

After all the fervent emotion of the prophet Jeremiah throughout the whole book, this is a remarkably emotionless telling of the story.

If you want to hear the same story told in all its pathos, we could pause here and spend a few weeks in the book of Lamentations:  
“How lonely sits the city that was full of people!  
How like a widow has she become,  
she who was great among the nations!  
She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.  
She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers she has none to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;  
they have become her enemies.” (1:1-2)

The book of Lamentations takes five chapters to reflect on the Fall of Jerusalem. After finishing Jeremiah, we will take a year for a catechetical series through the Shorter Catechism. Then, we will come back to Lamentations next year – in order to set up the Ezra-Nehemiah series.

But Jeremiah 39 is a cold factual account devoid of prophetic passion – and totally lacking in the “jeremiad” – the recounting of Jerusalem’s sins.

Indeed, in the whole account of the destruction of Jerusalem in verses 1-14, there is no reference to God – no reference to sin – only a simple, bare, factual account of the events.

Why so simple?  
Because by this point, it would be redundant.  
Jeremiah has been telling us *over and over* that God’s judgment is coming against Jerusalem.

Sometimes you just need to lay out the plain, unvarnished facts.

If you want to compare the fall of Jerusalem with other biblical events, this one is up there with the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the conquest of Canaan.

Though, of course, all of those events were judgments against the *nations*. This is the son of God – the people of God – the temple of God. God is bringing judgment against his *own people*.

There is no other event to compare it to – until you come to the cross of Jesus. The destruction of Jerusalem was a picture of God’s wrath against the sin of his people.

As such, it also points to the cross of Jesus.  
And as God forsook his only Son at the cross,  
so also he turned away from Jerusalem – and remained silent.

## **1. The Final Judgment (v1-10)**

### **a. The End of the 18-Month Siege (v1-3)**

*In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. <sup>3</sup> Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate: Nergal-sar-ezer of Samgar, Nebu-sar-sekim the Rab-saris, Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag, with all the rest of the officers of the king of Babylon.*

As we have seen, the “dated” sections of Jeremiah all come from the period  
after Baruch takes over as Jeremiah’s scribe.  
It would appear that Baruch provides most of the narrative summaries in this section.

The events in chapter 39 take several months to play out.  
There are 18 months in between verse 1 and verse 2.  
But we will find out later – in chapter 52 –  
that there was a whole month after the fall of the city  
before the burning of the houses (referred to in verse 8).  
So this is a highly compressed account of events –  
and many other things happened that are left out.

That means that we should pay attention to what *is* said!

And the first point is that the siege lasts for 18 months!  
Eighteen months.  
For a year and a half Jerusalem was scavenging for food.  
The bread ran out – and the people tried to find anything they could eat.  
Rats, old leather – even dirt – since at least it fills the stomach...

I will refrain from giving all the gory details  
of what people will eat when they get desperate!

Because the text passes over that – and moves straight to the breach of the wall.  
And then we are given the names of the Babylonian officials:  
Nebu-sar-sekim the Rab-saris  
is an official whom we know from Babylonian sources as well.  
Rab-saris means “chief eunuch” –  
one of the most powerful officers in Nebuchadnezzar’s court.  
We also know of Nergal-sar-ezer –  
because he was a high official who, 25 years later, became king of Babylon!  
And “Rab-mag” means “chief magi.”

In other words, we need to see that these are the great officials of Babylon.  
It was not some rag-tag band of outlaws who took down the city of God.  
It was an 18-month siege by the mightiest army of the age.

Remember that, because that will be important in what God says at the end of our passage.

But when Zedekiah sees that the walls are breached, he bolts!

**b. The Judgment Against Zedekiah (v4-7)**

<sup>4</sup> When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled, going out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls; and they went toward the Arabah. <sup>5</sup> But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, at Riblah, in the land of Hamath; and he passed sentence on him. <sup>6</sup> The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes, and the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. <sup>7</sup> He put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon.

