

JEREMIAH AND THE BABYLONIANS

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Lessons: Jeremiah 40 to 43

The Prophet Jeremiah was a brave man with a strong love for his country. So deeply did he love his country that he thought nothing of his own life or his own sufferings, if only he might prevail on the people to turn aside from their evil ways and worship the Lord, that they might be saved from the defeat and captivity that must otherwise come upon them. And yet the very people whom he most loved and whom he tried hardest to serve, were those who persecuted him, treated him cruelly, and sought to take his life.

The Babylonians—whose capture of Jerusalem and the carrying away of Zedekiah and thousands of the people captive fulfilled the prophecies of Jeremiah—saw on the other hand that he was a brave man, a patriot, and a true prophet of God. And though they were idolaters and knew not Jehovah, though he belonged to the race of their enemies and was among those whom they had come to punish, yet they respected him for his bravery and his courage. They were kinder to him than all his countrymen. Nebuzaraddan, the captain of the Chaldean guard, set him free from the chains with which he had been bound. He told Jeremiah that could go to Babylon—not as a captive but as a friend of the king, and dwell richly in the Babylonian court—or he could remain in his own country among his own people.

Jeremiah, in spite of all the cruelty his countrymen had practiced against him, still loved them and wished to remain and help them. So he chose to dwell among the poor remnant of the land where he would have to toil hard and undergo many trials with his people. He refused all the ease and comfort and riches of the Babylonian court.

Now one Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, had been made ruler over the remnant of the Jews in Jerusalem by the King of Babylon, and Jeremiah went to dwell with him. But no sooner had the Chaldean army withdrawn than trouble broke out afresh among the wicked Jews. A man by the name of Ishmael, of the seed royal—who had long before fled from his country in its extremity, fearing to meet and defend it against its enemies, and who dwelt among the Ammonites—coveted the throne that had been given to Gedaliah. He came therefore with intent to kill his rival and assume the government. Gedaliah was warned by his friends that Ishmael purposed this wicked deed, but being a just man he refused to believe it without proof and received Ishmael into his house to eat bread with him. Then Ishmael slew him, and quickly gathering an army about him, he captured all who opposed his rule and carried them off to the

Ammonites. But Johanan, a friend of Gedaliah, who had warned him, roused all the rest of the Jews, and they went against Ishmael and delivered the captives out of his hand, although he himself escaped to the Ammonites with eight men.

After this the Jews were greatly afraid of the Babylonians. For they thought that because Gedaliah had been slain, the Babylonian king would come against them again with an army and bring greater punishment upon them. So they desired to flee into Egypt away from the king's wrath. But they pretended that they wanted to have the Lord's permission to do this. So they went to Jeremiah and asked him to inquire of the Lord His will, solemnly promising to abide by whatever he told them.

So Jeremiah inquired of the Lord, and in ten days made answer to them, saying that if they would remain in Judah they need not fear the King of Babylon, because the Lord would protect them and would be with them to build them up. But if they went into Egypt then would He cause the King of Babylon to follow them there with a great army, to capture them, and to slay them, that none of them might return to the land of their fathers.

But although they had promised to abide by the Word of the Lord, when this word came which was against their own wishes they refused to obey it. They accused Jeremiah of speaking falsely, in spite of the fact that all his other prophecies had already come true. And they arose and went down into Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them as a prisoner. Nor did they ever return to their native land, but according to the prophecy of the Lord through Jeremiah they perished in the land of Egypt.

Why do you suppose the Lord wished them to remain in the land? Because they had sworn to serve the King of Babylon, and to remain subject unto him. And having taken this oath, it was very wicked to break it. It is most important that having made a promise, it should be kept. Never think lightly of a promise given. Be careful not to promise that which you cannot fulfill; but having promised, see to it that your promise is kept, no matter how hard it may be. For to keep a promise is to abide by the truth, and to break it is to deal falsely. The one belongs to heaven and is always done by the angels of heaven, while the other is done by the devils in hell. And only those who speak the truth, who love truth more than anything else, and who for that reason will be very careful to keep their promises, and to abide by their covenants and agreements, can come into heaven, even according to the Lord's words: "O Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? He that walketh up—rightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart."
(Psalm 15:1-2)