

Jeremiah 42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 42 Then all the commanders of the forces, and Johanan the son of Chorea, and Jezaniah the son of Hoshiah, and all the people from the least to the greatest, came near and said to Jeremiah the prophet, Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the Lord your God for us, for all this remnant, because we are left with but a few, as your eyes see us, that the Lord your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do.

Jeremiah the prophet said to them, I have heard you. Behold, I will pray to the Lord your God according to your request, and whatever the Lord answers you, I will tell you. I will keep nothing back from you.

Then they said to Jeremiah, May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us, if we do not act according to all the word with which the Lord your God sends you to us. Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the Lord our God.

At the end of ten days the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Then he summoned Johanan the son of Korea, and all the commanders of the forces who were with him, and all the people from the least to the greatest, and said to them, Thus says the Lord the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him.

If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down. I will plant you and not pluck you up, for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid.

[1 : 2 9] Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land.

But if you say, We will not remain in this land, disobeying the voice of the Lord your God, and saying, No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war, or hear the sound of the trumpet, or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there, then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die.

All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, As my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt.

[2 : 3 5] You shall become an execration, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. You shall see this place no more. The Lord has said to you, O remnant of Judah, Do not go to Egypt.

Know for a certainty that I have warned you this day that you have gone astray at the cost of your lives. For you sent me to the Lord your God, saying, Pray for us to the Lord our God, and whatever the Lord our God says, declare to us, and we will do it.

And I have this day declared it to you, but you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that he sent me to tell you. Now therefore, know for a certainty that you shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence in the place where you desire to go to live.

After the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of the captives to Babylon, the Babylonians established a new government in Judah, with Gedaliah as the governor.

However, after he failed to take action after he was warned by Johanan, back in chapter 40, in chapter 41, working with the support of Baalus, the king of the Ammonites, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, killed Gedaliah.

[3 : 40] While Johanan and the other leaders managed to recover the captives that he had taken, the damage seemed to be done. Ruled by a Judahite governor has failed. A number of Chaldeans who had been with him were killed, and now the remaining leaders of the Judahites expect the Babylonians to come with reprisals.

They do not intend to wait until this happens, and so their plan is to go down to Egypt, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 41 verse 17, and they went and stayed at Giruth-Kimham, near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt.

It is quite possible that many of the Judahite refugees to Egypt would have understood the move as being akin to the patriarchs going down to Egypt to take refuge after the famine.

They had remained there for many years in the land of Goshen, and had prospered and expanded as a people, until they were delivered from the oppression of Pharaoh in the Exodus, and brought back to the land of Canaan. However, the Lord had subsequently warned the people not to return to Egypt.

In Deuteronomy chapter 17 verse 16, Only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, You shall never return that way again.

[4 : 49] And then in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 68, the return to Egypt is seen as an act of judgment. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again.

And there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer. Johanan seems to be the leader of the remnant company in the absence of Gedaliah.

Jezeniah, who here accompanies him, is probably a different Jezeniah from Jezeniah the Maacathite mentioned previously. They and the people with them approach Jeremiah, asking for word from the Lord.

Acknowledging their vulnerability, they are asking the Lord for direction. It is interesting to pay attention to the pronouns of their appeal to Jeremiah. Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the Lord your guard for us.

In 1 Samuel chapter 12 verse 19, there is a similar expression used as the people asked Samuel to pray for them. And all the people said to Samuel, Pray for your servants to the Lord your guard, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.

[5 : 53] Perhaps the fact that they speak of the Lord as Jeremiah's guard, rather than as their own guard, reveals something about the way that they are distanced from him. Jeremiah's response speaks of the Lord as their guard.

I will pray to the Lord your guard, according to your request. He promises to reveal the full word of the Lord to them, to hold nothing back from them. Jeremiah's faithful reporting of the word of the Lord to the rulers of Judah had been a consistent characteristic of his ministry, and one that had provoked considerable opposition and persecution.

The people follow up their request with a declaration of their commitment to follow the word of the Lord that Jeremiah delivers to them. They bind themselves with an oath in the name of the Lord that they will follow through with the instruction that he gives them.

Whatever he says, they will obey. This all sounds very promising, but we should consider the fact that they had already expressed their desire to go towards Egypt. The answer to their query does not come immediately.

Jeremiah waits for ten days before he hears word from the Lord. When it comes, it is a good word, a promise to build them up and to prosper them, but it is not what they had originally planned.

[6 : 59] They should not go to Egypt. Jeremiah summons the whole company of the people to deliver the word of the Lord to them. If they remain in the land, they will be built up. We already saw an indication of what this might have looked like under the governorship of Gedaliah.

Former refugees were returning to the land. Pilgrims were coming down from the north to worship in Jerusalem. The people were gathering abundantly in the harvests. Just as the Lord has brought disaster upon them, so he can relent of that disaster and give them protection.

The king of Babylon that he brought against them now no longer needs to be feared. The Lord will deliver them from any threat that he poses. The language used here, the four key verbs, are once again the typical ones that we find throughout the book of Jeremiah.

They come from the programmatic statement of the Lord to Jeremiah at his installation as a prophet in chapter 1 verse 10. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

However, remaining in the land would take considerable courage. The Babylonians will surely come down upon them, and they fear what will happen when they do. Surely it is far better for them to take refuge in Egypt.

[8 : 10] It seems to be the most sensible course of action. The Lord presents the choice that they face. If they go back to Egypt, they will face destruction there. The very judgment they seek to escape will come upon them.

It will pursue them to the land that they are taking refuge in. The very same sword, famine and pestilence will afflict them there, as would have afflicted them in Judah. And no remnant or survivor will be left to them.

In the Lord's warning, we might hear something of the words of the wilderness generation again. Like the wilderness generation that sought safety and wanted to return to Egypt, rather than courageously following the word of the Lord and entering into possession of the promised land, so in their human wisdom, against the instruction of the Lord, they would be tempted to return to a position of perceived safety.

In Exodus chapter 16, verses 2 to 3, for instance, And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full.

For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. The people had bound themselves with an oath to obey the word of the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah was not just delivering this word unbidden.

[9 : 25] He was responding, giving a word that had been requested by them, and indeed a word of blessing if they would only receive it as such. The grace and mercy of the Lord shown in protecting them from the destruction of the king of Babylon is something that will only be received through obedience.

If they reject it, it will be at the cost of their lives. In running from the Lord's wrath in the ways of disobedience, they will merely find themselves facing a more devastating and final wrath.

If they take that route, and it seems at this point that they have reneged upon their oath and are determined to go to Egypt despite the words of the prophet, hope will be cut off from them.

In deciding upon this course, they are following in the ways of their fathers and in the ways that they have practiced to this point. They have not obeyed the voice of the Lord in the past, and they are not obeying his voice now.

Back in chapter 29, verses 17 to 19, the Lord had declared concerning the bad figs, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten.

[10 : 27] I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them.

Because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the Lord, that I persistently sent to you by my servants, the prophets, but you would not listen, declares the Lord. Even when offered mercy, even when offered a chance to re-establish life within the land, even when experiencing initial signs of the Lord's goodness, and his holding out the possibility of the forming of new life under his blessing and protection, they reject it, and continue in the way of disobedience.

For such an ungrateful and unheeding people, only death remains. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which we, in presenting our petitions to the Lord, can, like the Judahites in this chapter, close ourselves off to unwelcome responses of the Lord to our requests in disobedience?