

CHAPTER 21

It is plain that the prophecies of this book are not placed here in the same order in which they were preached; for there are chapters after this which concern Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jeconiah, who all reigned before Zedekiah, in whose reign the prophecy of this chapter bears date. Here is,

I. The message which Zedekiah sent to the prophet, to desire him to enquire of the Lord for them (v. 1, 2).

II. The answer which Jeremiah, in God's name, sent to that message, in which,

- 1.** He foretels the certain and inevitable ruin of the city, and the fruitlessness of their attempts for its preservation (v. 3-7).
- 2.** He advises the people to make the best of bad, by going over to the king of Babylon (v. 8-10).
- 3.** He advises the king and his family to repent and reform (v. 11, 12), and not to trust to the strength of their city and grow secure (v. 13, 14).

~~201~~ JEREMIAH 21:1-7

ZEDEKIAH'S MESSAGE TO JEREMIAH

Here is,

I. A very humble decent message which king Zedekiah, when he was in distress, sent to Jeremiah the prophet. It is indeed charged upon this Zedekiah that he *humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet, speaking from the mouth of the Lord* (~~442~~ 2 Chronicles 36:12); he did not always humble himself as he did sometimes; he never humbled himself till necessity forced him to it; he humbled himself so far as to desire the prophet's assistance, but not so far as to take his advice, or to be ruled by him. Observe,

1. The distress which king Zedekiah was now in: *Nebuchadrezzar made war upon him*, not only invaded the land, but besieged the city, and had now actually invested it. Note, Those that put the evil day far from them

will be the more terrified when it comes upon them; and those who before slighted God's ministers may then perhaps be glad to court an acquaintance with them.

2. The messengers he sent — *Pashur and Zephaniah*, one belonging to the fifth course of the priests, the other to the twenty-fourth, ^{<329>}1 Chronicles 24:9, 18. It was well that he sent, and that he sent persons of rank; but it would have been better if he had desired a personal conference with the prophet, which no doubt he might easily have had if he would so far have humbled himself. Perhaps these priests were no better than the rest, and yet, when they were commanded by the king, they must carry a respectful message to the prophet, which was both a mortification to them and an honour to Jeremiah. he had rashly said (^{<328>}Jeremiah 20:18), *My days are consumed with shame*; and yet here we find that he lived to see better days than those were when he made that complaint; now he appears in reputation. Note, It is folly to say, when things are bad with us, “They will always be so.” It is possible that those who are despised may come to be respected; and it is promised that those who *honour God he will honour*, and that those who have *afflicted his people shall bow to them*, ^{<334>}Isaiah 60:14.

3. The message itself: *Enquire, I pray thee, of the Lord for us*, v. 2. Now that the Chaldean army had got into their borders, into their bowels, they were at length convinced that Jeremiah was a true prophet, though loth to own it and brought too late to it. Under this conviction they desire him to stand their friend with God, believing him to have that interest in heaven which none of their other prophets had, who had flattered them with hopes of peace. They now employ Jeremiah,

(1.) To consult the mind of God for them: “*Enquire of the Lord for us*; ask him what course we shall take in our present strait, for the measures we have hitherto taken are all broken.” Note, Those that will not take the direction of God's grace how to get clear of their sins would yet be glad of the directions of his providence how to get clear of their troubles.

(2.) To seek the favour of God for them (so some read it): “*Entreat the Lord for us*; be an intercessor for us with God.” Note, Those that slight the prayers of God's people and ministers when they are in prosperity may perhaps be glad of an interest in them when they come to be in distress. *Give us of your oil*. The benefit they promise themselves is, *It may be the Lord will deal with us now according to the wondrous works he wrought*

for our fathers, that the enemy may raise the siege and go up from us.
Observe,

[1.] All their care is to get rid of their trouble, not to make their peace with God and be reconciled to him — “That our enemy may *go up from us*,” not, “That our God may return to us.” Thus Pharaoh (^{Exodus 10:17}): *Entreat the Lord that he may take away this death.*

[2.] All their hope is that God had done wondrous works formerly in the deliverance of Jerusalem when Sennacherib besieged it, at the prayer of Isaiah (so we are told, ^{2 Chronicles 32:20, 21}), and who can tell but he may destroy these besiegers (as he did those) at the prayer of Jeremiah? But they did not consider how different the character of Zedekiah and his people was from that of Hezekiah and his people: those were days of general reformation and piety, these of general corruption and apostasy. Jerusalem is now the reverse of what it was then. Note, It is folly to think that God should do for us while we hold fast our iniquity as he did for those that held fast their integrity.

II. A very startling cutting reply which God, by the prophet, sent to that message. If Jeremiah had been to have answered the message of himself we have reason to think that he would have returned a comfortable answer, in hope that their sending such a message was an indication of some good purposes in them, which he would be glad to make the best of, for he did not desire the woeful day. But God knows their hearts better than Jeremiah does, and sends them an answer which has scarcely one word of comfort in it. He sends it to them in the name of *the Lord God of Israel* (v. 3), to intimate to them that though God allowed himself to be called the *God of Israel*, and had done great things for Israel formerly, and had still great things in store for Israel, pursuant to his covenants with them, yet this should stand the present generation in no stead, who were Israelites in name only, and not in deed, any more than God's dealings with them should cut off his relation to Israel as their God. It is here foretold,

1. That God will render all their endeavours for their own security fruitless and ineffectual (v. 4): “I will be so far from teaching your hands to war, and putting an edge upon your swords, that I will *turn back the weapons of war that are in your hand*, when you sally out upon the besiegers to beat them off, so that they shall not give the stroke you design; nay, they shall

recoil into your own faces, and be turned upon yourselves.” Nothing can make for those who have God against them.

2. That the besiegers shall in a little time make themselves masters of Jerusalem, and of all its wealth and strength: *I will assemble those in the midst of this city* who are now surrounding it. Note, If that place which should have been a centre of devotion be made a centre of wickedness, it is not strange if God make it a rendezvous of destroyers.

3. That God himself will be their enemy; and then I know not who can befriend them, no, not Jeremiah himself (v. 5): “I will be so far from protecting you, as I have done formerly in a like case, that *I myself will fight against you.*” Note, Those who rebel against God may justly expect that he will make war upon them, and that,

(1.) With the power of a God who is irresistibly victorious: *I will fight against you with an outstretched hand*, which will reach far, and *with a strong arm*, which will strike home and wound deeply.

(2.) With the displeasure of a God who is indisputably righteous. It is not a correction in love, but an execution *in anger, in fury, and in great wrath*; it is upon a sentence sworn in wrath, against which there will lie no exception, and it will soon be found what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God.

4. That those who, for their own safety, decline sallying out upon the besiegers, and so avoid their sword, shall yet not escape the sword of God's justice (v. 6): *I will smite those that abide in the city* (so it may be read), *both man and beast*, both the beasts that are for food and those that are for service in war, foot and horse; *they shall, die of a great pestilence*, which shall rage within the walls, while the enemies are encamped about them. Though Jerusalem's gates and walls may for a time keep out the Chaldeans, they cannot keep out God's judgments. His arrows of pestilence can reach those that think themselves safe from other arrows.

5. That the king himself, and people that escape the *sword, famine, and pestilence*, shall fall *into the hands* of the Chaldeans, who shall cut them off in cold blood (v. 7): *They shall not spare them, nor have pity* on them. Let not those expect to find mercy with men who have forfeited God's compassions, and shut themselves out from his mercy. Thus had the

decree gone forth; and then to what purpose was it for Jeremiah to *enquire of the Lord for them?*

~~2018~~ JEREMIAH 21:8-14

ADVICE TO THE KING AND THE PEOPLE

By the civil message which the king sent to Jeremiah it appeared that both he and the people began to have a respect for him, which it would have been Jeremiah's policy to make some advantage of for himself; but the reply which God obliges him to make is enough to crush the little respect they begin to have for him, and to exasperate them against him more than ever. Not only the predictions in the foregoing verses, but the prescriptions in these, were provoking; for here,

I. He advises the people to surrender and ??desert to the Chaldeans, as the only means left them to save their lives, v. 8-10. This counsel was very displeasing to those who were flattered by their false prophets into a desperate resolution to hold out to the last extremity, trusting to the strength of their walls and the courage of their soldiery to keep out the enemy, or to their foreign aids to raise the siege. The prophet assures them, "*The city shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall not only plunder it, but burn it with fire, for God himself hath set his face against this city for evil and not for good, to lay it waste and not to protect it, for evil* which shall have no good mixed with it, no mitigation or merciful allay; and therefore, if you would make the best of bad, you must beg quarter of the Chaldeans, and surrender prisoners of war." In vain did Rabshakeh persuade the Jews to do this while they had God for them (~~2361~~ Isaiah 36:16), but it was the best course they could take now that God was against them. Both the law and the prophets had often set before them life and death in another sense — life if they obey the voice of God, death if they persist in disobedience, ~~6319~~ Deuteronomy 30:19. But they had slighted that life which would have made them truly happy, to upbraid them with which the prophet here uses the same expression (v. 8): *Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death*, which denotes not, as that, a fair proposal, but a melancholy dilemma, advising them of two evils to choose the less; and that less evil, a shameful and wretched captivity, is all the life now left for them to propose to themselves. *He that*

