

A Severe Mercy

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[0 : 00] Now we're continuing our studies in the book of Jeremiah this evening reaching chapters 24 and 25. And you can find that on page 652. You're using one of the Bibles.

On page number 652 we'll read chapter 24 and part of chapter 25. Chapter 24.

The basket had very good figs like first ripe figs. But the other basket had very bad figs so bad that they could not be eaten. The Lord said to me, what do you see, Jeremiah?

I said, figs. The good figs are very good and the bad figs very bad. So bad they cannot be eaten. And the word of the Lord came to me. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.

Like those good figs, so I will regard as good. The exiles from Judah whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes on them for good and I will bring them back to this land.

[1 : 32] I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord and they shall be my people and I will be their God.

For they will return to me with their whole heart. But thus says the Lord, like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. So I will treat Zedekiah, the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. I will send sword, famine and pestilence upon them until they be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.

The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah. That was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, which Jeremiah, the prophet, spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

For 23 years, from the 13th year of Josiah, the son of Ammon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me. Now I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened.

[2 : 55] You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants, the prophets, saying, Turn now every one of you from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever.

Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm. Yet you have not listened to me, declares the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands for your own harm.

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, because you have not obeyed my words. Behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant.

I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.

Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp.

[4 : 10] This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then, after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.

For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them. I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands. Thus, the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand all the nations whom I send you drink, and make all the nations whom I send you drink it.

They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them. So I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it.

And then follows a roll call of the various nations and a final announcement of judgment in the last verse of the chapter. Like a lion, he has left his lair, for their land has become a waste because of the sword of the oppressor and because of his fierce anger.

[5 : 34] Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us. Now, if you could please have your Bibles open at Jeremiah 24 and 25.

We'll have a moment of prayer. Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we pray indeed that that gracious Holy Spirit who inspired these words will speak deeply into our hearts, that he will lead us not only into what the scriptures once meant, but into the eternal word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. I wonder how many people here can remember what they were doing 23 years ago.

Some of you, of course, are far too young to remember. Possibly you weren't even born then. Or if you were born, you probably were too young to remember the year 1990.

For many, in my own case, there have been hugely significant changes over those years, changes in family, changes in jobs, changes in places where we have lived.

[7 : 09] Now, the reason I'm saying this is not to talk about the year 1990, but because in chapter 25, verse 3, Jeremiah tells us for 23 years, from the 13th year of Josiah, the son of Ammon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me.

That is a long, long time to preach a word which was persistently rejected. Jeremiah, as we've often seen, was in despair so many times.

23 years, and the poor guy has another period of time almost as long. It's a frustrating, apparently, fruitless ministry in which he's engaged.

And what I'm going to try to suggest in the next moment is that what the Lord is doing in these chapters is reassuring Jeremiah, reassuring him that he has not been wasting his time, reassuring him that the word has not been empty.

We're coming, I think, to the end of the first major section of this book. I'm saying I think because I am still not clear what the structure of this book is.

[8 : 21] I may be able to tell you when we reach the end of it, if we ever do. Dick Lucas asked me, what are you preaching on just now, brother? I said, the book of Jeremiah.

He said, oh, that will take you the rest of your life. So I don't know how long he expected that I would live. But in any case, it seems to me we are coming to the end of the first major section, which has not been chronological but thematic.

This is what it was like to be a prophet in Judah as exile loomed. This is showing the sheer persistence of unbelief from a variety of angles, an irreversible breakdown of the relationship between the Lord and his people.

Jeremiah has exhausted all the resources of language, imagery, pictorial language, all kinds of words he has used to bring this message home.

Now, just a quick word about the historical setting. I'm sure I've said this many times before, but I'm not pretending myself anyone's remembered this. Jeremiah ministered during the reigns of four kings.

[9 : 34] The godly Josiah, who is mentioned here again in verse 3 of chapter 25, and we saw back in chapter 22 that Jeremiah welcomed that king and praised his reforms, although he saw they didn't go far enough as the rot had spread too deeply.

But his sons who followed him were a totally different question. His reforms were reversed, the slides continued, and here the exile is beginning.

The event we call the exile actually didn't happen all at once. If you look at chapter 24, verse 1, after Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem, Jeconiah or Jehoiakim as he sometimes called, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsman of the metal workers, and brought them to Babylon.

And then again in chapter 25, he mentions this. What happens is that in the year 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, takes away to Babylon many leading citizens, people like here the officials, craftsmen, and metal workers.

Now, fascinatingly, among those people are Daniel and his friends. That's referred to in Daniel chapter 1. So among this group of people who are taken to Babylon, and this helps us understand many of the things that are happening here, is included the man who is going to be the bright shining hope throughout the exile, the prophet Daniel himself.

[11 : 14] And very likely, though we can't be certain, the other great prophet of the exile, Ezekiel, was taken in this group as well. So in 597 BC, this happens.

It's a warning shot, and Nebuchadnezzar installs the puppet king, Zedekiah. But the judgment has begun. Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar returns, and the city falls in 587 BC. The problem is, though, in this 10-year period, between 597 and 587, there is a strong party in Jerusalem who say nothing bad can ever happen.

This is God's city. God will never allow it to be destroyed. And probably many of them were looking back to the time, 100 years and more before that, when Hezekiah had been saved from the Assyrian invasion.

A tremendous story you can read in both Kings and in Isaiah, a shorter version in Chronicles. They ignored one simple difference.

[12 : 23] Hezekiah was a good and godly man who trusted in the Lord. Now they have godless kings who do not trust in the Lord. It's astonishing what people will believe.

And even when the city was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, many of the rabbis were still saying, in spite of Babylon and the exile behind them, God will never allow this city to fall.

It's this way that people have of refusing to accept what's unpalatable. So God brings to Jeremiah a very surprising message.

He brings it to Jeremiah. It's also for us. An unpalatable message that judgment is coming. It's now inevitable, but there is hope beyond that judgment.

There's not hope of avoiding that judgment. That's the point. But there is hope beyond that judgment. That's why I'm calling this sermon this evening a severe mercy.

[13 : 25] This is mercy, but it is a severe mercy. So let's look then. That's the situation. The prophet reaching this stage in his ministry almost halfway through, with apparently little to show for it.

What is the Lord saying to him and saying to us? Well, first of all, in chapter 24, the Lord is authenticating Jeremiah's ministry. In chapter 1, Jeremiah was called through a vision from the natural world, an almond tree, the growing of the almond tree.

And as Jeremiah looked at the almond growing season after season, no doubt he remembered that initial story. Now here, once again, it's the fig tree this time.

God is at work in what we call natural processes. The fancy word for that is providence, that the God who created is at work and controls what we call the processes of nature.

The fig, often mentioned along with the vine, is a symbol of prosperity. But you may remember in the Gospels that Jesus curses a barren fig tree, which becomes the symbol of rebellious Israel.

[14 : 42] So you see what's happening here. Israel is not one basket of figs. Israel is two baskets of figs. One is good. One is edible. One will grow and produce fruit.

Beyond this, the other is only fit to be thrown out. You see, it's almost as if God is saying, Jeremiah, 23 years ago I showed you this vision of Ammon's.

Here is another vision. The Lord showed me this vision. I mean, I think the language there is beautiful. Not I saw this vision, but the Lord showed me this vision. The Lord taking Jeremiah into his confidence, saying, look, I'm going to show you, Jeremiah, what is happening.

And as he applies the story, once again, the very words are used from Jeremiah's call. Verse 6, I will set my eyes on them for good.

I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not uproot them. These are the words that Jeremiah was given to preach right at the beginning.

[15 : 45] There is going to be tearing down. There is going to be uprooting. There is also going to be building and planting. The Lord is saying, in effect, I think, Jeremiah, you have labored all these years and you have seen no results.

But what I said to you, what you have faithfully proclaimed through all the discouragement and passed on, is true. And it's going to have results.

Why is it going to have results? Because the Lord is working to produce results. I think that's very important for us. We mustn't identify success with the blessing of God.

