Our focus in this lesson is Jeremiah, chapters 37 through 39. We are dealing with the disobedience of Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem. Obviously, we understand that these are very important chapters, because they’re dealing with the central event that took place in Jeremiah’s life and ministry—the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. What the theology of Jeremiah is going to develop for us is that this fall of Jerusalem is the direct result of the king, and the people, and the officials of Judah not listening to the word of the Lord.

Again, the greatest theological crisis perhaps in the Old Testament is the exile, and how God allowed the temple to be destroyed. What’s happened in all of this? We see passages in the Psalms, where the people are wrestling with this and struggling with what happens to the future of God’s people. Psalm 89 asks: what has happened to God’s covenant with David? So, this is a major event.

The theological message of Jeremiah is that it is directly connected to the failure of the people to respond. It is not God abandoning his people. It is not God failing on his covenant promises. It is Israel, who is failed in the covenant by not listening to or obeying the Lord. We see in the design and in the literary structure of Jeremiah 26-45, that Jeremiah 37-39 is closely related to the passage that we looked at last time in chapters 27-29. Both of them are dealing with the last days of Judah as a nation. They’re dealing with the time of Zedekiah, and they’re dealing with the very responses that people have to Jeremiah’s message: submit to the Babylonians; the exile is going to last for 70 years; and God is using the Babylonians as an instrument of judgment. In many ways, that was a subversive message, the idea that God had given control of Judah over to these pagan Babylonians. The false prophets of peace were the ones that were particularly opposing this message. We saw in chapters 27-29, the whole issue of
prophetic conflict and how very real that was. We almost get a chance to put ourselves on
the streets of Jerusalem in the last days of Judah as a nation. Putting ourselves in the
minds of the people we wonder, who’s telling us the truth here?

Prophetic Conflict in Micah

Now, this problem with false prophets, and prophetic conflict, and the engagement
in those kinds of issues is not just found in the book of Jeremiah. But it’s also briefly
reflected for us also in the prophet Micah, and I wanted to just reference a couple of
verses here as a follow up to what we talked about last time. Remember, Micah preached
a century before Jeremiah. He announced that the city of Jerusalem was going to be
destroyed, and Jeremiah 26 specifically says that it was the preaching of Micah and those
warnings of the destruction of Jerusalem that motivated Hezekiah’s response of
repentance.

As Micah was preaching that message, and pronouncing and proclaiming the
judgment that was coming, he was as opposed in the same way as Jeremiah by prophets
of peace, who had the defective view of the covenant, that believed that God would
protect Israel. They were his chosen people, no harm could befall them. God would look
over his house. God would protect the Davidic King. So their response to Micah as he’s
preaching Jerusalem’s going to be leveled, it’s going to be reduced to a heap of rubble.
They said these things: “Do not preach” thus they preach, “One should not preach of such
things. Disgrace will not overtake us. Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the
Lord grown impatient? Are these his deeds?” They were saying: Look, you shouldn’t
really preach this way. Why would God bring judgment against his people?

Then in chapter 2, verse 11, Micah, thinking of how the people have responded to
that and how they want to hear the messages of peace rather than the messages of
judgment, he says to them, “If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying,
‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ he would be just the preacher for these
people!” Look, you don’t want to hear my messages of judgment, but if someone were to
come along and say God is going to give you plenty of beer and wine to drink, you’re
going to experience all kind of pleasure and prosperity. That would be the guy you want
to hear. But, I’m warning you, those kinds of people are only speaking lies and wind to you. I’m telling you the truth.

In chapter 3:5-6, Micah talking about the false prophets says, “Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace!” He is dealing with the same kinds of prophets Jeremiah had that were saying: “Peace, peace.” They say peace “when they have something to eat, but they declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths.” So, they’re not only offered empty promises of peace, but if you pay them the right price, they’ll tell you what they want you to say. They’ll offer you promises of peace, but if you don’t give them a good love offering they’re going to announce judgment on you. So, Micah was struggling with false prophets, and ultimately Hezekiah made the right choice to respond to God, to listen to the warnings of judgment, to take those things seriously, and Jerusalem was spared in 701 BC in part because of that.

