

I cannot tell how he will win the nations

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning, and it's in the prophecy of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. We're reaching the end of this book, not quite the end, but nearly.

And you'll find it in the Church Bibles on page 672, Jeremiah chapter 46. And Bob will be preaching to us shortly from this passage, which we'll read together now in its entirety.

Jeremiah 46 at verse 1. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations, about Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah.

Prepare buckler and shield, and advance for battle. Harness the horses, mount, O horsemen, take your stations with your helmets, polish your spears, put on your armor.

Why have I seen it? They are dismayed and have turned backward. Their warriors are beaten down and have fled in haste. They look not back. Terror on every side, declares the Lord.

[1 : 19] The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape. In the north, by the river Euphrates, they have stumbled and fallen. Who is this, rising like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge?

Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. He said, I will rise, I will cover the earth, I will destroy cities and their inhabitants. Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots, let the warriors go out.

Men of Cush and Put who handle the shield, men of Lud skilled in handling the bow. That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes.

The sword shall devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord God of hosts holds a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates.

Go up to Gilead and take balm, O virgin daughter of Egypt. In vain you have used many medicines. There is no healing for you. The nations have heard of your shame, and the earth is full of your cry.

[2 : 29] For warrior has stumbled against warrior. They have both fallen together. The word that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, the prophet, about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to strike the land of Egypt.

Declare in Egypt, and proclaim in Migdal, proclaim in Memphis, and Tebes, say, Stand ready and be prepared, for the sword shall devour around you.

Wire your mighty ones face down. They do not stand, because the Lord thrust them down. He made many stumble, and they fell. And they said to one another, Arise, and let us go back to our own people, and to the land of our birth, because of the sword of the oppressor.

Call the name of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, noisy one who lets the hour go by. As I live, declares the king, whose name is the Lord of hosts, like Tabor among the mountains, and like Carmel by the sea, shall one come.

Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt. For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin without inhabitant. A beautiful heifer is Egypt, but a biting fly from the north has come upon her.

[3 : 48] Even her hired soldiers in her midst are like fattened calves. Yes, they have turned and fled together. They did not stand, for the day of their calamity has come upon them, and the time of their punishment.

She makes a sound like a serpent gliding away. For her enemies march in force, and come against her with axes like those who fell trees. They shall cut down her forest, declares the Lord, though it is impenetrable, because they are more numerous than locusts.

They are without number. The daughter of Egypt shall be put to shame. She shall be delivered into the hand of a people from the north. The Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, said, Behold, I am bringing punishment upon Ammon of Thebes, and Pharaoh, and Egypt, and her gods, and her kings, upon Pharaoh and those who trust in him.

I will deliver them into the hand of those who seek their life, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and his officers. Afterward, Egypt shall be inhabited, as in the days of old, declares the Lord.

But fear not, O Jacob, my servant, nor be dismayed, O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity.

[5 : 12] Jacob shall return, and have quiet, and ease, and none shall make him afraid. Fear not, O Jacob, my servant, declares the Lord, for I am with you.

I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished.

Amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, on page 472, passage that Willie read, chapter 46 of Jeremiah.

We'll have a moment of prayer. Lord God, we believe you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear.

And we believe that in your word, which leads us so faithfully to the living word, Christ Jesus, you have given us all that we need for life and godliness.

[6 : 24] So we pray, Lord, you will open our eyes, you will open our ears, that you will lead us in the ways of righteousness. And we ask this in the strong name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. C.S. Lewis used to talk about what he called chronological snobbery.

And by that he meant that imagining the age in which we live has reached a kind of peak of excellence, and we can stand on that peak and observe all the other ages and see their limitations.

And he also talked about geographical snobbery, which meant imagining that the place we live is more significant, more important than any other place.

And you can see how easy it is to fall into that trap, particularly chronological snobbery. Look how we've advanced scientifically, medically, sanitation, hygiene, all these kind of things.

[7 : 26] But if we do that, we are going to impoverish ourselves, because this age is not the objective platform. The kingdom has not arrived.

The place where we live, however much we love it, and all of us love particular places, is not the kingdom of God on earth. The Bible won't allow us to fall into that trap, because the Bible, right from the beginning, is concerned with the importance of the whole world, which God created at the beginning.

Right from the early chapters of Genesis, God cares for the nations. In Genesis chapter 10, after the flood, we have the so-called table of the nations, where the sons of Noah spread out throughout the earth, families first, and then becoming nations.

In Genesis 12, God chooses Abraham so that all the families, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. We have frequent references throughout the Old Testament.

In the psalm we just sang, Psalm 96, psalm about the nations coming to worship God. And in the other prophets, prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Zephaniah, we have these so-called oracles or prophecies about the nations.

[8 : 44] Indeed, two small Old Testament books, Obadiah and Nahum, focus entirely on a nation other than Israel. But why?

After all, the whole Bible is addressed to the covenant people. You see, it's very easy to read these chapters and say, oh, that's about the world, we're God's people. The point is, Jeremiah the prophet and the other prophets spoke these oracles, had them committed to writing so that the people of God could learn from them the word of judgment and salvation.

I believe that in the new creation there will still be nations. After all, the book of Revelation talks about every people from every nation, tribe, and language standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb.

Of course, it will be nations without racism, without narrowness, without prejudice, without unhealthy rivalry. So, that's the first thing, the importance of the nations of the world, of the whole world.

The second thing is this, you'll notice in verse 1, the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. This is the whole of the chapters, 46 to 51, and the whole collection of nations who influenced Israel.

[10 : 05] Smaller ones such as Edom and Ammon, more distant places like Kedar, probably in the Arabian Desert, and Elam, which was the far north of what is now Iran.

Now, we're not going to go through all these oracles, you might be relieved to hear. What I'm going to do is, this morning, we're going to look at this oracle against Egypt, and next week at chapters 50 and 51 against Babylon, the bookends of the section.

Not, I'm saying, the other chapters don't matter. They are important. But I think we'll get the essence of Jeremiah's teaching by looking at these two great powers which so dominated the life of God's people throughout their history.

And this will, God willing, allow us to finish the book of Jeremiah in two weeks' time, the end of the marathon, so to speak. And so today we are looking at Egypt.

Now, verse 2 is a historical note, pointed out how the rising power of Babylon defeated the declining power of Egypt.

[11 : 10] Now, in context, that's very important, because the people of God left in the land had gone down to Egypt against the warnings of Jeremiah, against the word of the Lord.

And Jeremiah is essentially saying there is no safety in Egypt, because Nebuchadnezzar is the rising power. Now, these are literal nations, literal nations of the time, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, and so on.

But they are also representative of human power throughout the ages. And it's language of poetry to show us the inner reality.

God is saying to us, don't read this if it's about other people. This is about us. And this points to the final day of judgment. Because the prophets speak about the final day of judgment, they have a message for every day about how the Lord works among the nations.

My title of the day comes from a line from the hymn we'll sing at the end, I cannot tell how he will win the nations. Because this is pointing far away from the situation, the world situation in the 6th century BC, even from our world situation, to the time when, as we sang, Jesus will reign where'er the Son, this successive journeys run.

[12 : 33] The context then, 1 and 2, this particular historical battle at Carchemish, where Nebuchadnezzar crushed the Egyptians, and Babylon emerges as the secret power.

There are three particular great truths in this chapter, I think. The first one is, the Lord is active in history. That's verses 3 to 12.

The Lord is active in history. This is the doctrine of providence. Providence. Now the word providence doesn't appear in the Bible, but the idea is everywhere. Providence essentially means that the creator didn't just create and leave things to go their own way.

The creator is active every moment of history, every place in the universe. The kind of thing that David talks about in the Psalms. Where can I flee from your spirit?

Where can I hide from your presence? It goes through the whole of creation. There's nowhere. So here he is active in history, the feet of the apparently invincible Egypt, so often reproduced in history.

[13 : 40] Some of you remember the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the Soviet Union. Now as we look at what the events are unfolding in Russia and Ukraine, we see that that event, while significant, didn't bring the kingdom.

In fact, it brought the war and the Balkans and so on. You see, so many of these things that happen in history, which people think have changed everything radical, and they do change things, are only pointing to the great day.

You see, the key to this is verse 10. That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, the day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes.

What Jeremiah is saying, that historical victory that the king of Babylon won, is simply a trailer of something much, much bigger. Something which is future for us as well, as it was future for Jeremiah.

It anticipates the day of judgment, the last day, the day of Jesus Christ, as the New Testament calls it, when all rival powers will be overthrown.

[14 : 54] That's what this is really about. And in the Bible, you've got to distinguish between two things, God's judgments in history, and God's judgment on history.

God's judgment on history has not yet happened. It will take place on the last day. Book of Revelation has the vivid image of the great white throne, before whom everyone who has ever lived gathers, to hear the verdict pronounced.

And the Psalms, including the psalm we sang, talk about the nations coming to praise and to worship God. And the language of poetry here is verses 3 and 4.

This is probably the Egyptian commander summoning their troops. It's not very long, only verse 5. When they are completely demoralized and defeated, why have I seen it?

They are just made, have turned backwards. The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape. See, back at the passage we looked at last week, chapter 45, verse 5, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh.

[15 : 56] And I suggested then that was the day of judgment once again. So anticipates the day of judgment. The Lord is active in history, anticipating the day of judgment.

But the Lord is also active in history, condemning human arrogance. Verse 7, Who is this, rising like the Nile?

Now remember, for ancient Egypt, the Nile was a god. And remember the plague stories back in Exodus, when the Nile is, when the Nile is turned into blood.

When Pharaoh is defying Yahweh, God of Israel, the first action that happens is the Nile is turned into blood. The life-giving God of Egypt is shown to be completely impotent.

And so what we're having here, Jeremiah is echoing that story. As if he's saying, remember long ago, at the beginning when you became a nation, how the Lord defeated not just Pharaoh, but the gods of Egypt.

[17 : 01] Pharaoh had sneeringly said to Moses, Who is the Lord? Who is Yahweh that I should obey him? That's no doubt he thought of all the magnificent gods of Egypt.

And in chapter 12, verse 12, he gets his answer, I will pass through Egypt tonight. And against all the gods of Egypt, I will carry out judgment.

I am Yahweh. So you see, this is the story being replayed again. And you'll remember, a few chapters ago, that these people in Egypt had said, we're going to worship the Queen of Heaven.

The Queen of Heaven, and totally impotent to help them, just as the Egyptian gods are totally impotent. And behind it all, of course, is a much earlier story still, surely.

You will be like God, knowing good and evil. Isn't that the absolute root of human arrogance and pride? You will be like God.

[18 : 03] When I was young, I used to imagine pride was something, it was characteristic of a few arrogant people. I realize now, that pride is the natural human condition, without the grace of God.

I see that in my own heart. And I'm sure we'll all, if we're honest, see that in our own hearts. You will be like God. You'll be in control. That's the point. Egypt is behaving as if it were the Nile.

The Nile, which of course had already been shown, to be impotent. The house built on the sand. Remember the story, the man who built his house on the sand.

That's what Egypt has done. It's built his house, literally on the sands of the desert, but metaphorically as well. That's the first thing then. In these verses, the Lord is active in history.

Notice verse 12, the nations have heard of your shame. The earth is full of your cry. But secondly, verses 13 to 26, the Lord judges and saves.

[19 : 05] Now the context is Nebuchadnezzar coming to invade Egypt. The word that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to strike the land of Egypt.

Egypt's power, Egypt's gods. And the first thing to notice here is that the Lord sees through pretentiousness. He sees through what is unreal.

We noticed that a few chapters ago. Indeed, all through this book, there has been a continual deciding between what is true and what is false. Long before this, Jeremiah had condemned the other prophets, the false prophets, for calling what he called the lie.

Egypt exemplifies this as well, as do the false prophets. And notice verse 14, declaring Egypt, proclaiming Migdal, proclaiming Memphis and Tachpanhus.

These are the very places the Jews have fled to escape from judgment. Proclaim, but there, stand ready and be prepared. The sword shall devour around you.

[20 : 11] There is no escape from the all-seeing and all-judging eye of the Lord. Then verse 15, why are your mighty ones face down?

Now the mighty ones here, carrying on the theme of the earlier chapter, are probably not human beings. They are probably the gods of Egypt. The images, the statues, which Nebuchadnezzar's army had smashed.

Indeed, verse 15 could be translated, Why has Apus, the bull god of Egypt, fled? The bull calf god of Egypt, whom the Egyptians trusted in.

It's ironic, isn't it? That was the, that was what the Israelites imagined in the desert. They created this golden calf. This is the god who has saved us.

Of course it wasn't the god who had saved them. This was the false god of Egypt. And Pharaoh, call the name of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, noisy one, who lets the hour go by.

[21 : 16] I don't usually recommend the New English Bible as a good translation, but he does have a very good translation of verse 17. Call the name of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, king bombast, who has lost his way.

It just shows the emptiness, the pretension of this king in his magnificence, in his splendor. And we know, of course, a great deal about the splendor of ancient Egypt. From the, you know, so much has been preserved because the, the sphinx, the pyramids, and, and, and so much of that splendor, which is, which is not reality, of course.

As I live, declares the Lord, verse 15, whose name is the Lord of hosts. Once again, that title. This is the, this is the one who commands the hosts of heaven. This is the one who rules in heaven and earth.

The one who commands the starry host. As I said, sometimes this phrase can refer to the armies of Israel. David says to Goliath, I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel.

And in, and in verse 22, she makes a sound like a serpent gliding away. The serpent, the worship of the serpent, was at the heart of Egyptian religion.

[22 : 31] Where do we read about the serpent in the Bible? Of course, in Genesis chapter 3, the serpent, behind all pagan religion, behind all falseness and unreality of the present day, which is going to disappear, insubstantial, pageant, faded, leave not a wreck behind, as Prospero says in the Tempest.

The difference is between what will last into eternity, and what will disappear. Egypt is like the things that Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 5.

The things that are seen are transient. The things that are unseen are eternal. So the Lord sees through pretentiousness and unreality. And we need to remember this in our own lives as well.

Well, I've often quoted T.S. Eliot, humankind cannot bear very much reality. Sometimes I think humankind can't bear any reality at all. When I look into my own heart often, I'm so horrified what I find there.

I try to hide away from it, and try to ignore it. But God's penetrating eye sees right into it. But surely, while that is absolutely true, that is not in itself gospel.

[23 : 51] Where does the gospel come? Look at verse 26. Afterward, Egypt shall be inhabited, as in the days of old, declares the Lord.

The Lord is gracious. Not only does the Lord see through pretentiousness, but the Lord is gracious. Doom is certain, but that is not the final word.

The nations will worship. Just one example in Psalm 87, verse 4. Rahab, another name for Egypt, Rahab and Babylon, will come and worship in Zion.

Look at Isaiah had talked about before. The nations will come to Zion and worship, worship the God of Jacob. Now, we don't know how this is going to happen.

I cannot tell how he will win the nations. We know it's certain. And it's very interesting, it's very interesting to see how this develops in the New Testament, isn't it?

[24 : 54] The, at the beginning, at the beginning of Acts, it's a very, very significant passage. The apostles, the apostles, and others say, Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Is Israel going to be the head of the nations? It's just how they, I suppose, naturally interpreted the prophecies in the Old Testament, if they're familiar.

The Lord says to them, not, not you're talking nonsense. What he says is something much more like, you don't understand. It's something far, far bigger than that.

What he says is, you will be my witnesses, yes, in Jerusalem, of course, in Judea and Samaria, the old kingdom, but to the ends of the earth.

The message you have is not a message about the political revival of a nation, but about the son of David reigning over the whole earth. And when Paul talks about this in Romans 15, he says, the root of Jesse will come.

[25 : 59] He who rises to rule the nations, in him will the nations quote the whole. Quote in Isaiah 12, look what's happening. Look around you, says Paul.

The nations of the world are coming to worship the Davidic king, the son of Jesse. And that's ultimately the fulfillment of these prophecies, not a political entity, piece of real estate in the Near East, but the reigning of the son of David, where e'er the son does his successive journeys run.

That's why these passages are so mind-boggling and so mind-expanding. It's not you in your small corner and I in mine. It's God working on a huge canvas all over the world, calling the nations to him, calling people from every language, tribe, and nation.

And as the gospel spreads, the kingdom is anticipated. God's people are called to anticipate the kingdom as God's people in the Old Testament were, and we fail often and as badly as God's people in the Old Testament, but yet, the kingdom will come.

So that's the second great truth in this chapter. The Lord is active in history. The Lord judges and saves. Let's look now at the last two verses of the chapter.

[27 : 24] The Lord remembers his covenant. Remember, this book is all about covenant. The title I gave to it long ago when we started this season, it seems long ago, is Jeremiah, the prophet of the costly new covenant.

And as the book comes to its end, the covenant language is used over and over again. Verse 27, words which he'd already used in chapter 30 and which echo earlier words of Isaiah, Fear not, O Jacob, my servant, nor be dismayed, O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away and your offspring from the land of the captivity.

Notice, this is something that's going to go down the generations, not just for this generation. So, let's look at these verses then. And I want to say two things. First of all, this in a sense is summarizing the whole story so far.

Jacob, Israel, all through the Old Testament, right from the book of Genesis, Jacob, Israel, the two names for God's people. Jacob reminding us, them and us, where we came from and indeed who we still are.

And Israel reminding us of what God in grace is making us and will one day completely make us into. You will no more be called Jacob, but Israel.

[28 : 47] That great story back in Genesis 32. Jacob by nature, Israel by grace. In verse 28, my servant, of course, that draws richly from the prophet Isaiah, where Israel, fallen, fallible, is still God's servant, and points beyond it, of course, to the servant who did not fail.

And that's the first thing I want to the whole story, Jacob, Israel. Remember, in this world, we are never totally going to escape Jacob.

Read Romans 7 again. I know many people want to pretend that Romans 7 is a defeated state and we move into the victory of Romans 8, but that just doesn't make any sense at all.

If you look at your own heart, don't you say with Paul, the good that I want to do, I don't, and the evil that I don't want to do, I do? But put it another way, Lord, there's an awful lot of Jacob still in me.

And, of course, Paul uses another name, we are in Adam, we're in Jacob. And because we're in Adam and in Jacob, we're going to continue to struggle and fail, but because we're in Christ, one day the kingdom will come and we'll become part of it.

[30 : 12] So the whole story is summarized. But secondly, salvation comes at a cost. The end of verse 28. I will discipline you in just measure and will by no means leave you unpunished.

There's no cheap grace, the phrase used by Bonhoeffer, which he defined as Christianity without the cross. No cheap grace. There is discipline, there is judgment, there is need for sin to be punished, for sin to be judged, in order that salvation will come.

as we've read through this book, we've seen over and over again how Jeremiah walked the way of the cross, anticipating the words of Jesus himself, whoever will follow me, let him take up his cross.

And Baruch as well, as we saw last week, shared in that experience along with Jeremiah. There's one thing, of course, that neither Jeremiah, nor Baruch, nor Josiah, nor Moses, nor Paul, anyone could do.

They may walk the way of the cross, but they cannot forgive the sins of others, cannot even forgive their own sins. Surely this is pointing us to someone who was going to take the anger of God and himself, who was going to take God's discipline, who was going to be punished so that all who believed in him would not be punished.

[31 : 44] So you see, it's not an easy thing, it's not a trivial thing. Salvation comes at a cost, and that cost is the life of the Son of God, the servant, the true servant, the one who transforms Jacob into Israel, but the one who took all of Jacob on himself, on the cross, so that all the other Jacobs might become Israel.

But to go back further still in the Old Testament, the one who took the flaming sword of divine justice that was at the gates of Eden, disarmed its power, and opened the way back to the tree of life for all his brothers and sisters who would believe in him.

That's, I believe, what Jeremiah is saying to us in these verses. You see, the end of the story is not in doubt, but the end of the story was a painful one and it is a mystery.

You see, the mystery why the divine son left the father's house and travelled into the far country is a greater mystery in the Trinity itself. But since he did that, we know, though we don't know how, that he will win the nations.

He will claim his earthly heritage. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, who turns Jacob's into Israel's, who takes us from the world and makes us into your people, help us never to forget the cost that was paid for our redemption, and help us to look forward to that day when all the lands will worship.

[33 : 38] We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen.