

August 9, 2026

The Prophet Jeremiah
XI. The Promise of Home
Jeremiah 33:10-18

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I was late to Kenneth Grahame's classic book, The Wind in the Willows. I can remember riding Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disney World in the seventies and finding it far more frightening than anything in the Haunted Mansion. That moment when the train is coming right at you in a dark tunnel – I still get nightmares from that! But I had no idea what that ride was about or, for that matter, who Mr. Toad was until I first read Grahame's book about twenty years ago – the ride was based on that book. And I was captivated by Grahame's story – and still am. It is a book I believe everyone should read as a child, then again as a teen, then again and again as an adult. It is first and foremost just a wonderful tale, filled with adventure and discovery and fear and laughter – Mr. Toad, as the Disney ride suggested, being rather key to most of the chaos which occurs.

But at its heart, The Wind in the Willows is a story about our hearts – and all that matters most to them. For example, in one scene about halfway into the story, Mole and Rat – the main characters – are plodding through the snow heading towards Rat's riverbank home. They have both now been away from their homes for several months. And as they plod on, suddenly Mole is struck by something that hits him like an electric shock – he catches the scent of his own home hidden under the snow and very near to where they are walking. I'll let Grahame tell the story:

We others, who have long lost the more subtle of the physical senses, have not even proper terms to express an animal's inter-communications with his surroundings, living or otherwise, and have only the word 'smell,' for instance, to include the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day, summoning, warning, inciting, repelling. It was one of these mysterious fairy calls from out the void that suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through with its very familiar appeal, even while yet he could not clearly remember what it was. He stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching hither and thither in its efforts to recapture the fine filament, the telegraphic current, that had so strongly moved him. A moment, and he had caught it again; and with it this time came recollection in fullest flood.

Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! Why, it must be quite close by him

at that moment, his old home that he had hurriedly forsaken and never sought again, that day when he first found the river! And now it was sending out its scouts and its messengers to capture him and bring him in.¹

Home calling to Mole, with memories thick as molasses, with a longing as strong as love – Mole is drawn home. Home.

* * * * *

The Israelite exiles captive in Babylon sure wanted to go home. We have already witnessed the depth of their longing for home in our brief encounter a few weeks ago with Psalm 137. Jeremiah had sent the exiles a letter telling them to settle in where they were – that they were going to be stuck in Babylon for years to come. But all they wanted was to come home to Jerusalem: *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.”²*

But as it turns out – and as we learn this morning – it wasn’t just the exiles stuck in Babylon who were longing for home, it was also those Israelites who had been left behind in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas after the Babylonian conquest. Their longing for home perhaps was even deeper, and more fervent and desperate, than that of the exiles in Babylon. For the exiles in Babylon just wanted to hit the road and head home. But those still in the land were all too familiar with what home had become. Though they were still at home, their home no longer felt like home. It had changed. More than that, it had been destroyed. They might still be living in Jerusalem, but Jerusalem no longer looked or felt anything like home to them – because the Babylonians had turned it into a wasteland. A place of constant hunger, devastating pestilence, ever-threatening death. If the exiles in Babylon longed to come home, what those who remained in the land longed for was for home to come back to them – for Jerusalem, for their life in Jerusalem, to once again be what it had once been, when it had truly felt like home.

Jeremiah wrote a second book, the book of Lamentations, which expresses how terrible it was to be alive in Jerusalem in those days, as well as the longing of those still in Jerusalem for their home, their city, their life they had known before the Babylonians to be restored to them. Lamentations is one of the grimmest books in the Bible – five poems, each one an outpouring of grief and loss, suffering and longing: *“How lonely sits the city that was full of people!”* Jeremiah’s first lament begins:

*How like a widow she has become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.*

*She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has none to console her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;*

they have become her enemies . . .

*All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
to revive their strength.
“Look, O Lord, and see,
for I am despised.”³*

The longing for home. The exiles in Babylon longing to come back home. But the Israelites still living in the land longing for home to come back to them.

And it is to both these groups, to both their longings, that God speaks His Word of promise which we read in our morning Scripture – God’s promise of home:

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, “It is a waste without man or beast,” in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord:

*“Give thanks to the Lord of hosts,
for the Lord is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!”*

To the exiles, longing for home from Babylon, God promises that He will, in time, bring them home to Jerusalem. And to those still in the land, longing for their home to come back to them – the home they had known before it was laid waste by the Babylonians – to them God promises that Jerusalem shall be rebuilt; that their life in Jerusalem shall be restored, made good again; that there will once again be heard the sound of joy in their city streets, the sound of laughter in their homes, the sound of thanksgiving and praise to God in the Temple as well as in their hearts.