Why the Destruction? No Response to God’s Word

Jeremiah in chapters, 37-39, is preaching that God is going to bring destruction on Jerusalem. Zedekiah is not going to respond in the right way. The first thing that we read in chapter 37:1-2, introducing the section, is an important summary statement for Jeremiah 26-45 as a whole says this: “Zedekiah the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Coniah [or Jehoiachin] the son 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.” So, why is the destruction of Jerusalem that’s described for us in chapter 39, that’s also recounted for us at the end of the book of Jeremiah, in chapter 52, why did it happen? Because the king and the people did not respond to the word of the Lord.

What we see in Jeremiah 37-39, leading up to the account where we have the actual fall of the city is that we have five separate episodes that are dealing with the response to Jeremiah’s message of how we submit to Babylon. Back in chapters 27-29, we had Jeremiah repeating three times saying, “Submit to Babylon, surrender to his authority, don’t listen to the prophets who are trying to deceive you.” In the same way,
we’re going to have various episodes where Jeremiah is going to talk about the need to surrender to the Babylonians and what kind of response did that receive?

Now the layout of this, in these five episodes, is also going to follow a specific pattern. We’re going to have a pattern again where we have a type of paneling going on. We have A and B elements that are being laid beside each other. We have an A element in chapter 37 verses 3-5, where we have King Zedekiah interacting with Jeremiah and his response to the message that they need to surrender to the Babylonians. Chapter 37:6-10, we have a B element where we have the military officials that are under Zedekiah, giving their response to Jeremiah. Chapter 37 goes back to the A element. We have a story of Jeremiah interacting with King Zedekiah. Then the next B element again, it’s the military officials in chapters 38:1-12 and their response to Jeremiah’s message and their hostility to this message that Jeremiah’s preaching that they believe is decreasing the war effort and hindering their resistance against Babylon. Then finally, at the end of chapter 37 from verses 17 to the end of the chapter, we have the A element again of where Jeremiah is interacting with King Zedekiah. So, in this ABABA contrast in Jeremiah’s different interactions with the king and the royal officials, we again see some narrative parallelism that helps us to see the recurring examples of response to the Word of the Lord.

We also have narrative parallelism in chapters 37-39 in the sense that the disobedient response of Zedekiah is placed beside the earlier disobedient response of Jehoiakim in chapter 36 as well. Jehoiakim was the king who reigned from 609 to 597; he did not listen to the word of the Lord. In fact, when the word of the Lord came to him, he became angry and hostile. He killed Uriah in chapter 26. He cut up the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies in chapter 36. Now, the responses of Zedekiah, chapter 37-39 are placed right beside that. Zedekiah is the king in the last days from 597-586 BC. Neither he, nor his people, nor the attendants listened to the word of the Lord as well. So in whatever time frame you’re looking at, whatever time period of Jeremiah’s ministry you’re considering, the leaders and the officials and the people did not listen to the word of the Lord.
Jehoiakim and Zedekiah and the Word of God

Zedekiah is as deserving of God’s judgment as Jehoiakim. Now that’s a little bit surprising because when you compare the two individuals, they look very different. Jehoiakim becomes angry and becomes violent whenever he’s confronted with the word of the Lord. He does not fear God. It appears that he has no regard whatsoever for the prophetic word. He has no fear of the consequences that could happen. There is never a time where Jehoiakim and Jeremiah have a meeting with each other because it’s just too volatile. The relationship between these men is too explosive. Jeremiah can’t be in the presence of this king because if he is, the king is going to seize him and do the same thing to him that he did to Uriah and have him put to death. On the other hand, when we come to Zedekiah, we have a much different kind of individual. We have a king who is constantly interacting with the prophet. There are the messages where Jeremiah is speaking to Zedekiah, they’re dialoging with each other, Zedekiah is constantly asking him: “Is there a word from the Lord?” And every time he asked him, “Is there a word from the Lord?” the message is essentially the same. But we have him three different times here asking “is there a word from the Lord?” But we have already seen Jeremiah and Zedekiah interacting with each other earlier in the book as well. Chapter 21:4-10, Zedekiah says to Jeremiah, “Would you pray for us that the Lord might bring us deliverance?” Chapter 32:1-5 again Jeremiah’s message is: “this is what’s going to happen to the king if he doesn’t submit.” Chapter 34:1-7 is another time where Zedekiah says, “Is there a word from the Lord about what’s going to happen?” The word of the Lord is the same every time.

Now Chapter 34 is interesting because it seems like there, Jeremiah gives Zedekiah a more positive response: “You’re going to be able to die in peace.” It seems like things could go well for Zedekiah. Some critical scholars have looked at this and they’ve tried to separate out different editors, and different redactors have composed these different responses to Zedekiah. But what I think we have going on is that we have the possibility of different outcomes based on how Zedekiah will respond to the word of
the Lord. You see, in spite of the fact that Judah has really crossed over the line, in spite of the fact that God has had all of these moveable deadlines and ultimately they’ve reached a point of irrevocable judgment, God is still giving Zedekiah some flags that, if he will respond to Jeremiah’s message and surrender, then his life will be spared and things will turn out for him much better than they actually did. Jeremiah is saying in chapter 34 “You’re going to die in peace.” When we look at what happens to Zedekiah in chapter 39 we realize that he forfeited the opportunity of this positive outcome by the way that he responded to God’s word.

Now Zedekiah is constantly having these conferences with the Jeremiah. He’s different from Jehoiakim. He doesn’t get angry, he doesn’t threaten the life of the prophet, he often does things to help the prophet in some sense, partly because Zedekiah is as afraid of the officials as Jeremiah is. But ultimately he’s just as disobedient as Jehoiakim. It doesn’t matter if someone is rebellious, hostile and angry toward the word of God or just indifferent and fearful to carry through on what God tells him to do, ultimately that’s disobedience. Whether someone angrily rejects the Gospel and says, “I don’t want to hear that, get away from me,” or someone politely hears it and then ignores what it says, they both stand under God’s condemnation. I think that’s really what you see in the narrative parallelism in the second panel here is that the disobedience of Zedekiah is paralleled to the disobedience of Jehoiakim. Ultimately, they’re in the same boat.

Episodes

So let’s look at these five episodes, chapter 37:3-5. Zedekiah says this in verse 3, “please pray for us to the Lord our God.” So here’s the initiation of the conflict: “we need prayer.” Remember what God has said to Jeremiah in back in chapter 7, chapter 11, chapter 14, and chapter 15? “Do not pray for these people.” So the prophet ultimately is not going to be able to do what the king is asking him to do. Now what exactly is the king asking Jeremiah to pray for? Is he asking Jeremiah “pray that the Lord would give me wisdom to obey him and the strength and courage to follow through on what God is telling me to do”? No, that’s not exactly what he’s praying for. We learn in chapter 21:2,
which maybe is simply a parallel account of the same event that we’re reading in chapter 37. Here’s what he’s actually asking God to do: “Inquire for the Lord for us for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all of his wonderful deeds and make him withdraw from us.” So he is not asking for the courage and the moral fiber to do what God wants him to do. He’s asking for God to get him out of this situation. When we come back to chapter 37, and the encounter there and the episode, Jeremiah is not going to pray for him. He’s not going to give him the opportunity that God is going to rescue him out of this. He’s going to tell him the situation is hopeless.

Now I’ve brought this up a number of times and I promise this is probably the last time that I’ll mention this. But whenever we’re hearing these stories about the coming fall of Jerusalem, we always have what’s happened with Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem in 701 BC that’s still echoing. It hasn’t been that long ago and it was a miraculous deliverance. God had stepped in at the eleventh hour, it had fulfilled, confirmed and in a sense validated, the traditions that the people of Judah had about Jerusalem that God was always going to protect the city. So when Hezekiah experiences this deliverance, what Zedekiah is asking for when he prays, “maybe the Lord will relent; maybe the Lord will deliver us,” he’s asking maybe God will do for us a “Hezekiah deliverance.”

Now we saw with Jeremiah’s interaction with Jehoiakim, that that is not going to happen because king Jehoiakim, you are no Hezekiah, you are no Josiah, your judgment is going to come. But we’re back to this possibility- we’ve got a new king here, we’ve got a king who is at least willing to invite the prophet in, and hear what the prophet has to say: Maybe there’s the possibility that God will bring about a deliverance. Maybe we’re going to experience another one of these “Hezekiah deliverances.”

Well. Listen to what God is going to say to the prophet, or, what God’s going to say to the king and to the officials: “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Thus you shall say to the king of Judah who is 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 yourself saying, “The Chaldeans will surely go away for us,” for they will not go away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of the Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men, every man in his tent, they would rise up and they would burn this city.”

So, partly what had motivated Zedekiah to come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray for him is that there had been a positive turn of events. The Egyptians had marched up and they were offering help to Judah because they didn’t want the Babylonians encroaching on their territory. They knew that if the Babylonians ultimately take Judah that just makes them closer to invading our land, so they’re trying to help Judah to stop this. Zedekiah is trusting in this alliance, with Egypt, as possibly being the thing that will deliver him. Jeremiah comes and he absolutely explodes any possible hopeful resolution to this: The Egyptians are not going to help you. Their military interventionist situation is not going to turn this situation around. In fact, if your army marched out and defeated the Chaldeans, the wounded people that were left in the Chaldeans, they could still capture this city. Remember how David had gone in, and ultimately captured Jerusalem with the small group of people that had sort of snuck into the city. The Chaldeans are going to do that. There is no getting away from this. Even if you could have a major military victory, it’s not going to work.

**Jeremiah & Isaiah Contrast**

Well, this sort of sets Jeremiah up, let’s contrast Jeremiah and Isaiah as a prophet. Isaiah: “the Lord is going to deliver this city. Sennacherib and his armies, they will not fire a single arrow into this city.” I’m sure the king was thinking, why we couldn’t just have one of those prophets from the good old days like Isaiah. Jeremiah seems like kind of a lesser guy. Isaiah is tight enough with God that he can guarantee the Lord’s deliverance, we have sort of got a second class prophet that all he can tell us is judgment.

Pete Diamond provided some interesting intertextual studies of this part of Jeremiah and one of the things that he noticed is that there are definitely some intertextual connections between the story of Isaiah and Hezekiah and then of Jeremiah
and Zedekiah. The interesting thing here is that Jeremiah definitely comes off looking like a lesser prophet. In fact, what Diamond is going to suggest is that if you go back to the story of Isaiah and Hezekiah, the individual in that story that Jeremiah most closely resembles is the pagan Assyrian Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army, who is telling the king of Judah, “it’s hopeless for you to try to withstand our army.” So, if we’re going to do an intertextual comparison between Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jeremiah doesn’t look like an Isaiah, Jeremiah looks more like a pagan Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army who’s telling the people of Judah, “look it’s hopeless, there is no way you are ever going to be delivered from our army!”

In fact, listen to this passage from Jeremiah 37:4-10 and compare it to what we just heard Jeremiah saying to King Zedekiah. “Look, even if you defeat the Babylonians, even if the Egyptians come and help you, the wounded guys in the Babylonian army that are in the hospital they’re the ones that could come in and burn the city.” Listen to what the Rabshakeh says; and it’s in Isaiah chapter 36:4-9. “Say to Hezekiah: ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? [You know, that the city of Jerusalem is going to be protected]. Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting in Egypt!”

Hezekiah had done the same thing that Zedekiah was doing. He had made an alliance with Egypt and thought that the military assistance of the Egyptians was going to help him. It’s not going to help. Jeremiah is saying the same thing that the Rabshakeh says in Jeremiah chapter 37. The Rabshakeh also says Egypt is just a broken reed of a staff which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is the pharaoh the king of Egypt to all who trust in him. So you’re putting your trust in this army that’s going to help you, but they’re not going to be a help. The pharaoh is going to be like a broken reed that’s going to puncture your hand; he’s not going to deliver you. He goes on to say in verse eight: ‘Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria, I will give you two thousand horses. If you’re able on your part to set riders on them, how then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master’s servants when you trust in
Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up to this land and destroy it.”

So, in every way, if you’re going to do an intertextual comparison between Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hezekiah and Zedekiah, Jeremiah doesn’t come out looking too good. He looks like the Assyrian Rabshakeh. Don’t trust in the LORD to deliver you. Jeremiah says: Look! Even if you defeat the army, even if you defeat the Chaldeans, the wounded guys in the hospital will still defeat you! The Rabshakeh, the Assyrian commander taunts them and says: Look, let’s make this a fair fight. I will give you two thousand horses! You don’t even have enough of an army to put guys on the horses. I’ll help you out here. Even then, I would still defeat you. The Rabshakeh says, “Look, I didn’t come up here on my own strength, the Lord sent me to come and to defeat this people.” Jeremiah says, ‘The Lord is the one who has brought up the Babylonian army. The Lord is the one who will give Jerusalem into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar.”

You know in every possible way here, the only person that Jeremiah looks like is not Isaiah, not a true prophet of God, he looks like the Assyrian commander and just like this pagan who said, “Don’t trust in the Lord to deliver you.” It almost sounds like that’s what Jeremiah is saying as well. But the twist and the punch line of this intertextual analysis is that the problem is not the prophet. The problem is not that Jeremiah is a lesser prophet than Isaiah. The problem is not that Jeremiah shares the theology of a pagan commander. The problem is that there is not going to be a response in the life of Zedekiah comparable to the response of Hezekiah. Therefore there can be no deliverance. There can be no army marching in at the eleventh hour to deliver because there’s no response of faith here by Zedekiah. So the intertextuality that appears to diminish the ministry of Jeremiah is again making the same point that Jeremiah had earlier made to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim, you’re no Hezekiah. The prophet is now saying the same thing to Zedekiah. Look, there has been no response; there’s been no repentance. Therefore God cannot bring deliverance.

Zedekiah’s Responses

What kind of response does this get from Zedekiah? There’s no indication that
he’s ever going to respond in a positive way. In fact what happens is now we have the intervention of the military officers in our B element in chapter 37 verses 11 and following: “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.” This is probably dealing with the purchase of land that he had made back in chapter 32. But when he is getting ready to leave the city, it says that a group of military officials seized him. I’m not going to read their names this time like I did in one of the earlier videos and massacre them, but here’s what they said to them. They seized Jeremiah and said, “You are deserting over to the Chaldeans. This confirms exactly what we think about you. You’re a traitor. And this whole message, and this whole idea that we need to surrender to the Babylonians, you’re defecting over to them to try to get away.” In some sense you would think they’d be glad to be rid of him, but they accuse him of defection. Jeremiah says, ‘It is a lie. I am not deserting to the Chaldeans.” But they would not listen. They seized Jeremiah, they imprisoned him, and they beat him.

So, in the A element, we have the response of the king. He can’t accept what Jeremiah has to say, he’s fearful of that. Then chapters 37:11-15, to B, we have the episode where Jeremiah is interacting with the military officers. They’re hostile, they’re angry, and they’re accusing Jeremiah of being a traitor. As a result of that they beat him and put him in prison.

Confronting Zedekiah Again (Jer 37:16-21)

Now back to the A element. The next episode again is going to be Jeremiah repeating to Zedekiah, “You need to surrender to the Babylonians.” Chapter 37:16-21: Jeremiah is put in prison, he remains there many days. Here’s what happens in verse 17, we’ve seen this before: ‘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?’” I haven’t gotten God’s perspective on this yet, is there any word from the Lord? Jeremiah’s response should have been: Yes, you’ve already heard it numerous times! But Jeremiah says, “There is! You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah
also said to Zedekiah, “What wrong have I done to you, or your servants, or this people, that you have put me in prison?” And verse 19, “Where are your prophets who prophesied to you saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land’?” So we’re back to the prophetic conflict: Look, if those guys were right, why aren’t you talking to them? Is there a word from the Lord? The only thing, again, there’s no response. Zedekiah is not going to follow the word of the Lord. The only thing that he does here is that he gives Jeremiah a more favorable prison to stay in. Instead of the dungeon that the military officers have put him in Jeremiah is going to be put in the court of the guard and be given more favorable conditions. He’s also going to be given a loaf of bread. But that’s not enough. It’s just taking care of the prophet and preserving his life. If he really wants to listen to what God has to say here, he needs to carry through and obey. But the idea that you get is he’s coming secretly, he’s inquiring. He’s as fearful of these military officers and what they might do to him, as Jeremiah is.

Back to the Military Officers (Jer 38:1-16)

So we’ve had this A element, the king meets with the prophet. We have the B element, the military officers meet with the prophet and they imprison him, they accuse him of being a traitor. Then we’re back to the king, and in chapter 38:1-16, the next episode, we’re back to Jeremiah interacting with the military officers. And again, the response that the officers are going to have is one of anger. They’re going to say, “Why do you keep preaching this message that he who stays in this city shall die by the sword?” They bring this to the king. Verse 4: “This man is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in the city.” The same expression that’s found in the Lachish letters where military officers there are discussing how the troops have become demoralized and it talks about “the weakening of their hands.” They’re discouraged. They don’t want to keep fighting. Jeremiah’s message is directly the cause of that, they say. So as a result of that what we need to do is we need to get rid of Jeremiah, and they throw him into a cistern.

Zedekiah, being the weak leader that he is, vacillating back and forth, fearful of these officers and these commanders, he says, “Behold, he’s in your hands, for the king
can do nothing against you.’ So they took Jeremiah, and they threw him into the cistern. And they leave him there to die. It is only the intervention of an officer by the name of Ebed-Melek, a foreigner, who says to the king, “We can’t do this great evil. Jeremiah is a messenger of God.” And this foreigner, this Ethiopian, convinces the king to rescue Jeremiah out of the cistern. We’ll talk about Ebed-Melek a little bit more.

Return to Zedekiah (Jer 38:14ff)

But notice the response of the officers. We go back and forth, the vacillation of Zedekiah, the anger of the officers. This is going to play itself out in one more encounter, between Jeremiah and the king. There are just a couple of things I’m going to note here. Chapter 38:14: “King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord.” He’s going to have his moment at the temple of the Lord in the same way that Jehoiakim did back in chapter 36 and 26. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question. Hide nothing from me.” Alright, he hasn’t hidden anything from the king. But he’s going to inquire again, “Do you have a word from the Lord?”

And I just want to mention a few specific things here, as we go into verse 17 and 18. Here’s the word from the Lord. You know what it is: “surrender to the Babylonians and be spared. If you surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon then your life shall be spared and this city will not be burned with fire and your house shall live.” There’s an ‘if/then’ conditional going on here. You have the chance to avoid God’s judgment, but if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon then this city shall be given into the hands of the Chaldeans, so the choice is yours.

The message has not changed; it’s exactly what we’ve heard the prophet saying time and time again: three separate times in chapters 37 and 38. This again, reminds us of back in chapter 27, three separate times: submit to the king of Babylon to these different groups. There’s clearly a parallel here.

But finally, in verse 19, we get an explanation from King Zedekiah of exactly what it is that’s keeping him from obeying the word of the Lord. Here’s what Zedekiah says, “I am afraid of the Judeans, who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed
over to them and they deal cruelly with me.” Look, I’m afraid of these guys who have already been taken hostage and taken into exile to Babylon, or maybe the people that have defected over to the Babylonians. They’re going to blame me for all the things that are happening, and if I get put in prison with these guys, somebody’s going to give me the shiv in the middle of the night. So he’s scared. So, ultimately, it is fear of men that keeps him from properly fearing and responding to God. Zedekiah is more afraid of what’s going to happen to him if he’s captured and given over to these other Jewish prisoners than he is of what will happen to him if he fails to listen to the word of God. The consequences and the disaster that’s going to come when you don’t listen to the word of God is always going to be far more severe. But he’s afraid of men. He’s afraid of what’s going to happen to him, and Jeremiah’s trying to say, “look you need to understand what’s going to happen if you don’t listen to God.”

Then, finally, here’s a last statement that Jeremiah’s going to make to the king in verse 21: “But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision that the Lord has shown to me: Behold, all of the women left in the house of the king of Judea were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon” and the women were saying.” Now, let’s listen to these words because there’s something important here. “Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you, now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you.” So he pictures Zedekiah being arrested and the women of the palace saying, “Zedekiah look at what’s happened to you; the friends and the allies and the officers, they have turned away from you, and your feet have sunk in the mud.” Now the wording is not exactly the same, but I can’t help but hear as I read that, the officers throw Jeremiah in the mud and it says, earlier in this chapter, verse 6, “there was no water in the cistern but only mud, and Jeremiah sunk in the mud.” That was bad, there are some bad circumstances. The real prisoner in this story is Zedekiah. He was in much worse shape than Jeremiah being thrown into the cistern and left to sink in the mud because God had ultimately promised to deliver him. Zedekiah has sunken in the mud and there’s not going to be anyone to deliver him because he has not listen to the word of the Lord. When the city of Jerusalem is going to be captured, Jeremiah is released! Zedekiah is not
going to be released, and like a prisoner who is thrown into a cistern, Zedekiah’s feet are going to sink into the mud.

