

Where is God?

For that matter, where is Jeremiah?!

We know from verse 6 of chapter 40 that Jeremiah was living in Mizpah with Gedaliah.

But in our whole text, neither God nor Jeremiah shows up.

Sometimes God is silent.

Sometimes God allows all sorts of awful things to happen.

And sometimes he does not tell us why!

Sometimes you have to wait!

Last time we heard about the fall of Jerusalem very briefly – with almost no detail,
and certainly no emotion!

Now the narrative slows down.

We hear a very detailed account of events that would appear far more trivial.

For two chapters Jeremiah disappears.

This is narrative history – not prophetic oracle!

Not only does the narrative slow down – the narrative shrinks!

In the book of Chronicles the size of the armies are gigantic.

Tens or hundreds of thousands of men are waging war with each other.

Here in Jeremiah the size of the armies are miniscule.

Ishmael defeats Gedaliah with 10 men.

He escapes with 8 men.

Talk about “micro-history”!

And all through our text *place matters*.

So we’ll pay attention to our geography as we go through the text.

Because our text is setting us up for Israel return to Egypt in chapters 42-43.

God had told Israel that they should never return to Egypt.

And yet, the relentless burden of this section of the book of Jeremiah

is to show how intent the remnant of Judah is

to return to Egypt.

All of Israel’s history is going backwards.

Introduction: The Remnant in the Land (40:7-12)

⁷When all the captains of the forces in the open country and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahikam governor in the land and had committed to him men, women, and children, those of the poorest of the land who had not been taken into exile to Babylon, ⁸they went to Gedaliah at Mizpah—Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, Johanan the son

of Kareah, Seraiah the son of Tanhumeth, the sons of Ephai the Netophathite, Jezaniah the son of the Maacathite, they and their men.

Our story begins with the remnant following Gedaliah – the governor.

Gedaliah is repeatedly called “the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan” – reminding us of his connection to the noble house of Shaphan – the family that had repeatedly supported Jeremiah.

Shaphan was the secretary of King Josiah who had read the book of the Law to the King – prompting Josiah’s reforms in 622 B.C. (35 years earlier). Ahikam, Gedaliah’s father, had been a court official in 622 B.C., and had served as one of the messengers sent to the prophetess Huldah. Ahikam had protected Jeremiah, back in chapter 26.

Now his son, Gedaliah, has been appointed governor of Judah.

But Gedaliah is in a difficult position.

He had been one of the deserters – one of those who had left the king and surrendered to Babylon.

Now the king of Babylon has appointed him as governor of Judah.

How will the people of Judah respond?

Our text suggests that (at least at first) they responded very well.

In verse 9 Gedaliah speaks words that are in keeping with Jeremiah’s preaching:

⁹ *Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, swore to them and their men, saying, “Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Dwell in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you.”*

Remember that God is silent.

Before the fall of Jerusalem, God had said through Jeremiah, “Submit or die.”

But now Jerusalem has fallen.

The temple is in ruins.

What does God require of his people *now*?

Indeed, given that they have rebelled against him repeatedly, *will he* protect them now?

The political realities on the ground in Judah are grim.

Any hint of rebellion could call forth brutal retaliation from Nebuchadnezzar.

Their neighboring enemies (Moab, Ammon, Edom)

are watching for any sign of weakness to exploit.

And of course, Egypt remains like the great crocodile in the Nile,

unable to venture far from the River –

but ready with powerful jaws to crush any that come too near!

Gedaliah goes on to promise them that he will protect them:

“As for me, I will dwell at Mizpah, to represent you before the Chaldeans who will come to us.

The Chaldeans – the Babylonians – will come by from time to time,
and Gedaliah will represent the people of Judah at Mizpah.

Mizpah is north of Jerusalem,
on the main north-south route through the hill country
between Jerusalem and Samaria.

It is one of the northernmost cities in Benjamin, on the border with Ephraim.

With the walls of Jerusalem broken down,
Mizpah would be a better seat of government –
certainly it would be easier to protect –
and it communicates to the Babylonians
that Gedaliah is not trying to rebuild Jerusalem.

But Mizpah is also a highly symbolic site.

(Since Mizpah means “watchtower” there are several places called “Mizpah”).

Mizpah is where Israel had gathered at the end of the book of Judges
to bring judgment on Benjamin after the sin of Gibeah (Judges 20-21).

Mizpah is where Israel had gathered twice in the book of Samuel:
Samuel had called Israel to repentance at Mizpah in 1 Samuel 7.
And after Samuel had led Israel in defeating the Philistines,
he set up “Eben-ezer” the stone of help outside the city.

