

## “The Story Continues”

Reading: *Jeremiah 5:1-11, 12-18*

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On June 18, 1990, I sat at home watching what would turn out to be one of the best episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ever. I was nine years old at the time, and the episode was an epic confrontation between the heroic crew of the *Enterprise* and their unstoppable, terrifying enemies, the Borg. Like all good stories, the outlook for the heroes seemed bleaker and bleaker and the stakes kept getting higher and higher, and if I'd really stopped to think about it I might have realized that there was no way that the heroes were going to save the day in the last few minutes of the episode. So, of course, at the absolute highest moment of tension, the screen went black, and three infuriating words appeared: “to be continued...” It was the season finale, and we would have to wait in that moment of highest tension until the next season’s premiere in September. Nine-year-old me simply could not believe my eyes. How would we survive the summer?

Of course, many writers have perfected the art of the cliffhanger, though I doubt many of us really enjoy seeing the words “to be continued” breaking up our story at the worst possible moment. TV show writers want to keep us coming back for more, while we want to see what happens to our heroes. There have even been times when a story has ended on a cliffhanger and then been canceled before it can be continued, and those heroes are forever trapped in a limbo of ambiguity. To be continued... It’s torture for those of us who have no appreciation for delayed gratification.

Today as we continue through the story of the Bible, this great story of how God has been at work in His creation, we have reached one of the points of highest tension. This week’s chapter would be a great moment for a season finale cliffhanger, because things are about as bleak as they can possibly be, and we should be wondering if the story can even go on from here. We’ve spent the entire summer so far reading the Bible as one continuous story about God and His people, and we started out in a beautiful, harmonious creation where God and His people could live together. And after we rebelled against God and rejected His intent for creation, the story has always been focused on this: 1) God, 2) and His people, 3) living together, and 4) blessing God’s creation. That was the intent from the beginning, and that’s the content of God’s plan for redemption. Those are the pieces of the puzzle He wants to put back together.

But here in our chapter of the story for this week we see that story completely falling apart. The plan is in tatters. The heroes are in desperate trouble. God has spent something like the last fifteen centuries gradually, carefully crafting a nation of people who will be loyal to Him and who can live in the land He has given them and be a blessing to other nations. This nation of descendants of Abraham was supposed to be the focal point for that redeemed creation, people among whom God can live and bless, who will then draw other nations to the worship of the Lord. But now it’s gone wrong on just about every level. God has been warning them time and time again that the consequences of their actions are going to catch up to them, and here they are at last. This story has gone completely wrong, because in 586 BC the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and God’s people were carted off wholesale into exile in a faraway land.

So out of those elements of our story that God has been working to re-create, the only one that has remained faithful is God. God has crafted a people, yes, but they have not remained His

people, as the prophet Jeremiah and others make very clear. They have worshipped all sorts of other gods, which Jeremiah compares to adultery since they were pledged to have an exclusive relationship of love and worship with the Lord alone. They have not been His people. They have not been a blessing to God's creation; in fact, rather than being an influence for good they have been led astray by the other nations around them. And now, with the attacks of the Babylonians, the land God gave them has been conquered, their capital city has been annihilated, their kings and leaders have been killed or humiliated and removed from power, and worst of all, the temple of the Lord has been destroyed and the people have been removed from the land. They are no longer living together with God in the land. Surely now the story is over, and God has to start again. This was a long, painstaking, painful, false start in God's plan.

And then the screen goes black, and those three words pop up: "to be continued..." Amazingly enough, the story continues. These prophets who have been speaking for God share an incredible message, that the story continues. Even in the midst of the rubble and smoke and death of the Promised Land, the prophets promise that God is not yet done. The pieces of the puzzle have been scattered, and the chapters of the story would seem to have been shredded and burned, and yet the story continues. Even now, God is not giving up. Even now, God still has a plan.

The message that the story continues has been the content of God's messages from the beginning, really. There were those among God's people who were determined to go their own way, as people have always wanted to do since the beginning up to the present, and the prophets were called to remind them that they couldn't remove themselves from God's story. The story would continue. There is only one creation, and though it has rebelled against God, God is determined to reclaim it, so if you want to continue living as part of the rebellious creation you are choosing the wrong side of history. It may look like God is absent or dead, and it may look like sin and darkness will win the day, but the story continues. To the people of Israel in their time, the prophets had to continually and harshly remind them that the story was continuing, and God's patience in holding off the consequences of their sins did not mean that the consequences would never come. The story would continue.

The prophet Jeremiah in particular faced off against those who insisted that God's story was on pause. He lived right at that cliffhanger moment, during the years when the Babylonians were systematically destroying the land of God's people. There were apparently a lot of very vocal false prophets in town at the time proclaiming that everything was fine, that God would save them again as He had done in the past, that there would be peace. Don't worry, they said, because we have the temple of the Lord in our city, and surely God will defend His temple, so no matter how bad things look, we're safe as long as it's standing. And what's worse, the king didn't want people to panic, so he supported these false prophets and persecuted Jeremiah when he contradicted them. But Jeremiah said that "they dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, but there is no peace." Jeremiah's counsel was to surrender to their enemies, which is practically treason. But the story is continuing, it's going forward, and if you want to survive long enough to see the next chapter, you need to stop resisting God's judgment.

Sometimes we don't want to hear the message that the story continues. Sometimes we want the story to stay where it is. Sometimes the story moving forward means that things will get shaken up too much, that I can't continue in the ignorant bliss I'm in now, that the consequences of my

choices will catch up to me and the piper will want paid and I can no longer pretend that my actions aren't affecting me and other people. To those who are persisting in their rebellion against God, the message is that the story continues, and the rebels will one day have to meet the triumphant Lord of all creation. The story continues, and there are consequences for our choices, and one day the page will turn and we will find out what they are. The story continues. Some people cry out "Peace, peace!" but Jeremiah says, "'Should I not punish them for this?' declares the Lord, 'Should I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?'" The story continues for those who do not want it to, and we should tremble for them.

But the story also continues for those who cannot believe it. "'Yet even in those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will not destroy you completely.'" The outcome looks bleak; continuing the story seems impossible when so much of what God has worked for is being undone. Can anyone hope to escape such destruction? Is there a chance of redemption when sin and death have triumphed so powerfully? Sometimes we can't see how God could possibly continue His story of redemption. Things are too grim, the consequences are too bad, the reasons to despair are too many. Surely God has washed His hands of us.

But for as harsh as the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah can be as they blast the people with messages of wrath, they each also have beautiful, tender messages of hope and trust that the story will continue after the storm. God tells Jeremiah to go and buy a parcel of land as a sign to the people that their exile will not last forever; they will one day be rooted again in their land. God gives Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with dry bones, the remains of God's people, but as God's breath enters them, they come together and live again. Jeremiah promises that one day, people will not look for religious artifacts to guide them to God, because Jerusalem will be called "The Throne of the Lord," and He will be present with them. The very last words of Ezekiel's prophecy are a promise that He will resettle His people in a city named "The Lord is There." The story continues. God and His people living together and blessing His creation.

The story continued for God's people 2500 years ago, and the story continues for us today as well. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah foretold a time when God living among His people would be fulfilled by God's own Holy Spirit dwelling within us. The church exists today as a visible sign of the reality that God's story continues, both in the lives of individuals and in creation as a whole. He is still working toward that plan of a redeemed creation, with God and His people living together and blessing the world around them. For those who don't want to hear that the story is continuing, those who are content to remain in their sin, those who hope to get away with their wrongdoing, they need to hear that God is still at work and they are on the wrong side of history. They need to hear that there are consequences to their actions, and their only eternal hope rests in turning to God. And for those who think their story is over, that there is no longer any reason to have hope, they also need to hear that the story continues. God is at work in inexplicable, surprising ways, and He will continue His story. He invites you to be a part of it.

Neither Ezekiel nor Jeremiah could do anything but proclaim the message that God's story will continue. For Jeremiah, God's words became a fire in his mouth. Ezekiel was taken like a captive by God's Spirit to see the visions he must proclaim. And for us as the church today, the message that the story continues is something we, too, must proclaim to a world that doesn't want to hear it and can't

believe it. We have words — and lives — that call others to repentance and hope in God. Praise God, the story continues!



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