Zedekiah’s Final Days

Now we come to the end of chapter 38 and the last words Zedekiah and Jeremiah share with each other is Zedekiah’s making it clear he doesn’t want Jeremiah to tell anyone what they’ve talked about. But the last verse of this chapter speaks to me in a significant way, here it says, “Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day Jerusalem was taken.” We’ve seen some of these summary statements about Jeremiah being in prison before that sort of wraps up these different episodes. But there’s nothing in this story, there’s nothing in this passage that tells us about the response of Zedekiah to the word of the Lord. It reminds me in some ways of what the narrator does in chapter 36 when Baruch reads the scroll in the hearing of all the people and there’s no mention of their response.

The word has been read in the presence of the king. He simply allows the events to unfold. The resistance continues, he does not listen to the word of the Lord and the first statement that we read in chapter 39 is a title telling us that now the city of Jerusalem is going to fall.

There’s a real sense of prophetic justice here in that the man who allowed Jeremiah’s feet to sink in the mud is ultimately going to be the one who sinks in the mud as a prisoner. Jeremiah is going to be released; Zedekiah is not. I won’t go through all the details of the stories; we have talked about the fall of Jerusalem before. But let me just remind you of what happens to Zedekiah. His response to the word of God is a big part of chapters 37 and 38 and so it’s important for the narrator to stress that what happens to Zedekiah is a result of this; God is meeting out justice. This is what happens to kings, to people, and to leaders when they fail to listen to God’s word – God’s word is a matter of life and death.

When the city of Jerusalem is captured, Zedekiah and his sons attempt to flee by night. They make it about ten or fifteen miles outside of Jerusalem, and they are captured in the plains of Jericho. Then they are shackled up and they are brought as prisoners to
Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, which is to the north of Syria. Because Zedekiah is a rebel against the Babylonians, they had set him up on the throne as their puppet, you know, “take care of our interests, submit to us, pay tribute to us, maintain the situation here and we’ll allow you to stay on the throne and pretend to be a king,” and that’s in a sense what it was. Zedekiah was too weak as a ruler to even do that. So Nebuchadnezzar pronounces sentence on him as a rebel and the sentence is that Zedekiah’s sons are executed in front of him. Then the Babylonians gouge out Zedekiah’s eyes. I can’t help but think about the fact that his unwillingness to hear the word of the Lord ultimately leads to a sentence of blindness and imprisonment in chapter 39. There are serious consequences to spiritual blindness. I don’t know if there’s a particular connection here but we are almost reminded of what happens to Samson at the end of his life—he is blinded and taken away as a prisoner. Zedekiah is going to die as a Babylonian prisoner, as a blind man deprived of his sons because of his failure to obey the word of the Lord.

There is also a sense of justice here in that the officers and the king who have kept Jeremiah in prison, and the prison provides such a context to Jeremiah’s ministry, the people who had done that to Jeremiah will now experience their own form of imprisonment and while God made it possible for Jeremiah to be released in the Babylonians’ when they take the city. They’re going to be the liberators who release him from prison. The captivity that the officers and the king who inflicted these things on Jeremiah there is not going to be a deliverance for them and all that the people and all that the leaders and all that the king of Judah had to look forward to who did not obey the word of the Lord is a sentence of imprisonment. There will not be a release until the time that Cyrus conquers the city of Babylon and allows the Jews to return to their home land. This would be for another generation.

So we’ve spent some time in chapters 26-45 looking at all of the ways that the narrator demonstrates that the fall of Jerusalem and the judgment of Jerusalem was absolutely deserved. There is a sense of prophetic justice here because this is the punishment that Judah received for failing to hear the word of the Lord. The people that inflicted imprisonment and persecution on Jeremiah are now going to experience their
own forms of persecution and imprisonment.

Remnant: Positive Responses to the Word of God

So as we’re looking at all of this section and we’re thinking about all the things that we have talked about in the previous sections this is a pretty depressing part of the Bible. The offer of life that is given to Judah in the beginning of each one of these panels in chapter 26 the only people who experience it are the Rechabites in chapter 35. In the second panel the offer of life that is offered to Israel when the temple scroll is read in 605 BC the only person who responds in a positive way to that is Baruch. But if we go back to this section of the book of Jeremiah were also going to see that sometimes between the lines and sometimes is minor figures here there are other positive examples of obedience to the prophetic word and to the word of the Lord. So I would like us to close out this lesson by looking at some of those positive examples of obedient people who did listen to the word of the Lord. We have such a negative example here was that the consequences of what happened to the people at large but let’s remember some of the positive examples that we’ve been introduced to in chapters 26-45 as well.

