

Jeremiah and the Siege of Jerusalem

May 16, 2021

Jeremiah 38: 14-23

This lesson finds us back in the final years of the Kingdom of Judah. This is about 100 years after the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, whom we studied last week. The Assyrian besiegers of Isaiah's day are gone. The capitol of Assyria, Nineveh, fell to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 B.C. Three years later, in 609, the righteous King Josiah died in battle at Megiddo. He was acting as an ally of Babylon, opposing the Egyptians on their way to help the remnants of Assyria. The Egyptians installed a client king, king Jehoiakim. Several years after that disaster, his son, the young King Jehoiachin, surrendered to the Babylonians. The Babylonians carried off to Babylon treasure and valuable people, about 8000 in all. These were the soldiers, priests, craftsmen and officials. The Babylonians then installed their client king, Zedekiah, another son of Josiah. Later he, too, revolted. Our current lesson takes place as the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem. (In II Kings, we are at the beginning of Chapter 25.)

Jeremiah began to prophesy during the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah. (See Chapter 1.) That was after the death of King Josiah, but before the first siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. The contents of the book of *Jeremiah* skip back and forth in time between events in the time of Jehoiakim or Jehoiachin (also called Coniah, a shortened name) during that first siege, and the time of King Zedekiah later. Chapters 35 and 36 deal with that earlier siege, while 34 and then 37 and following pertain to the later siege and the fall of Jerusalem in 597-596 B.C.

The sequence of events during that second invasion by the Babylonians is interesting. In Chapter 34 the Babylonians have invaded the kingdom and are successively capturing all of the other fortified towns and cities before bringing all their might against Jerusalem. As the prophet Jeremiah is speaking, only two cities, Lachish and Azekah, remained. So, the threat of the Babylonians was very evident, but the worst had not yet come to pass. Jeremiah prophesies that Jerusalem will be given over to Babylon. King Zedekiah then made a proclamation of liberty that the Hebrew slaves in Jerusalem should be freed, and they were indeed set free. This release may not have been entirely altruistic. During a siege a slave was a liability that had to be fed. Releasing them may have meant starvation. But afterward, they were again enslaved. This was a violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 15:1, 12; also Exodus 21:2). Jews were not to hold one another as a slave more than six years. Jeremiah had a prophesy concerning this, and it was not a favorable one.

As it happened, the threat of the Babylonian invasion and siege was only just temporarily lifted. The Egyptians sallied out of Egypt with an army. (See Jeremiah 37:4-5.) The Babylonians turned to confront them, leaving Jerusalem alone temporarily. This reprieve may have been the occasion for the re-imposition of slavery of Chapter 34:11. It would seem that the tame prophets of the court took this as God acting to end the threat to Jerusalem. Jeremiah received a different message. **“Behold, Pharaoh’s army which came to help you is about to return to its own land. And the Chaldeans [Babylonians] shall come back and fight against this city; they shall take it and burn it with fire...”** (Jeremiah 37: 7-8).

During this interlude when the Babylonians had lifted the siege, Jeremiah sought to take care of business in his home town in the land of Benjamin. He was seized at the gate as a deserter, and then beaten and imprisoned. It is interesting that even while Jeremiah was being publicly condemned as a traitor, King Zedekiah secretly met with him to ask the word of the LORD. Jeremiah was subsequently released to the Court of the Guard (37: 16-21). But then, in Chapter 38, the princes again insisted that Jeremiah should be killed. This time he was cast into an empty cistern. Actually, lowered with ropes into the mire at the bottom (v. 6). Yet, Jeremiah was rescued once more, this time by Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch. Then, yet again, King Zedekiah asked to speak to Jeremiah, bringing us to the words of today’s scripture.

Jeremiah’s message is consistent with what he and other true prophets of the LORD have been saying all along. God’s judgment is against Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians will capture and destroy the city. But if Zedekiah will surrender, lives will be spared, even his own. If Zedekiah persists, it will be the doom of him and all of his family.

I find it interesting that King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah not to tell anyone else about what they had said. Zedekiah seems to have been more afraid of “the princes,” which I take to mean his nephews and cousins, than the Babylonians. He was, after all, the third son of Josiah to take a turn on the throne. Likely, there were among the “princes,” others who felt they would make a better king. Zedekiah publicly told the princes and other important people what they want to hear. But then he privately spoke with Jeremiah, and seemed to understand Jeremiah truly was a prophet of the LORD. If he believed Jeremiah, perhaps he did, he didn’t seem to think there was any way out for himself, despite Jeremiah’s words. He was very much afraid of “the princes.” He could not bring himself to trust the words of the

LORD spoken by Jeremiah, not enough to act on them. He did not have the needed courage. He did at least preserve Jeremiah from those who sought to kill him.

The fall of Jerusalem was the end of the idea that kings could substitute for God. Yes, the Pharaohs and later the Roman emperors insisted on being worshiped as gods. It never worked. Even later, kings would reign “by divine right,” and that did not work but so well either. When Jesus refused the temptation of earthly power at the beginning of His ministry, his path ultimately led to the cross, destruction, as humans would normally see it. Just as the fall of Jerusalem seemed to be the end of God’s chosen people, the Israelites. But, in God, miracles happen. The Jews would return from Babylon, the temple would be rebuilt, and Israel would even become an independent nation again in the second century B.C. But, they never again had a king. Yes, King Herod the Great styled himself a King, but he was Nabatean, and received that honorific from the Romans, not the Jews. Even after the next destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Jews would continue, but now as a people of God more than as a nation.

In like manner, the death of Jesus on the cross was not the end of God’s work through Him, either. We live in the light of the Resurrection. We as Christians in the United States do not see a king or any other ruler as an intermediary between ourselves and God. We seek God not through the edicts of king or government, but in scripture, in the words and deeds of fellow Christians, and in the light of the Holy Spirit, from God.

The lesson writer mentions the case of Perpetua of Carthage, who was martyred along with others for being Christian, and thus unwilling to make sacrifices to the Emperor Septimius Severus as a god. I had not known of her before. There were many such martyrs for our faith in the days of persecution, both then and now. This is from: <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/perpetua.html>>

Perpetua was a Christian noblewoman who, at the turn of the third century, lived with her husband, her son, and her slave, Felicitas, in Carthage (in modern Tunis). At this time, North Africa was the center of a vibrant Christian community. It is no surprise, then, that when Emperor Septimius Severus determined to cripple Christianity (he believed it undermined Roman patriotism), he focused his attention on North Africa. Among the first to be arrested were five new Christians taking classes to prepare for baptism, one of whom was Perpetua. ...

The day of the hearing arrived, Perpetua and her friends were marched before the governor, Hilarianus. Perpetua's friends were questioned first, and each

in turn admitted to being a Christian, and each in turn refused to make a sacrifice (an act of emperor worship). Then the governor turned to question Perpetua.

At that moment, her father, carrying Perpetua's son in his arms, burst into the room. He grabbed Perpetua and pleaded, "Perform the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby!"

Hilarius, probably wishing to avoid the unpleasantness of executing a mother who still suckled a child, added, "Have pity on your father's gray head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor."

Perpetua replied simply: "I will not."

"Are you a Christian then?" asked the governor.

"Yes I am," Perpetua replied.

Her father interrupted again, begging her to sacrifice, but Hilarius had heard enough: he ordered soldiers to beat him into silence. He then condemned Perpetua and her friends to die in the arena. ...

The other person mentioned, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is closer to our own time, and much better known. Bonhoeffer was implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, though his imprisonment predated the unsuccessful assassination of July 20, 1944. Many others were also caught up in the assassination and Hitler's retaliation for it, including General Rommel, who had so bedeviled the Allies in Africa and later at D-Day in Normandy. A total of 4980 were executed. Bonhoeffer's articulation of the duty of Christians to stand against oppressors, despite the costs, is what will stand out in his life. Does that mean he should have conspired against Hitler? That's not ours to answer. His writings have been inspirational since, There are some controversies that I can't comment on; I have not studied the issues.

We do need to remain aware that living as Christians, as God would have us do, may have costs. In days of persecution, that may require cost of life. Early Christian martyrs understood that. They were faithful to death. Those deaths were not futile. Nor were they final; their trust in God was not misplaced. There have been martyrs ever since, including the present. We pray that we will not be brought to such a time of "hard testing," and give thanks that the United States remains a free country.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may Jeremiah shine light on your ways, and may we continue to learn from his faith. Amen.