Mizpah is where Saul had been proclaimed king in 1 Samuel 10.

In other words,

when everything was going wrong for the first generation in the land
(in the days of Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the high priest)

Israel gathered at Mizpah –
and the LORD made things right.

When everything was going wrong in the days of Samuel
(after the catastrophes of the judges)

Israel gathered at Mizpah –
and the LORD made things right.

Of course, Mizpah was also one of the fortified cities of King Asa (1 Kings 15)
who had built up the defenses of Judah against the northern kingdom of Israel.

So it’s possible that Gedaliah simply chose the best fortified city still standing!
But symbolically he chose the city where Israel’s great prophet and priest
had gone when facing catastrophe –
and the LORD had made things right.

Now that the kingdom is over – and the great catastrophe has befallen them –
Gedaliah takes Israel back to the days of the Judges – back to Mizpah –
and he calls Israel to heed the voice of Jeremiah.

And he says to the remnant:

But as for you, gather wine and summer fruits and oil, and store them in your vessels, and dwell in your cities that you have taken.”

Remember that Gedaliah is speaking to the poor – those who owned nothing.

Now they have taken possession of cities they did not build, vineyards they did not plant,
and wells they did not dig.

They had nothing.

Now they have cities, houses, vineyards, and orchards!

Maybe he is thinking of how Israel came into the land and dispossessed the Canaanites!

Maybe he recognizes that the rulers of Israel had become like the Canaanites –
and so now the *poor* of Judah and Israel have inherited the land.

Certainly back in Jeremiah 2:6-7

the LORD had spoken of how he had brought Israel out of Egypt
“into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things.”

And, at least at first, it looks like the poor heed the words of Gedaliah!

As we hear in v11-12:

¹¹ Likewise, when all the Judeans who were in Moab and among the Ammonites and in Edom and in other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, as governor over them, ¹² then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah. And they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance.

Hearing that peace has returned to Judah,
the refugees come home.

The city of Jerusalem fell in the summer of 587 B.C.

It was too late for the barley harvest –
the armies of Babylon prevented much planting in the spring –
but the grapes and other summer fruits were in great abundance.

So the refugees return home from Moab, Ammon, and Edom.

But another disaster awaits them.

After all, the silence of God reflects the fact that God has turned his back on his children.

Jerusalem and Judah are now experiencing the wrath of God due to sin.

God had poured out his wrath indiscriminately on all the earth in the Flood.

He had brought his last-days wrath upon the Canaanites in the Conquest.

But now he focuses his judgment on his own people.

Israel – God’s firstborn son –
the house of David – God’s adopted son –
will now bear his wrath.

And not even the faithful Gedaliah can stand in the breach.

1. Love Hopes All Things: The Conspiracy Against Gedaliah (40:13-16)

¹³ Now Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces in the open country came to Gedaliah at Mizpah ¹⁴ and said to him, “Do you know that Baalis the king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael the son of Nethaniah to take your life?” But Gedaliah the son of Ahikam would not believe them. ¹⁵ Then Johanan the son of Kareah spoke secretly to Gedaliah at Mizpah, “Please let me go and strike down Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it. Why should he take your life, so that all the Judeans who are gathered about you would be scattered, and the remnant of Judah would perish?” ¹⁶ But Gedaliah the son of Ahikam said to Johanan the son of Kareah, “You shall not do this thing, for you are speaking falsely of Ishmael.”

Listening to the story of Gedaliah is like watching one of those slow-motion scenes where you see the disaster coming – and you want to shout out to the hero –
“Stop!”

You know by the end of verse 14 that Ishmael will assassinate Gedaliah.
But how do you prevent it?

Verses 13-16 tell us that Gedaliah was warned.

Johanan and Ishmael were both captains of the forces in the open country (v7-8).
These were those troops who had been outside of Jerusalem
during the Babylonian invasion,
and now that the Babylonians are gone,
they provide defense against Judah’s old enemies –
like the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites.

As we see, these soldiers had mixed loyalties.

Johanan was loyal to Gedaliah –
but Ishmael was in the pay of the Ammonites.

Ishmael was the name of Abraham’s older son by his concubine Hagar.
Given that a portion of the Ishmaelites had become part of the Midianites –
who were connected to the Moabites and Ammonites
on the east side of the Jordan –
it is not surprising to find a man named “Ishmael”!

What *is* surprising is that Ishmael was the grandson of Elishama,
“of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king.” (41:1)

We heard of Elishama the secretary back in chapter 36 –
during the reign of Jehoiakim, more than a decade earlier.

But apparently there is intermarriage between the “royal family”
and the Ammonites (or at least someone who likes the name “Ishmael”!).
Since Dt 23:3 forbade Ammonites to enter the assembly of the LORD,
this is not a good sign.
(And in Ezra-Nehemiah we will hear
that the Ammonites became rather influential in Judah during the exile...)

So Johanan came to Gedaliah and warned him of the plot against him.
The Ammonites had hired Ishmael to assassinate Gedaliah.
Ishmael, no doubt, wanted to get rid of Gedaliah in order to further his own ambitions.
There may not be much of Judah left –
but as one of the chief officers,
he undoubtedly thought that *he* – not Gedaliah – would be a better ruler.
The Ammonites had long had designs on Judah,
so now, with Babylon out of the way –
and the house of David out of the way –
the territory of Judah would be an easy target!

But Gedaliah is a trusting soul.
When Johanan comes a second time and offers to kill Ishmael,
Gedaliah refuses.
On the one hand, Gedaliah may be naive.
He is too trusting of Ishmael.
But on the other hand, Gedaliah is *right* to forbid Johanan’s counter-plot.
You do not kill someone because you *fear* what they *may* do!

Love hopes all things.
Yes, such love can get you killed.
And that’s okay!

Gedaliah is that rare political animal –
an honorable man who does what is right at whatever cost to himself.

I wonder how many politicians today would do this?
Of course today we tend to avoid *actual* assassinations.
But *character* assassination has become ordinary.
Do you know any politicians who go out of their way
to defend the reputation of their opponents?

We like to think that those who do what is honorable and right will prosper.
(And *sometimes* they will – because this is still God’s world –
and he designed this world so that what is honorable and right would *work*!)
But when sin and misery have worked their corruption,
then righteousness and honor will result in death.

Gedaliah, the last remnant of the house of Shaphan,

does honor to the family name –
as he refuses to use his power to destroy the innocent –
even at the cost of his own life!

2. Ishmael Triumphant (41:1-10)

a. “As They Ate Bread Together” – the Murder of Gedaliah (41:1-3)

41 In the seventh month, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king, came with ten men to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, at Mizpah. As they ate bread together there at Mizpah, ² Ishmael the son of Nethaniah and the ten men with him rose up and struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, with the sword, and killed him, whom the king of Babylon had appointed governor in the land. ³ Ishmael also struck down all the Judeans who were with Gedaliah at Mizpah, and the Chaldean soldiers who happened to be there.

And so in the seventh month – three months after Gedaliah was appointed governor –
Ishmael struck him down as they ate bread.

Maybe Gedaliah should have been more on his guard.

After all, *he was warned* that Ishmael had evil intent.

But sometimes there is no good way to avoid disaster!

Sometimes the innocent need to walk into the trap and die.

Gedaliah and his family have been faithful throughout the whole book of Jeremiah.

They have done righteousness and executed justice in Judah.

Sometimes you do the right thing and you get stabbed in the back.

If we are following Jesus, then we should expect that from time to time!

The timing of this is important.

It is the seventh month.

The seventh month is the most important month in the liturgical calendar of Israel.

The seventh month opens with the Feast of Trumpets –

the blowing of trumpets to herald the coming of the seventh month.

Then on the tenth day of the seventh month came the Day of Atonement –

a day to “afflict yourselves” (Numbers 29:7) – generally a day of fasting.

Then on the fifteenth day of the month – for eight days – was the Feast of Booths –

the harvest festival when Israel was to bring their tithes and offerings to the LORD.

It’s not clear which feast is in view here in Jeremiah 41,

ordinarily, given the condition of the men in verse 5,

I would say it should be the Day of Atonement,

but given what they are bringing, it could be the Feast of Booths.

Ordinarily the Feast of Booths would be a celebration –

but this year, there is no celebration at the Feast of Booths.

After all, there is no *temple* to bring their offerings to:

b. The Eighty from Israel – Murder and Mayhem in Mizpah (41:4-8)

⁴ *On the day after the murder of Gedaliah, before anyone knew of it, ⁵ eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria, with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed, bringing grain offerings and incense to present at the temple of the LORD.*

Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria.

These are three key cities in the northern kingdom of Israel.

They have not been under the house of David since the days of Solomon!

