

Jeremiah 34:1-22 Our Sin of Unreliability Falls Church AM 10/2/2022

For four chapters, from Jeremiah 30, 31, 32, and 33, we enjoyed the book of consolation, and its wonderful promises. But now in chapter 34, we are jolted back to the imploding city of Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar had invaded and was systematically destroying the land of Judah.

Today we remember again that the Book of Jeremiah is not organized chronologically, but rather according to themes. In terms of the timestamp, we are now prior to chapters 32 and 33, since Jeremiah is not yet in prison here in chapter 34. That is how God could say to Jeremiah here in chapter 34, verse 2 to “...go and speak to...” the king.

Compared to God’s reliability, we notice our sin of unreliability.

1. Facing destruction, the king promised to free the slaves. (v.1-10)

Verse 1, God spoke to Jeremiah, while Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon was attacking Jerusalem. Apart from Jerusalem, only two other cities were still intact, and soon all three of these cities would be reduced to mounds of rubble. It felt like the whole world was against Jerusalem, and actually, verse 1 says, “*all the kingdoms of the earth...were fighting against Jerusalem...*” It is because the God of all the earth was against Jerusalem. The armies of the King of Babylon were merely agents of God! Notice the pressure from Babylon, seen in the repeating of the word “all” in verse 1. All his army, all the kingdoms, all the peoples, all of its cities. The king of Jerusalem realizes that destruction is inevitable.

Verse 2, God told Jeremiah to go speak to his King Zedekiah, within the walls of Jerusalem. Tell him that God will be giving the city to Nebuchadnezzar, and he will burn it.

Verse 3, tell the king of Judah that he will not escape, but not be burned either. He will be captured, and taken away. The king Zedekiah will be brought to the King of Babylon, and will see him eye to eye, and speak to him face to face. After that, the King of Judah will be brought away into captivity in Babylon!

In verses 4-5, if the king were to repent now and obey God, he could still have mercy and a good ending. The king would not die by the sword! If he repented, instead of dying in a time of war, the king could die in a time of peace. People will grieve and lament the loss of the king, and they will burn spices as part of an ancient funeral for the king. Basically, God is threatening the king and reasoning with the king - what kind of legacy do you want?

Verses 6-7, Jeremiah told the king this message from God. We again get the repeated use of the word “all” in verse 6, all these words, and in verse 7, all the cities of Judah. It is a reminder of the severe threat and pressure that Babylon’s army was putting on King Zedekiah. He is under assault by the enemy army, and also by the Word of God. The destruction was inescapable, unless the king turned to God and repented!

Verse 8, The LORD commanded King Zedekiah to release all the slaves to be free, and the king did it. Verse 9, the king ordered that there should be no more slaves of any kind. Verse 10, everyone obeyed, and all the slaves were freed.

God gave enough warnings that the king decided to obey God, do the right thing, and now the slaves were free! Quick look now. King Zedekiah reflects King Jesus – setting slaves free. But it won't last long. We move to our 2nd point.

2. When the enemy withdrew, the king changed his mind. (v.11, 21)

The enemy suddenly withdrew, as verse 21 says, “...*the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you.*”

And in verse 11, we read that King Zedekiah and his officials “...*turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves.*”

The king now added the sin of unreliability. The king did not follow through on his commitment to do the right thing. He reneged on their covenantal agreement. What a terrible situation for those poor slaves! The sin of the king had damage on many people. That brings us to God's response in point 3.

3. God punished the king for unreliability and mistreating others. (v.12-22)

God responded by making a comparison between God's reliability and the results for the people, and the king's unreliability and the results for the people.

Both God and King Zedekiah made proclamations about slaves being set free. God conducted a side-by-side comparison of the action of King Zedekiah in verse 8, “*to make a proclamation of liberty...*”, and the action of God Himself in verse 13, to bring His people “...*out of the house of slavery.*” God showed His own covenant faithfulness, upon which God did not renege, contrasted with King Zedekiah's covenant, upon which he did renege.