First of all, going back to the Temple Sermon remember the response where the officials and the people say to the priest and the prophets “This man does not deserve the sentence of death for he has spoken into us in the name of the Lord our God.” They recognized Jeremiah as the true prophet the tragedy is that they don’t really respond to that or really do anything about it but there is a positive response here.

Chapter 26 verse 24 tells us that when the King Jehoiakim executed Uriah the prophet it says in verse 24 but the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so he was not given over to be put to death. So this family of Shaphan and throughout the book of Jeremiah there are going to be supporters who are going to take his message seriously and at this time when Jehoiakim is trying to wipe out the prophets of judgment he’s taking care of one of the witnesses. Maybe if I can get rid of the other one, we can do the same to Jeremiah. Ahikam intervenes and uses influence to protect Jeremiah. He hides him away so the king can’t get his hands on him. The family of Shaphan this scribal family, is going to be an example of positive response to the word of the Lord.
Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch is a positive example of obedience to the Lord when the Lord has him write down the message that Jeremiah dictates to him. Baruch is the one who faithfully carries out that commission and goes to the temple and with all of the risks that are involved with all of that he does what the Lord commands him to do. In a very real way Baruch is as much a faithful servant of God as Jeremiah himself, so that’s why in chapter 45 he’s the one who is positively rewarded at the end of this. Chapter 36 verse 11 of when Baruch reads the scroll and the people at large basically ignore this, it does tell us in verse 11 chapter 36 Micaiah the son of Gemariah the son of Shaphan heard all of these words.” Again, it’s a family member in this scribal family from Shaphan who listens to God’s word and takes it to the other officials. They realize, “we have got a crisis here, we need to take this to the king.” There were at least a group of people that day when the nation ignored it, when the king destroyed the scroll, there were at least some scribes and officials who listened to what the prophet had to say.

We very quickly were introduced to Ebed Melek chapter 38 verses 7-13 it’s ironic that the one officer who steps into the situation here and says, “Look, we need to listen to Jeremiah. We would be doing a great sin here by putting Jeremiah to death.” The one officer who stands up for him is Ebed Melek an Ethiopian eunuch. So foreigners who were outside the covenant actually respond more faithfully to the word of God then the Jews do themselves. And I believe that Ebed Melek the Ethiopian eunuch here previews and pre-figures for us an Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts who is also going to respond positively to prophetic passage and comes to Jesus and is baptized. We have another faithful Ethiopian eunuch here in the book of Jeremiah. The promise that’s given to Ebed Melek at the end of this in 39:5-18 after the city of Jerusalem is captured. Ebed Melek’s life is spared and the Lord gives him a promise because of the fact that he was the one who intervened to deliver Jeremiah from out of the cistern. “Thus says the Lord God of hosts: Behold, I will fulfill my words against this city for harm and not for good and they shall be accomplished before you on that day. But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you were afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have
your life as a prize of war.”

So the Lord is going to deliver Jeremiah, and Baruch but the Lord is also going to deliver Ebed Melek. The same expression is used to describe the deliverance of Baruch “you will have your life as a prize of war.” Remember that kind of soldiers’ joke. Things didn’t go well in the war we didn’t bring back any plunder but at least we saved our own necks. The Lord promises Ebed Melek that the reward for his obedience to God and for taking care of the life of the prophet is that when the city of Jerusalem is captured the Lord will rescue him in the same way that he will rescue Baruch and Jeremiah.

As we look at this section of the book it is a very depressing time. There is all kinds of disobedience, all kinds of episodes where we basically know how things are going to turn out. Someone’s going to hear the word of the Lord and not respond to that in a positive way. But even in this time of national apostasy, even in this time when there’s so much resistance to the prophetic word there are these family members of Shaphan and there is Ebed Melek, there are the princes and officials who take Jeremiah’s message seriously. There is a faithful scribe by the name of Baruch. There are Rechabites who remain faithful to their family traditions. In the midst of national apostasy there is always a remnant. That remnant throughout history, in the history of God’s people, in the history of salvation the remnant is always going to be marked by the faithfulness and obedience to God’s word and to the message of God's servants.

Transcribed by Marissa Radzick, Molly Elias, Steffen Pollock, Ginny Walker, Jacqueline Kiernan and Katy Dressel; edited by Rachel Galda
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt