

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. 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. ... ⁶Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: 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.

"Are You Ready to Buy Land?"

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People often ignore potential disaster in good times and don't prepare for the lean times, and when things are bad, they can't see the hopeful signs of change. We are often stuck in our temporary emotions and can't see the bigger picture from a historical perspective. We forget the lessons of the past and fail to adequately prepare for the future. The prophet Jeremiah has some investment advice for us.

Jeremiah is about to engage in history's worst land deal. We are at the very end of the life of the country of Judah. Judah has existed for over 400 years. Now its doom is sealed. Nebuchadnezzar, king and general of the armies of Babylon, is besieging the city of Jerusalem. The date is 587 B.C.E. Jeremiah is confined in a royal prison in the palace of Judah's final king, Zedekiah.

In the middle of all this upset and uncertainty, Jeremiah takes the unexpected action of purchasing a piece of land in his hometown of Anathoth.

So what's going on here? The word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah. A cousin named Hanamel, says, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours" (Jeremiah 32:8). Hanamel is offering Jeremiah a piece of land that seems to be worthless because the Chaldeans are about to crush King Zedekiah and the Israelites and take them into exile in Babylon. But Jeremiah jumps at the opportunity — the Lord speaks to him and says, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (v. 15).

Jeremiah takes a chance and makes a risky investment. Why? Because he has hope for the future despite all evidence to the contrary in the present. Sure enough, the people of Anathoth do eventually return, after the exile (Ezra 2:23). What looked risky turns out to be right.

The wait may be long, but God tells Jeremiah that he doesn't have to feel stuck — he can use that time of captivity to take an action that shows his complete faith in God.

The message of this passage is that the Lord will not let us languish even when the world around us is collapsing.

So Jeremiah buys the **field at Anathoth**, and carefully weighs out the money — 17 shekels of silver. He signs the deed, seals it, gets the proper witnesses, and then orders that the papers be put in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long, long time (vv. 9-14). If you know anything about the history of manuscripts of the Bible, this scene is amazingly reminiscent of that great discovery in the last century of the Dead Sea Scrolls, manuscripts preserved in earthenware jars for over 2000 years. Jeremiah knew that this legal action of sealing his deed in jars would indeed last a long time! Jeremiah is prepared to wait for the geo-political reality to change, to wait as long as it takes. He trusts that God is going to create a better future for the people of Israel, but it's not going to happen as quickly as the people would like.

So what are we supposed to do when life gives us little hope? What are we supposed to do when our employer is leaving town and laying off? What are we supposed to do when our technical college is losing accreditation and closing down? What are we supposed to do when our marriage is breaking up or our doctor has given us a dreaded diagnosis. Each of us is going to feel trapped from time to time, put on hold by some omnipotent operator, but that doesn't mean that we cannot make a move toward a better future. A great deal of good can be done while we are confined.

One possibility is that *we make a down payment on the future*, as Jeremiah does when he buys the field in Anathoth. There are times when our faithfulness to God doesn't appear to be a good investment, but it always is. Despite the fact that Anathoth is about to be burnt and destroyed, Jeremiah puts his money into it. He trusts that God will restore the fortunes of his people.

For us, this down payment could mean working with integrity in our job, trusting that God will channel our best efforts to a positive end. It could mean being faithful to our spouse, trusting that the Lord will lead long-term partners to deeper levels of intimacy. It could mean being generous in our giving to God's work in the world, trusting that God will use our gifts to accomplish good that we cannot see ... or even imagine.

We can also trust God *to turn impossibilities into possibilities*, and wait with patience for God to work God's purposes out. After buying the field, Jeremiah prays to the Lord, saying: "Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you" (v. 17).

Remember the work of **William Wilberforce**. Wilberforce was a member of the English Parliament two centuries ago, and in the course of his life he became convinced that the slave trade was contrary to God's will. He committed himself to abolition, and saw his mission in life as the suppression of the slave trade.

But change came slowly ... painfully slowly. Wilberforce introduced a 12-point motion against the slave trade in May of 1788. The motion was defeated. Planters, businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists and even English royalty opposed his motion, seeing abolitionists like Wilberforce as dangerous radicals.

But Wilberforce refused to yield, introducing another anti-slave bill in 1791. It, too, was rejected. Another defeat followed in 1792. And in 1793. Others still in 1797, 1798 and 1799. And in 1804 and 1805.

It must have appeared that nothing was going to change.

But gradually the public came to support the abolition of slavery, and in 1806 Parliament abolished the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Wilberforce wept with joy. It took until 1833 to free all the slaves in the British Empire, but Wilberforce remained committed to his cause, eliminating the greatest evil of his day by using the tools of faith, politics and persistence.

You may despair that the world is a mess, with billions of people locked in inescapable cycles of war, famine and poverty, with children perishing from hunger, disease and violence. As world leaders gathered for the United Nations General Assembly this week, all the evidence suggests that we are at a turning point. The number of people living in extreme poverty (\$1.90 per person per day) has tumbled by half in two decades, and the number of small children dying has dropped by a similar proportion — that's six million lives a year saved by vaccines, breast-feeding promotion, pneumonia medicine and diarrhea treatments!ⁱ

Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering.

- As recently as 1981, my first year in ministry, 44 percent of the **world's population lived in extreme poverty**, according to the World Bank. Now the share is believed to be less than 10 percent and falling. "This is the best story in the world today," says Jim Yong Kim, the president of the World Bank.

- For the entire history of the human species until the 1960s, a majority of adults were illiterate. Now 85 percent of adults worldwide can read and the share is rising.

- Although inequality has risen in America, the global trend is more encouraging: Internationally, inequality is on the decline because of gains by the poor in places like China and India.ⁱⁱ

Great good can be done, even when it happens incrementally.

Finally, we can remember that God is always *working to turn evil into good*, and death into new life. Over the course of our lives, we will certainly experience pain and suffering, but punishment and defeat are never the last words in our story. "I will rejoice in doing good to them," God promises, as God looks to the future, "and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (v. 41). If we're going to follow in the prophet's faithful footsteps, we need to take some risks in response to

God's Word. So what are the apparently foolish things we should be doing as Christians today?

For one, despite the decline of mainline denominations like this one, we can make a *significant financial investment in the ministry of the church*. Notice how **Jeremiah** puts his money where his mouth is, like a church member making a pledge to a stewardship campaign. When you put your money into the mission and ministry of the church, you don't know what the future holds. But you show faith that this congregation will continue to provide meaning and serve the world for generations to come.

Making an investment in God's future is a risk that Jeremiah took — and that we should take as well.

“Faith is like spiritual oxygen. As we allow faith to freely flow within us, it awakens and enlivens our spiritual senses. It breathes life into our very souls. As faith flows, we become sensitively attuned to the whisperings of the Spirit. Our minds are enlightened, our spiritual pulse quickens, our hearts are touched. Faith fuels hope. Our perspective changes; our vision becomes clearer. We begin to look for the best, not the worst, in life and in others. We gain a deeper sense of life's purpose and meaning. Despair gives way to joy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When we see a world hell-bent on destruction, when we see the barbarians at the gate, when we think that the end has finally come to our hopes and dreams for justice and righteousness for all of God's people, then we can watch the land deal of Jeremiah, watch him sign the deed, weigh out the money, give the deed and its copy to Baruch, witness Baruch put them in a jar, and we can know that the end has not yet come, because God has more for us yet to do.^{iv}

ⁱ Nicholas Kristof, “The Best News You Don't Know” - The New York Times, 9/24/2016
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/opinion/the-best-news-you-dont-know.html?_r=0 2/5

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ David S. Baxter

^{iv} John C. Holbert, “The Worst Land Deal in History,” *Opening the Old Testament*, 2013.
<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian>