

The Imprisonment of Jeremiah

Jeremiah 37

Jeremiah 37:1-10 - *“Now King Zedekiah the son of Josiah reigned instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah. ² But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land gave heed to the words of the Lord, which He spoke by the prophet Jeremiah. ³ And Zedekiah the king sent Jehucal the son of Shelemiah, and Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah, the priest, to the prophet Jeremiah, saying, “Pray now to the Lord our God for us.” ⁴ Now Jeremiah was coming and going among the people, for they had not yet put him in prison. ⁵ Then Pharaoh’s army came up from Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news of them, they departed from Jerusalem. ⁶ Then the word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah, saying, ⁷ “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Thus you shall say to the king of Judah, who sent you to Me to inquire of Me: “Behold, Pharaoh’s army which has come up to help you will return to Egypt, to their own land. ⁸ And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city, and take it and burn it with fire.”’ ⁹ Thus says the Lord: ‘Do not deceive yourselves, saying, “The Chaldeans will surely depart from us,” for they will not depart. ¹⁰ For though you had defeated the whole army of the Chaldeans who fight against you, and there remained only wounded men among them, they would rise up, every man in his tent, and burn the city with fire.”’*

Background Notes

The events of this chapter occurred during the reign of King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (v1). Chapters 35-36 went back a few years to the time of King Jehoiachin, but in chapters 37-38 Jeremiah returned once again to the reign of King Zedekiah, during the final siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army. The date was sometime between 588 BC and 586 BC. In 586 BC, the wall of Jerusalem was breached, the city and the Temple were burned, and the people were carried away as captives to Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem will be covered in Jeremiah 39.

Why did verse 1 essentially skip over the three-month reign of Jehoiakim (or Coniah), the son of Jehoiachin? The reason is that his reign was so short that his throne was never really established before Nebuchadnezzar took him away into captivity in Babylon. Thus the prophecy of Jeremiah 36:30 was fulfilled - no descendant of Jehoiakim would ever sit on the throne of David.

Doctrinal Points

1. Unbelievers will ask for prayer - but refuse to repent.

King Zedekiah sent a couple of officials to Jeremiah requesting prayer (v3). That's interesting, especially in view of verse 2: *"But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land gave heed to the words of the Lord, which He spoke by the prophet Jeremiah."*

So did this request for prayer mean that Zedekiah had suddenly decided to repent and "get right with God"? No, I don't think so. But - he asked for *prayer!* Well, so what? A lot of people ask for prayer, who have no idea whatsoever of what repenting from their sins means. True repentance involves more than asking for prayer. In fact, true repentance is *more than being sorry for your sins*. ***True repentance means that you are willing to confess your sins, and turn away from your sins, and change your ways.*** King Zedekiah was unwilling to repent, even though he wanted Jeremiah to pray for him.

Meanwhile, the army of the Pharaoh came up from Egypt. When the Babylonians (Chaldeans) who were besieging Jerusalem heard that news, they departed from Jerusalem to fight the Egyptians (v5). The pressure was off when the Babylonian siege was lifted. During this temporary lull, King Zedekiah and the people of Judah reneged on their covenant to release their slaves (Jeremiah 34). Maybe Zedekiah thought that the Lord had answered Jeremiah's prayer, and so there was no need for him to repent since the immediate threat from Babylon was removed.

But Jeremiah assured King Zedekiah that the Babylonian army would return. The Babylonians would not only besiege Jerusalem once again, but they would capture and burn the city. *"And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city, and take it and burn it with fire"* (v8). In fact, through Jeremiah the Lord said that even if Judah were to defeat the entire Babylonian army, the wounded Babylonian soldiers would be able to conquer Jerusalem. *"For though you had defeated the whole army of the Chaldeans who fight against you, and there remained only wounded men among them, they would rise up, every man in his tent, and burn the city with fire"* (v10).

Of course God was able to see through King Zedekiah's "pious request" for prayer. And He still sees through any request for prayer today when people are unwilling to truly repent and turn from their sinful ways. Has an unbeliever ever piously asked you to pray for them? Many times unbelievers have asked me to pray for them, but they have absolutely no intention of confessing and repenting of their sins, and getting their hearts and lives "right with God." They don't want to change their selfish and sinful ways. Unbelievers will ask for prayer - even when they refuse to repent.

2. Unbelievers will hate the messenger as well as the message.

Jeremiah 37:11-16 - *“And it happened, when the army of the Chaldeans left the siege of Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh’s army, ¹² that Jeremiah went out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin to claim his property there among the people.¹³ And when he was in the Gate of Benjamin, a captain of the guard was there whose name was Irijah the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah; and he seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “You are defecting to the Chaldeans!”¹⁴ Then Jeremiah said, “False! I am not defecting to the Chaldeans.” But he did not listen to him. So Irijah seized Jeremiah and brought him to the princes. ¹⁵ Therefore the princes were angry with Jeremiah, and they struck him and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe. For they had made that the prison. ¹⁶ When Jeremiah entered the dungeon and the cells, and Jeremiah had remained there many days...”*

When the Babylonian army temporarily lifted the siege, Jeremiah went out of Jerusalem to inspect and take possession of some property in the land of Benjamin. It was probably the field that he bought from his cousin in his hometown, Anathoth, north of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32). *“So I bought the field from Hanamel, the son of my uncle who was in Anathoth, and weighed out to him the money — seventeen shekels of silver. And I signed the deed and sealed it, took witnesses, and weighed the money on the scales” (Jeremiah 32:9-10).* So Jeremiah was probably going to Anathoth to see the land he had purchased.

When Jeremiah passed out of Jerusalem through the Benjamin Gate, he was arrested, falsely accused, beaten, and thrown in to prison. Why? The only reason was that Jeremiah had told the king and the nation the Word of the Lord - that they should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. So the captain of the guard logically assumed that Jeremiah was going out of Jerusalem to surrender to the Babylonians.

Jeremiah told the captain of the guard that this was not true, but he wouldn’t listen. So Jeremiah was beaten and thrown into a dungeon. *“Therefore the princes were angry with Jeremiah, and they struck him and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe, for they had made that the prison. Jeremiah entered the dungeon and the cells, and Jeremiah had remained there many days” (v15-16).*

The real reason for their anger and their actions was that they didn’t like Jeremiah’s message – the message that Jerusalem would be conquered and burned, that thousands of people would be killed or taken as captives, and the nation of Judah would come to an end. They did *not* like that message! But notice - Jeremiah didn’t water down his message, even when King Zedekiah gave him the opportunity. The king and his officials hated that message of judgment - and they hated the messenger as well.

And that's still true today. People don't mind hearing that God is a God of love - but when you start talking about the holiness of God, and that people are under God's judgment because of their sin, and that trusting in Jesus Christ is the only way of escape from hell - unbelievers hate that message. And they will **hate you** as well! In John 15:18 the Lord Jesus said, *"The world hated Me; it will hate you."* And 1 John 3:13 says, *"Don't be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you."* It doesn't matter that you are just the messenger. They won't hate you if you believe in Santa Claus - but if you believe what the Bible teaches? Well, that's different.

Unbelievers will hate the messenger as well as the message. So if we're not experiencing some hatred from this world, maybe we should be a little concerned. Are we really preaching the message?

Practical Application

Try to separate the message from the messenger.

Jeremiah 37:17-21 - *"...then Zedekiah the king sent and took him out. The king asked him secretly in his house, and said, "Is there any word from the Lord?"*

And Jeremiah said, "There is." Then he said, "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon!" ¹⁸ *Moreover Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What offense have I committed against you, against your servants, or against this people, that you have put me in prison? ¹⁹ Where now are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, 'The king of Babylon will not come against you or against this land'? ²⁰ Therefore please hear now, O my lord the king. Please, let my petition be accepted before you, and do not make me return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there."*

²¹ *Then Zedekiah the king commanded that they should commit Jeremiah to the court of the prison, and that they should give him daily a piece of bread from the bakers' street, until all the bread in the city was gone. Thus Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison."*

Jeremiah tried to show King Zedekiah that he had no personal animosity toward the king. He was only the message-bearer. And King Zedekiah had to admit that everything Jeremiah predicted had come true - unlike the smooth-talking false prophets who had falsely prophesied that Babylon would *not* invade the kingdom of Judah or besiege Jerusalem. King Zedekiah saw the point, and at least he took Jeremiah out of the dungeon and provided him with a daily ration of bread.

We, too, should try to separate the message from the messenger. We should try to help people see that we have nothing against them personally, but it's so important that we share the truth of God's Word with them. They need to know that they're under the judgment of God, and that they are destined for hell if they don't receive God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

It won't be easy, but at least try to separate between the message and the messenger.