

Message #38

Jeremiah 34:1-22

Last time we saw the amazing reality that God has entered into an unbreakable covenant agreement with Israel that absolutely guarantees that the Davidic Messiah will return and will set up a Kingdom for Israel that will restore everything to her that God has promised. God said my covenant with Israel is unbreakable (Jer. 33:20-26).

Now things didn't look real positive at the time. The Babylonians were bearing down on Jerusalem, but apparently there was a break in the action. As we will see the Babylonians went down toward Egypt to fight there and the heat was off Jerusalem for the moment.

So Zedekiah, who was king, thought the game is over and we are off the hook. So what he decided to do was to have some religious service so they could make some public statement to God. His thinking was we will hold a religious service and publically show God we are now on the right track.

But now let's suppose that some of God's people decide they are going to do that. Let's suppose they decide they are going to do something public at a church service to show God they are on the right track. Let's say that a person goes to church and at the conclusion raises a hand or walks an aisle promising God they are really going to be different. But let's say a little time goes by and the person goes back on what he promised God. Does God take that seriously? Would the God who never wavers in a covenant promise overlook those who renege?

We don't have to speculate about this because that is exactly what happens in Jeremiah 34. Let me say this, if a person makes some public profession or some emotional commitment before God and before others and then goes back on his/her word, that person is heading to serious chastisement and consequences.

Verse 1 gives us the historical context and stage for this. The year was 586 BC and Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king was on the move and was taking over Israel's land. In fact, by this point Nebuchadnezzar had conquered many different kingdoms and he demanded that the people he conquered join him in his military conquests.

Now it appears as though at this point, there was a break in the actions of the attack against Jerusalem (**v. 22**). As we will see, it seems that Nebuchadnezzar had moved his forces south of Jerusalem. So Zedekiah probably thought we are all good.

In that context, the people of God started making promises to God that they did not keep. So God came to Jeremiah and he wanted him to give a specific message to Zedekiah the king of Judah.

GOD WOULD SEND HIS SPECIFIC, FEROCIOUS JUDGMENT AGAINST HIS OWN PEOPLE IN JERUSALEM BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT PEOPLE WHO OBEY HIM AND KEEP THEIR WORD.

God's people went to worship service and made serious promises to God, and then they did not follow through. God did not view this as some light matter. He never does.

God's people often make promises to God and then go back on their word. I have been in hospital rooms before a surgery when a person would promise God that if God would bring them through the surgery; they would really be faithful to God. God brought them through the surgery and shortly after, they were right back in their same pattern of life.

That is not a light matter in the mind of God.

PART #1 - God sends Jeremiah to Zedekiah with His word. **34:2-7**

We will say this about Zedekiah, he seemed to be more open to hearing the word of God more than Jehoiakim, who so hated God's word that he cut it and burned it (Jer. 36). But even though he was more open to hearing the word, he did not obey it.

Message #1 - Tell Zedekiah that God is going to sovereignly give Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar to burn it down. **34:2**

God says I am the One who will give this city over to the king of Babylon and I will permit him to burn this city down (II Kings 24:9; II Chron. 36:18-20). Now there are some things to see here.

- 1) God is in sovereign charge over everything that happens to His people.
- 2) God is a God who does sovereignly authorize horrible things to happen to His people.
- 3) God's people never want to do the kinds of things that would cause God to do this.

Message #2 - Tell Zedekiah that God will cause Nebuchadnezzar to personally see him, speak to him and take him captive. **34:3**

God tells Zedekiah that My sovereignty of negative things does not just refer to a city, but also to an individual. Jeremiah was to tell Zedekiah that God will sovereignly see to it that he will not escape. He will come face to face with Nebuchadnezzar and He will be captured and taken to Babylon.

Again, God is sovereign over our individual lives. When He permits us to get hit with a string of negatives, we are very wise to get before God see if there be any wicked way in us.