The parallel is continued as we move on through the next verses. In verse 14, God quoted His own Word back in Deuteronomy 15:1-11, to say that slaves must be set free after six years of service. Verse 14, then God reminded them that their ancestors “...*did not listen to Me or incline their ears to Me.*” That is, just like the current king, also the ancestors did not heed the covenant provision of cancelling debts on fellow covenant members, and setting them free.

So, God pulled it all together for the king in verses 15-16, “*You recently repented and did what was right in My eyes by proclaiming liberty...but then you turned around and profaned My name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves.*”

We see four areas of comparison: 1) both God and the king made a covenant 2) God kept His covenant, but the king broke his covenant 3) all of Judah was unreliable because they turned toward God, but then turned away from God 4) God's name was doubly used, first in turning toward God with a covenant made in

God's temple and called by His name, but then the king and the people turned away from God and profaning His name.

Verse 17 follows with a big and ominous "*Therefore.*" Because the people have broken the covenant or committed the sin of unreliability, what will be the verdict? Instead of a covenant of life, they will receive basically a covenant of death! Verses 17-22 give God's sweeping and harsh sentence. It was a pronouncement of an awful judgment from God which matches the great offense committed against the LORD God.

It starts with a play on the word liberty. Basically, if they won't free the slaves, then they are free to die! Since they would not proclaim liberty, then their punishment is that God would proclaim to them "...*liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, declares The LORD!*" Since they would not keep covenant promises, then God releases the devastation of covenant curses. Verse 17, they will be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth! Verse 18, God will make them like the two halves of the calf that they cut in two and passed between the parts. This is a reference to how an ancient covenant was established, such as we find in Genesis 15. Today we print a legal contract, and sign the paper copy, sometimes with witnesses. But in the ancient world, they would literally cut a covenant by cutting an animal in half! They would lay both halves of the animal on the ground on the left and on the right, and both parties would walk between the parts of the animal. This was to demonstrate commitment and reliability. If we fail to keep our word on this, then let us become like this animal, killed and cut in half. This seems gruesome to us, but it was well-known practice in the ancient world. Since they broke the covenant, they are free to die!

Verse 19, all the leaders were expected to fulfill their covenant or lose their lives. Verse 20, God will give them into the hands of their enemies. Their bodies will be food for the vulture type of birds. In verse 21, God will give the king and officials into the hand of their enemies. How can that be, since the enemy had withdrawn from attacking Jerusalem? God gave the answer in verse 22, that God will command the enemy to come back and attack Jerusalem.

The first step toward death was to have slavery.

God's first act of redemption was freeing slaves.

A failure to obey God, placed in danger the king, the city, the villages, the temple, and all the people!

How our study of this chapter point us to Christ? At first, King Zedekiah did the right thing by releasing slaves, but then he took the slaves back again. This shows the sin of unreliability. Our only hope is that God later sent us the reliable king Jesus, who took our punishment on the cross and set us free from sin. We were dead in our sins, but Christ saved us and enables us to obey God from our hearts! Consider Romans 6:17-18, "...*thanks be to God, that you who were once*

slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." Jesus our good king will never let us return to slavery to sin.

Let me go farther with 3 application points of Christ from this chapter.

Concluding applications:

1. Repent of the sin of unreliability. We could call it double-mindedness. Sometimes we want to do the right thing, and sometimes we do not. Instead, we trust in Christ to give us hearts that are singularly devoted to loving Christ and saying no to all ungodliness. No longer wavering. We need grace for that! Grace we have. Listen to Paul describing the blessing of the covenant of grace in Titus 2:11-14, "*the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*" In our repenting of the sin of unreliability, remember that it is Christ who redeemed you from the sins of being fickle and untrustworthy and unreliable. Christ has taken your covenant curses upon the cross. Christ has risen again. Christ has purified us for His own possession. Christ has given us hearts that are zealous for good works.

2. Follow through with what you say you are going to do. Become reliable. The fruit of repentance of the sin of being fickle is to become dependable. The third commandment about not taking the Lord's name in vain for us by violating our oaths and vows. Basically, Christ enables us to become people of our word. Jesus taught in Matthew 5:33-37 not to take oaths at all. But rather to *let what you say be simply yes or no; anything more than this comes from evil.*" (Matthew 5:37) God matures us into people who follow through.

SI - a wealthy oil tycoon lay on his deathbed, his pastor talked of God's healing power. "Pastor," he gasped, "if God heals me, I'll give the church a million dollars." Surprisingly, the man revived and within a few short weeks was out of the hospital. One day, several months later, he and the pastor chatted on the sidewalk in front of a hardware store. "You know," the pastor said, "when you were in the hospital dying, you promised to give the church a million dollars if you got well. We haven't got it yet." "Did I say that?" the tycoon asked. "I guess that goes to show how sick I really was!"

As God's people we are careful what we say, and then we do what we agreed to do. We do what God commands us to do. We do what God calls us to do. We follow through. We become reliable and faithful in our tasks before God. We are consistent, in Christ. It is expected of us. Do what you say you are going to do. Here is the math of the new covenant, as Paul wrote it out in 2 Corinthians 9:6,

“...whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Or also in Galatians 6:8, “...the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

3. Rest in Christ’s reliability.

In Christ, we have been set free from our slavery to sin. Christ will never renege on our freedom. We are saved and safe. We remember the apostle Peter. He messed up by denying Christ. He had a fickle heart. He said that he would never deny Christ, but then he denied Christ three times before the morning rooster crowed. Now fast forward to the end of that story of Peter. Peter repented of his sin of unreliability. Peter believed in the Savior who redeemed him from lawlessness. Peter then became faithful. But Peter’s faithfulness did not bring honor to Peter. Peter’s faithfulness brought honor to Christ.

When we read Acts chapter 2, we see that Peter had one of the highest privileges in all of redemptive history – Peter got to give the sermon on the day of Pentecost, giving out the gospel of grace, exalting Christ, and explaining the gift of the Spirit! But it wasn’t bringing honor to Peter, but to Christ. Later, Peter got to write two letters to Christians in New Testament exile. What would Peter say to Christians going through a hard time? Peter would say throughout the difficulty of your exile, be faithful. Let me read what Peter wrote to the New Testament exiles in 1 Peter 1:7, “...now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” We are in New Testament exile, away from our home in the New Jerusalem of heaven. While here, we go through trials. Why? So that the tested genuineness of your faith...may result in...honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

SI - Ignace Jan Paderewski, the famous Polish composer-pianist, was once scheduled to perform at a great American concert hall for a high-society extravaganza. In the audience was a mother with her fidgety nine-year-old son. Weary of waiting, the boy slipped away from her side, strangely drawn to the Steinway on the stage. Without much notice from the audience, he sat down at the stool and began playing "chopsticks." The roar of the crowd turned to shouts as hundreds yelled, "Get that boy away from there!" When Paderewski heard the uproar backstage, he grabbed his coat and rushed over behind the boy. Reaching around him from behind, the master began to improvise a countermelody to "Chopsticks." As the two of them played together, Paderewski kept whispering in the boy's ear, "Keep going. Don't quit, son...don't stop...don't stop."

Rest in Christ’s reliability to bless His people through our feeble efforts.
We return to the main point of the sermon, which is this:

Compared to God’s reliability, we notice our sin of unreliability.

We now reverse it and say it backwards.

Compared to our sin of reliability, we notice God’s reliability.

Or, to say it in Jeremiah language, we can say that no matter how much we break the covenant, God keeps the covenant.

Or, we can read it in New Testament language from

2 Timothy 2:11-13, “*The saying is trustworthy, for:*

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, He also will deny us;

if we are faithless, He remains faithful—

for he cannot deny Himself.”