; as if Jesus Christ the Son were not as just as the Father; or as if God the Father were not as ready, through a Mediator, to accept of sinners, as the Son is.

I would ask you yet further, Do you think, or can you with any just reason think, that your covenant is sure, when you know neither what it is, nor how you have entered into it? In the covenant, as there is an offer on God's side, so there must be a receiving on yours. Though I grant that oftentimes this to serious souls will be unclear, and it will be their burden

that they have not strong enough desires to have it thorough and clear; such poor souls would put their darkness, unbelief and unskilfulness in Christ's hand to be helped.

But it is a sad matter, that, when we should be praying you to close with Christ in the covenant, it must be our work, and the hardest piece of it, to shake many of you out of your presumption. It is no pleasure to us, God knows, to preach you out of the covenant; but your presumption lays a necessity on us to lance you to the quick, and to search down to the bottom of your sores; because these must be discovered and laid open before there can be any just ground for the application of consolation.

If once we could get you brought under a thorough conviction that you have been deluding yourselves, we might yet have sweet, lively, comfortable and refreshful days. If you were in this posture, *going and weeping for perverting your ways, with your faces towards Zion*, towards God through the Mediator, you might expect God's blessing on these solemn ordinances, and that there should be a covenant made up with him *never to be forgotten*. O! be serious in the business, and let not this opportunity go by you unimproved to the best and utmost advantage; and himself graciously help you hereunto.