At times, God's people enjoy great blessing. And we rejoice in that. And we pray for that. It's right to pray for it. But we must remember, too, that sometimes resistance is so deep-rooted that sometimes God is determined to judge.

And that is the way the message is going to have results. It's a terrifying thing to see people hardening their hearts against the gospel until they come to a stage where they can no longer respond.

[16 : 56] But the amazing thing in Jeremiah's day is God is saying, I am going to bless those who are taken to Babylon. I'm not going to bless those people who stay here pretending everything is wonderful.

I'm not going to bless this institution which has become totally decrepit like these bad figs. And remember, figs were offered up and sacrificed in Deuteronomy, and bad figs were thrown out.

Don't listen to the false prophets who promised peace and security. But look what they actually get. Verse 9, I will make them a horror to all the kings of the earth to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse, and all the places to which I shall drive them.

That is the end result of unbelief. So you see, going to Babylon is a severe mercy. Read the book of Daniel and see the faith of that man and his friends in the land of exile.

We'll come back to that in a few weeks' time in chapter 29. So the Lord is basically saying, Jeremiah, keep on doing this. Do it even if no one listens, because this is the right message.

[18 : 11] I think we need to remember that actually in our own day. None of us know where the Lord is going to call us to in the future. It may well be. The Lord will call some of us to places to labor in where the ground is hard, unproductive.

But we must still present the message faithfully. One of the great pioneer missionaries, Judson, who went to Myanmar, then called Burma, and labored for many years, seeing practically nothing for his labors, and dejected and alone, he got down on his knees.

This is what he wrote. Then, though the longing be unfilled, O heart, be faithful still. We sow on Burma's barren strand.

We reap on Zion's hill. We need to remember that in our own ministries. We reap on Zion's hill. Sometimes God graciously calls his servants to a time of reaping, but not always.

Jeremiah was called to a time when he had to pronounce judgment. So the Lord authenticates the words of the prophet.

[19 : 29] And while we are not Jeremiah, if we preach faithfully the word that God gives us, then that is going to do its work. And what the prophet Isaiah says, the word will not return to me empty.

It may work in judgment rather than in blessing, but it will work. No doubt about that. Now, the second thing is, and I think this is fascinating as well, the Lord authenticates his written word.

That seems to me what chapter 25, 1 to 14 is about. Verse 13, I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it. And for the first time in the book, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.

See what's happening. This is, I mean, Jeremiah could not, at the time he was living, realize how astounding these words were. The Lord is saying to Jeremiah, your words are going to become part of Scripture.

They are going to be written down, become part of the canon. He's basically saying, just as the words of Moses are the words you have faithfully preached, your own words are going to take, your own words are going to join these.

[20 : 43] Everything written in this book. And we know that. Later on, read Daniel chapter 9. Some 17 years or so after this, Daniel reads the book of Jeremiah, this chapter and chapter 29, Jeremiah says, Jeremiah says, God, you've not been wrong all those 23 years.

And what's going to happen is your words, I mean, Jeremiah could not have realized this, generations yet unborn, in lands he had never heard of, in languages that had never, hadn't even been spoken by then.

These words are going to be written. These words are going to be read as the word of the living God. And notice how he, notice how God builds this up.

Verse, very important, verse 4. The Lord persistently sent to you all his servants, the prophets. That's all the people from Moses particularly onwards.

Remember, there is no authority in the Old Testament that supersedes or bypasses Moses. Moses is the great authority to whom all the others draw from.

[22 : 03] I've just been reading the early chapters of the book of Judges. Right from the very beginning, there's persistent unbelief, and God sends prophet after prophet, most of them nameless, most of them rejected, most of them forgotten.

They reject God's word over years, over decades, and still expect God to bless. Now, you see, that's not going to happen. It didn't happen in Jeremiah's time, and it's not going to happen today.

If people persistently refuse to listen to the word of God, God will not and does not and cannot bless. Verses 4 to 7 are really a summary of almost a thousand years.