Even at the very end, Zedekiah refuses to surrender.  
He tries to escape – leaving the people behind!  
But the army of the Chaldeans sees him – and gives chase –  
finally catching him on the plains of Jericho.

Zedekiah had been installed as King by Nebuchadnezzar  
because his brother and nephew had been too pro-Egypt.  
Nebuchadnezzar had made Zedekiah King  
with the understanding that Zedekiah would be pro-Babylon!

Zedekiah failed to keep his end of the bargain –  
and now he has cost the King of Babylon *eighteen months* of siege warfare –  
not to mention all the hassle of conquering the rest of Judah.

That's expensive.  
And all the plunder in Jerusalem will probably *not* cover the cost to Babylon.

What should the king of Babylon do to the former vassal who rebelled?!  
Zedekiah and his sons, and the nobles of Judah,  
were taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah – about 50 miles north of Damascus.

The LORD had told Zedekiah through Jeremiah in 34:2-3  
“Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon,  
and he shall burn it with fire.  
You shall not escape from his hand  
but shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand.  
You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face.

And you shall go to Babylon.”

And so at Riblah in the land of Hamath,

Zedekiah saw the king of Babylon eye to eye.

And there Nebuchadnezzar passed judgment:

Zedekiah would watch as his sons were put to death before his eyes.

And then he would watch as the nobles of Judah were slaughtered before his eyes.

And that would be the last thing that Zedekiah would ever see!

Jeremiah had told him repeatedly – “you will not listen.”

Zedekiah had refused to hear – or to obey – the word of the LORD.

He refused to hear – and now he would be unable to see.

He was taken in chains to Babylon – and there he died.

There are none so blind as those who will not see!

There are none so deaf as those who will not hear!

Zedekiah did not listen – and so he wound up blind and in chains.

Verses 8-10 then speak of what happens to the people and the city of Jerusalem:

**c. The Judgment Against the People and the City (v8-10)**

<sup>8</sup> *The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the house of the people, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem.* <sup>9</sup> *Then Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, carried into exile to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city, those who had deserted to him, and the people who remained.* <sup>10</sup> *Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.*

It's important to recognize that all of this takes time.

Ch 52 tells us that the burning of the city took place a month after the wall was breached.

So the point is that even as Zedekiah – the Son of David –

is forced to watch his sons be slaughtered –

so now the rest of the people must watch as their city wall is broken down,

and their homes are burned.

In Ezekiel 33:21, a fugitive from Jerusalem comes to the exiles in Babylon and tells them

“The city has been struck down.”

Ezekiel says that this happened in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of their exile, in the tenth month.

In other words, the exiles only received the news *six months* after the fall of Jerusalem.

It would take weeks to wrap up matters and get the caravans moving to Babylon.

And it would take weeks to travel by foot to Babylon.

And it was *not* a priority for the Babylonians to inform the exiles –

so they only learn six months later that Jerusalem had fallen.

Meanwhile Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard,  
has rounded up the rest of the “notables” –  
the landowners –  
those who participated in the resistance,  
as well as those who had deserted to him –  
and prepared to march them off to Babylon.

This was a standard part of Assyrian and Babylonian tactics.  
When you capture a foreign country,  
you cart off its people and resettle them elsewhere –  
preferably some place where you can keep an eye on them –  
and then you give their land as a reward to your allies.  
If the people of Judah behave well,  
then maybe someday they will be resettled in Afghanistan or Turkey!

But don’t ever plan on going “home” again.

It is worth noting that unlike the Assyrians with the northern kingdom of Israel,  
the Babylonians do not appear to have settled many foreigners in Judah.

That’s probably due to the fact that the hill country of Judah is not very attractive land.  
The northern parts of Israel – around the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River –  
are the more fertile and bountiful.  
Judah’s neighbors, Moab and Edom, seem to have allied with Babylon,  
and Babylon was happy to let them plunder Judah as their reward.

But when we say that the Babylonians deported “the rest of the people”  
we need to remember that this does not include the poorest of the people.

Chapter 52 also tells us that only around 800 people were deported.  
The first deportation (when Ezekiel and Daniel were carried away)  
had removed most of the “notables.”  
Now the rest were carried away as well.  
The ordinary folk – the people who “owned nothing” – were left behind.  
And they were given vineyards and fields.

Do you remember what we saw a few weeks ago? (chapter 34 –  
the very chapter where Jeremiah prophesied  
that Zedekiah would be taken to see Nebuchadnezzar?!)  
Zedekiah had made a proclamation of liberty to the slaves.  
He had done what the Law required!  
There was only one problem.  
He didn’t give them any land.

The Law required that the freed slaves be given the wherewithal to *stay free*.  
But Zedekiah had *not* done that.

So now Nebuzaradan – the Babylonian captain of the guard –  
does what the Son of David had failed to do!

Deuteronomy had said that the nations should come to you and marvel at the justice of your laws.  
Instead, it was a pagan governor who does justice for the poor!  
Now the former slaves (those who owned nothing)  
are given the resources that will enable them to rebuild their lives.

God will do justice.  
He may use strange tools sometimes!

That theme of the ‘strange tools of God’ continues in part two of our passage.  
After all, where is Jeremiah in all this?

## **2. Jeremiah and the Remnant (39:11-40:6)**

### **a. Jeremiah Spared by Nebuchadnezzar (v11-14)**

*<sup>11</sup> Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, saying, <sup>12</sup> “Take him, look after him well, and do him no harm, but deal with him as he tells you.” <sup>13</sup> So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, Nebushazban the Rab-saris, Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag, and all the chief officers of the king of Babylon <sup>14</sup> sent and took Jeremiah from the court of the guard. They entrusted him to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, that he should take him home. So he lived among the people.*

Nebuchadnezzar had heard about Jeremiah.

After all, from the Babylonian side, Jeremiah is their best ally!  
Jeremiah had persuaded dozens, perhaps hundreds, or even thousands of Jews  
to abandon Zedekiah and surrender to Babylon!

We should take verses 11-14 as the summary of what happened to Jeremiah –  
the following two oracles then give more detail about the same basic event.

So, for instance, in verse 14 it says that they took Jeremiah from the court of the guard,  
and that the chief officers entrusted him to Gedaliah.

In chapter 40, verse 1, it says that the conversation with Nebuzaradan  
happened at Ramah – several miles north of Jerusalem.

The short version (here in verses 11-14) simply points out that the order came down from the top.  
Do whatever Jeremiah tells you.

When Jeremiah heard that, he must have laughed a bitter laugh!

If only there had been a son of David – a son of Josiah –  
who would have said that to his servants!

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, orders his servants to do what Jeremiah says!

God had said through Jeremiah that those who surrendered would live.  
Jeremiah himself becomes the paradigm of that.

And so he is spared,  
and the officials entrust him to Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan,  
the new governor.  
Once more, the faithful house of Shaphan comes to the rescue!

But we need the next two sections to explain what this means.

But first, we have some unfinished business.

**b. The Word of the LORD to Ebed-Melech (v15-18)**

<sup>15</sup> *The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard: <sup>16</sup> “Go, and say to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 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. <sup>17</sup> 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 are afraid. <sup>18</sup> 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, because you have put your trust in me, declares the LORD.’”*

Verses 15-18 give us the word of the LORD to Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian.

Please pay attention!

Because this is the only word that the LORD himself speaks to Jeremiah at this time.

God has nothing to say to Zedekiah – to Jerusalem – or to any of the Jews.

He only has a word for this Ethiopian eunuch – this African foreigner.

Indeed, we are taken *back* just before the fall of Jerusalem.

And now we hear that Ebed-melech – the faithful Ethiopian eunuch –  
who rescued Jeremiah from the pit –  
from the empty cistern –  
Ebed-melech is promised salvation.

“I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword,  
but you shall have your life as a prize of war...”

Why?

Because you rescued Jeremiah?

Not really.

“...because you have put your trust in me, declares the LORD.”

Sure, Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah *because he trusted God!*

Ebed-melech *heard* and therefore *obeyed* the words of the LORD through Jeremiah!

Trust and obey – for there’s no other way...

But Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, will live –

and 600 years later, his fellow-countryman, another Ethiopian eunuch,  
will reap the reward for his faithfulness!

Why did Ethiopia become of the early centers of the Christian faith?

Because God loves to demonstrate his faithfulness from generation to generation!

And even the eunuch – who has no chance of furthering his own family –  
can become a fruitful tree in the garden of God!

Here at the pit of Jerusalem’s history, there is a future for the one who trusts the LORD.

There are only two words from the LORD in this darkest of Jewish corners.

The first was the word of the LORD to an Ethiopian eunuch.

The last was the word of the LORD *through* Nebuzaradan himself!

After all, look at verse 1 of chapter 40:

**c. The Word of the LORD through Nebuzaradan (40:1-6)**

*The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD after Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he took him bound in chains along with all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon.*

Who speaks?

Not Jeremiah.

He’s done talking!

Now the Babylonian captain of the guard takes his place among the prophets!

Okay, we’ve got a Babylonian King doing what the Son of David is supposed to do.

And we’ve got a Babylonian soldier doing what a prophet is supposed to do.

The next thing you know a Babylonian priest will show up!!

(Surprise, surprise – that *doesn’t happen!*)

Remember that the beginning of chapter 39 highlighted the names of the Babylonian officials.

It showed us that it required 18 months for the greatest army of the day  
to reduce the City of God to ashes.

God has always had a pattern to his revelation.

First, he tells his people that he will do mighty deeds.

Second, he does mighty deeds.

Third, he explains to his people the mighty deeds that he has done.

Nebuzaradan understands this better than you might imagine!

<sup>2</sup> *The captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, “The LORD your God pronounced this disaster against this place. <sup>3</sup> The LORD has brought it about, and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the LORD and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you.*

Jeremiah hears this and says to himself –

“I couldn’t have said it better myself!”



and at that point realizes that he has heard the word of the LORD from Gentile lips!

And then Nebuzaradan sets Jeremiah free but invites him to come to Babylon:

*<sup>4</sup> Now, behold, I release you today from the chains on your hands. If it seems good to you to come with me to Babylon, come, and I will look after you well, but if it seems wrong to you to come with me to Babylon, do not come. See, the whole land is before you; go wherever you think it good and right to go. <sup>5</sup> If you remain,<sup>[a]</sup> then return to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed governor of the cities of Judah, and dwell with him among the people. Or go wherever you think it right to go.” So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present, and let him go.*

You can come with me – stay with Gedaliah –  
or go anywhere you like!

But he gives him an allowance of food and a present.

He is honored by the Babylonians as a friend and a benefactor!

This will do nothing to repair relationships with those who withstood the siege.

Jeremiah will be viewed all the more as a traitor

But

*<sup>6</sup> Then Jeremiah went to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, at Mizpah, and lived with him among the people who were left in the land.*

Jeremiah will not flee.

And he will not resist Babylon.

In taking this stand he remains faithful to the word that he had preached.

As Brueggeman puts it,

“faithfulness to God seems to some to be treason to royal Jerusalem.” (p376)

But Jeremiah never seems to feel the need to defend himself against such a charge.

After all, the word of the LORD has come to pass.

While Jeremiah’s words and actions might be treasonous to the *king* and his cronies –  
he is faithful to the LORD!

Jeremiah’s blithe indifference to the accusation of being pro-Babylonian  
can only be explained by his steadfast commitment  
to hearing and doing the word of the LORD.

Where is God in the destruction of Jerusalem?

According to the prophet Nebuzaradan,  
the LORD is bringing judgment upon Jerusalem.

According to the prophet Jeremiah,  
the LORD is giving comfort to Ethiopian eunuchs.