
August 22 : Scriptures Jeremiah 39-41

SUMMARY

We now reach the moment when the Babylonian army conquers Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army arrived and laid siege to the city in the 10th month of King Zedekiah's 9th year. Six months later, on the 9th day of the 4th month, Tammuz, Jerusalem's walls were breached. Twenty-eight days later, on the 9th day of the 5th month, Av (Tisha B'Av) the First Temple was destroyed.

The account is sad and straightforward. The walls are breached, and King Nebuchadnezzar's officials sit down in the Middle Gate, a sign that they're now in charge. King Zedekiah tries to escape, is captured, and brought to King Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. Riblah is north of Damascus and was used as a staging ground for the Babylonian forces at the intersection of military routes. Nebuchadnezzar executes his rebel king's sons before Zedekiah's eyes, then blinds him, so his sons' deaths are the last thing he sees (39:6-7). Per the Lord's words through Jeremiah, the Babylonians (Chaldeans) destroy the palace, the houses, and the city walls. They deport the rest of the people except the poorest, to whom the army gives lands and fields.

What about Jeremiah? Nebuchadnezzar gives orders for the prophet to be spared. How did King Neb know about Jeremiah? It's possible King Neb heard about Jeremiah from the letters he sent to the Judahites that the Babylonian king had previously exiled. Those letters told the Judahite exiles to settle in for the 70-year stay and seek the good of Babylon. But that's speculation. King Neb's officials release Jeremiah and place him in Gedaliah's hands to take him home. Hey! Do you remember the guy who had been instrumental in removing Jeremiah from the muddy cistern in chapter 38, "Ebed-melech, a Cushite court official in the king's palace?" The Lord tells him through Jeremiah that the Lord will keep him safe. See? It's a good thing to be nice to God's prophets.

Speaking of that, chapter 40 has a curious scene. Nebuzaradan, captain of the guards, releases Jeremiah at Ramah, just north of Jerusalem, and gives Jeremiah the option of coming to Babylon with him or going where he wants to go. However, Nebuzaradan changes his mind and tells Jeremiah to either stick with Gedaliah, Judah's new governor, or go where he wants (40:5). Jeremiah throws his lot in with the governor. But here's what caught my eye. Nebuzaradan tells Jeremiah what Jeremiah has been telling the people. Nebuzaradan knows he and the Babylonian army are on a mission from God (40:3) and that it had been prophesied. Imagine that! The Gentile had more faith in God than God's people, who were now suffering under the fulfilled Lord's word.

With Gedaliah as the vassal governor of Babylon, guerilla forces came out of hiding to see Gedaliah at Mizpah. He advised them wisely to settle in the cities they had captured, harvest the summer fruits, and begin to receive the returning Judahite refugees who had fled (40:9-12). During that time, Johanan, son of Kareah, and all the commanders of the armies in the countryside inform the king that Ishmael, son of Netheniah, was no friend or ally. They tell Gedaliah that Ishmael was an Ammonite assassin sent by the Ammonite king to dispatch Judah's new governor. Ishmael probably had other motives as well. He was of the Davidic line, so he could have conspired with the Ammonite king to retake Judah's throne, and Ammon would support him. Ishmael also hadn't agreed with Jeremiah about surrendering to the Babylonians. Despite his officials' warning, Gedaliah refused to believe Ishmael was dangerous. Boy, was Gedaliah fatally wrong!

In chapter 41, Ishmael and ten warriors assassinate governor Gedaliah during a meal, a big faux pax regarding Middle Eastern hospitality. They could have at least waited until after dessert. Depending on how you figure it, this killing happened three months after Jerusalem's fall or five years later (582 B.C.) in connection with another wave of exile. Ishmael's big problem is that Gedaliah had been installed as vassal governor by King Nebuchadnezzar. An attack on King Neb's representative and the resident Chaldean soldiers is an attack on Babylon and a declaration of rebellion (41:2-3). Ishmael then attacks eighty worshippers on a pilgrimage to what's left of the Temple. After that, he captures the people of Mizpah, including daughters from Judah's royal family, and flees to Ammon. Apparently, Ishmael wants to establish Judah's royal line in exile (in Ammon).