abides in the city, and trusts to that to secure him, shall certainly die either by *the sword* without the walls or *famine* or *pestilence* within. But he that can so far bring down his spirit, and quit his vain hopes, as to go out, and fall to the *Chaldeans*, *his life shall be given him for a prey*; he shall save his life, but with much difficulty and hazard, as a prey is taken from the mighty. It is an expression like that, *He shall be saved, yet so as by fire*. He shall escape but very narrowly, or he shall have such surprising joy and satisfaction in escaping with his life from such a universal destruction as shall equal theirs that divide the spoil. They thought to make a prey of the camp of the Chaldeans, as their ancestors did that of the Assyrians (²⁰³³Isaiah 33:23), but they will be sadly disappointed; if by yielding at discretion they can but save their lives, that is all the prey they must promise themselves. Now one would think this advice from a prophet, in God's name, should have gained some credit with them and been universally followed; but, for aught that appears, there were few or none that took it; so wretchedly were their hearts hardened, to their destruction.

II. He advises the king and princes to reform, and make conscience of the duty of their place. Because it was the king that sent the message to him, in the reply there shall be a particular word for *the house of the king*, not to compliment or court them (that was no part of the prophet's business, no, not when they did him the honour to send to him), but to give them wholesome counsel (v. 11, 12): "*Execute judgment in the morning*; do it carefully and diligently. Those magistrates that would fill up their place with duty had need rise betimes. Do it quickly, and do not delay to do justice upon appeals made to you, and tire out poor petitioners as you have done. Do not lie in your beds in a morning to sleep away the debauch of the night before, nor spend the morning in pampering the body (as those princes, ²¹⁰⁶Ecclesiastes 10:16), but spend it in the despatch of business. You would be delivered out of the hand of those that distress you, and expect that therein God should do you justice; see then that you do justice to those that apply to you, and *deliver them out of the hand of their oppressors, lest my fury go out like fire* against you in a particular manner, and you fare worst who think to escape best, *because of the evil of your doings*." Now,

1. This intimates that it was their neglect to do their duty that brought all this desolation upon the people. It was the *evil of their doings* that kindled the fire of God's wrath. Thus plainly does he deal even with the *house of*

the king; for those that would have the benefit of a prophet's prayers must thankfully take a prophet's reproofs.

2. This directs them to take the right method for a national reformation. The princes must begin, and set a good example, and then the people will be invited to reform. They must use their power for the punishment of wrong, and then the people will be obliged to reform. He reminds them that they are *the house of David*, and therefore should tread in his steps, who executed judgment and justice to his people.

3. This gives them some encouragement to hope that there may yet be a lengthening of their tranquillity, ²¹⁰² Daniel 4:27. If any thing will recover their state from the brink of ruin, this will.

III. He shows them the vanity of all their hopes so long as they continued unreformed, v. 13, 14. Jerusalem is an *inhabitant of the valley*, guarded with mountains on all sides, which were their natural fortifications, making it difficult for an army to approach them. It is a *rock of the plain*, which made it difficult for an enemy to undermine them. These advantages of their situation they trusted to more than to the power and promise of God; and, thinking their city by these means to be impregnable, they set the judgments of God at defiance, saying, "*Who shall come down against us? None of our neighbours dare make a descent upon us, or, if they do, who shall enter into our habitations?*" They had some colour for this confidence; for it appears to have been the sense of all their neighbours that no enemy could force his way into Jerusalem, ²¹⁰² Lamentations 4:12. But those are least safe that are most secure. God soon shows the vanity of that challenge, *Who shall come down against us?* when he says (v. 13), *Behold, I am against thee*. They had indeed by the wickedness driven God out of their city when he would have tarried with them as a friend; but they could not by their bulwarks keep them out of their city when he came against them as an enemy. If God be for us, who can be against us? But, if he be against us, who can be for us, to stand us in any stead? Nay, he comes against them not as an enemy that may lawfully and with some hope of success be resisted, but as a judge that cannot be resisted; for he says (v. 14), *I will punish you*, by due course of law, *according to the fruit of your doings*, that is, according to the merit of them and the direct tendency of them. That shall be brought upon you which is the natural product of sin. Nay, he will not only come with the anger of an enemy and the justice of a judge, but with the force of a

consuming fire, which has no compassion, as a judge sometimes has, nor spares any thing combustible that comes in its way. Jerusalem has become a forest, in which God will *kindle a fire* that shall consume all before it; for our God is himself *a consuming fire*; and *who is able to stand in his sight* when once he is angry?