

The word and work continue

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[0 : 00] Now, if I could ask you to turn, please, once again to the book of Jeremiah. This evening we're in chapters 40 and 41, which you'll find on page 668.

Page 668, and we're going to read these two chapters, chapters 40 and 41. Last week we saw how the city of Jerusalem had fallen and the king and many of the aristocracy taken away into captivity. So, 40, the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nabuzeradan, the captain of the guards, had let him go from Ramah. When he took him bound in chains along with all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon, the captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, The Lord your God pronounced disaster against this place.

The Lord has brought it about and has done as he has said, because you have sinned against the Lord and did not obey his voice. This thing has come upon you. Now, behold, I release you today from the chains on your hands.

If it seems good for you to come with me to Babylon, come, and I will look after you well. But if it seems wrong to you to come with me to Babylon, do not come.

[1 : 21] See, the whole land is before you. Go wherever you think it good and right to go. If you remain, then return to Gedali, the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed governor of the cities of Judah, and dwell with him among the people.

Or go wherever you think it right to go. So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present and let him go. Then Jeremiah went to Gedali, the son of Ahicham at Mizpah, and lived with him among the people who were left in the land.

When all the captains of the forces in the open country and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedali, the son of Ahicham, governor in the land, and had committed to him men, women, and children, those of the poorest of the land who had not been taken into exile to Babylon, they went to Gedali at Mizpah.

Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, Jehanan, the son of Kereah, Sarai, the son of Tanhumeth, the sons of Ephai, the Netophathite, Jezani, the son of the Maacathite, they and their men.

Gedali, the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, swore to them and their men, saying, Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Dwell in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you.

[2 : 39] As for me, I will dwell at Mizpah to represent you before the Chaldeans, who will come to you. But as for us, you gather wine and summer fruits and oil and store them in your vessels and dwell in your cities that you have taken.

Likewise, when all the Judeans were in Moab and among the Ammonites and in Edom, and in other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedali, the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, as governor over them, then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven and came to the land of Judah to Gedali at Mizpah.

And they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance. Now Jehanan, the son of Kereah, and all the leaders of the forces in the open country came to Gedali at Mizpah and said to him, Do you know that Baalus, the king of the Ammonites, has sent Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, to take your life?

Gedali, the son of Ahicham, would not believe them. Then Jehanan, the son of Kereah, spoke secretly to Gedali at Mizpah, Please let me go and strike down Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it.

Why should he take your life? So that all the Judeans who were gathered about you would be scattered, and the remnant of Judah would perish. But Gedali, the son of Ahicham, said to Johanan, the son of Kereah, You shall not do this thing, for you are speaking falsely of Ishmael.

[4 : 08] In the seventh month, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishamah, of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king, came with ten men to Gedali, the son of Ahicham, at Mizpah.

As they ate bread together there at Mizpah, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, and the ten men with him rose up and struck down Gedali, the son of Ahicham, son of Shapham, with the sword, and killed him, whom the king of Babylon had appointed governor in the land.

Ishmael also struck down all the Judeans who were with Gedali at Mizpah, and the Chaldean soldiers who happened to be there. On the day after the murder of Gedali, before anyone knew of it, eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria with their beards shaved and their clothes torn and their bodies gashed, bringing grain offerings and incense to present at the temple of the Lord.

And Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, came out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he came. As he met them, he said to them, Come in to Gedali, the son of Ahicham. When they came into the city, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, and the men with him slaughtered them and cast them into a cistern.

But there were ten men among them who said to Ishmael, Do not put us to death, for we have stores of wheat, barley, oil, and honey hidden in the fields. So he refrained and did not put them to death with their companions.

[5 : 33] Now the cistern into which Ishmael had thrown all the bodies of the men whom he had struck down along with Gedaliah was the large cistern that King Asa had made for defense against Baasha, king of Israel.

Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, filled it with the slain. Then Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah, the king's daughters, and all the people who were left at Mizpah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guards, had committed to Gedaliah, the son of Ahicham.

Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites. But when Jehanan, the son of Korea, and all the forces with him heard of all the evil that Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, had done, they took all their men and went to fight against Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah.

They came upon him at the great pole that is in Gibeon. And when all the people who were with Ishmael saw Jehanan, the son of Korea, and all the leaders of the forces with him, they rejoiced. So all the people whom Ishmael had carried away captive from Mizpah, turned round and came back and went to Jehanan, the son of Korea.

But Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, escaped from Jehanan with eight men and went to the Ammonites. Then Jehanan, the son of Korea, and all the leaders of the forces with him, took from Mizpah all the rest of the people and he recovered from Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, after he struck down Gedali, the son of Ahicham, soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs, whom Jehanan brought back from Gibeon.

[7 : 08] And they went and stayed at Geruth-Kimham near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt because of the Chaldeans. So they were afraid of them because Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, had struck down Gedaliah, the son of Ahicham, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, could I ask you please to have your Bibles open at these chapters we've just read and as we approach them, let's have a moment of prayer.

Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we ask that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to us, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. There are a few phrases I use more regularly in the Cornhill classroom than there is no part of Scripture that is unpreachable.

When I read these chapters this week, my heart began to sink. There appears to be very little to preach on in these chapters. Then, as so often, C.S. Lewis came to the rescue.

[8 : 49] Those of you who are familiar with *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* may remember its wonderful opening sentence. There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.

One of Eustace's problems was that he was a know-all. Now, if you know everything, obviously you can be taught nothing. There can be no advance, no development, no kind of discovery you can make.

And once, in one of his more pompous moments, he pronounced, In our world, says Eustace, a star is just a huge ball of flaming gas.

The reply was, Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, it's only what it's made of.

Now, that strikes me as being a good way of approaching difficult passages like this.

Distinguished between what it's made of, if you like, the surface architecture, and the actual underlying meaning, what it's made of is very, very unpromising, very depressing story.

[9:56] It begins quite upbeat, fuller account of how Jeremiah is freed by the Babylonian captain, promising start made as Gedolai, a decent man, is appointed as governor, and he makes a very good beginning.

He's hardly begun, though, when he's warned of a plot against him by this man, Ishmael. He ignores the warning. He's treacherously assassinated by Ishmael, who then embarks on a killing spree.

Then Ishmael, finding he may have won some battles, he hasn't won any hearts, himself flees to the Ammonites, and another leader, Johanan, then decides they should flee to Egypt.

That is what the chapter is made of, if you like. That's its architecture. That's the story. But what is it? What's it about? And the clue is in verse 1, the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

Now, it's very interesting. Jeremiah says virtually nothing in these two chapters. But the point surely is that the exile is over.

[11:03] Jeremiah's words, sorry, the exile isn't over. The city has fallen. The exile has begun. His message of judgment has been fulfilled. But there is still a word from the Lord, particularly to the remnant.

The remnant mentioned several times in the passage. And this is the heading, it seems to me, not just for these chapters, but for the rest of the book. The last 13 chapters in the book.

There is still a word. And that word is to be found in what happens as well as what's said. That's a principle of biblical prophecy. In the, the Jews call the, what we call the historical books, the former prophets.

God working through the events of history, which prophets comment on and sometimes embody.

So my title is The Word and the Work Continues. That is what this is about.

It's not ultimately about war infections, about murder and mayhem and treachery. It's about the word and the work of the Lord continuing. So what I want to do is to try and trace this through these chapters.

[12:07] Not so much verse by verse as trying to trace this, if you like, underground stream, which gives, which fertilizes this whole rather barren-seeming territory.

First of all then, the word given. That's my, that's my first point. Now, interestingly, the exile has taken place. This great watershed has happened, but the word is still the same word.

It is a word of judgment and it is a word of grace. So first of all, let's look at the word of judgment, verses two and three. Surprisingly, from the mouth of the Babylonian captain, the Lord your God pronounced disaster against this place.

The Lord has brought it about. That's done what he said, because you sinned against him and did not obey his voice. History is confirming who the Lord of history is. And just as in the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar himself is to acknowledge this, the verses I refer to in the prayer.