And, indeed, both of these promises of home that God makes to Israel come to pass. The destruction of Jerusalem and the removal of the exiles by the Babylonians took place around 586 B.C. But in 539 B.C., God used King Cyrus of the Persian Empire to defeat the Babylonian Empire. And the exiles in Babylon were allowed to go home to Jerusalem. Not only that, Cyrus authorized and even supported the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and of its city walls – and of the Temple, most of all. This period in Israel’s history is known as the Return, or the Restoration. But, again, God kept the promise of home He had made to His people. The exiles came home to Jerusalem. And for those still in Jerusalem as it lay waste, Jerusalem – and the life they had known in her before the Babylonians – came home to them. Joy and laughter and thanksgiving to God were, indeed, heard once again in the city. We can read all about it in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

And yet. God did keep His promise of home to both the exiles and to those still in the land – and yet. And yet as wonderful as it was, it wasn't as wonderful as they had hoped that it would be. Somehow the Return, the Restoration, as great as it was, still was nowhere near as great as the people had hoped for it to be. It was, in some ways, more of a disappointment. One small example: Ezra records that after the foundations for the rebuilding of the Temple were laid, while most of the people rejoiced, those old enough to remember the original Temple before it had been destroyed instead wept – because the new Temple would be a smaller and far less glorious version of what Solomon had once built.⁴ And as for the sound of gladness in the land, well, life in Israel never quite returned to its former glory – Israel itself, as a nation, never returned to her former glory. In fact, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, and ultimately the Romans all came in rapid succession to reduce Israel to an occupied vassal state, putting the people constantly under one foreign thumb or another.

And there never again was an Israelite king over Israel – a king from the lineage of David. We haven't even mentioned that part yet, but for those in exile as well as for those still in the land, that promise of God to restore the Davidic kingship was the icing on the cake of God's promise of home. The exiles would come home, and home would be rebuilt for those still in the land – but to top it all off, God would raise up a great king from the house of David, fulfilling the promise He had made to David and to Israel centuries before: that a king from David's line would one day rise up to rule over God's people forevermore – a glorious and never-ending golden age.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely.

It just didn't happen during the time of the return from exile and the rebuilding of life in Jerusalem – it just didn't happen, this birth of a Davidic king who would rule over God's people forever in power and in righteousness and in security. God's promise of home technically had been fulfilled, but not at all as grandly as the people had longed for. And the Davidic king never came.

Or rather, He didn't come until one night, centuries later, when a child, descended from the house and lineage of David, was born in the city of David which is called Bethlehem.⁵ And it was then, and only then, that the people of God were finally able to see what it was God had actually been promising them when He made to them His promise of home. Yes, He had brought the exiles home, as He had promised; yes, He had rebuilt Jerusalem and life in Jerusalem, as He had promised. But on that night in Bethlehem what God revealed was that His promise of home was about so much more, so very much more, than just Jerusalem and life in Jerusalem. What that night in Bethlehem revealed was that His promise of home was about so much more, so very much more, than even Israel herself – that it was about all peoples, all nations. What God revealed that night in Bethlehem was that His promise of home was to be fulfilled far beyond anything the exiles and those still in the land could have ever imagined.

That all along the home God was promising to bring His people to, all God's people to, was not Jerusalem rebuilt, but all of Creation redeemed. The home God was promising to bring

His people to, all God's people to, was not even Jerusalem at all – but Himself, that He Himself would become their one true and eternal home. What God's promise to the exiles and to those still in the land really meant was that God, at long last, was going to make a way for all His children, for all His prodigal sons and daughters, to come home to Him from out of the exile of their sin and from out of the wasteland of their sorrow and suffering. God Himself was going to make Himself our forever home – that is what the promise of home really meant.

And Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of that promise God made to the exiles in Babylon and to those still in the land – and to you and me still today in our own longing for home. God's promise to us all that one day we will all be gathered together with Him, nevermore to part – home. But also home not as we have known it here on earth, for better or for worse – but God's promise to us is of a heavenly home. Not just home up there in heaven, but home the way we always knew it could be. Home the way we have always longed for it to be. A home full of love, full of belonging and acceptance, full of peace, full of laughter, full of joy. And no more sorrow, no more hurting, no more pain or fighting or fears. Home the way we have always longed for it to be.

And, because God always keeps His promise, because indeed He has raised up for us an eternal king from David's line – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has raised us up from sin and death and sadness; and because our God indeed longs for us to come home to Him even more than we long to come home: therefore you and I are even now being led by our King on a journey through life that will, in the end, indeed bring us home to God. And home to one another with God forevermore – where there will be peace without end, joy without end, thanksgiving and reconciliation with end. God's promise of home, fulfilled in Jesus Christ – the righteous branch from David's line – means that even now you and I are on our way home. And that God is with us every step of the way, leading us home. We won't miss it, we won't miss out on it – our heavenly home – because every step of our way through life God is with us, leading us and blessing us and sustaining us, until we are home with Him and home with one another forever.

Presbyterian pastor Donald McCullough tells of traveling in the African country of Malawi. Early one morning he climbed to the top of a nearby mountain, where he then looked around at the beautiful panorama, thanking God for the glory of His creation. As he was standing there, he began to hear faint sounds in the distance. The sound was getting closer and closer, coming up the mountain towards him – until at last he could make it out. It was a group of children coming up from the village below, walking together on their way to school, singing together a traveling song as they walked – a beautiful melody complemented by a very complex harmony. Singing over and over again a single phrase: *"We have come this far by the mercy of our God. We have come this far by the mercy of our God. We have come this far by the mercy of our God."*⁶

We, you and I, have come this far by the mercy of our God." We, you and I, have come this far by the grace of our Savior and King Jesus Christ. And His grace shall, in the end, lead us home.

¹ Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows: An Annotated Edition, ed., Seth Lerer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009), p. 115.

² Psalm 137:1.

³ Lamentations 1:1-2, 11.

⁴ Ezra 3:12.

⁵ Luke 2:1-20.

⁶ Donald McCullough, If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It? (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 215.