

CHAPTER 34

In this chapter we have two messages which God sent by Jeremiah.

I. One to foretel the fate of Zedekiah king of Judah, that he should fall into the hands of the king of Babylon, that he should live a captive, but should at last die in peace in his captivity (v. 1-7).

II. Another to read the doom both of prince and people for their treacherous dealings with God, in bringing back into bondage their servants whom they had released according to the law, and so playing fast and loose with God. They had walked at all adventures with God (v. 8-11), and therefore God would walk at all adventures with them, in bringing the Chaldean army upon them again when they began to hope that they had got clear of them (v. 12-22).

~~2811~~ JEREMIAH 34:1-7

CAPTIVITY OF ZEDEKIAH FORETOLD

This prophecy concerning Zedekiah was delivered to Jeremiah, and by him to the parties concerned, before he was shut up in the prison, for we find this prediction here made the ground of his commitment, as appears by the recital of some passages out of it, ~~2814~~ Jeremiah 32:4. Observe,

I. The time when this message was sent to Zedekiah; it was *when the king of Babylon*, with all his forces, some out of *all the kingdoms of the earth* that were within his jurisdiction, *fought against Jerusalem and the cities thereof* (v. 1), designing to destroy them, having often plundered them. The cities that now remained, and yet held out, are named (v. 7), *Lachish and Azekah*. This intimates that things were now brought to the last extremity, and yet Zedekiah obstinately stood it out, his heart being hardened to his destruction.

II. The message itself that was sent to him.

1. Here is a threatening of wrath. He is told that again which he had been often told before, that the city shall be taken by the Chaldeans *and burnt with fire* (v. 2), that he shall himself fall into the enemy's hands, shall be made a prisoner, shall be brought before that furious prince Nebuchadnezzar, and be carried away captive into Babylon (v. 3); yet Ezekiel prophesied that he *should not see Babylon*; nor did he, for his eyes were put out, ⁴²³Ezekiel 12:13. This Zedekiah brought upon himself from God by his other sins and from Nebuchadnezzar by breaking his faith with him.

2. Here is a mixture of mercy. He shall die a captive, but he *shall not die by the sword* he shall die a natural death (v. 4); he shall end his days with some comfort, *shall die in peace*, v. 5. He never had been one of the worst of the kings, but we are willing to hope that what evil he had *done in the sight of the Lord* he repented of in his captivity, as Manasseh had done, and it was forgiven to him; and, God being reconciled to him, he might truly be said to *die in peace*, Note, A man may die in a prison and yet *die in peace*. Nay, he shall end his days with some reputation, more than one would expect, all things considered. He shall be buried *with the burnings of his fathers*, that is, with the respect usually shown to their kings, especially those that had done good in Israel. It seems, in his captivity he had conducted himself so well towards his own people that they were willing to do him this honour, and towards Nebuchadnezzar that he suffered it to be done. If Zedekiah had continued in his prosperity, perhaps he would have grown worse and would have *departed* at last *without being desired*; but his afflictions wrought such a change in him that his death was looked upon as a great loss. It is better to live and die penitent in a prison than to live and die impenitent in a palace. *They will lament thee, saying, Ah lord!* an honour which his brother Jehoiakim had not, ⁴²⁸Jeremiah 22:18. The Jews say that they lamented thus over him, *Alas! Zedekiah is dead, who drank the dregs of all the ages that went before him*, that is, who suffered for the sins of his ancestors, the measure of iniquity being filled up in his days. They shall thus lament him, *saith the Lord, for I have pronounced the word*; and what God hath spoken shall without fail be made good.

III. Jeremiah's faithfulness in delivering this message. Though he knew it would be ungrateful to the king, and might prove, as indeed it did, dangerous to himself (for he was imprisoned for it), yet he *spoke all these words to Zedekiah*, v. 6. It is a mercy to great men to have those about

them that will deal faithfully with them, and tell them the evil consequences of their evil courses, that they may reform and live.

~~2808~~ JEREMIAH 34:8-22

TRANSIENT REFORMATION

We have here another prophecy upon a particular occasion, the history of which we must take notice of, as necessary to give light to the prophecy.

I. When Jerusalem was closely besieged by the Chaldean army the princes and people agreed upon a reformation in one instance, and that was concerning their servants.

1. The law of God was very express, that those of their own nation should not be held in servitude above seven years, but, after they had served one apprenticeship, they should be discharged and have their liberty; yea, though they had sold themselves into servitude for the payment of their debts, or though they were *sold by the judges* for the punishment of their crimes. This difference was put between their brethren and strangers, that those of other nations taken in war, or bought with money, might be held in perpetual slavery, they and theirs; but their brethren must serve but for seven years at the longest. This God calls the covenant that he had made with them when he *brought them out of the land of Egypt*, v. 13, 14. This was the first of the judicial laws which God gave them (⁴⁰²¹Exodus 21:2), and there was good reason for this law.

(1.) God had put honour upon that nation, and he would have them thus to preserve the honour of it themselves and to put a difference between it and other nations.

(2.) God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and he would have them thus to express their grateful sense of that favour, by letting those go to whom their houses were *houses of bondage*, as Egypt had been to their forefathers. That deliverance is therefore mentioned here (v. 13) as the ground of that law. Note, God's compassions towards us should engage our compassions towards our brethren; we must release as we are released, forgive as we are forgiven, and relieve as we are relieved. And this is

called *a covenant*; for our performance of the duty required is the condition of the continuance of the favours God has bestowed.

2. This law they and their fathers had broken. Their worldly profit swayed more with them than God's command or covenant. When their servants had lived seven years with them they understood their business, and how to apply themselves to it, better than they did when they first came to them, and therefore they would then by no means part with them, though God himself by his law had made them free: *Your fathers hearkened not to me* in this matter (v. 14), so that from the days of their fathers they had been in this trespass; and they thought they might do it because their fathers did it, and their servants had by disuse lost the benefit of the provision God made for them; whereas against an express law, especially against an express law of God, no custom, usage, nor prescription, is to be admitted in plea. For this sin of theirs, and their fathers, God now brought them into servitude, and justly.

3. When they were besieged, and closely shut in, by the army of the Chaldeans, they, being told of their fault in this matter, immediately reformed, and let go all their servants that were entitled to their freedom by the law of God, as Pharaoh, who, when the plague was upon him, consented to *let the people go*, and bound themselves in a covenant to do so.

(1.) The prophets faithfully admonished them concerning their sin. From them they heard that they should let their Hebrew servants *go free*, v. 10. They might have read it themselves in the book of the law, but did not, or did not heed it, therefore the prophets told them what the law was. See what need there is of the preaching of the word; people must hear the word preached because they will not make the use they ought to make of the word written.

(2.) All orders and degrees of men concurred in this reformation. The *king*, and the *princes*, and *all the people*, agreed to *let go their servants*, whatever loss or damage they might sustain by so doing. When the king and princes led in this good work the people could not for shame but follow. The example and influence of great men would go very far towards extirpating the most inveterate corruptions.

(3.) They bound themselves by a solemn oath and covenant that they would do this, whereby they engaged themselves to God and one another.

Note, What God has bound us to by his precept, it is good for us to bind ourselves to by our promise. This covenant was very solemn: it was made in a sacred place, *made before me, in the house which is called by my name* (v. 15), in the special presence of God, the tokens of which, in the temple, ought to strike an awe upon them and make them very sincere in their appeals to him. It was ratified by a significant sign; they *cut a calf in two, and passed between the parts thereof* (v. 18, 19) with this dreadful imprecation, “Let us be in like manner cut asunder if we do not perform what we now promise.” This calf was probably offered up in sacrifice to God, who was thereby made a party to the covenant. When God covenanted with Abraham, for the ratification of it, a *smoking furnace* and a *burning lamp passed between the pieces* of the sacrifice, in allusion to this federal rite, ^{<157>}Genesis 15:17. Note, In order that we may effectually oblige ourselves to our duty, it is good to alarm ourselves with the apprehensions of the terror of the wrath and curse to which we expose ourselves if we live in the contempt of it, that wrath which will *cut sinners asunder* (^{<151>}Matthew 24:51), and sensible signs may be of use to make the impressions of it deep and durable, as here.

(4.) They conformed themselves herein to the command of God and their covenant with him; they did *let their servants go*, though at this time, when the city was besieged, they could very ill spare them. Thus they did *right in God's sight*, v. 15. Though it was their trouble that drove them to it, yet he was well pleased with it; and if they had persevered in this act of *mercy to the poor*, to their poor servants, it might have been a lengthening of their tranquillity, ^{<107>}Daniel 4:27.

II. When there was some hope that the siege was raised and the danger over they repented of their repentance, undid the good they had done, and forced the servants they had released into their respective services again.

1. The *king of Babylon's army* had now *gone up from them*, v. 21. Pharaoh was bringing an army of Egyptians to oppose the progress of the king of Babylon's victories, upon the tidings of which the Chaldeans raised the siege for a time, as we find, ^{<157>}Jeremiah 37:5. *They departed from Jerusalem*. See how ready God was to put a stop to his judgments, upon the first instance of reformation, so slow is he to anger and so swift to show mercy. As soon as ever they let their servants go free God let them go free.

2. When they began to think themselves safe from the besiegers they made their servants come back into subjection to them, v. 11, and again v. 16. This was a great abuse to their servants, to whom servitude would be more irksome, after they had had some taste of the pleasures of liberty. It was a great shame to themselves that they could not keep in a good mind when they were in it. But it was especially an affront to God; in doing this they *polluted his name*, v. 16. It was a contempt of the command he had given them, as if that were of no force at all, but they might either keep it or break it as they thought fit. It was a contempt of the covenant they had made with him, and of that wrath which they had imprecated upon themselves in case they should break that covenant. It was jesting with God almighty, as if he could be imposed upon by fallacious promises, which, when they had gained their point, they would look upon themselves no longer obliged by. it was *lying to God with their mouths* and *flattering him with their tongues*. It was likewise a contempt of the judgments of God and setting them at defiance; as if, when once the course of them was stopped a little and interrupted, they would never proceed again and the judgment would never be revived; whereas reprieves are so far from being pardons that if they be abused thus, and sinners take encouragement from them to return to sin, they are but preparatives for heavier strokes of divine vengeance.

III. For this treacherous dealing with God they are here severely threatened. *Be not deceived; God is not mocked*. Those that think to put a cheat upon God by a dissembled repentance, a fallacious covenant, and a partial temporary reformation, will prove in the end to have put the greatest cheat upon their own souls; for *the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God*. it is here threatened, with an observable air of displeasure against them,

1. That, since they had not given liberty to their servants to go where they pleased, God would give all his judgments liberty to take their course against them without control (v. 17): *You have not proclaimed liberty to your servants*. Though they had done it (v. 10), yet they might truly be said not to have done it, because they did not stand to it, but undid it again; and *factum non dicitur quod non perseverat* — *that is not said to be done which does not last*. The righteousness that is forsaken and turned away from shall be forgotten, and *not mentioned* any more than if it had never been, ²³⁸²⁴ Ezekiel 18:24. “*Therefore I will proclaim a liberty for you; I will discharge you from my service, and put you out of my protection, which*

those forfeit that withdraw from their allegiance. You shall have liberty to choose which of these judgments you will be cut off by, *sword, famine, or pestilence;*” such a liberty as was offered to David, which put him into a *great strait*, ~~1214~~ 2 Samuel 24:14. Note, Those that will not be in subjection to the law of God put themselves into subjection to the wrath and curse of God. But this shows what liberty to *sin* really — it is but a liberty to the sorest judgments.

2. That, since they had brought their servants back into confinement in their houses, God would *make them to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth*, where they should live in servitude, and, being strangers, could not expect the privileges of free-born subjects.

3. That, since they had broken the covenant which they ratified by a solemn imprecation, God would bring on them the evil which they imprecated upon themselves in case they should break it. out of their own mouth will he judge them, and so shall their doom be; the penalty of their bond shall be recovered, because they have not performed the condition; for so some read v. 18, “*I will make the men which have transgressed my covenant as the calf which they cut in twain; I will divide them asunder as they divided it asunder.*”

4. That, since they would not let go their servants out of the hands, God would deliver them into the hands of those that hated them, even *the princes* and nobles both *of Judah and Jerusalem* (of the country and of the city), *the eunuchs* (chamberlains, or great officers of the court), *the priests, and all the people*, v. 19. They had all dealt treacherously with God, and therefore shall all be involved in the common ruin without exception. They shall all be *given unto the hand of their enemies, that seek*, not their wealth only, or their service, but *their life*, and they shall have what they seek; but neither shall that content them: when they have their lives they shall leave *their dead bodies* unburied, a loathsome spectacle to all mankind and an easy prey to *the fowls and beasts*, a lasting mark of ignominy being hereby fastened on them, v. 20.

5. That, since they had emboldened themselves in returning to their sin, contrary to their covenant, by the retreat of the Chaldean army from them, God would therefore bring it upon them again: “They have now *gone up from you*, and your fright is over for the present, but I *will command them to face about as they were; they shall return to this city, and take it and burn it,*” v. 22. Note,

(1.) As confidence in God is a hopeful presage of approaching deliverance, so security in sin is a sad omen of approaching destruction.

(2.) When judgments are removed from a people before they have done their work, leave them, but leave them unhumbled and unreformed, it is *cum animo revertendi* — *with a design to return*; they do but retreat to come on again with so much the greater force; for when God judges he will overcome.

(3.) It is just with God to disappoint those expectations of mercy which his providence had given cause for when we disappoint those expectations of duty which our professions, pretensions, and fair promises, had given cause for. If we repent of the good we had purposed, God will repent of the good he had purposed. *With the froward thou will show thyself froward.*