

Jeremiah 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 21. This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord when King Zedekiah sent to him Pasha, the son of Malkiah, and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseah, saying, Inquire of the Lord for us, for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is making war against us.

Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all his wonderful deeds and will make him withdraw from us. Then Jeremiah said to them, Thus you shall say to Zedekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls, and I will bring them together into the midst of this city. I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath, and I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence. Afterward, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his servants, and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword and famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion. And to this people you shall say, Thus says the Lord,

Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. But he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live, and shall have his life as a prize of war. For I have set my face against this city, for harm and not for good, declares the Lord. It shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. And to the house of the king of Judah say, Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David. Thus says the Lord, Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds. Behold, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, declares the Lord. You who say, Who shall come down against us? Or who shall enter our habitations? I will punish you according to the fruit of your deeds, declares the Lord. I will kindle a fire in her forest, and it shall devour all that is around her. In chapters 21 to 23, we find a collection of material that is particularly condemning the kings of Judah, concluding in chapter 23 verse 8, and followed by material addressed to its prophets, which takes up the remainder of chapter 23.

King Zedekiah sends a delegation to Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord. This might be compared to King Josiah's delegation to the prophetess Huldah in 2 Kings chapter 22. The delegation here contains Pasha, the son of Malkiah. Not the same man has put Jeremiah in the stocks in chapter 20, but a different figure. He is also mentioned in chapter 38. He was accompanied by Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseah, who might have been Pasha, the son of Imah's successor, as the man responsible for temple order. In chapter 29, Zephaniah is presented as a more sympathetic figure to Jeremiah. We see a further instance of the king consulting Jeremiah in a similar situation in chapter 37. While occurring around the same time, however, these address different situations. Jack Lumbum notes Cornel's observation that the question in this chapter is, will the Chaldeans withdraw, while the question in chapter 37 is, will the Chaldeans, who have withdrawn, come back again? The first deportation from Jerusalem has already happened here. Nebuchadnezzar has exiled Jehoiakim and the queen mother, set up Mataniah as king in his place, and named him Zedekiah, while Jehoiakim is in Babylon. At this point, the year is probably 588 or maybe early 587 BC, and the final end of Jerusalem and Judah is about to fall. Zedekiah, however, tentatively hopes for an encouraging word from the Lord. Perhaps he expects Egyptian help. He might be hoping for something similar to the response that Hezekiah received from Isaiah when threatened by

Sennacherib in Isaiah chapter 37. Walter Brueggemann argues that the question of verses 1 to 2 is given four answers in the chapter. The first is in verses 3 to 7, the second in verses 8 to 10, the third in verses 11 to 12, and the final one in verses 13 to 14. Lumbum divides things differently, seeing four oracles with key word repetitions in verses 4 to 6, verse 7, verses 8 to 9, and then in verse 10. The message is driven home as we work through. Does the Lord still have it in him to save Judah? Zedekiah wonders. Jeremiah's response is not encouraging. The Lord is still living and active. He's still the master of human affairs. He's still the Lord of history. But now he is fighting against Judah. The vocabulary of divine action is all present here. God acts with an outstretched hand and a strong arm. He will turn back. He will strike down. But now, however, this vocabulary is aimed against Judah. This is the language of the Exodus, for instance. But now the God of the Exodus is Judah's adversary. Yes, the Lord will show his wonderful deeds to Zedekiah, but they will be his wonderful deeds against Judah. Verse 7 makes clear that there is no avenue of escape. In verses 8 to 10, Jeremiah turns to address the people.

[5 : 41] There remains a chance for life for them. The language here echoes the covenant language of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 15 to 20. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For he is your life, and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. The choice that Jeremiah presents here, however, is between resistance and surrender. Resisting the Babylonians will lead to death. Surrendering to them will allow people to escape with their lives. The city is doomed, but those who abandon the sinking ship need not be.

Brueggemann points out the use of the typical verb that is used in connection with the Exodus here, the verb of going out. By itself, this might not mean very much, but in the context of the other allusions to Exodus language in the wider context, there may be an ironic reversal here.

Deliverance comes, of an Exodus type, in leaving Jerusalem like Egypt and turning oneself over to the exile in Babylon.

[7 : 31] One can also imagine how well such a message would go down. Jeremiah might seem to be a traitor, undermining morale and the willingness of the men to stand and fight. Verses 11 to 14 address the king more generically, not necessarily Zedekiah, and likely not in the immediate historical context of the preceding section. This is probably 15 to 20 years earlier.

The Lord presents the king with an ultimatum. Unless he executes justice in the morning, delivering equitable and righteous judgment, delivering the weak from the hand of their oppressors in the manner that he is supposed to do, the Lord's wrath will come upon him.

The king is supposed to be the Lord's covenant son, representing and affecting the Lord's justice in the land. The Lord is the God who cares for and redeems the oppressed, and the king must do the same.

As an agent of justice, the king is primarily to act as a deliverer. Jerusalem and those within it may feel secure. They are situated on the table land. They look out from their height over the surrounding valleys, enjoying a commanding position. Yet the Lord is against them on account of their unrighteousness, and the punishment for their deeds will surely come upon them. Their forest, the royal buildings of the city, would be kindled by the Lord, and the entire world of Jerusalem would be consumed in the resulting conflagration.

A question to consider. The concluding oracles of this chapter likely date from 15 to 20 years prior to the earlier oracles of the chapter. What effect does it have to place them alongside each other like this?