

The Warnings to Zedekiah and to the People

Jeremiah 34

Jeremiah 34:1-7 – *“The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army, all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion, and all the people, fought against Jerusalem and all its cities, saying,*

²“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. ³ And you shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be taken and delivered into his hand; your eyes shall see the eyes of the king of Babylon, he shall speak with you face to face, and you shall go to Babylon.”’”⁴ Yet hear the word of the Lord, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the Lord concerning you: ‘You shall not die by the sword. ⁵ You shall die in peace; as in the ceremonies of your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so they shall burn incense for you and lament for you, saying, “Alas, lord!” For I have pronounced the word, says the Lord.’”

⁶ Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem, ⁷ when the king of Babylon’s army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.”

Background Notes

Jeremiah 30-33 formed a sub-unit of the book that is called the “Book of Consolation,” because these chapters contained messages of hope. But in chapter 34 Jeremiah returned to the theme of God’s judgment because of Judah’s sins. In fact, the theme of God’s judgment on Judah and Jerusalem continued throughout chapters 34-45.

In verses 1-7 the Lord sent a message to King Zedekiah of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah. This message came to King Zedekiah before Jerusalem completely fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC - but the handwriting was already on the wall. Many of the outlying fortified cities that formed a defensive ring around Jerusalem had already fallen to the Babylonian army (v7). Only Lachish and Azekah remained - but they too were about to fall.

By the way, the detailed conditions described by Jeremiah have been confirmed by archaeology. The “Lachish Letters,” which date to this time, were found in the ruins of the fortified city of Lachish. These letters contained military communications, confirming that Lachish and Azekah were still standing. But the letters went on to say that the bonfire signals from Azekah were seen no more, signifying that it had fallen to the Babylonians.

In this message from the Lord, Zedekiah was told that Jerusalem would fall to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who would “burn it with fire” (v2). 2 Kings 25 and Ezekiel 17 reveal that Zedekiah had rebelled. He broke the covenant he had

made with Nebuchadnezzar by making an alliance with Egypt. This was a serious mistake, and it was also a sin, because Zedekiah had made this covenant with Nebuchadnezzar **before the Lord** (Ezekiel 17).

As a result of Zedekiah's treachery and rebellion against Babylon, Jerusalem would fall to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies. As for Zedekiah himself, he would not die by sword in battle. He would die in peace as a captive in Babylon (v4), but he died as a blind king, because Nebuchadnezzar put out his eyes before taking him into Babylon. The customary funerary incense would be burned for King Zedekiah in Babylon (v5).

Doctrinal Points

1. God's discipline is relaxed when His people repent.

Jeremiah 34:8-10 - *"This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them: ⁹ that every man should set free his male and female slave—a Hebrew man or woman—that no one should keep a Jewish brother in bondage. ¹⁰ Now when all the princes and all the people, who had entered into the covenant, heard that everyone should set free his male and female slaves, that no one should keep them in bondage anymore, they obeyed and let them go."*

Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem made a covenant to release their slaves in accordance with the Law of the Lord, which said that slaves were to be released at the end of every seven years (Exodus 21). Israel had not kept this law, but now during the siege, they released their male and female slaves. But don't get the idea that Zedekiah and all the people had suddenly become godly. No. But it does seem (at this point at least) that they were genuinely repentant, and they hoped that somehow God would show mercy because of their obedience to His Law.

God said that they had done right in making this covenant in the Temple (v15). Furthermore, the covenant was made before the Lord (v18). And in God's sovereign ways, the Babylonian siege was put on hold for a while. In Jeremiah 37 we will learn that Nebuchadnezzar withdrew his forces temporarily, because the Egyptian army had set out from Egypt to intervene. Certainly the measure of repentance exhibited by the people was a factor in the temporary lifting of the siege. The Lord responded favorably to the people's act of self-judgment, and He relaxed His discipline.

This is true today as well. 1 Corinthians 11:31-32 says, *"For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world."* As Christians, do we examine our actions and our motives? Do we judge ourselves, so that God does not have to discipline us? God's discipline is relaxed when His people repent.

2. God's discipline is returned when His people rebel.

Jeremiah 34:11-22 - *"But afterward they changed their minds and made the male and female slaves return, whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection as male and female slaves.*

¹² Therefore the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ¹³ "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying, ¹⁴ "At the end of seven years let every man set free his Hebrew brother, who has been sold to him; and when he has served you six years, you shall let him go free from you." But your fathers did not obey Me nor incline their ear. ¹⁵ Then you recently turned and did what was right in My sight—every man proclaiming liberty to his neighbor; and you made a covenant before Me in the house that is called by My name. ¹⁶ Then you turned around and profaned My name, and every one of you brought back his male and female slaves, whom you had set at liberty, at their pleasure, and brought them back into subjection, to be your male and female slaves.'

¹⁷ "Therefore thus says the Lord: 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and every one to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim liberty to you,' says the Lord — 'to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine! And I will deliver you to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸ And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— ¹⁹ the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf — ²⁰ I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

²¹ And I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his princes into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their life, and into the hand of the king of Babylon's army that has gone back from you. ²² Behold, I will command,' says the Lord, 'and cause them to return to this city. They will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.'"

During the temporary lull of the Babylonian siege, God's people reneged on the covenant they had made before the Lord, and forced their slaves to return to servitude again. God was not pleased with this act of rebellion. In fact, He considered it an act of profaning the Lord's name (v16). Therefore, said the Lord, because the people would not release their slaves, God would "release" the people themselves to the sword and famine when the Babylonians returned to besiege the city again (v17).

The people had broken the covenant that they had solemnly made before the Lord when they "cut the calf in two." In that day, this was the typical way of ratifying a covenant (v18-19). Therefore, because the people had rebelled and broken the covenant, the Babylonians would return and Jerusalem would be burned. The people would be broken. They would be "cut in two." Their bodies would become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth (v20). Even King Zedekiah and his officials would not escape (v21-22). We will see the fulfillment of these prophecies in Jeremiah 39 and 52. God's discipline returns when His people rebel.

The same is true today. The good news is that God's discipline is always intended to correct us, and to direct us in the way of righteousness. Again, 1 Corinthians 11:31-32, *"For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world."*

Hebrews 12:11 says, *"Now no chastening or discipline seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields a peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."* God's discipline is intended to bring good results in our lives. But remember, God's discipline must return when His people rebel.

Practical Application

Don't be a "fox hole Christian"!

You know what a "fox hole Christian" is, right? During a battle, when the bullets are flying overhead, soldiers would sometimes dig "fox holes" in the ground and go down into them for shelter. And sometimes in the stress and fear of battle, the soldier will make a promise to the Lord: "Lord, if you save my life, I'll follow You." But when the battle is over, the "fox hole Christian" forgets his promise to the Lord and reverts to his old way of life. That is often called a "fox hole" conversion.

In Jeremiah 34, the people in Jerusalem were like "fox hole Christians." Under the stress of the Babylonian siege, they released their slaves as the Lord had commanded. But as soon as the pressure of the siege was lifted, they disobeyed God and His Word and took back their slaves.

What about us? Do we only pray or read Scripture when we're under pressure from difficult situations, or when we're in danger? Do we only go to the church when we're hurting, or when we want God to heal us from sickness? And then when the pressure is off, do we revert to our old careless ways?

Don't be a fox hole Christian!