He is the one who rules in heaven and in the kingdoms of the earth and who can stay his hand and say to him, what are you doing? And Jeremiah himself is to embody that word.

[13:18] The word is still to be flesh in Jeremiah. Verse six, he went to Gedali, the son of Ahicham at Mizpah and lived with him among the people who were left in the land.

The temptation to go to Babylon must have been considerable. He would have been treated well there. He would have been honored and he would have been, he would have at long last been able to settle down among people who are they not, who they might not have wholly appreciated him, yet wouldn't have treated him the way that his own people had.

But no, he remains among the people and not only brings them the word, but is himself the word to them. Remember, uniquely, the word becomes flesh in Jesus.

But everyone who communicates that word, the word has to become flesh in them. Not just when you're communicating from somewhere like this, but communicating it to others.

The word needs to become flesh. An old poem that says, it was not then the truth you spoke to you so clear, to me so dim, was that in your words you brought a sense of him.

[14 : 33] That is what the word is about, bringing a sense of him. Never just explaining the Bible, it's proclaiming Christ. That's what Jeremiah is in Jerusalem in 587 BC and beyond.

And as he is to us today, his word continues today to us. There's the word of judgment. And then there is the word of grace. Now one of the things you might well wonder about when you read a passage like this, why you need to be told three or four times who Gedaliah is?

Why do we, surely we learned the first time he was son of Ahicham and grandson of Shapham. Surely once is enough. But that's not the point.

The point is, this is a detail, Jeremiah is showing us, this is a detail of vital significance. Back in 2 Kings 22, at the beginning of the reign of the great reforming king, Josiah, it was this man's grandfather, Shaphan, then secretary of state, who along with Halkai, the high priest, rediscovered the book of the law, the words of Moses, which gave impetus to Josiah's great reformation, fanned into a flame, a reformation, which had already partially begun.

And now down two generations, that word is still working. And that's why we're being reminded, don't forget, this man comes from a godly family who have been involved for two generations in the word of God.

[16 : 03] It was his grandfather who discovered the book of the law. And also we learn back in 26 in Jeremiah that his father, Ahicham, had protected Jeremiah against those plotting to kill him.

I think that's so important because in a very real sense, Josiah's great reformation failed. The city was not saved. It wasn't Josiah's fault.

It was because of his grandfather, Manasseh, who had gone so far and been so godless, the city was already doomed. But after the king's death, the word which he put into the nation's bloodstream again is still continuing and still working.

And also this curious little incident in verse 41, on the day after the, 41 verse 4, on the day of the murder of Gedaliah, 80 men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria.

These are all places in the old northern kingdom of Israel which had long gone to Assyria. Now, you can read in 2 Chronicles 35 of King Josiah's great Passover and one of the things he did was he sent messengers into the northern kingdom to invite those survivors who were still in the land to come and join them.

[17 : 19] He wanted to unite all Israel. The word is still at work in hearts many years later. And that is so important. We must trust the Bible to be the Bible.

We must believe that when the word is sown, it will bear fruit, perhaps well beyond the day of those who bring it. We may not see the results in our own day, but that word is a living word.

And there's further evidence of grace. In 40 verse 12, they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance. I think that little detail is so important as well.

God's grace is still at work in the life of the people. The land is devastated. The cities are destroyed. Only the very poor and disadvantaged of society are left.

And yet they have an abundant harvest. We see once again that's fulfilling the word of God. An even older word. As long as the earth remains, summer and winter, sowing and reaping, day and night, will never cease.

[18 : 22] Promise given so long ago to Noah, we remember heaven and earth will pass away. But my word will not pass away. So the word is given, and not just given, but the word given long before, even as long ago as Noah, is still at work.

Trust the Bible to be the Bible. Trust the word of God to do its work, even although it seems not to be doing its work, which so often happens. It would be great if that were all the passage said.

And of course, the temptation was to stop there. But the Bible is a realistic book. The Bible knows very well that not all accept and believe that word. That's the parable of the sower.

In the family of Shaphan and Ahicham and Gedali, the word had done its work. But in other families, it most certainly had not. It had fallen on thorns.

It had fallen on stony ground. So let's do other things I want to say. My second point is the word ignored. Now this is chapter 40, verse 13 to 41.

[19 : 29] Verse 3, this despicable incident where Gedali is assassinated. Now Johanan, one of the other commanders, Johanan, verse 13, son of Kuri and all the leaders of the forces in the open country.

Obviously, what had happened during the Babylonian invasion and during the siege of Jerusalem, some guerrilla forces had been operating in the Judean deserts and highlands and so on. And now

they come to Gedaliah.

Now, the man called Johanan comes and warns him. One of the other commanders is plotting against him. I'll say more of Ishmael shortly.

And he is conspiring with the king of Ammon. Verse 14, Ammon, one of those petty kingdoms around Israel, Ammon, Moab and Edom, which caused so much trouble for the people of Israel from the time of the desert wanderings onwards.

But Gedaliah refuses to believe it and he is treacherously assassinated. Now, this action is particularly despicable. It's done at a feast. In the ancient world, hospitality was regarded in a very sacred way and actually to assassinate your host was pretty, pretty, pretty dreadful.

[20 : 46] And that's what happened. Now, why did Gedaliah, why did Gedaliah not take the warning? He may just have been naive, of course. It may have been that he is, may have been that he, or it may have been political considerations if I move against one of these other commanders that would cause even more trouble than there is.

I think there's a deeper reason. Now, I know you cannot build too much on silences, but there's a particularly thundering silence in this episode.

Why did he not consult Jeremiah? Why, when the prophetic word embodied in the prophet himself, was near at hand, did he not consult him?

I think this is, this is confirmed in verse 16, I think, the last verse of chapter 40. You shall not do this thing for you are speaking falsely of Ishmael. The word more common in Jeremiah up to now than the word false, the false prophets, those who propagate the lie.

If anyone could have distinguished between lies and truth, surely it was Jeremiah. So, you see, he does not consult the prophet and therefore disaster comes upon him.

[22 : 04] I think, I think this is a, the word given must be consulted. I think this is a thing we need to reflect on, don't we? If that word is not continually shaping our lives, there is trouble ahead.

Many churches which flourish under Bible teaching ministries, then they become less committed to the Bible. It doesn't happen immediately. Over a generation or two, it's not long before very non-biblical and non-godly patterns emerge.

Very important for all of us at every stage of our lives, isn't it? Young people, if you move on, look at it, look for a church which has a Bible teaching ministry which will sustain your faith.

Older people, many of you have sat under decades of biblical ministry here. Is it still fresh? Is it still living? Is it still shaping? Still finding it fresh and new?

Now let's be realistic. I know that staleness and weariness can enter into our Bible reading sometimes. One of the suggestions I make when people say that to me is, why not stop reading your usual translation and read something like Eugene Peterson's The Message?

[23 : 26] Not rely on it, it's a paraphrase, it's not a literal translation. Nevertheless, Peterson is a real flow to him. The book, some of you will know it, it's written like an ordinary book, not in columns, much easier to sit down and read, and therefore it does refresh you, I think.

Oh, that's some bits I don't like. I can't really believe the heavenly hosts in Revelation 4 said, oh yes, as the Lamb opened the scroll, but that's just American anyway, so we have to forgive that. Peterson knows what he's talking about, he's retired now, he taught biblical languages for many years, so you're in safe hands. That's one thing. The other thing I want to say is don't torture yourself with guilt.

That never helps. You may, oh I'm not reading my Bible often enough. Different stages of your life, you're going to have different opportunities. Think about a young mum with kids.

When she sits down, she's hardly, if we can't hardly keep awake, far less read the Bible. Think of pressurised middle-aged people struggling with the demands of a job and bringing up a teenage family and so on.

[24 : 38] You see, you see the point I'm making? What I'm saying is make use of the opportunities you've got rather than lamenting the ones you don't have. Reflect on, if you don't have time to read, always make sure you have passages you can reflect on.

Meditate on. By meditation, of course, I mean meditating on Scripture, not sitting down and saying, as I was sitting among the Jews, I felt really exact. That's not meditation. Meditation is taking a passage of Scripture and reflecting on it.

Take a phrase like God is faithful. Take that with you to work tomorrow. Take that with you to your home. Reflect on it. So you see, we need to keep the word given.

We need not to ignore it. It must shape our lives. That's what it's given for. It's not just building up biblical knowledge, although we will build up biblical knowledge. Remember what Paul says in Galatians, the letter kills.

We can know the content of the Bible without knowing the Lord of the Bible. So firstly, the word given. Then the word ignored. Don't be like Gedaliah.

[25 : 49] Consult the Lord through the Scriptures. But thirdly and finally, the word defied. Because here in chapter 41, one of the nastiest characters in the Bible, whose every action shows his defiance of the word of God.

In the seventh month, Ishmael, the son of Nephaniah, son of Elishamah. Notice the next phrase, of the royal family. This gives us the hint what he was up to. He's a member of the royal house, probably not in the direct line, but nevertheless, a member of the house of David, and his intention almost certainly is to seize power and reestablish the Davidic dynasty.

But everything about him is a disgrace to the name of David. Everything he does, everything he thinks. Read 1 Samuel, see how David resisted every temptation to get rid of Saul and to seize the throne before time.

He's no true son of David, he may be related to him genetically, but he's certainly no true son of David. And notice his treacherous betrayal of hospitality, contrasting totally with David's generous hospitality to Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, son.

And his defiance of the Lord's words in 27 verse 6, words of Jeremiah, I have given all these lands and attend of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, my servant.

[27 : 17] We want to see at the very end of the book how the Lord is looking after the Davidic house, even during the exile, but this is not the man who's fit to take over the throne of David.

today, no individual, no institution which defies the Lord's word will prosper. People who want to use connections, institutions for their own ends will be judged as Ishmael was.

And so that's the first thing, the word is defied. It would be nice to think that, and we'll see this more clearly next week, that those who obviously hadn't warmed to Ishmael, but Ishmael soon realizes he hasn't won any hearts, may have got rid of a lot of people, but he hasn't won any hearts, and so he flees back to Ammon with no idea what happens to him.

But there is panic among the survivors. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had appointed Gedaliah. Not only had he been killed, some of the Chaldeans had been killed, he's bound to be back wanting revenge.

So, what do they do? They decide they are going to go to Egypt. Verse 17 of chapter 41, intending to go to Egypt.

[28 : 39] All through the prophetic scriptures, the prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah warn, don't go down to Egypt for help, because they won't help you. And we'll see next week how Jeremiah warns against this, and later in chapter 45, we'll see that even going to Egypt doesn't place them outside the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, because Nebuchadnezzar, having subdued these smaller countries, then immediately turns his attention to Egypt.

So, you see, the word given, the word ignored, but now the word defied. You see, the word ignored is bad enough, but the word defied is deadly, because the word defied is God's word, and brings judgment, terrible judgment.

As we finish, two things which we, two things which we want to say. First of all, believe in the power of this word.

It is a living word. Believe in, believe in what we are trying to do here week after week, to scatter the seed of the word. what so many of you are doing in groups, individuals, and so on.

Believe that perhaps beyond your own day, there will be a harvest. There will be those who will respond perhaps long after you've gone. Secondly, make sure as well that in our own lives, that word is the shaping principle.

[30 : 12] I say, take every opportunity we have to read it, to listen to teaching about it, to engage with it, and to apply it to our lives. Heaven and earth, said Jesus, will pass away, but my word will not pass away.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, how we praise you that you have given the living word, Christ Jesus. You have given to us the written word, which so fully and faithfully points to him. And you have given to us the gracious Holy Spirit who gave that word and who now helps us as we engage with it, who reads its pages with us, and in our hearts shows Christ from that same word.

So help us, Lord, to love your word, to believe in it, and to continue teaching and spreading it, and leaving the consequences to you, the Lord of the harvest.
Amen.