Long story short, the good guys, led by Johanan, son of Kareah, show up. Ishmael's captives turn and run to their rescuers while Ishmael and his team flee east across the Jordan to Ammon. However, the good guys are afraid they'll be on the chopping block when Nebuchadnezzar discovers the assassination because they have Judahite soldiers and officials in the group. Their solution? RUN! ("I hear Egypt is lovely this time of year.") They move from Mizpah south to Geruth Chimham, near Bethlehem, where they prepare to make their break for Egypt. And we're left with a cliffhanger!

INSIGHT

We might not like the situation in which we find ourselves. But if the Lord has placed us there or allowed it for His purpose, we'd be wise not to fight it. Seek the Lord about it. If He tells you to stay put and do your best, don't fret. He hasn't left you. Your greater obedience is following His word, even if it seems counterintuitive.

August 23 : Scriptures Jeremiah 42-44

SUMMARY

When you were a kid and knew your mom didn't want you to have a snack before dinner, did you ask her or just grab a snack? Don't lie. I was a kid, too. We learned early not to ask questions we didn't want to be answered (42:1-3). This scenario is the case with the remnant from Judah that fled toward Egypt that had stopped at Geruth Chimham, near Bethlehem, in chapter 41. Here's another good piece of advice. Don't ask the Lord for guidance if you're not going to obey (42:5-6). Judah's escaping remnant is faced with a choice – stay in Judah and possibly be falsely punished for Gedaliah's assassination or run to Egypt out of Babylon's reach. So they ask Jeremiah what to do.

Here's another piece of advice. Follow the Lord's plan to stay safe (42:10-12). "Trust me," says the Lord, "even though it seems against your human reasoning." Or you could ignore the Lord's plan, and you're guaranteed to find trouble (42:13-14). Yehovah even gives them a warning and reason why they should heed His guidance. Disobedience = death. What *you* think is safe is fatal (42:15-17).

Furthermore, don't think you can run from the Lord's judgment. Disobeying God's word brought His judgment upon His people in Jerusalem. The remnant of His people are still bound to His word and will suffer the same fate, just in a different locale (42:18). However, both the Lord and Jeremiah know the people will disobey because they trust themselves and their understanding more than the Lord and His understanding (42:20-22).

What do the people decide to do? Exactly what Jeremiah knew they would do. In their arrogance, they figured they would run into the fire if they returned to Judah as Yehovah told them to do. But they were running *into* the fire instead because Babylon had set its eye on Egypt to conquer it. What's amazing to me is they blame Jeremiah's scribe and representative, Baruch, and the instigator of the bad advice when they already had the evidence that Jeremiah was the one who spoke with God (43:3). And so, the arrogant foolish leadership led everyone away to Egypt, including Jeremiah and Baruch. "They chose... poorly." (Hat tip to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.)

And now, another object lesson. Jeremiah lays down paving stones at Tahpanhes, Egypt, where the refugees stopped. They aren't escaping the Lord's judgment, only preceding it. The King of Babylon will set his chair in that precise spot and oversee Egypt's destruction (43:8-13), just as he did when the Babylonian king set his chair at Riblah and dispatched his army to wipe out Judah.

In chapter 44, Jeremiah releases the Lord's prophetic declaration against the Jews who fled to Egypt. It's the same message. They saw the Lord bring judgment against Judah for their compatriots' unrepentant idolatry. Now they've left Judah, but not their idolatry (44:7), endangering the few numbers that remain of Judah's remnant. Since they refused to listen to Yehovah and disobeyed Him, they'll get the same thing in Egypt they just went through in Judah and will experience the very thing they feared would happen after Gedaliah's assassination. Barely a few will survive the Egyptian sojourn (44:14).

But the people again reject Jeremiah's word. Why? They believe it's because they *stopped* worshipping idols (or so they think) at Jeremiah's word, not *because* of their idolatry. They "stopped" their idolatry, and trouble fell. Therefore, it wasn't the Lord *but their idol gods that caused Judah's destruction because they stopped worshipping Baal* (44:18-19). Well, they have the right cause, just not the right reason or Judge. Jeremiah rebukes the men for not restraining and stopping their wives from idolatry, and the women respond that their husbands approve of their worship.

Then comes Yehovah's final word to them. "You women have spoken, and your husbands have confirmed it by your actions. Fine! Then carry on! I'm giving you over to your idolatry. The remnant here in Egypt will be virtually wiped out (as their idolatry is too deep-seated to salvage them)." The Lord's word through Jeremiah will be confirmed when King Neb advances into Egypt and kills Pharaoh Hophra. You'll know, but by then, it will be too late.