But after the fall of Israel, Hezekiah had welcomed the remnant of Israel at the temple – as did Josiah, the last good king in Jerusalem.

Shechem was the city where Joshua had renewed the covenant with all Israel (Josh 24) – and the place where Joseph’s bones were buried in the land of Ephraim.

(Shechem was near Mt Gerizim).

Shechem was the city of Abimelech, the son of Gideon, who became king in Shechem (Judges 8).

It was the city where the rebel, Jeroboam, became king of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12).

Shiloh was the place where Joshua divided the land between the tribes of Israel.

It was the city where the ark of the LORD resided during the days of Eli the priest.

it was the last city where the ark of the LORD resided

before it was captured by the Philistines.

“Shiloh” became symbolic of “exile” – because the ark of God had been exiled.

As Jeremiah 26:6 had said “I will make this house like Shiloh.”

And Samaria?

Samaria was the city built by Omri in mockery of Jerusalem.

Samaria was the city where Ahab, his son, built a temple to Baal.

Samaria was the capital city of the Baal-worshippers in Israel –

the city where Elisha lived in the midst of idolatry and corruption.

So Shechem reminds us of the division of the kingdom.

Shiloh reminds us of the exile of the ark.

And Samaria reminds us of the failed kingdom of the Omrides – the house of Ahab.

Representatives of these three cities – these three catastrophic failures – now come to Gedaliah at Mizpah.

They do not come to Jerusalem – because Jerusalem lies in ruins.

The temple is destroyed and the priests are exiled.

So at the appointed time for the feast,

these 80 men of the faithful remnant of Israel

come weeping with beards shaved and clothes torn, and bodies gashed –
all the traditional signs of mourning.

And they bring grain offerings and incense.

Notice that they have no animals.
There will be no burnt offerings or peace offerings.

There is no temple.
There is no altar.

There will be no shedding of blood – no forgiveness of sin –
only grain offerings and incense –
grain offerings as provision for the remnant of the priests and Levites,
and incense as the prayers of the saints
to be offered up to the LORD in their distress.

But Ishmael sees these refugees coming and recognizes them as a threat.

After all, if they are faithful to the LORD, then they will probably be faithful to Gedaliah!
And there are 80 of them – and he only has 10 men!

⁶ *And Ishmael the son of Nethaniah came out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he came. As he met them, he said to them, “Come in to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam.”* ⁷ *When they came into the city, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah and the men with him slaughtered them and cast them into a cistern.* ⁸ *But there were ten men among them who said to Ishmael, “Do not put us to death, for we have stores of wheat, barley, oil, and honey hidden in the fields.” So he refrained and did not put them to death with their companions.*

Ishmael and his ten men slaughter seventy out of the eighty men from the three cities.

The scale again is important.

There were only 80 men coming from *three* cities.

You can only find 25 faithful men in any of these cities.

And ten of them are able to ransom their lives with promises of food stored in the fields.

In verse 9 we then hear about the cistern that Ishmael used:

c. The Ammonites and the Cistern of Asa (41:9-10)

⁹ *Now the cistern into which Ishmael had thrown all the bodies of the men whom he had struck down along with^[b] Gedaliah was the large cistern that King Asa had made for defense against Baasha king of Israel; Ishmael the son of Nethaniah filled it with the slain.*

Jeremiah 2:13 had identified the two evils of Israel:

“they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

We saw this same image come back when Jeremiah was thrown into a muddy cistern.

Now the cistern of Asa has become a tomb.

¹⁰ Then Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah, the king's daughters and all the people who were left at Mizpah, whom Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, had committed to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam. Ishmael the son of Nethaniah took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites.

It is likely that Jeremiah himself was included among the captives.

After all, Jeremiah is one of those who had been committed to Gedaliah by Nebuzaradan. But Ishmael reveals his true allegiance by taking the people to cross over the Jordan to the Ammonites.

If the king's daughters and the last vestige of the nobles of Jerusalem are in the hands of the Ammonites, then the Ammonites will have a leg up on others who would plunder the city!

I want you to think for a moment about the king's daughters.

Given the fact that Zedekiah was 32 years old when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, his daughters would only be children.

Even his eldest brother, Jehoahaz would only have been 45 – so if “king's daughters” is taken to mean the daughters of the royal family, you are still looking at early twenties and younger.

But none of these girls have ever known a day when Jerusalem dwelt in peace.

They grew up in the shadow of Babylon.

18 years before – in 605 BC – before most of them were born
Nebuchadnezzar triumphed over Egypt.

