

Jeremiah 37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 37. Zedekiah the son of Jeziel, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Jehoiakim. But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet. King Zedekiah sent Jehuciel the son of Shalamiah and Zephaniah the priest the son of Maaseah to Jeremiah the prophet saying, Please pray for us to the Lord our God. Now Jeremiah was still going in and out among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison. The army of Pharaoh had come out of Egypt, and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news about them, they withdrew from Jerusalem. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Thus shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to me to inquire of me, Behold Pharaoh's army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land, and the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city. They shall capture it and burn it with fire.

Thus says the Lord, Do not deceive yourselves, saying, The Chaldeans will surely go away from us, for they will not go away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and they remained of them only wounded men, every man in his tent they would rise up and burn this city with fire. Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people. When he was at the Benjamin gate, a sentry there named Arija, the son of Shalamiah, son of Hananiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, You are deserting to the Chaldeans.

And Jeremiah said, It is a lie, I am not deserting to the Chaldeans. But Arija would not listen to him, and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. And the officials were enraged at Jeremiah, and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, for it had been made a prison. When Jeremiah had come to the dungeon cells and remained there many days, King Zedekiah sent for him and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house and said, Is there any word from the Lord? Jeremiah said, There is. Then he said, You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon. Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people that you have put me in prison? Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land? Now hear, please, O my lord the king. Let my humble plea come before you, and do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary, lest I die there. So King Zedekiah gave orders, and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard, and a loaf of bread was given him daily from the baker's street, until all the bread of the city was gone. So Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. Jeremiah chapters 37 to 44, especially chapters 37 to 38, have been referred to as Jeremiah's passion narrative, the prophet suffers in the final days of Jerusalem and in the time that follows. The narrative of these chapters is a largely sequential account of the siege and fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent events. These events occur towards the end of the reign of Zedekiah. Jehoiakim had been taken into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC.

Jehoiakim, otherwise known as Jeconiah or Kaniah, was replaced on the throne by his uncle, a puppet king set up by Babylon. In 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 17, and the king of Babylon made Mataniah, Jehoiakim's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah. However, Zedekiah, his officials, and the people of the land still failed to listen to the words of the Lord through Jeremiah.

However, despite the rejection of his words, Zedekiah sends men to Jeremiah to ask him to pray for the nation. At this point, Jeremiah is still active in public life. He's not yet been imprisoned, which he will be by the end of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar and his army had been besieging Jerusalem. Judah, it seems, had sought help from Egypt. After the pharaoh came up out of Egypt, the Chaldeans withdrew from Jerusalem and prepared to face them. Hothra was the king of Egypt at this point, from 589 BC. Compared to the great powers in the north, first Assyria and now Babylon, and the great power in the south of Egypt, Judah was the smallest minnow. The little power it once possessed had largely been stripped in 597 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar had first defeated the city.

[4 : 33] Now it depends upon appealing to aid from elsewhere. It has been caught in the tempest of these unsettled relations between the northern and the southern powers for quite some time. Josiah had been killed by Pharaoh Necho, Jehoiachin had been deported to Babylon, and now Zedekiah was facing a renewed assault from this northern power. To face the threat of Babylon, Judah had appealed to help for Egypt.

Ezekiel also talks about this appeal for help and warns against it in chapter 17 verses 15 to 17. But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape? As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells, who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die.

Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. In the covenant, Israel had been explicitly told not to go back to Egypt for horses and chariots. Zedekiah was also subject to the king of Babylon, so at this point he was rebelling against his master. Jeremiah tells Zedekiah that though he might put faith in the Egyptians, whatever hope they offer is short-lived, there will be no real reprieve. The Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar will return, and they will take the city and burn it with fire. Although it may appear that they have gone, they will be back shortly. Indeed, even if Judah were to win the most remarkable victory over them, they would still ultimately fall to their might. In a hyperbolic statement, the Lord says that even if only wounded men were left, and only one man per tent, they would still rise up and defeat the city. There is no way for it to escape. Back in chapter 32, Jeremiah had bought a field from Hanamel, the son of Shalom, his uncle. Now as the siege is lifted, Jeremiah intends to go up to

Anathoth to take possession of the land that he has bought. However, as he's leaving the city, he's stopped there by a sentry, Irizia. He is accused of deserting to the Chaldeans. Even had Jeremiah explained his real errand, it might not have actually helped. One doesn't usually worry that much about taking possession of land when the land is being overrun by a hostile enemy force. Unless, perhaps, you are in league with that hostile enemy force, and assured that you will be allowed to keep possession of it. Of course, the reader of Jeremiah knows that the Lord has revealed to him that fields will be bought and sold in the land once more. However, Irizia seizes Jeremiah and brings him to the officials. The officials are angry at Jeremiah, beat him and imprison him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, a private residence that had been made into a prison. Though a grim place, the prison was most likely primarily used for detention rather than punishment. After being in the prison for some time, King Zedekiah sent to Jeremiah and wanted to have a private audience with him. Reading between the lines here, it shouldn't be hard to see some tensions between King Zedekiah and his officials.

Earlier, in the reading of Baruch's scroll back in chapter 36, we saw tensions between King Jehoiakim and his officials. In that case, the officials seemed to be far more favourable to Jeremiah, and the king seemed to be quite hostile. Here, the officials are probably different people.

[7 : 48] The officials during the reign of Jehoiakim had presumably largely been deported with Jehoiakim to Babylon. Now, there's a new bunch of officials, the bad figs that are described in the vision of chapter 24. Zedekiah asks for a word from the Lord, and Jeremiah says there is a word, the same word that he has received earlier, that he will be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.

Back in chapter 21, verse 7, Despite this harsh word, Zedekiah still seems receptive enough to Jeremiah, for Jeremiah to petition him for release from the house of Jonathan the secretary. Should he remain there longer, it would seem likely that he would die in its conditions. Jeremiah points out that he's done no wrong to the king. He's merely told the truth. He has never told anything but the truth, delivering the word of the Lord faithfully, and yet he's been rewarded with the cruelest treatment.

Where are all the flattering false prophets now, the ones who said that the king of Babylon would not come up against them? They were loved for their flattering words, but when those words proved hollow, they're nowhere to be found. They seem to have fled the scene. Meanwhile, the faithful and courageous prophet who delivered the word of the Lord and warned of the disaster that has befallen them, is wasting away in a dank prison. King Zedekiah is receptive to Jeremiah's plea, and he removes Jeremiah from the house of Jonathan the secretary, and delivers him to the court of the guard, where he will still be in detention, but in much safer and better conditions. He is also given a flatbread daily to sustain him from the bakers. As long as there is bread in the city, he will be fed.

A question to consider. Contrasting the behaviour of true and false prophets, and the way that they are treated by others, what are some of the lessons that we can learn that apply to our own situations?