Message #3 - Tell Zedekiah that he will not die by sword. **34:4**

Zedekiah will not die in some war conflict. Jeremiah would tell him later that he and his family would survive (Jer. 38:17). God's sovereignty controls when we die and how we will die.

Message #4 - Tell Zedekiah that he will die in peace and be buried in honor. **34:5**

We do not have a record of how Zedekiah died. We do know that his capture was not peaceful or honorable (Jer. 39:5-8). We may assume that the way he died was peaceful and also that he had some honorable burial and was not just left out in the field for predator birds and animals.

According to verses 6-7, Jeremiah spoke these words to Zedekiah directly while the Babylonian fighting seems to have moved away from Jerusalem. The specific area where the fighting was taking place was in Lachish, 23 miles SW from Jerusalem and Azekah, 18 miles SW from Jerusalem. Both of these cities were near the Egyptian border.

In 1935 and 1938, there were archeological excavations at Lachish. In those excavations was found a pit with about 1500 skeletons and a broken piece of pottery that were dated near this very time of Zedekiah. There were twenty one letters written. They were sent by a subordinate officer of Lachish who was in the field to a commander in Lachish. The message said, "We are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah."

What this means is Azekah had already been destroyed and the officer was waiting for orders from Lachish as to what to do. So the main focus of Babylonian fighting had moved south.

PART #2 - Zedekiah responds to the word of God spoken by Jeremiah. 34:8-11

This slight break in the action of the Babylonian attack against Jerusalem prompted Zedekiah to come up with some special religious service to make some bargain deal with God.

Now apparently, according to **verses 8-9**, sometime after Jeremiah had revealed all of this to Zedekiah, he decided to make some legal covenant before God that he and the key leaders would release all of the Jewish male and female servants.

There were four ways a Hebrew could become a slave to another Hebrew:

- 1) If you are very poor, you can sell yourself as a slave (Lev. 25:39).
- 2) A father might sell his daughter to another father, hoping she'd marry his son (Ex. 21:7).
- 3) If a debt could not be paid (II Kings 4:1).
- 4) If you were a thief, stole something, and got caught (Ex. 22:1-3).

The O.T. law demanded that Israelite slaves be freed after six years of work (Ex. 21:2-11; Lev. 25:39-46; Deut. 15:1, 12-18). No Israelite was to be a slave forever, and apparently the slave owners in Jerusalem had just ignored this law. So they decided to hold a public religious ceremony and make a covenant promise before God, hoping God would change His mind about Babylon.

Now remember God has made it clear that the covenant that He made with Israel was unbreakable (33:20). Just as day and night are guaranteed to come, so the covenant God has made with Israel is guaranteed to come. She will have her land, king and kingdom.

So if you hold a special religious ceremony before God to make some covenant promise, you had better take it seriously because God takes it very seriously.

According to **verse 18**, this was a very official and solemn promise they made before God. They brought a sacrifice before the Lord and cut a calf in two and passed between its parts. So this was a very legal covenant and sacred promise made before God.

We may assume that in view of the fact that God had told Zedekiah that he was going to be defeated that this covenant is some attempt to get God to perhaps change His mind. They thought this might gain the favor of God. If we make some public profession of faith, this will really impress God.

It is also possible that another motive for this was that by letting the slaves go, the masters would not be responsible to feed and clothe them, so this would be a way out. They may have also thought if we free these slaves, they will like us and fight for us.

According to **verse 10**, all officials who had servants embraced the covenant and obeyed it and set the servants free. It appears as though the freed servants for the most part stayed in the area, thinking we are now free.

But then as the Babylonians seemed to be staying down in the south in their war against Lachish and Azekah, these same people of God changed their minds.

After they had agreed to the covenant, they turned right back around and reneged and took back their servants and forced them into slavery (**verse 11**). In fact the Hebrew word “subjection” is a very strong word which means they not only took them back, but they subjugated them and treaded them down (F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah/Lamentations*, p. 309).