INSIGHT

Why do we doubt the Lord? He lives *outside* of time and knows everything in the past, present, and future. He knows what's coming with complete knowledge, especially when it has to do with His plans for us. Therefore, let's ask Him with boldness for guidance and cultivate an absolute commitment to obey Him when He answers. I've often quoted Proverbs 3:5-6 to myself and others. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight." Even if we don't get a direct answer from Jesus, He is absolutely able to steer us according to His will and our best interests. Trust Him!

August 24 : Scriptures Jeremiah 45-47

SUMMARY

Chapter 45 is concise but very interesting in Jeremiah. Evidently, Baruch has been complaining to himself about how hard it's been to serve Jeremiah the prophet. As you've already read, the people attacked not only Jeremiah but Baruch as well. They've gone so far as to accuse Baruch of being the prophetic puppet master behind Jeremiah. See? It's not just the ministry headliners that take the heat. I'm sure Baruch wanted rewards for his service to the famous prophet, but it shall not be the reward he thought it'd be. His reward is the same as all the Judahites who trust God – they get to keep their lives and earn a free trip to Babylon. The situation in Jerusalem is not the time for reward but faithfulness and gratitude.

Chapter 46 begins a final section of Jeremiah involving prophecies against the nations and a "Fall of Jerusalem" epilogue. Up to bat first is the country we left off with in chapter 44 – Egypt. This word is against Egypt and Pharaoh Neco, "which was defeated at Carchemish on the Euphrates River by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the fourth year of Judah's King Jehoiakim son of Josiah" (46:2). Pharaoh Neco defeated and killed Judah's King Josiah in 607 B.C. at Megiddo, a city in the midsection of Israel that was at the intersection of major trade routes in the land. This junction would be the logical place to engage an enemy passing through one's land.

This prophecy is against Neco's successor, Neco II, who swept out of Egypt through Israel and attempted, along with the Assyrians, to stop the Babylonians in 605 B.C. at the battle of Carchemish. Egypt's army quickly fell apart and was soundly defeated (46:5-6). Even though Egypt had surged as a world power, depicted as the Nile rising and flooding (46:7), and received mercenaries from Cush (Ethiopia) and Put (Libya), and Lud (in Asia Minor) (46:9), they were no match for the Babylonians. Pharaoh Neco II thought he could conquer the entire region (46:8). But no. Pharaoh Neco II's soldiers would return to Egypt and blame their Pharaoh as "all talk" and for missing a prime opportunity (46:17). Instead, it will be little "horsefly" Babylon that will take down Egypt and deport the people as they had done with Judah (46:19). Babylon will cut down Egypt's defenders like loggers taking down a forest of trees (46:23). However, though Egypt would sustain a grievous national tragedy, the nation will one day be repopulated (46:26).

Speaking of exile, Yehovah offers a comforting word to Israel (Jacob). He hasn't forgotten them and will fulfill His word to bring them home (46:27). The Lord will punish the nations after He has punished His people with justice.

Chapter 47 brings a prophecy against Israel's enemies, the Philistines. The rising water is Babylon, maintaining the picture of a rising river overflowing its banks. The Nile represents Egypt, and the Euphrates represents Babylon. Babylon will defeat Tyre and Sidon (the Lebanon area today), thus cutting off the Philistines' valuable allies (47:4). Babylon is again being used as the Lord's punishment against the nations in the region (47:7)

INSIGHT

It never ends. Nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom. It's humanity's never-ending search for power and conquest over others. And yet, what we learn from these prophecies is the Lord is in control. What peoples and leaders assumed was just the whim of other leaders, the Lord was behind it all for His purposes. As I watch the news and what's happening in the world today, I wonder how much (not if) God is orchestrating the conflicts today to encourage, discipline, and judge the global community.

The United States has allowed over 65 million abortions and tolerated injustice and corruption in our society and governments, and who knows how many ungodly (and anti-God) actions have been in the last 60 years. Seeing how Yehovah judged the nations in the past makes me fearful and wonder how soon we'll face our national judgment day.

August 25: Scriptures Jeremiah 48-49

SUMMARY

In today's chapters 48-49, Yehovah pronounces judgments on Israel's neighbors. Chapter 48 addresses Moab (east of the Jordan River). Chapter 49 addresses – Ammon (east of the Jordan, Edom (south of the Dead Sea), Damascus (in modern-day Syria), Kedar (Arabs east of Ammon), Hazor (a city in northern Israel), and Elam (Persia; modern-day Iran). Remember, Moab and Ammon were Abraham's nephew (Lot's) grandsons by Lot's daughters after Sodom and Gomorrah. Edom is another name from Esau, Jacob's older brother, whose descendants have animosity toward their kin. Damascus and the Arabs have a traditional dislike for Israel. Hazor was controlled by the people the Assyrians "imported" to replace the Israelites the empire exiled.

Moab's woe is about Babylon arriving to conquer Moab (48:40). Many towns and cities are mentioned as the targets of God's judgment: Nebo, Kiriathaim, Heshbon, Horonaim, etc. Chemosh is the despicable Moabite god that the Moabites worshiped via human sacrifice, primarily child sacrifice (48:7). Moab will be conquered, crushed, and her people, along with her god, Chemosh, will be exiled (48:3-9). As a nation, Moab has been "left quiet since his youth," i.e., even though Moab was a tribute nation to Israel, no other country has messed it up through exile. But that's about to change. Wine on the dregs is a picture of wine left standing in a bottle or jar for a long time. The dregs are small bits of solids that have settled to the bottom. The taste of the wine stabilizes and remains the same. Not any longer.

Yehovah will use Babylon to pour out Moab (48:11-12) and "empty the jar," empty the land. The Lord is doing this because they worshiped Chemosh and influenced Israel to do the same, for which He judged Israel earlier (48:13). Moab thinks they can take on Babylon, but they'll be humbled and crushed (48:14-20). Yehovah also judges Moab for their pride and empty words (48:29-30). The Babylonians will strip their land of its produce in the process. Yehovah will stop the Moabites from worshiping Chemosh via the Babylonians, shattering the nation like a clay pot (48:38-39). Moabites will try to escape, but to no avail (48:43-46). However, like Egypt, God will restore the Moab when He's through with them. It will come in "the last days." The Hebrew for "last days" is *acharit yom* (ah-cha-reet' yohm, done forget the 'ch' is that guttural, throat-clearing sound). This phrase often points to the Last Days of the End Times, just before the messianic kingdom era starts.

Jeremiah moves on to Ammon in chapter 49, referring to a land dispute between the tribe of Gad and Ammon. Why has Ammon pushed out some of the Gadites and settled in

their God-given land? Was it because there weren't enough Gadites to fill the villages? Yehovah declares a coming day when a battle will ensue, and Israel will take the land out of which the Ammonites were pushed (49:2). Their god, Milcom (Molech, a horrible god demanding child sacrifice), will go into exile along with Ammon's leadership (49:3). Yet, Ammon will be restored.

Edom's turn is next. Per my Study Bible, Edom was known for wisdom (Eliphaz the Temanite, the book of Job), but it didn't seem to serve them well. Yehovah will strip them of their people more than a grape harvester strips his vines (49:7). As the other nations have drunk the cup of the Lord's judgment, so Edom will, too. The Edomites are judged for their pride and the terror they caused Israel (49:16). These verses (49:14-16) are very similar to the prophet Obadiah's (vss. 1-4), which he spoke against Edom. The Edomites think they're out of reach by dwelling in the hills, but the Lord will hunt them down (49:19). Their people will be exiled and their land devastated. Babylon will come like an eagle swooping down from the sky upon its prey (49:22).

Now it's Damascus' turn. Even though Damascus is a city that brings God joy (49:25), they will still be judged. The Babylonian army will burn "the wall of Damascus; it will consume Ben-hadad's citadels" (49:27).

Next, Babylon will attack northern Israel and its tent-dwelling Arab neighbors to the east. They don't have much protection, so their only defense is to run! Again, the result is a desolate landscape after the Babylonians march through,

Finally, Elam gets the word. This prophetic word comes toward the end of Jeremiah's career when Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, is on the throne. Yehovah doesn't reveal who executes His judgment against Elam, but it will come from all over. Elam will be scattered as a nation, and the sword will kill those who flee. The Lord will rule Elam and take down their leaders. However, as with Israel, Moab, Ammon, and Egypt, the Lord will restore them "in the last days (*acharit yom*). So, this leads me to believe that this is likely an End Time prophecy having to do with the Lord's judgment on modern-day Iran.

INSIGHT

If Joel Richardson (*Mideast Beast, The Islamic Antichrist*) is correct, a revived Islamic Empire will arise to threaten Israel in the End Times of the Last Days. The nations (except Hazor) in this section of prophecy are Islamic nations and peoples: Moab and Ammon (Jordan), Edom (southern Israel, Arabs?), Damascus (Syria), Kedar (Jordan or Saudi Arabia), and Elam (Persia; modern-day Iran). Could this apply to Babylonian days and End Time days? It's ambiguous enough to leave the question open to consideration.

August 26: Scriptures Jeremiah 50-52

SUMMARY

We now conclude the prophecies against the nations with a climactic word against Babylon, God's instrument of judgment. In chapter 50, Jeremiah jumps right to it – Babylon is captured (50:2). Okay, so there's more. Not only is Babylon captured, but it will be via another nation to its north (50:3), and Babylon's fall will bring about the Israelites' and Judahites' release (50:4). How did God's people get to Babylon? Their leaders led them astray (50:6-7), but now it's time to regather the flock (50:8). The nations from the north (Medes/Persian alliance) will attack Babylon and bring her down because of how she treated God's inheritance, Israel (50:11-12) and rejoiced over their plunder. But Babylon herself will be plundered and desolated (50:13-16).

The following section pictures Israel as a little lamb chased by lions (Assyria, Babylon). The Israelites were familiar with lions and their prey, as it wasn't unusual for the beasts to make their way into Canaan from Africa. Samson and David fought lions (Judges 14:5, 1 Samuel 17:34). The two large empires as pictured as eating Israel and crushing its bones. Yehovah will deal with Babylon in conquering and exiling Judah as He had dealt with Assyria for its part in deporting Israel (50:18). Israel will return to their land and live under the Lord's forgiveness (50:19-20).

Babylon will be invaded and crushed by her enemies. I like how Jeremiah describes it – "How the hammer of the whole earth is cut down and smashed! What a horror Babylon has become among the nations!" We find out that the Lord used Babylon as his tool against Israel, but that was part of his plan, and it was a trap! To judge Babylon for her idolatry, the cause would be how Babylon treated Israel as His mean of judging His people (5:24). Now that Babylon has completed her task, it is time to give her what she gave so many nations around her (50:25-27).

Babylon will be humiliated. Babylon was arrogant, but the Lord will lay the empire and city low (50:28-32). Babylon will be desolated. The Lord of Armies will act against the army He used to discipline Israel. As you read, picture how utterly destroyed and emptied the once mighty city will become (50:35-40). Babylon's attackers, the Medo-Persian empire, will come from the north, and Babylon's downfall will reverberate throughout the region (50:46).

In chapter 51, it appears Babylon will be taken by surprise (51:3), and their soldiers will be unprepared. This fulfillment happened when Medo-Persia staged a sneak attack and entered Babylon through a waterway after they had diverted the water. The Medo-

Persians took the city in one night. Because Babylon's fall is coming soon, God's word to His people is to flee the city. The city is so far gone that there's no way for Babylon to recover (51:8-9).

At last, the Judahite exiles are vindicated (51:10)! Jeremiah accurately identifies Babylon's future attackers, the Medes (51:11), and describes Babylon as "who reside by abundant water, rich in treasures." The city of Babylon straddled the Euphrates River with the Tigris nearby and was undoubtedly a very prosperous, wealthy city. But the Yehovah is God (51:15-16) and not a worthless god of which stupid people make idols (51:17-19). He calls the shots.

Who is the battle club in 51:20-23? Since Babylon is getting the beating, it must be King Cyrus of Persia, and he will now be Yehovah's instrument of judgment against Babylon for all they did to Judah. The Lord will deal with Babylon (51:25-26). And so the armies that have allied themselves with Persia will advance, and the king will get the news his cities are taken (51:27-32). In 51:33-35, Zion cries over what the King of Babylon did to her and asks that it be done to Babylon. "I am about to champion your cause and take vengeance on your behalf," declares Yehovah (51:36). Verse 39 fascinates me because the Lord's fight against Babylon is put in terms of a drunken feast where the celebrants fall and pass out "and never wake up." When we get to Daniel, note that Babylon's downfall one night came during a drunken feast. Pretty cool prophecy, huh? Jeremiah goes on to describe Babylon's fall. It's pretty remarkable that such a mighty city was conquered. As great as it was, its destruction and humiliation are just as great (51:41). And when Babylon is defeated, all those exiles taken will be vomited back out, i.e., released (51:44).

