

Jeremiah walks the way of the cross

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[0 : 0 0] Well, from hobgoblins and fowl fiends to the book of Jeremiah. And we've got a long passage tonight, but it's a story that would be a terrible shame to break up. So turn with me to page 665 in the Visitor's Bibles, and we're going to read all of Jeremiah 37 and 38, two chapters.

Jeremiah chapter 37. Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Caniah, the son of Jehoiakim.

But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet. King Zedekiah sent Jehichel, the son of Shalamiah, and Zephaniah the priest, and Messiah to Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Please pray for us to the Lord our God.

Now Jeremiah was still going in and out among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison. The army of Pharaoh had come out of Egypt, and when the Chaldeans, who were besieging Jerusalem, heard news about them, they withdrew from Jerusalem.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet. Thus says the Lord God of Israel, thus shall you say to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of me.

[1 : 3 1] Behold, Pharaoh's army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land. And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city. They shall capture it and burn it with fire.

Thus says the Lord, do not deceive yourselves, saying the Chaldeans will surely go away from us, for they will not go away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men, every man in his tent, they would rise up and burn this city with fire.

Now, when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people.

When he was at the Benjamin gate, a sentry named Iria, the son of Shelemiah, son of Hananiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, you're deserting to the Chaldeans.

And Jeremiah said, it's a lie, I'm not deserting to the Chaldeans. But Iria would not listen to him and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. And the officials were enraged at Jeremiah and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan, the secretary.

[2 : 4 7] For it had been made a prison. When Jeremiah had come to the dungeon cells and remained there many days, King Zedekiah sent for him and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house and said, is there any word from the Lord?

Jeremiah said, there is. Then he said, you shall be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon. Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, what wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people that you've put me in prison?

Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying the king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land? Now here, please, O my lord, the king, let my humble plea come before you and do not send me back to the house of Jonathan, the secretary, lest I die there.

So King Zedekiah gave orders and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard. And a loaf of bread was given him daily from the baker's streets until all the bread of the city was gone.

So Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. Now Shephethiah, the son of Matan, Gedaliah, the son of Pashur, Jukal, the son of Shalamiah, and Pashur, the son of Malkiah, heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people.

[4 : 08] Thus says the Lord, he who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. But he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war and live.

Thus says the Lord, this city shall surely be given into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon and taken. Then the official said to the king, let this man be put to death, that he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in the city and the hands of all the people by speaking such words to them.

But this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm. King Zedekiah said, behold, he's in your hands for the king can do nothing against you. So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malkiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by the ropes.

And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud. And Jeremiah sank into the mud. When Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard that they'd put Jeremiah into the cistern, the king was sitting at the Benjamin gate.

Ebed-Melech went from the king's house and said to the king, my lord, the king, these men have done evil in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.

[5 : 35] So then the king commanded Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian, take three men with you from here and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.

So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe in the storehouse, and took from their old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes.

Then Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian, said to Jeremiah, put the rags and the cloths between your armpits and the ropes. Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up on the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord. The king said to Jeremiah, I will ask you a question, hide nothing from me.

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, if I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me. Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, as the Lord lives who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hands of these men who seek your life.

[6 : 53] Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, if you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared.

And this city shall not be burned with fire. And you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hands of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hands.

King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, I'm afraid of the Judeans who've deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me. Jeremiah said, You shall not be given to them.

Obey now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared. But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the Lord has shown me.

Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and were saying, Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you.

[8 : 06] Now that your feet are stuck in the mud, they turn away from you. All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourselves shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city shall be burned with fire.

Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. If the officials hear that I've spoken with you and come and say to you, Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you.

Hide nothing from us, and we will not put you to death. Then you shall say to them, I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.

Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard.

And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken. This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us this evening.

[9 : 12] Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at these chapters? That's page 665.

And we'll ask the Lord's help as we come to his word. God, our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, will you please take my human words in all their inadequacy, and will you use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. At a very dark moment in the Second World War, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister for only a few days, uttered the words, I can offer you nothing but blood and toil and tears and sweat, but at the end, victory.

And that is very much what the Lord Jesus Christ offers us, is it not? Blood and toil and tears and sweat, and at the end, victory.

So our subject this evening is, Jeremiah walks the way off the cross. But that's what we're all called to, isn't it? Jesus said, Whoever will come after me, let them take up their cross and follow me.

[10 : 47] Now, the situation was within weeks of the destruction of Jerusalem. It seems a long time since we began this book. We're going to be, not next week, but the three weeks after it, and then some weeks, some weeks late in the summer, we are going to, hopefully, God willing, reach the end of the book.

Although I'm slightly nervous, because last year, Dick Lucas said to me, What are you preaching on? And I said, Jeremiah. He said, It'll take you the rest of your life, brother. I don't know if he knows something that I don't know, but God willing, we will get to the end of the book by the end of the summer.

Now, Jeremiah is a very interesting among the prophets. There's hardly any other prophet whom we know so much about. Isaiah, although his book is very long, we know practically nothing about him.

We have glimpses of Ezekiel, but only of one or two dramatic moments. The only other book, which is like this at all, on a much smaller scale, is Jonah, where the actual experiences of Jonah take up far more time and space than his words.

And I think it's the same reason in both cases. Both in the case of Jeremiah and of Jonah, their lives are so much entwined with the message, indeed so much part of the message, that we need to know what happened to them.

[12 : 11] Otherwise, we miss the main impact of the message. Jeremiah here is pointing to his master, is he not? And giving us a faint foreshadowing of the way of the cross.

Now, as I said, the situation is within weeks of the exile. And if you look at verse 7, thus shall you say to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of me, behold, Pharaoh's army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt.

The siege of Jerusalem had been briefly lifted because an Egyptian army had come up from the Nile in order not really to rescue Jerusalem, but to safeguard Egypt.

Egypt was still a big player on the international scene. It had passed its great days, but it was dangerous enough for the Babylonians to take it seriously. And of course, that raised hopes in Jerusalem and in Judah, the city is going to be saved after all.

But that was not to be. So let's look then at this chapter. It seems to be the key to these two chapters is verse 2 of chapter 37.

[13 : 23] Neither he, that's the king, nor his servants, nor the people of the land, listened to the words of the Lord, that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.

See, once again, words and life going together. Jeremiah's message, Jeremiah's life, were all of a piece. We're going to look at the way this word was reacted to and responded to by different individuals, by different groups.

And first of all, we have a weak and unbelieving king, Zedekiah. Jeremiah had begun his ministry during the great days of the great reforming king, Josiah.

But now, this is a sorry figure who sits on the throne of Judah, who sits on David's throne, a weak and spineless individual. And of course, he had been put there by Nebuchadnezzar as a puppet king.

Nebuchadnezzar, a shrewd man, recognized this man, Zedekiah, would be no problem. But he wasn't just weak. The second book of Kings tells us he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

[14 : 30] You see, you can do evil by doing nothing. It was said by, I think it was, some 19th century statesman, all that evil needs to succeed is for good people to do nothing.

We've seen this over and over again in church and state, haven't we? A determined group of individuals pushed through a wrong agenda and a whole mass of people allow them to get away with it.

All that evil needs to succeed is for good people to do nothing. Zedekiah was an unbeliever. He did not listen to the words of the Lord.

He's unwilling to believe Jeremiah, but he also wants to consult him. Surely this must remind us of Herod and John the Baptist in a much later generation.

Herod had no intentions of doing what the Baptist said, but he also had no intentions of not hanging on to him. So, what kind of man is this? He is a man who wants prayer, but will do nothing to alter his ways.

[15 : 34] The verse we've just looked at, he did not listen to the words of the Lord. Then again, in verse 17 of the chapter, is there any word from the Lord?

See, Zedekiah is the kind of man. He's heard the word of the Lord. He knows what the Lord says. He doesn't like it, and he wants another word from the Lord. Now, if the Lord speaks clearly and plainly, we're not going to get another word which is going to set aside and contradict what he's already said.

He wants to change nothing. He wants to alter nothing. He doesn't want to repent. He doesn't want to put anything right, and he still expects a miracle. Now, aren't there people like that all around today and have been throughout history?

We do nothing at all, and then maybe the Lord will miraculously rescue us. Once prayer, we'll do nothing about it. He also believes lies which suit him.

Chapter 37, again, verses 18 and 19, Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, What wrong have I done to you or your servants or these people that you put me in prison?

[16 : 42] Where are your prophets? who prophesied to you, saying, The king of Babylon will not come against you and this land. Now, these false prophets have been discredited and discredited and discredited, but Zedekiah still wanted to believe them.

The human capacity for delusion is almost infinite. Poet T.S. Eliot says, Humankind cannot bear very much reality. We have this in our own hearts, don't we?

We want to believe what's plausible. We want to believe what's pleasant to believe. And we want to accept the truth. And he is also a man who is afraid to take a stand for truth.

38, verse 5, King Zedekiah says to his officials, Behold, he, that's Jeremiah, is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you. And then again in 38, verse 24, then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, Let no one know of those words and you shall not die.

He is a man who is afraid to take a stand. As we'll see when we next come to Jeremiah, the fate that he is to suffer is much worse than he would have suffered if he had taken a stand.

[17 : 56] This is a weak and timid man who will not, who is really at his grace to the throne of David, and who weakly and spinelessly allows the persecution of the prophet to go ahead.

And that's, I've often wondered why in the book of Revelation, when at the end of the book talking about the final judgment, it doesn't just mention notorious sinners, it also says the fearful and unbelieving.

The fearful, those who are too timid to take a stand. Those who won't stand for the Lord and for the gospel. That's what, that's what I think is meant. And Zedekiah is a classic example of the fearful and the unbelieving.

Now the second group of people are these vicious and unbelieving officials. People like, in chapter 38, verse 1, and then earlier as well, Shephethiah, the son of Meta, and Gedaliah, the son of Pasher, Jukil, the son of Shalamiah, and Pasher, the son of Malachi.

Once again, the root is unbelief. The king was, the king was spineless and weak. They were vicious. These are the kinds of people who ought to have been supporting the king, encouraging him in righteousness, and encouraging the prophet.

[19 : 19] Instead, they viciously persecuted him. It reminds me of a story of a young parliamentarian who was having his first outing on the front bench.

And as he sat on the front bench and surveyed the opposition and so on, he whispered to a veteran parliamentarian behind him, it's great to be here at last so I can look into the eyes of my enemies.

The veteran says, son, these are not your enemies. These are your opponents. Your enemies are on the benches around you and behind you. How often that is true.

But those who should be making a stand do not make a stand. Our so-called friends behave in this way. Now, what marked them?

What kind of people were they? And you find it out by implication when you look at what Jeremiah has said in verse 6 of chapter 37.

[20 : 18] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet. Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Thus shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of me, Behold, Pharaoh's army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt.

And then verse 10, Even the whole army of the Chaldeans who are fighting against you, the remained only wounded men, they would still take the city. They were narrowly nationalistic.

nationalistic. They believed Jeremiah to be a traitor. And this is a problem that surfaced already in the book of Jeremiah. There was a belief, a strong belief, in spite of all the evidence that Jerusalem could not fall, that the Lord would not allow it to be destroyed.

Because after all, he had spectacularly rescued it a hundred years or so before, when the great Assyrian army came against Jerusalem, it was annihilated, it was destroyed, and the city did not fall.

You see, there was a huge difference. On the throne at that time sat a worthy son of David, the godly king Hezekiah. And Hezekiah's, in that situation, turned to the Lord and turned to the words of the prophet Isaiah.

[21 : 39] You see what I said? Zedekiah wanted deliverance without obedience. Hezekiah humbled himself, was obedient, and the Lord answered, and the Lord rescued. The godly king Hezekiah, like his great father, David, he once again stood up to Goliath, as David has stood up to Goliath.

So Hezekiah stands up to the Assyrian Goliath. And way back in chapter 8, the so-called temple sermon, Jeremiah said similar things.

Do not say that this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. Well, the Lord will destroy it. That is the point. Once an institution, once a body, once a group of God's people abandon the word of God, then they cannot expect any blessing from the Lord or any protection from the Lord.

So they are narrowly nationalistic. They're proud. They're proud. They're conceited. Their history has not led them to gratitude to the Lord. It's led them to disobedience.

It's led them to complacency. It's led them to pride to an impossible degree. The other thing, of course, is their cruelty and persecution.

[22 : 55] First, the dungeon in the house of this sinister figure, this sinister figure, Jonathan, the secretary. And then, of course, this terrifying story of the pit in which Jeremiah is confined in chapter 38.

Rather, as Joseph's brothers put him in a pit. And I'm sure there's a deliberate echo of that story. Now, I think we need to think through what's being said here so that we don't misapply this passage.

I am terrified at the thought of persecution. So are most of us, I would imagine. Don't you ever say to yourself, what would happen if this country were governed by secret police who came and hammered at your door in the middle of the night, dragged you away to prison?

I think there's a couple of things that need to be said about that. First of all, we don't know anything about that in this country. Maybe in the providence of God we will, although I do know that some of our international friends here know far more about it than we do, and through the Barnabas Trust and other agencies, we know about persecution, savage, vindictive persecution of our brothers and sisters and other lands.

When we say, how would we stand up to it? Remember, the Lord does not give you strength for things that don't come. After all, all sorts of awful things could happen and do happen.

[24 : 23] The Lord is not going to give us strength for things that may not happen. I want to say this as well. I think this is very important. We mustn't go away when we read these stories feeling aggrided with guilt.

The Lord is not going to say to you on the last day, how did you handle the persecution I didn't send you? The Lord is going to say, how faithful were you in the place I put you?

How did you take up your cross and follow me in that situation? Because all of us, not just Jeremiah, not just the persecuted Christians in places like Sudan and Nigeria, but every Christian is called to take up the cross.

The Lord in his providence, the Lord in his goodness, the Lord in his wisdom knows exactly what circumstances he's going to bring into our lives. Not he's wondering, are we going to be faithful?

Well, that's why we sang Jesus, keep me near the cross. That's the only way we're going to be faithful, even near the cross of Jesus. Not simply taking up our own cross, but finding the strength from that cross.

[25 : 34] So, as we read this story, as we think of savage persecution elsewhere, let's not misapply it and go away with feelings of neurotic guilt.

That will not help us to be faithful where we are. Now, thirdly, the brave and believing prophet. We've had the weak and unbelieving king.

We've had the vicious and unbelieving officials. Now we have the brave and believing prophet, Jeremiah himself. And this is a faint foreshadowing of the cross.

One of the pictures in the Old Testament of the cross. Almost a kind of dramatization in narrative form. What Isaiah says in chapter 53, I said it's faint foreshadowing.

Jeremiah did not save his people or even himself by his suffering. Nevertheless, it is a picture of someone who walked the way of the cross. I want you to notice one or two things.

[26 : 31] First of all, his humanity. Notice chapter 37, verse 18. Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, what wrong have I done to you or your servants, this people, who put me in prison?

And then verse 20. Now hear please, O my Lord the king, let my humble plea come before you and do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary lest I die there.

The conditions must have been nightmarish. He was there for, says, many days, perhaps quite a few months. You see, he was a sensitive man. He wasn't seeking persecution.

He wasn't looking it out. And he wanted to get out of this difficulty if he could. I remember reading about some of the Scottish covenanters imprisoned on the Bass Rock during the times of persecution.

And they prayed daily, Lord, take us out of this horrible place. That is not lack of faith. It is simply showing the humanity and sensitivity. We've noticed this already about Jeremiah, a very sensitive man.

[27 : 33] Not at all, the not at all the thundering, arrogant person he's often represented to be. That's the first thing. He's human. Secondly, he inspires courage in others.

And we have a bright light shining in these dark chapters. We come to 38, verse 7. When Ebed-Meloch, the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard they had put Jeremiah into the cistern, Ebed-Meloch went from the king's house and said to the king, in contrast to the cruel officials, in contrast to the weak king, here is a good and generous man.

Now, Ebed-Meloch means the servant of the king. Of course, he was the servant of the king's edekiah, but surely he is the servant of the king of kings. As this, and surely it was Jeremiah's courage that inspired his courage.

We'll see when we come to the next chapter. He's given a special promise from the Lord. One of those hardly noticed and little-known individuals in the Bible.

By the way, it's quite a good thing sometimes. I recommend this to you as a study. Study the unknown and partly insignificant people in the Bible who did great things for the Lord.

[28 : 48] A little girl who was in Naaman's house who led to the cleansing of her master. Paul's nephew nephew who went and warned the centurion that Paul's life was in danger.

Great thing in the celebrity culture of today to realize that so much of God's work is done by unknown and unnamed individuals. Here we know the man's name. We know little about him.

But this is a man who is admirable and this is a man who is... And once again, the other thing, often notice this. Remember the Old Testament is never, ever narrowly Jewish as many people claim it to be.

Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian. Surely this we must think of that other Ethiopian traveling through the desert whom Philip the Evangelist spoke to went back to his own country rejoicing with the message of the gospel.

And I'm sure as Rupert read this passage you would realize this is an eyewitness account. The circumstantial detail, the, you know, the verse 11, Ebed-Melech went to the house of the king to a wardrobe and the storehouse took from their old rags and worn out clothes.

[30 : 02] She let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. These are the kind of things that could only come from a nigh witness. And then this brave and believing prophet has his final meeting with Zedekiah, 38 verses 14 and following.

King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah and received him at the third entrance of the temple to the Lord. Once again, the futile searching for a word that will set aside the words already given.

Now, notice that even at this late stage there is still the possibility of hope. Basically, verse 17, Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, if you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared and your city shall not be burned with fire.

And you and your house, and what that house was, of course, the house of David, you and your house shall live. If you do not surrender in this city, we will give them to the hand of the Chaldeans and you shall not escape from their hands.

So there is still hope at the last moment, at the eleventh hour, as long as there is the word of God being spoken, as long there is hope.

[31 : 27] And surely, you must have noticed in verse 22, Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you. Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you.

That's surely saying the prophet may have been stuck in the mud. The king is in far deeper mud than the prophet was, and in far greater danger. All your wives and your sons be led out to the Chaldeans.

Once again, shades of Herod and John the Baptist. Herod trembled when he heard the Baptist, but he would not take any action. And as we know, he ended up the murderer of the Baptist.

So, you see how this story is developing. It's a story, a challenge to everyone to walk the way of the cross because the way of the cross leads to safety.

The way of the cross leads home. We need to take the word seriously. We need to obey it. Because if we don't obey it, we're going to end up either like the weakened, wimpish Zedekiah who did not obey the word simply because he was too spineless, or we're going to end up like the persecuting officials who set out to destroy it.

[32 : 39] And when that happens, people's ignorance and prejudice is all but unbelievable. We need to be faithful. And the other thing is as we finish, as I've said, we need to be faithful where we are.

Our way may not be the house of Jonathan, the dungeon of Jonathan, and the cistern, but as we all know, God sends into our lives many trying and testing experiences.

And he sustains us through these by the word of the cross and by the assurance that the way of the cross leads home. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that as we have looked at this brave prophet, at this godly and sensitive man, so cruelly ill-treated by people who ought to have known better, and yet still willing to share that message with anyone who would listen, give to us faithfulness in our day and generation to walk the way of the cross and thus to know the true joy of those who love and serve the Lord.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 08] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.