

Jeremiah Chapter 42

The final events now move swiftly. Nebuchadnezzar's army comes and besieges Jerusalem; the king of Egypt sets out to relieve them; the Babylonians go to meet him, leaving the city free.

At this point Zedekiah sends to Jeremiah to seek counsel from the Lord. It is strange, but perhaps very human, that all the way through this people seem to recognize that Jeremiah is a true prophet of the Lord, but still they hate him for his prophecies, as if they were his own personal opinions.

The answer of God was devoid of any comfort—

"Deceive not yourself: the Babylonians shall take this city and burn it with fire."

While the Babylonian army was gone to meet the Egyptians, Jeremiah tried to leave Jerusalem and go to the land of Benjamin but was halted at the gate and charged with deserting to the enemy.

Why he decided to go we cannot tell. Apparently, God's will was that he should remain with the city to the end, and this would seem more fitting in view of his appointed position, though it was very hard on him, and his desire to leave this hopeless, condemned place was very natural and understandable.

His greatest trials and dangers now begin. It seems that in his own body he must suffer to the full the increasing calamities that are befalling the city. He is beaten and then cast into a miry dungeon as a traitor and, we read, he remained there "many days." *Many days* in the dismal filth of this dungeon, not knowing what the next day would bring, nor if he would ever again see light.

When we compare our prosperous, easy, comfortable lives, and the many luxuries we so take for granted, with the faithful, suffering pilgrimage of the holy men of old, we are overwhelmed with shame and unworthiness. We have largely degenerated to the conception that life is a self-pleasing matter of fine homes, fine cars, light social intercourse, picnics and games. What can arouse us to the terrible realities before it is too late?

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We are now in the ninth year of Zedekiah. The city has 1½ years left—the final siege has begun which is to end, after terrible hardships, in complete destruction.

Finally, Zedekiah again sent for Jeremiah from the dungeon and asked him secretly, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah said. "*YES, there is*—thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon!"—a faithful, fearless message.

Upon Jeremiah's plea to the king, he was not sent back to the dungeon, but confined in the court of the prison. But this did not satisfy the princes. They demanded his death. And the king said, "Take him—I have no power to resist."

So, they lowered him by ropes into a miry cistern, and left him there to slowly die. Jeremiah would now be about 60 years old.

At this point a new name comes into the story—Ebedmeleck, a servant of Zedekiah, an Ethiopian—a coloured man—one of the very few good men in this book, and one with whom we hope to meet in intimate association in the kingdom of God, if we are found worthy, as he was.

He rescued Jeremiah from the cistern, and he was placed again in the prison court where he stayed through the rest of the siege.

Finally, the Babylonians broke into the city, and destroyed it. The Temple of Solomon was demolished, and all its ornaments and vessels taken to Babylon. The Temple had had a very sad history and had never accomplished the holy purpose for which it was erected. *The Temple was a failure*, through the weakness and evilness of the flesh.

In Jeremiah's day it had become a hypocritical symbol of lip-service and outward sacramentalism; inwardly it was a den of thieves. That which had been ordained to life was found to be unto death, and it had to be swept away.

Like the Temple in Jesus' day, it and everything connected with it were incurably infected with the leprosy of fleshliness and sin, and the Law required that a leprous house must be pulled down and carried forth *out of the city* into an unclean place (Lev. 14:45). So, Israel's leprous house must be broken down and carried away.

Jeremiah is given his choice of going to Babylon to join Ezekiel and Daniel and the more favoured captives there, or of staying in the empty and desolated land with the few poorest of people. This time he chose to remain. It would seem that he had come to clearly realize that his work lay here as a witness to this miserable remnant until death released him from his thankless task.

The Babylonians set up Gedaliah in charge of what was left in the land. He was a good man, and the Jews who had scattered into the countries nearby gradually began to assemble and build again.

But peace and tranquillity were not to be. God had ordained trouble and distress. Gedaliah and many with him were murdered by Ishmael, an evil prince of *the royal family of David*. It is another strange detail of the intricate divine pattern that in these dark closing days of the kingdom another Ishmael, even of David's own seed, rises up to trouble Israel, and ruthlessly stamp out the few embers of hope that remained.

In the extremity of their fear and misery, those that remained assembled to Jeremiah to ask him to pray to God for them. Jeremiah has now been proclaiming God's Word to the Jews for just 40 years, from the happy days of Josiah down to this sad time when only a handful are left in the ruined land. They come to him and say (Ch. 42)—

"Pray for us unto the Lord for we are but a few of many, that He may show us the way wherein we may walk . . . we will obey the Lord our God."

And God told him to tell them—

"Abide in this land, and I will build you, and I will show mercy unto you."

But He well knew their hearts, and the shallowness of their "sincerity." It was their last chance. All the rest of the nation were gone. The floods of judgment which had been rolling over the land for 22 years had swept everything else away.

But now God was willing to hold His hand for the last small remnant, if only they would accept Him. Surely, after all that had happened (exactly as Jeremiah had said) the few that were left would hearken when God appealed directly to them once more!

Jeremiah was told to warn them that if they would stay, God would protect them; but if they went to Egypt as they proposed, the sword, famine and pestilence would pursue them to the end, and *not one of them should escape from the evil determined*.

But for all their professions of repentance they showed themselves to be no different from the rest. It is the final witness of the utter corruption of the nation. They had learned nothing. Their approach to God was a deceit and a falsehood, and He plainly told them so through the prophet. How hateful it must be to God when we piously seek His guidance in prayer while all the time we are doing and planning to do what we know is not in harmony with His will! Yet this is a very common thing, to which we are all prone, unless we exercise great care. Only with a pure heart and a clear conscience as to our purpose for the future dare we approach God. Communion with God, which we sometimes take so lightly, is a great and awesome responsibility.

This people had no intention of obeying. They were set in their wilfulness on going to Egypt, and they were hoping that God could be persuaded to go along and bless them in what they had themselves decided was best. What a strange outlook, but yet how common!

Surely it is obvious that there is no use praying for guidance if we do not sincerely intend seek and follow God's way, wherever it leads. There are many very plain commands in God's Word, we are not wholeheartedly trying to keep *them*—the ones we *do* know—it is hypocrisy to be pretending to seek His guidance in other problems that arise.

This people hoped that God would agree to their going to Egypt so that they could have the added pleasure of a feeling of self-righteous piety, but if He disagreed they were going anyway, though doubtless quite willing to express their "sorrow" that it was necessary to break His commands to get what they wanted.

Jeremiah was taken with them by force against his will. He was right, of course, to object and resist being taken, but we see as we look back that it was fitting that circumstances should be such that he should go with them. This was the last, forlorn remnant of the nation. His long labour of warning was nearly done.

In Egypt two more prophecies are recorded—a brief one against Pharaoh, and a long one against the idolaters of the Jewish remnant, with repeated warnings of their utter destruction.

And this is the end. We hear no more of Jeremiah. We are not told how, when, or where he died. As the curtain falls upon the last scene in his book, it is still the same picture—the prophet's voice raised in faithful warning—the people rejecting his word to the end and clinging to their wickedness and abominations.

And so, the ever-rising flood of judgment closed over this last obstinate remnant of the nation, *and all was gone*. The Kingdom of God had failed, and fallen. The glory was departed from Israel, and the long Gentile night had begun. But the words of the prophet still remain—

"Ye shall seek Me, and ye shall find Me—when ye shall search for Me with all your heart."
"He that scattered Israel shall gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock."