Then, in 597 – when most of them were little girls –
Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem

and carried away many of their older cousins captive.

Now, after 11 years of negotiations and fighting,

Nebuchadnezzar has killed their brothers and captured their father.

Most of their friends and relatives are now marching to Babylon.

You are a ten year girl – who just watched your city burn to the ground.

You are a refugee – helpless and alone –

and only Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan to watch over you.

And now you have watched him be assassinated and thrown into a cistern.

And now you are being forced to march to Ammon.

That's why I refer to our final point as “a world of fear and vengeance.”

With Gedaliah dead, there is nothing noble – nothing honorable – left in Judah.

3. A World of Fear and Vengeance (41:11-18)

a. The Rescue of the Captives at the Pool of Gibeon (v11-15)

¹¹ But when Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him heard of all the evil that Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had done, ¹² they took all their men and went to fight against Ishmael the son of Nethaniah. They came upon him at the great pool that is in Gibeon.

¹³ And when all the people who were with Ishmael saw Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him, they rejoiced. ¹⁴ So all the people whom Ishmael had carried away captive from Mizpah turned around and came back, and went to Johanan the son of Kareah.

¹⁵ But Ishmael the son of Nethaniah escaped from Johanan with eight men, and went to the Ammonites.

But Johanan the son of Kareah will not let Ishmael get away with his dastardly deed.

He and his men came upon Ishmael at the great pool at Gibeon.

(The great pool at Gibeon was a remarkable engineering feat.

It was 88 feet deep – dug straight down into limestone –

with steps leading down the outside – 88 feet down to the water.)

We keep falling into cisterns and pools in our narrative...

Why is Ishmael at Gibeon?

After all, if you want to go to the Ammonites, you go *east*.

Gibeon is about 2 miles *west* of the road from Mizpah to Ammon.

But perhaps the reference to the pool at Gibeon helps us understand.

Remember those ten men who had stores of wheat and barley and oil and honey?

The pool at Gibeon has many secret chambers cut into the rock!

Perhaps Ishmael was trying to cash in on their secret stash!

But for whatever reason,

he winds up at the pool of Gibeon –

the place where Abner and Joab had skirmished in 2 Samuel 2 –

when the people of Israel were deciding whether to accept David as king.

There are only two references to the pool of Gibeon in the Bible.

Both speak of skirmishes between lesser captains at a time of disorder in Israel.

But “skirmish” is perhaps too strong a word for this encounter.

When Johanan arrives, the people rejoice.

And notice that it says that the people turned around and came back –

before Johanan does anything more than show up!

After all, Ishmael only has ten men with him –

or perhaps at this point – only eight!

Verse 15 says Ishmael escaped with eight men.

He only started with ten men.

He lost two somewhere along the way.

Then again, he has killed all the strong men.

Sure, there were 10 men who bought their lives with promises of food.

And there are teenage girls – probably an aged prophet,

and all the survivors of the siege of Jerusalem are still weak and feeble.

But Ishmael escapes.

Johanan does not have enough soldiers to chase down 9 men.

After all, if he pursues them – he may not have time to get away from the Chaldeans!

b. The Fear of the Chaldeans and the Road to Egypt (v16-18)

¹⁶Then Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him took from Mizpah all the rest of the people whom he had recovered from Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, after he had struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahikam—soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs, whom Johanan brought back from Gibeon. ¹⁷And they went and stayed at Geruth Chimham near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt ¹⁸because of the Chaldeans. For they were afraid of them, because Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land.

After all, what will the Chaldeans say?

The Babylonians had appointed Gedaliah governor.

Now their governor is dead.

When the Chaldeans hear that Johanan failed to protect Gedaliah,
what will they say?

So the soldiers, the women, children, and eunuchs go to Geruth Chimham near Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is three miles *south* of Jerusalem.

As far south of Jerusalem as Mizpah is north of Jerusalem.

This gives them a head start if they hear that the Babylonians are looking for them!

Why are they heading south?

Because they intend on going to Egypt!

Jeremiah 2:18 –

“And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile?”

Egypt did not protect them before Jerusalem fell –

what makes you think that anything has changed?

But after all that we have seen about the importance of geography in our story,

can it be an accident that our story ends in Bethlehem,

with preparations for a flight to Egypt?

At Bethlehem a child will be born who finally reverse the catastrophe of history.

Not by the way of Ishmael – not by power and intrigue –

rather he will follow the way of Gedaliah –

the way of surrender and faithfulness –

the way of the cross.