

The Duration of the Captivity

Jeremiah 24-25:11

Jeremiah 24 – *“The Lord showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord, after Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes of Judah with the craftsmen and smiths, from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylon. ² One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs that could not be eaten, they were so bad. ³ Then the Lord said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” And I said, “Figs, the good figs, very good; and the bad, very bad, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad.” ⁴ Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ⁵ “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶ For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. ⁷ Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. ⁸ ‘And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad’—surely thus says the Lord — ‘so will I give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. ⁹ I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them. ¹⁰ And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.’”*

Background Notes

This prophetic message came to Jeremiah after Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) as a captive to Babylon (v1). A number of other captives were taken to Babylon in 597 BC, including the prophet Ezekiel. This was the second wave of captives who were deported to Babylon. Daniel and others of the nobility were taken in the first wave of captives in 605 BC, but it was the second wave, in 597 BC, that was referenced in Jeremiah 24.

A third and final wave of captives was taken in 586 BC, when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. The majority of the Jewish population died of starvation in the lengthy siege of Jerusalem, or were killed by the sword, or were taken as captives to Babylon when the city fell.

At the time of the prophetic vision of the figs in Jeremiah 24, there were two distinct groups of Jewish people – those who had already gone as captives to Babylon, and those who were still living in Jerusalem, in the land of Judah. In the vision, Jeremiah saw two baskets of figs placed in the Temple courts in Jerusalem. One basket contained good and delicious figs, and the other basket contained bad and rotten figs.

The Lord made sure that Jeremiah saw the obvious difference: *“Then the Lord said to me, ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ And I said, ‘Figs, the good figs, very good, and the bad, very bad, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad’ (v3).* The two baskets of figs represented the two different groups of people – the captives in Babylon and the people who were still living in Judah, now under King Zedekiah. But which basket of figs represented which group of Jewish people? Who were the good figs - and who were the bad figs?

Doctrinal Points

1. The Jewish captives in Babylon were the good figs.

The Lord began His interpretation of the vision to Jeremiah in verse 4. He explained which people the good figs represented, and which people the bad figs represented. At first glance we might think that the good figs represented those folks that God allowed to stay in the Land, and the bad figs represented the captives in Babylon. But no - it was just the opposite. The good figs represented the captives in Babylon!

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans’ (v5). God was disciplining the Jewish captives *“for their own good.”* God said He would watch over them, and build them up, and bring them back from captivity to the land of Judah: *“For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up” (v6).*

Out of these good figs would come a remnant of godly Jewish people who would know and love the Lord with all their hearts. *“Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart” (v7).* Think of Daniel and Ezekiel, and then Zerubbabel and Ezra, and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. And on to the Maccabees, and others who were part of those godly people whom the Lord preserved. This remnant of the godly Jews preserved the Old Testament Scriptures during the captivity in Babylon, and through this godly Jewish remnant the Messiah was born.

But the people who remained in the Land at the time of the Babylonian captivity were the bad figs. They followed the evil ways of their wicked king, Zedekiah. *“And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad’ — surely thus says the Lord — ‘so will I give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt’ (v8).* Many of these people escaped to Egypt and continued their idolatry there. As a result, the bad figs would be scattered and destroyed by sword, famine, and pestilence. *“I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them. And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed*

from the land that I gave to them and their fathers” (v9-10). All of this came true. The Jewish captives in Babylon would be the good figs.

2. The Jewish captivity in Babylon would last for seventy years.

Jeremiah 25:1-11 - *“The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon),² that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying:³ “From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the Lord has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened.⁴ And the Lord has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear.⁵ They said, ‘Repent now every one of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers forever and ever.⁶ Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands; and I will not harm you.’⁷ Yet you have not listened to Me,” says the Lord, “that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt.*

⁸“Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Because you have not heard My words,⁹ behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,’ says the Lord, ‘and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations.¹⁰ Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp.¹¹ And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

The vision of the figs in chapter 24 came to Jeremiah soon after Nebuchadnezzar’s second attack on Jerusalem in 597 BC. The Lord’s message recorded in Jeremiah 25 was given eight years earlier, as we determine from verses 1-3. That year would have been 605 BC. During that year Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho at the Battle of Carchemish, so you can imagine how everyone in the kingdom of Judah was wondering what was in store for them. Would Nebuchadnezzar come against Jerusalem?

In this message from the Lord, Jeremiah gave the people the answer: Yes, the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar would soon attack and conquer Judah and Jerusalem because of the people’s sin. They wouldn’t listen to the true prophets of the Lord (v4-6). So, because they would not return to the Lord, and would not turn away from their idolatry and other evil ways, the Lord would allow them to be destroyed. This included the destruction of all the surrounding idolatrous nations as well (v7-9).

All joy and normal life would come to an end in Judah, and the nation would go into captivity in Babylon for 70 years. *“Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of*

the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (v10-11).

Later that very same year, 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar made his move on Judah and Jerusalem. Daniel and others were taken into captivity in this first attack. It was the beginning of the end for Judah and Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 36 says that the reason for 70 years of captivity was that Israel had failed to keep 70 sabbatical years. The Lord had decreed that every seventh year was to be a “Sabbath year,” in which the people were not to plant or harvest, but were to give the land a “Sabbath rest.” The people had deliberately disobeyed this commandment. The captivity lasted for 70 years, so the land could rest for the 70 Sabbath years that had not been observed. 2 Chronicles 36:20-21: *“And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”* The Jewish captivity in Babylon would last for 70 years.

Practical Application

Your boss is God’s servant.

What? Your boss is God’s servant? At this point you may say, “No way! You don’t know my boss. He’s an atheist. He has a foul mouth and a corrupt mind, and he’s quite unethical in the way he runs his business.”

Well, let me ask you - Is he or she worse than the cruel Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar? I don’t think so. And yet God called Nebuchadnezzar “My servant” in verse 9 of chapter 25. At that point, Nebuchadnezzar was a pagan, and he was quite unaware that God was using him as His servant. Later in his life Nebuchadnezzar may have become a believer (read Daniel 4), but he was a pagan at this time.

In Isaiah 44-45 God called Cyrus, the Persian emperor, “My servant.” So why not your boss? God can use **anyone** and **anything** as His servant. 2 Corinthians 2:15 says that “all things are for your sake.” And Romans 8:28 says that God works for the believer’s good – in **all** things (Romans 8:28)!

So if you’re a believer - remember, your boss is God’s servant!