As God will punish Babylon for her idolatry, rampant killing, and for violating the Temple's holy precincts (51:47, 49, 51), it's now time for His people to leave the city. That's a repeated theme in scripture where the Lord calls for His people to separate from those He's about to judge – Noah and the Ark, Lot's family and Sodom/Gomorrah, and Moses and Korah's rebellion, for example. For those who know about the Rapture of the believers when Jesus returns, could we say that the reason is for Jesus to separate His followers from those He's about to judge? Possibly.

Long chapter short – Babylon's going down (51:54-58)! Jeremiah does something fascinating. He writes his prophecy against Babylon on a scroll and sends it to Babylon with the exiles accompanying King Zedekiah. Once in Babylon, the quartermaster, Seraiah, son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, is to read it out loud as a proclamation against Babylon, tie a rock to it, and throw it into the Euphrates. The act prophetically acts out Babylon's destruction (51:59-64). And so end Jeremiah's words.

We come to the epilogue in chapter 52. Twenty-one-year-old Zedekiah came to the throne and was not a godly king. As per the descriptions, we so often see, "he did what was evil in the Lord's eyes." For that reason, in his ninth year as king (30 years old), Nebuchadnezzar and his whole Babylonian army show up on Jerusalem's doorstep for a campout until Jerusalem surrenders. This siege lasts for almost two years. Once the famine and conditions get so bad, the Jerusalemites can't stand it any longer, they make a break for it. King Zedekiah is captured, his sons killed before him, and then he's blinded. King Nebuchadnezzar's commander entered the city, burned the Temple, took the valuable stuff, and broke down the wall around the city to keep it defenseless. He rounded up the leaders and brought them to King Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where they were all dispatched. There are three successive waves of exiles – the 1st (3,023 Jews), eleven years later, the 2nd (832), and five years later, the 3rd (745). The total was 4,600 Jews. Notice the use of the word, Jews. God's people were the Israelites. When Solomon's kingdom split into the north and south, the people were referred to as the Israelites (north) and the Judahites (south). The Judahites were the majority of the survivors, so the term Jew (shortened form of Judahite) came into use as it is today.

And now we have an amazing addendum. King Nebuchadnezzar decides to pardon and honor King Jehoiachin, Judah's 2nd to last king. King Neb promotes Jehoiachin above the other kings in Babylon, lets him dine daily at the king's table, and gives Jehoiachin an allowance. After all that drama!

INSIGHT

Something to think about: Throughout this section, we come across words that say, "It will never again be inhabited or lived in through all generations... no one will live there; no human being will stay in it even temporarily as a temporary resident" (50:39-40). Also, "No one will be able to retrieve a cornerstone or a foundation stone from you, because you will become desolate forever" (51:26). And yet, after Persian King Cyrus overthrew Babylon and its empire, Babylon persisted as a city for the next roughly 700 years until it was abandoned at that time. So how do we figure Jeremiah's prophecy about Babylon's desolation? Not all prophecies happen immediately or elapse over a short period. It took 700 years for the city of Babylon to reach Jeremiah's prophesied state.

August 27: Scriptures Lamentations 1-2

SUMMARY

I don't like to be sad and especially don't like crying. I think it's the embarrassment of my big ugly "cry" face. But there are times when nothing else will do – like funerals, family issues, when my wife is in distress, and being unable to get a White Castle hamburger when I've been anticipating it for days. I know, I know. I'm making light of some very serious situations.

Let's get real. How many of us have experienced a national catastrophe? Hurricanes, earthquakes, massive accidents, and terrorist attacks have rocked the United States throughout our national history. The previous generations experienced the horrors of World Wars, the Civil War, our War of Independence, and the Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars. The closest our nation has come to what Jeremiah experienced was the tragedy of the Civil War. Some areas of the Confederacy were utterly destroyed.

Jeremiah not only saw Yehovah's judgment approach prophetically, but he witnessed in real-time the famine, plague, warfare, atrocities, and other horrendous consequences God had promised.

And now all is silent.

Sometimes, all you can do is cry.

Or raise a lament.

That's what Jeremiah does as he walks through the rubble of Jerusalem's streets and past the burned, blackened, empty, and ruined Temple. His words from the Lord probably whispered in his head, "I will eliminate the sound of joy and gladness from them—the voice of the groom and the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp" (Jeremiah 25:10). And so it was.

As we Cruise Through the Bible along Lamentations, let the somber tone echo within you. There are consequences for rebelling against God. Let the ray of hope fill your soul as we read about God's mercy. There are blessings to embracing God.

Chapters 1-4 are organized like Psalm 119 is. The verses are arranged in acrostics, starting with a Hebrew letter and the following verse with the next letter. Chapter four is an exception, but the verses are still labeled with the Hebrew alphabet. This construction

was likely done to help with memorization and recall. Here's one final point about how Lamentations was laid out. It's written as an acrostic (per my Study Bible) which means chapter 1 parallels 5 as "summaries of the disaster, 2 and 4 "are more detailed descriptions of what took place," and chapter 3 is the core that celebrates God and His mercy amid tragedy.

Chapter 1 focuses on Jerusalem's destruction. Jerusalem is depicted as alone and dejected, emptied of its exiled citizens. There are no more celebrations, the priesthood grieves for the Temple, and the young women grieve for their dead men. Jerusalem is now captive, but it was the people's punishment for betraying God. What was once a splendid city now lies in ruins while her leaders have run from her. She's humiliated and ritually unclean, like a woman stripped of her clothing. She (Jerusalem and the people) never thought the Lord would make good on His threats, but she fell fast when the time of judgment came. Not only did the enemy plunder the city, but they also dared to enter the Holy Temple and defiled it.

Meanwhile, the starving Judahites scrounge for food scraps. Is Jerusalem not to be pitied by the nations who see her destruction? The Lord's burning anger in the form of fiery judgment has struck Jerusalem and incapacitated her. She wears the yoke (enslaved) by her attackers. Her young warriors could not withstand the Babylonian fighters and were overrun like a man stomping grapes in a winepress. Jerusalem/Zion weeps, and no one comforts her. Her neighbors (countries next to Judah) are enemies and are disgusted by her impurity. Is Yehovah to blame? No. "The Lord is just, for I have rebelled against his command" (1:18). Even though Jerusalem's people called out to their idols and allies, they refused to help. Inside and outside the walls, there is only death. Oh, that the Lord would smite the nation that did this, the same way Babylon struck Jerusalem.

Chapter 2 is about God's wrath. "How the Lord has overshadowed Daughter Zion with his anger!" (2:1). This is not a time of God's favor or blessing. Jerusalem was Israel's glory, but now the city has been leveled. As promised, Yehovah has destroyed Judah's houses within and outside the city. He has taken out the leaders (the horn, a symbol of strength) and removed His protection from the city so Judah's enemies could attack. It wasn't the enemy who did this. It was Yehovah who was responsible. Through His instrument (Babylon), He destroyed Israel, its cities, and the Temple. He stopped the yearly feast celebrations and rejected Israel's leaders – king and priest. Rather than a shout of celebration at a feast, there is a shout of victory by Judah's enemies as they tear down the Temple. In His anger, Yehovah tore down Jerusalem's walls and gates, leaving her helpless and vulnerable while her leaders sit in exile. There's no more instruction since the priests are gone, and even the prophets are quiet because Yehovah doesn't speak.

Only some elders and the young women are left to mourn Jerusalem's destruction because of the Lord's wrath.

Jeremiah weeps as he sees helpless babies and infants die from starvation in their mothers' arms, and he's overwhelmed at the magnitude of the devastation. The other prophets saw false visions of God blessing Jerusalem but didn't address the Judahite's sin problem that would have brought them real healing and restored fortunes. The nations that knew Jerusalem's fame look in wonder at how her God treated the city. Israel's enemy neighbors pass by and mock her. This result is the day they had been waiting for – Jerusalem's downfall. But they can't take credit for it. This was the Lord's doing, something He had planned because of Jerusalem's sin. Only by Yehovah's hand could Israel's enemies accomplish their vicious attacks. So let the people cry out for all the havoc they've endured.

INSIGHT

Many churches today preach God's love and mercy at the expense of His holiness and justice, especially when it comes to His people living in obedience to Him. But like the prophets of 2:14, "Your prophets saw visions for you that were empty and deceptive; they did not reveal your iniquity and so restore your fortunes. They saw pronouncements for you that were empty and misleading." How much preaching and teaching today is empty and misleading? I wonder. I don't want to wallow in the "Oh, woe is me!" attitude, but there are times when we must do honest soul-searching to see if some of the troubles we face are from the Lord for the things we've done in rebellion to Him. Divorce, illness, financial problems, relationship conflicts, and the like. What's our responsibility for these things? Yes, the Lord wants us to prosper, but only according to His instruction. May those responsible for the Lord's instruction – the pastors, prophets, and teachers – be faithful with their responsibilities, and may we take our responsibility to learn and obey seriously.

August 28: Scriptures Lamentations 3-5

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 is about God's compassion and is the core of this book. The first twenty verses are Jeremiah's lament about how he has suffered as the Lord poured out His wrath on Jerusalem. Just because he's "God's man" doesn't mean he would have been exempt from what the Lord was bringing to Jerusalem. Yehovah helped him live through it. Not one of us is exempt from life's problems, but the Lord helps us through them, even if they are very painful and bitter situations. Jeremiah's descriptions of what he's been through are descriptive, even to the extreme. And yet, the prophet doesn't dwell on it. Jeremiah looks to the One who sustains him. We should all memorize Jeremiah's great declaration for times of great tragedy and affliction. "Yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! I say, 'The Lord is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in him'" (3:21-24).

God's mercy is always available, always accessible, and always welcome. Even in terrible times, God's mercy is at hand. What should we do? Wait quietly for Him, bear the burden we must, accept the Lord's discipline, and if needed, put up with abuse about which we can do nothing. Why? Because it won't last forever. The Lord will eventually step in at His time and in His way. "Even if he causes suffering, he will show compassion according to the abundance of his faithful love. For he does not enjoy bringing affliction or suffering on mankind" (3:32-33). And for those who are dishing out the suffering, the Lord will deal with them because He doesn't countenance injustice. And if we suffer for our sins, let's freely confess them to God and turn from them.

This situation is where Jeremiah finds himself, in the depths of God's discipline for Jerusalem and His people. Because he took a stand for the Lord as His spokesman, Jeremiah endured many abuses (3:52-54). But Jeremiah called to his God, who saved him from those troubles (3:55-60). Therefore, just as God can save, He can go after Jeremiah's tormentors, for which the prophet prays.

Chapter 4 details the uselessness of human glory, as my Study Bible puts it. In the face of such overwhelming tragedy – babies starving to death – how useless is glory to those in need? Very. The people who once enjoyed fine food and haute couture now sit dirty and destitute in the streets. Their glory didn't prevent that, did it? Sodom and those killed by the sword fared better because they died quickly. Those Jeremiah sees die slowly with much suffering. The only way to stay alive is to resort to cannibalism. Again, it was because of the Lord alone that Jerusalem was overthrown. Many kings in the region

thought Jerusalem was impregnable. Jerusalem's weakness wasn't her walls but her leaders – the false prophets who sinned and the compromised priests' guilt. They shed innocent blood in the city. Therefore, the leaders are regarded as outcasts whom God has scattered. The people looked to other nations for help, but none came to help. The enemy broke into the city and captured "the Lord's anointed," Judah's king, whom the people believed would protect them in their exile. But as we recall, Zedekiah was blinded. The remnant and the exiles had no one left to protect them.

Oh, and Jeremiah has a lament for Edom, Israel's enemy. Edom abused the Jerusalemites as they were being exiled to Babylon and parts east, and Jeremiah pronounces a judgment on them, similar to what Obadiah prophesies. Jerusalem's exile won't last forever because their punishment is complete, but Edom will have their sins exposed and punished.

Chapter 5 is Jeremiah's closing prayer. He describes Jerusalem's sad and hopeless state (5:1-16) and puts the blame where it belongs, "Woe to us, for we have sinned" (5:16). IT's because they sinned against the Lord, "our heart is sick (extreme sadness)... our eyes grow dim (swollen with crying and weakness)." But the Lord is still on His throne. Jeremiah appeals to Israel's covenant King to forgive His people and regather, renew, and restore them *unless* He has wholly rejected them in His intense anger.

INSIGHT

The core of Lamentations is God's compassion. We can always take heart, even in the direst circumstances that we may have brought on ourselves. God is a God of love, true. But let's not forget that He also has tremendous mercy. Mercy means "compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power; compassion, pity, or benevolence" (dictionary.com). Because we've all sinned against God, we need His mercy for salvation from death and continual forgiveness as we learn to live as He wants us to live. Truth: We will sin until the day we die. We will fall short until the day we die. But our Heavenly Father's mercy has given us Jesus as our proxy to take the punishment for sins we commit and provided the Holy Spirit to give us strength to start anew. "Because of the Lord's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness!" (3:22-23)