They took their servants back and treated them worse than before.

PART #3 - God sends His word to Zedekiah and all the men of Israel who broke the covenant.
34:12-22

God is not ever pleased with liars. God does not bless those who go back on their word. You go to some service and promise something before God and don't follow through with what you promised, and it is a very serious matter in the mind of God. Notice **verse 12**, this is the direct revelatory word of the LORD. God sends them four messages:

Message #1 - God made a legal covenant with Israel and freed Israel from Egyptian slavery and every six years you were to free your brothers and sisters. **34:13-14**

God said I made a covenant with you and brought you out of the land of slavery. You should be compassionate because you yourselves were once slaves and I set you free. I commanded you to free these people, but you and your forefathers did not listen to Me.

Message #2 - You did what was right when you made a covenant to free the slaves.
34:15

God said what you recently did pleased Me. You finally did something right. You went to My Temple and you made a covenant that reaffirmed the word and will of God.

In fact, you all told others about the sacred promise you made to free your slaves. You called on My name and you did something consistent with my word. That was good.

Message #3 - You went back on your word and turned away from doing right when you did not release the slaves permanently. **34:16-17a**

God says what you have done is profaned My name. The word “profane” (halal) is a word that means to “pierce”. In fact, this is the very word Isaiah uses in saying that Jesus was “pierced for our transgressions.” So they had unconditionally released their slaves, just like Jesus Christ unconditionally releases us from the slavery of sin and sets us free. The only problem is these people went back on their word and totally disregarded the covenant they made.

Message #4 - God is releasing you to judgment because they did not release their slaves. **34:17b**

God was going to punish them severely. They would face a “horrible fate.” (*Ibid.*, p. 311)
There are seven specific judgments God would sanction against His own people.

(Judgment #1) - God would judge them with the sword. **34:17c**

They cut up an animal so God would let many of them get cut up and killed.

(Judgment #2) - God would judge them with pestilence. **34:17d**

God would let these people get hit with serious sicknesses and diseases.

(Judgment #3) - God would judge them with famine. **34:17e**

God would literally cause some of His people to starve to death. Someone once asked how can you explain a God who would let people starve. Simple---judgment.

(Judgment #4) - God will make His people an object lesson of His anger. **34:17f**

This is not describing a lost heathen world. This is what God would do to His own people.

(Judgment #5) - God will specifically cause the covenant breakers to be killed and their dead bodies eaten. **34:18-20**

God says I will kill these covenant breakers. These men walked between animals and made a covenant. That is serious business in My sight and I will kill every one of them.

This includes the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers, the priests and all the people of the land who agreed to this covenant.

This is not just a national threat, this is individual. God does keep individual records and He does repay.

If there is a key lesson to be learned here it is this - if you go before God and promise something, you better follow through because it makes God angry if you do not. God does not require that we promise something before Him. He does not demand that we promise anything.

God does not require that we make covenant deals with Him. But if you decide to go to church and promise God something, you had better follow through.

(Judgment #6) - God will specifically give Zedekiah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. **34:21**

Now we see what prompted Zedekiah to do this, Babylon had turned away and temporarily had swung their attention to Egypt.

So once the people in Jerusalem felt the threat was gone, they reverted right back to their old ways just like a dog returns to vomit.

(Judgment #7) - God will bring back enemies to totally destroy Jerusalem. **34:22**

God says you have made a fatal mistake in your calculation. You are a covenant breaker and you will reap what you sow. God will not ever be mocked; what one sows, one will reap.

Practical Lessons:

- 1) God is in sovereign control of everything happening to His people - positive and negative.**
- 2) God can authorize blessing and God can authorize cursing.**
- 3) God monitors nations, organizations and individuals.**
- 4) God does not demand we promise Him anything, but if we do promise Him something, we had better follow through with it because if we don't it angers Him.**