

## The Promise of Kings and Priests

### Introduction

A few weeks ago, I spent about an hour reading information on the internet concerning the history of the Cold War. From the end of WWII in 1945 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the thoughts of at least two generations of United States citizens were gripped by the threats of communism and nuclear war. After only a few minutes of reading about the iron curtain, atomic bombs, the Berlin crisis, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the arms race, the Cuban missile crisis, and more; I was amazed at how I was drawn into a world of fear and despair. People built fallout shelters, suspected communist sympathizers were hunted down, traitors were executed, wars were fought to keep communism at bay, and US citizens agonized over the possibility of nuclear catastrophe. The very next morning there was an article in the newspaper about Cold War Web sites. One man quoted in the article implied that such memories hit too close to home, as he recalled living through "duck and cover drills" at school desks, and the fear of radioactive fallout from above-ground nuclear tests getting into the milk supply. Many of us who lived through those decades literally entertained the thought that the planet could possibly come to an end. I was amazed, as I reviewed this data about our recent history, by the sorrow and sense of despair that was portrayed. The reports and images were overwhelming.

Human history has moved us into a new era of fear and despair. The current global war on terror has become the latest threat to the well-being of humanity. Beginning with Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, terror has been accelerated by a nuclear program in Iran and a nuclear bomb test in North Korea. From the "Cold War" to the "War on Terror," our world appears balanced on the edge of annihilation. This state of affairs is compounded by the poor spiritual and moral climate in our country. Murder, pornography, adultery, rampant divorce, abortion, robbery, and molestation are just a sample of the headlines in our news. Closer to home we might add our own personal struggles with lying, anger, cheating, and neglect of our walk with God. All of this creates a political, social, and spiritual atmosphere of fear and despair.

Though the historical circumstances were quite different, such a desperate atmosphere was experienced by ancient Israel in the Bible. The message which God used to address ancient Israel's world speaks to our own global situation.

The situation in which the children of Israel found themselves during the sixth century B.C. could also be described as a political, social, and spiritual atmosphere of fear and despair. The prophets had long preached condemnation against Israel for their sin and idolatry. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Judah actually experienced a "hot war" as her people endured destruction and exile at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. The Temple, understood to be the place of God's presence, had been torn down and burned. Jerusalem, the city of David, was left in ruins. The promised land, once flowing with milk and honey, was devastated as a wasteland. All of the great signs of Israel's glory and relationship to God were destroyed.

Now, in exile, in Babylon, the children of Judah had nothing but memories, and guilt over all that was lost. Surrounded by pagan practices, idolatry, and the worship of false gods, the children of Judah were lost and hopeless. Many likely understood that they deserved to be here. They did not deserve God's attention. They were no longer worthy of being called His people. The prophets had made all of this clear many times over. Imagine the despair of such physical loss compounded by the realization that God had abandoned them and they deserved it.

It is to this crisis of hopelessness and loss, that the voice of the prophet is sent once again. It is an announcement that the children of Judah desperately needed to hear. It is also an announcement, for which we should recognize our own serious need:

**[Read Jeremiah 33:14-22]**

This particular announcement focuses on the fulfillment of God's intentions regarding Kingship and Priesthood. In regard to both King David and the Priests from Levi, the text speaks of one who will come and of a multitude who will follow as descendants.

### **I. The Corruption of Kingship and Priesthood.**

The focus of this passage in Jeremiah is on the promise of right leadership, both political and religious. **In the past**, Israel had experienced times with poor leadership or no leadership at all. For example, the end of the book of Judges relates two very strange accounts. The first story describes a young Levite who becomes the personal priest for an individual and his household idols. A group of soldiers from the tribe of Dan robs the individual by taking his household idols. The young Levite initially objects, but is soon persuaded to join the group as their new priest.

The story is about how the tribe of Dan seeks their inheritance and secures a land for themselves. In the process, however, they also gain their own Levitical priest, along with some idols, a graven image, and a molten image. The account ends with a picture of the tribe at peace, in their new home, worshipping stolen idols.

Do you notice something wrong with this picture!?! In case we missed it, the narrator ends the account with this subtle statement: "*meanwhile, the house of God was at Shiloh.*"

There is something absurd about this picture. An individual and a tribe in Israel are described as going about their business, in relationship to household idols and graven images and personal priests, and nothing in the account indicates that anyone senses there is anything wrong here! Meanwhile, the house of God is at Shiloh, seemingly completely detached from the entire scene, as God is ignored.

The second story at the end of Judges is even more odd. This story also involves a Levite. This Levite has a concubine who runs away from home. He chases after her, finds her at her father's house, and plans to take her back home. On the journey home, they spend the night with an old man in the city of Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin. That night, wicked men from the city pound on the old man's door and demand that the Levite be brought out to them, so that they might have relations with him. The old man objects, and offers his daughter and the Levite's concubine instead. It turns out that the Levite's concubine was thrown out to the evil men, who rape and abuse her all night long. In the morning she appears to be dead. The Levite places her on his donkey and takes her home. He then takes a knife and cuts her into twelve pieces, and sends her body parts throughout the land of Israel. The tribes of Israel were gathered and were told about the horrible acts which took place in the city of Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. In reaction to these shameful deeds, civil war broke out. All the tribes of Israel fought against their brother tribe of Benjamin. It took three battles, and many lives were lost. In the end, the tribe of Benjamin was nearly wiped out. In fact, Israel began to mourn because one of their own tribes was practically cut off.

It's not difficult to recognize the chaos in these stories. Both of the accounts at the end of Judges are recorded without any real theological explanation. There is no prophetic judgment against the idolatrous and wicked actions which take place. There is no indication of punishment or consequence for what happens. There is only a cryptic statement which is repeated at the beginning of the first story and at the end of the second story. This statement surrounds or envelopes the two strange accounts. The statement is simply this: "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*"

The picture of chaos at the end of the book of Judges is explicitly associated with the lack of proper leadership from Priests and Kings. The period of Judges concludes with Levitical priests involved in tales which defy the imagination, in a community which is supposed to be characterized by covenant relationship with God. We encounter a community crying out for some sense of direction and leadership, but for which there is no king and everyone is left to fend for themselves.

This is just one example of the corruption and wickedness which was a major contributor to the downfall and exile of the children of Israel. Now the children of Israel, in Jeremiah's day, are left with memories of failure, feelings of guilt, and the depression of deserving abandonment by God.

The painful and hopeless situation of Israel in exile is not alien to our own time and place. I don't need to rehearse in detail the failure of leadership, both political and religious, in our own day. From sex scandals and the telling-of-lies among Presidents; to adultery, embezzlement, and child molestation among priests and ministers of the Gospel. Like the children of Israel, we all-too-readily follow in the wake of our leadership. After all, is the gang rape of a woman in New York, in the midst of a crowd of cheering and applauding onlookers, any less absurd than the slicing up of a concubine in Ancient Israel?! We are members of a human community which bears the shame of such wickedness. It is reflected even in the subtle deceit and unfaithfulness which may stain our own households, even our own hearts and hands. As a result, there are too many times when we sense our guilt, feel abandoned by God, and fear that there is no way back to reconciliation with the Lord!

## **II. God's Promise of New Kingship and Priesthood.**

It is for such a time of hopelessness that the Word of the Lord comes through those like Jeremiah! The prophet proclaims that God will cause to spring forth a righteous Branch of David who will execute justice on the earth. God also promises to multiply the descendants of David His servant, and the Levites, His ministers. Thus, this word of hope to the exiles promises leadership in terms of a King and Priest, as well as numerous descendants who will follow in the steps of the just and righteous one who comes.

When we think of the power and authority of a King, traditionally, we think of might, strength, great size, superior weapons and more. Whoever has the most and greatest of these is the one who wins and rules! This traditional view is well illustrated in Daniel's vision, in chapter 7 of Daniel, which depicts gruesome and fierce beasts ripping, clawing, and tearing at each other in attempt to gain dominion.

In contrast to this tradition, Jesus Christ, as King, brings a power and authority which is different than any we might imagine. It is characterized by "inverse" phrases; such as, "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first," "the greatest shall be the servant of all," "the one who loses his life for my sake, shall find it," "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live!" It is characterized by the opposite of what we recognize as the norm; for example, consider the exhortations "when someone strikes you, turn the other cheek," and "offer yourselves a living sacrifice."

Christ displays a power and authority that does **not** defeat and conquer, destroy and kill, strike or beat its opponent. Rather, Christ displays a power which reverses such approaches. This power appears to "take-in," "absorb," and "receive," pain or an attack or a blow from an opponent. This power is also able somehow to "dispel," or "disarm" any attack or pain, so that ultimately the power of the opponent is rendered harmless.

The core of this indescribable power is LOVE. Love which is able somehow to take-in suffering and evil; and return forgiveness, kindness, and favor! Christ portrays a Kingship of power and authority which rules without weapons, threat, destruction, or violence; but rather wields a LOVE which takes in even death, and returns Resurrection! This view of power is also illustrated in the vision of Daniel 7. As the fierce beasts maul each other, Daniel envisions the "Ancient of Days" who, without effort, removes dominion from the fearsome beasts. Then Daniel sees "one like the Son of Man" simply floating down with the clouds. With absolutely no indication of violence, weapons, or great size; this one is given an eternal Kingdom and everlasting dominion!

In a similar manner, Christ displays a unique view of Priesthood. The picture of Priests in the Bible is one of persons **set apart, as much as possible, from all defilement**, that they might serve as ministers on behalf of the people, in the presence of God. The entire community of Israel was called to be holy, and separate from the nations. The priesthood, however, was held to an even higher call of separation. The sacrificial system, detailed in the Pentateuch, makes very clear that God cannot abide impurity or sin. Israel must continually cleanse the members of its community and the Temple which is the place of God's presence.

If the Temple becomes overly defiled due to sin and impurity, God's presence must leave and abandon the community of Israel. In fact, the prophet Ezekiel pictures that very tragedy, as he envisions the Spirit of the Lord leaving the Temple. That is exactly what the exiles, whom Jeremiah addresses, fear has happened. God has abandoned them due to their sin and impurity.

In direct contrast to that fear, however, Jeremiah announces that God is bringing forth a new Priesthood in the midst of restoration. As with Kingship, this promised Priesthood is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As with Kingship, once again, Christ portrays a most unique approach, to Priesthood. Christ Himself is sinless, holy, and pure, without question. However, He maintains holiness, not by meticulously avoiding impurity, but rather in the midst of shocking displays of contact with impurity. Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, and of breaking the Sabbath. He freely associates with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Christ even touches lepers; a direct contact with impurity.

**What is unimaginable here, is that God, who cannot abide impurity, for whom the Temple must be regularly cleansed lest God be forced to abandon the community; this same God, in Jesus Christ, touches our sin and my impurity! Literally, in Jesus Christ, God defiles Himself, for the love of His children, for you and me!**

**As with a power which takes-in death and returns resurrection, Christ is somehow able to touch sin and impurity and turn it to holiness and righteousness.** The miracles of forgiveness and justification come with His wondrous touch. Admittedly, it is not that God is defiled, but God is able to cleanse, even as He comes in contact with the repentant sinner.

## Conclusion

Jeremiah proclaims that God will multiply the descendants of King David and the descendants of the Levitical priests. As followers of Christ, we participate in the fulfillment of Jeremiah's words. We are called to live like Christ. We are called to display the Kingly power of love, and the Priestly ministry of holiness. The Spirit of Christ enables us!

How then shall we live as Kings and Priests. Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord. We live as Kings not concerned with securing our own earthly empires of my time and my space. Rather we live secure in the eternal provisions of God. Thus, we need not fight for our place at the head of the line at the grocery store, or our rightful turn merging on the freeway. We need not destroy our enemy by returning a volley of abusive language when insulted. We need not use the weapons of anger and spite and manipulation to conquer those who threaten us. We live as Priests who minister to the needs of those around us, unafraid of being defiled by the world. Our community will see a class of royalty and a division of priesthood which functions on the basis of love and service, following the lead of the One who is coming.

Kingly and Priestly leadership, characterized by love and holiness, comes to us initially in the form of the baby in the manger. We acknowledge His coming every year at advent, continually keeping before us the leadership of Christ in our lives. Let us forever celebrate this coming of the righteous Branch of David!

Benediction: Go forth in the confidence and hope of the presence and coming of our Lord's Kingdom!

-Dr. Thomas J. King