And the almost a thousand years that have passed since the Exodus and the entry into the land, apart from one or two bright moments, there has been disobedience followed by disobedience.

After all, why was the great reforming King Josiah, why was his work undone almost immediately? Obviously because it had only made a superficial impact.

[23 : 09] People don't just suddenly change overnight. So, you see, the Lord is saying, your words, Jeremiah, they are going to go beyond your time to talk to people whom you had never heard of, whom you could not have imagined.

Now, this word is both specific and universal. It's one of the great things about Bible study. You find the prophet or the other writer speaking into their own time.

They have a word for the people of their time. But this word is also a word for all times. The specific word, verse 9, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, for Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my enemy.

That's not what he says at all. He says, Nebuchadnezzar, my servant. I'm sending this Babylonian king and he is going to do my work. It's interesting, later on in the prophet Isaiah, Cyrus, the Persian, who destroys Babylon and allows the people to return, is also called servant.

Indeed, Cyrus is called the Messiah at one point because he is doing God's work. And one of the most amazing things in the book of Daniel, I think the most amazing, the words I quoted in my prayer, the words of Nebuchadnezzar himself, who I firmly believe came to faith in the living God.

[24 : 33] Who can say to him, what are you doing? Who can stand against him? Now, I know in earlier times, he had used language, praising Yahweh, but the same kind of language could be used about Marduk, the god of Babylon.

In chapter 4, I believe, he comes to know the living and the true God. That is astonishing because that means that in the very heart of the enemy city, the very oppressor himself is conquered by the king whom he comes to acknowledge as he is the king of kings and lord of lords who can stay his hand or say to him, what do you do?

That's specific. In Jeremiah's time, in Daniel's time, Babylon is the instrument, but Babylon is going to be judged as well because, verse 12, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity.

But then, verses 10 and following, I will banish from the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride, and so on. These words are taken up in the book of Revelation, chapter 18, where Babylon has become a symbol of the defiant world order, dominated by Satan himself before the breaking in of the new creation.

See, what the book of Revelation is saying, essentially, is this didn't just happen in 6th century Judah. It didn't just happen in the ancient world.

[26 : 12] Babylon, what John calls the world, the world which passes away in the second chapter of his first letter, Babylon the great falls before the king of kings.

There's a message for us as well. And in that chapter, the Lord says to his people, come out from among them. Don't become part of Babylon.

Don't get tied up in Babylon so much that you'll share in her destruction. And the other wonderful thing, I think, is verse 11.

These nations shall serve the king of Babylon 70 years and after 70 years are completed. God limits his judgment.

His mercy, his steadfast love, as we read in the psalm, lasts forever. His great word, Ss, covenant love of God, lasts forever. His judgment is limited.

[27 : 13] It is a severe mercy. It will happen. Nevertheless, it will lead to the return of the people to the land. When we read in the prophets about the return of the people to the land, there's always, once again, a specific and a general and a wider reference.

The people return to the land in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah spoken to by the prophets like Haggai and Zechariah. It's very low-key and downbeat.

It's not the high midsummer pomps. It's a kind of uncertain early spring. But you see how important it is because the temple is built.

The temple has to be built because Malachi says, the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple. The temple has to be there to receive him. So, that is only a trailer of something greater and the book Haggai the prophet talks about that.

I will do greater things. I will shake the heavens and the earth. Severe mercy which will bring the people back to the land and point to the last day.

[28 : 22] Even those who did not return are not forgotten. Read the book of Esther which is a glimpse into how God protects his people whether they're in Babylon or not.

So, you see the Lord authenticates the prophet. The actual words of the prophet he's speaking in 6th century Jerusalem. He authenticates the word that is going to speak well beyond 6th century Jerusalem and he's going to speak well beyond our own day.

Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away. And finally and in chapters 25 the part we didn't read I'll talk about this briefly the Lord authenticates the destiny for the nations that he is Lord of the nations.

Jeremiah 1 verse 5 I appointed you a prophet to the nations says the Lord. That's why there's so much about the nations and their destiny in Jeremiah.

Indeed in a later section of the closing section chapters 46 to 51 there are so-called oracles against the nations where the nations of the world are brought under God's judgment.

[29 : 36] He is the God of Israel but he is also the Lord of the nations from one end of the earth to the other. There's a couple of things I want to notice. First of all we have a roll call of the nations verse 16 and following.

We have great empires like Egypt Pharaoh king of Egypt his servants his officials and all his people and who along with Babylon is the great superpower of the time.

We have commercial powers of Tyre and Sidon. See once again human society while it changes in detail in general terms there's always political power there's always commercial power.

There's distant Arabia and the countries across the sea. You see how the vision is widening out and the surrounding petty kingdoms like Edom Moab and the sons of Edom.

Now sons of Ammon sorry. Now this goes right back to the book of Genesis the table of the nations after the flood where all the nations of the world their origins are outlined among these of course is Nimrod the mighty hunter the founder of Babylon of Babel the story of the Tower of Babel the nations are important in God's purpose Matthew 25 32 when the son of man comes in glory before him will be gathered all the nations and he will separate them as the sheep and the goats now I think one of the things this means is in the new creation while we'll be all like Christ and it's a wonderful thought we'll be all like Christ really wonderful thought we won't all be like each other and the kind of characteristics of different peoples in this in the present earth will not be reproduced in the kingdom to come not not the unsatisfactory characteristics the things we all joke about but the point is that

[31 : 45] God loves variety look at the creation story the endless amazing variety wonderful things that God does God is not there's nothing mechanical or routine about God as Don Carson says somewhere God makes snowflakes we make ice cubes and I think I think the whole richness and variety of the human family will be represented in perfection not in its annoying characteristics but in perfection the roll call of the nations God cares for the nations and these nations can come remember another full film is on the day of Pentecost what happened people from every language and nation heard the wonderful deeds of God in their own language and then what happens in the heavenly city I saw a great multitude whom no one could count from every nation tribe people and language standing before

God and before the Lamb the other thing I want to point out is the metaphor of the cup that's used here verse 15 thus says the Lord the God of Israel take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations whom I send you drink it they shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the swords that I am sending among them this of course cannot be literal they say remember how often eating and drinking is a metaphor of taking if you like taking Christ totally into ourselves take eat this is my body drink this is my blood eating and drinking on Christ hungering and thirsting after righteousness and the cup used throughout the Old Testament the cup of judgment meaning that this judgment is not something abstract it's something which is totally consuming but there's another idea of course of the cup the Lord is my cup says David in Psalm 16 verse 5 of course

Psalm 23 preparing a table in the midst of our enemies how does the cup of judgment become the cup of blessing surely there we have to go to the garden of Gethsemane don't we father if it be possible let this cup pass from me nevertheless not what I will but what you will if Jesus Christ had not drunk that cup of judgment fully finally none of us none of the nations could have been saved that judgment needed to be experienced by him and exhausted by him till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied that's why it's so important we believe that Jesus Christ took our place and drank our cup so you see as we read of the cup of wine which is the cup of judgment as always in scripture we are impelled forward to Christ himself the only one who could drink this cup the only one who could exhaust it but if we refuse to shelter under him then that cup has to be drunk by ourselves and that is why judgment is so terrifying you see why I call this a severe mercy

Judah in that day experienced the anger of God they drank the cup of exile the bitter unpleasant cup it was just as today we have to drink the bitter unpleasant experience of saying we are sinners we need repentance we need to be forgiven judgment now so that we can escape judgment then and that is that's what the gospel is and in the book of Jeremiah in this apparently obscure passage we are looking at a well loved face listening to a well loved voice come to me all you who are weary I will give you rest amen let's pray father how we praise you for those ancient prophets who were totally faithful in their own day spies rejected in their day and yet their voice is speaking to us now and not just now but their voices will still resound in eternity because that word that they spoke has become part of your word which will outlast heaven and earth

Lord give us great confidence in your word in the gospel help us to believe in it help us to live it help us to trust it in the name of the living word Christ Jesus amen