

The Backroom Boy is Honoured

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- [0 : 0 0] So let's turn now to our Bible reading in the book of Jeremiah. Now, we are particularly going to be looking at Jeremiah chapter 45, which for the book of Jeremiah is an amazingly short chapter, only five verses, but we'll have to go back to chapter 36 first.
- Some months ago we looked at chapter 36, a chapter about, this is on page 664 and 665 first, about how the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah was beginning to be put together by his secretary Baruch and how it was read to King Jehoiakim and King Jehoiakim's response to it.
- So we read, first of all, Jeremiah 36 verse 20. Scroll had been put together, been given a public reading, and the officials felt it ought to be read to the king.
- So this is on page 665. Jeremiah 36. So they, that's the officials, went into the court to the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elishamah the secretary, and they reported all the words to the king.
- Then the king sent Yehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishamah the secretary, and Yehudi read it to the king, and all the officials who stood beside the king.
- [1 : 2 3] It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him. Yehudi read three or four columns.
- The king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire pot until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the fire pot. Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments.
- Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, and the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, take another scroll, and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll.
- Jehoi king, the king of Judah, has burned. And concerning Jehoi king, king of Judah, you shall say, thus says the Lord, you have burned this scroll, saying, why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast.
- Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning Jehoi king, king of Judah, you shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night.
- [2 : 5 8] And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disasters I have pronounced against them.
- But they would not hear. Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll that Jehoi king, king of Judah, had burned in the fire.
- And many similar words were added to them. Now, over a few pages to page 672. We'll read this short chapter 45, which tells us about Baruch's response to that incident of burning the scroll.

Chapter 45. The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch, the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoi king, the son of Josiah, king of Judah.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch. You said, woe is me, for the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.

[4 : 17] Thus shall you say to him, thus says the Lord. Behold what I have built, I am breaking down. And what I have planted, I am plucking up. That is the whole land.

And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. I will give your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now, if we could please have our Bibles open at page 672.

That's Jeremiah 45. And let's have a moment of prayer before we begin. Come then with prayer and contemplation.

See how in Scripture Christ is known. And Father, as we look into the words of the prophet, may we hear our master's voice and see our master's face.

[5 : 22] And like those on the Emmaus Road, while the Lord Christ reveals to us the Scriptures, which point so faithfully to him, their hearts might burn within us, and our eyes may be opened.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Winston Churchill, during his long career, suffered from bouts of depression, which in his writings he calls the black dog moments.

They were particularly severe during the Second World War, but not confined to that. And one time when he was in one of those moments, a friend said to him, cheer up, sir.

History will treat you kindly. And he replied, it most certainly will, because I intend to write it. And that, of course, is an issue we face when we come to a prophet like Jeremiah.

Last week in chapter 44, we examined the question, how do we know who is telling the truth? Who is telling the reality? Who is giving the inner meaning of the events as they unfold?

[6 : 39] And that seems to be also to be at the heart of this little chapter 45. And obviously an important question we have to ask, why is this chapter here?

It's a very odd place to put it, because as I said, it refers to an incident 20 years earlier, to chapter 36, when the reading of the scroll of the prophet, the first scroll of the prophet, was burned by King Jehoiakim.

Chapter we read last week, chapter 44, the last words of Jeremiah to the exiles in Egypt, who had gone there unwisely and indeed against the commandment of the Lord.

And we'd expect it to go on now to chapter 46, the oracles against the nations. But instead we've got this little chapter here, referring back to chapter 36.

Remember what happened in 36. Jeremiah has told the prophet Baruch the words that he has spoken, which are probably the first 25 chapters of the book, and indeed probably chapters 46 and following the final section of the book.

[7 : 46] The king had burned it, but he had been unable to destroy the word of God. The beginning of the process by which the book is coming together.

So this little chapter here is reminding us of that, in spite of failure and rebellion. In spite of the total rejection of Jeremiah's words, not only back in 36, but in the previous chapter, 44.

He is, the Bible, the book of Jeremiah, is coming together. Where the book is finished and the gospel is growing. And to some extent this applies to the whole canon of scripture.

Frequently repeated phrase in Acts, the word of God grew and multiplied. So that's why I think the chapter is here. As we come to the close of the actual words spoken by Jeremiah to the Judeans, now we have this little chapter giving us an insight into what's happening.

And it also shows the importance of the written word, write these words in a book. Now even today, with all our electronic media and email and all the rest of it, we still have to put many things in writing.

[8 : 59] We're all familiar with this. Have you got anything in writing? This has to be presented in writing. And so, God, for future generations, as we've just sung, gave in his wisdom for our learning, gave his inspired and holy word.

God didn't leave us to depend on traditions. God didn't leave us to depend on hearsay. Here we have the written word which faithfully points to the Lord Christ.

Come then with faith and contemplation. See how in the scripture Christ is known. And he uses people like the faithful Baruch. This is the only place where Baruch speaks in his own voice and gives us a glimpse into his heart.

This is the most personal of the prophetic books. We've had many, many glimpses into Jeremiah's heart. Here we have a glimpse into the heart of his faithful secretary. The man who has been behind the scenes.

That's why I've given this, you may think, the rather odd title. The backroom boy is honored. That's my title for today. Baruch, beavering away behind the scenes and wondering if he's got it all wrong.

[10 : 12] Now, here in the word of God, this man is honored. So let's look at this little chapter then. Uncharacteristically short for the book, but a very important one.

And first of all, we have the word given by God. It's the first thing I want to say. The word that Jeremiah spoke to Baruch, the son of Neriah, notice, comes through Jeremiah.

But then in verse 2, thus says the Lord, thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel. The word is given by the Lord to Jeremiah. And Jeremiah passes it on to Baruch.

Now, as I said last week, Baruch takes down the words of Jeremiah. He takes them down by dictation. That doesn't mean that Jeremiah was a dictaphone. This book of Jeremiah was obviously labored over for many years.

Jeremiah did his work, did his homework. Remember, I refer to Luke, who says the same thing at the beginning of his gospel. I've listened to people. I've read what they've written. But under the inspiration of the Spirit, the product is the word of the Lord, as well as the words of Jeremiah.

[11 : 17] Jeremiah, in a book, a permanent record, that for the same thing is said to John, the apostle on the island of Patmos in Revelation, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches.

And what a gift this book is. So he sang life, symbol and story, song and saying, life-bearing truths for heart and mind.

Timeless truths. But because they're eternal, they are timely for every generation. See, if Jeremiah had only been speaking to his own day, which he was, he predicted the exile, it happened.

He predicted the disasters, they happened. He's not just speaking to his own day, he's speaking to every day. Remember on the Emmaus Road, the Lord, the risen Lord, opens the scriptures and reveals to his followers the things about himself.

It's almost as if the Lord is saying, Baruch, over many, many years, 40 years or so, you have seen the rejection of this word. You've been in a tiny minority, and you feel, looking back, it hasn't been worth it.

[12 : 34] That must have been Baruch's feeling. I've decided to be loyal to Jeremiah, decided to be loyal to the Lord. Has it all been worth it?

But the Lord says, you've been faithful, and the words I'm giving to you will bring blessing and judgment to future generations, including us, people who live in lands Baruch had never heard of, speak a language that was unknown, and so on.

This is what happens when the Lord says something written in a book. Now, books, of course, as Ecclesiastes says, are making many books. There is no end.

Most of them go out of print after a short time. But this book outlasts the time into which it's spoken. Indeed, will outlast our time, and indeed, in eternity will still be there.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. These words which have been fulfilled. Now, in the next few chapters, chapters 46 and following, look at the next two weeks.

[13 : 36] These words are relevant to the nations of the world as well. And just glance ahead at the beginning of 46, the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations.

This word has power beyond what Baruch or even Jeremiah could have dreamed of. That's the first point I want to make about this chapter. This chapter is about the word given by God, but coming through people, living, suffering people.

And that's my second point, the pain of serving God. You might think it would have been rather fun to be involved in the production of Scripture, that it would have been a tremendous honor.

Look what Baruch says. Woe is me, for the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with groaning, and I find no rest.

He doesn't say, isn't it great? I am involved in the production of Scripture. My, I really am a big player. No, he doesn't say that at all. This is the cry of exhausted faith.

[14 : 44] Some of the commentators, of course, who, amazing how many commentators are far more spiritual than the biblical writers, and are so ready to sit in judgment.

But, if we're going to be super spiritual, we're going to be, we're going to be different from most of the figures in the Bible. Elijah, in 1 Kings 19, take away my life, for I'm no better than my ancestors.

Of course, the commentators have a great, great fun with Elijah. The Lament Psalms, above all, the book of Job. So, the pain of serving God.

I want to make two points here. First of all, this is real disillusionment and grief. How do we distinguish between lament and whinging?

Lament and complaining? You may remember, you know, Psalm 95, an evil and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. People of God are condemned for that.

[15 : 49] Endless complaining. Endless criticizing of the Lord. Of course, that refers to the innocence we read about earlier on in Numbers and so on. The complaining that the Lord has brought them into the desert to destroy them.

The point about, the one major difference between lament and whinging is, lament criticizes the Lord. Talks about, you know, almost behind his back.

Life treats me harshly. What we, of course, mean is that God has treated me harshly. Characteristic voice of lament is to say, Lord, please explain what this is about.

Lord, I don't understand. Lord, I am totally baffled. How do your promises and what's happening now fit together? Why is the dream dying?

Why is faithfulness unrewarded? Paul, with his thorn in the flesh, asking the Lord time and time again to take it away. You see, lament brings it to the Lord.

[16 : 55] Lament doesn't talk about the Lord. It brings it to, Lord, please answer. Because after all, the ultimate cry of lament is, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Into that cry is gathered up all the suffering, all the disillusionment, all the agonies of God's people throughout the ages. So there is real disillusionment and grief here.

And as I say, we mustn't dismiss it otherwise, because if we dismiss it, sooner or later, it's going to catch up with us. If we think that Christian life is going to be fun from start to finish, we're very soon going to be disillusioned.

There's a boy who used to sing the song, Happy Day When Jesus Washed My Sins Away. He taught me how to watch and pray and live rejoicing every day.

He didn't teach me how to live rejoicing every day, and he didn't teach you either. There are many days when you will not be rejoicing, many days when you'll be in agony and saying, Why, Lord? Why? How long?

[18 : 00] The words of the lament song. And many of the modern choruses are just as bad. With this idea, it's all going to be fun. My love just keeps on growing.

Well, brothers and sisters, my love doesn't just keep on growing. You have to work jolly hard at it. And you probably do as well. So this is lament, is questioning the ultimate realities. Lord, why is your behavior and your promises not seeming to gel together?

But that, of course, is also the beginning of the answer. Because the second thing is, seeing the Lord behind it all, notice verse, the Lord has added sorrow to my pain.

That's the point. It's not a ghastly accident. It's not something that the Lord is standing by idly, or even perhaps almost saying, Well, that will teach them.

No. Behind all such experiences, we must see the words, remember the words of Joseph, the end of Genesis, You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

[19 : 08] Things that happened to Joseph were not good. In the pit, in the prison, the cheating, the lying, and all the rest of it, these were not good things in themselves. But God overruled them and meant them for good.

Now, that does not take away the pain. That does not mean that we suddenly feel lighthearted. Because there will be times of great distress. When we will feel this way, the Lord has added sorrow to my pain.

This is being utterly honest. And the people in Scripture are honest. You remember Jeremiah way back in chapter 20 himself, says, Lord, you seduced me.

I was seduced. In other words, Jeremiah says, Lord, I've been faithful to you, but you haven't been faithful to me. These terrifying words. The old hymn says, Is there trouble anywhere?

Now, we know there's trouble everywhere. And the old hymn says, Take it to the Lord in prayer. Take your hearts. Take your agonies. Take your loneliness and your fear and your disillusionment.

[20 : 11] Take it to the Lord in prayer. The Lord will not be angry with us for that. What the Lord is angry with, as we know from Psalm 95 and others, is complaining and whinging.

This is not complaining and whinging. This is saying, Lord, please explain. And as we know, there are some questions we will not know the answer to until we reach the Father's house.

So that's the second thing, the pain of serving God. Now, the third thing is the reward God gives. This is very interesting to me. This is what the Lord says.

Behold what I have built, I am breaking down. What I have planted, I am plucking up. That is the whole end. These are words from chapter 1, from Jeremiah's original commission.

Go and preach about building and tearing down, about planting and plucking. Years have passed, but the words remain true.

[21 : 08] That is the point. But, there is still a problem here. Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. So, first of all, there is always going to be disappointment in this world.

Baruch might have hope for rewards in this world. Baruch, after all, was a man of some standing in the community. His brother, Saraiah, who is mentioned once or twice in the book, was palace steward during King Zedekiah's time.

He might well have expected honors in this world. And, no doubt, he had suffered greatly because of his loyalty to Jeremiah.

He had his prestige. Now, once again, some of the commentators read verse 5 as a rebuke. Do you see great leap them not?

I don't read it as a rebuke at all. I read it as a reminder that in this world there is always going to be disappointment and disillusionment.

[22 : 15] You see, ultimately, there is only one well done that matters. The Lord says, Baruch, people can't be trusted to be fair, to give honor where honor is due.

This is a real temptation to all of us, isn't it? We all love the praise of men, don't we? Well, he's saying, learn to scorn the praise of men. Well, I think that's a wise thing to say, learn, because it doesn't come naturally.

We all love to be praised, to be appreciated. And, of course, that's no excuse for us not giving appreciation where appreciation is due.

And, of course, it's not just people in ministry who feel this. All of us feel this, don't we? When we help people, when we do things, we want people to know.

We want to make sure that not just that it's done, but it is seen to be done. And we are so limited in our thinking. Isn't it true that people whom we like can do nothing wrong?

[23 : 19] And if they do, we always find excuses for them. And people we don't like can do nothing right. even when they do something right, we're always finding unworthy motives.

So, you see, this is such a temptation to seek great things for ourself. That is what lies at the heart of and is exacerbated by our evangelical celebrity culture.

The kind of thing that infiltrates all of evangelicalism everywhere. You know, the kind of nonsense you get on Facebook. This is a picture of me with Don Carson and so on.

You know, that kind of thing. Trying to be, trying to draw attention, trying to draw attention to ourselves and to our importance in the scheme of things. Now, I think it's very interesting what he says.

I'm bringing disaster upon all flesh. Now, notice, up to now, they've been speaking about disaster on the city. But this is speaking about not just the exile, but the day of judgment.

[24 : 23] judgment. What's being said here, what the Lord is saying here is, look, in all of this world, all of the provisional verdicts, all of the praise, there is going to come a time when it's all going to be set aside, when the day of judgment comes.

That's why I think it says disaster on all flesh. Not just the exile, but the day of judgment. That's the second thing, it seems to me. Life in the world to come.

Disappointment, disillusionment in this world. Heartbreak. Life in the world to come. I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.

Now, in the immediate context, that means that Baruch's life is going to be spared. He's not going to be killed. He's not going to be assassinated. He'll live out his natural life as a prize of war.

And probably this is also true about Jeremiah for the remainder of his life. Both of them having suffered greatly. Both of them having been disappointed. Now, in the later years of their life.

[25 : 30] But also, I think, it refers to the life of the world to come when true verdicts will be given. You see, it's almost like what the Lord said to the apostles, isn't it?

Lord, we cast out demons in your name. We heal the sick people to listen to us. And the Lord replies, don't rejoice that you cast out the demons.

Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. That's what I think is the abiding message of this. It's so difficult on earth to see this because if you live for a long time, you'll know that people who were famous at one time earlier in your life, they're forgotten.

You mention names that you think everybody would know, and no one's heard of them. Some of the salutary lessons of doing student work, which I did a great deal of in earlier days, when you go back in a year or two, nobody's heard of you because the generations pass.

Indeed, it's what the book of Ecclesiastes says. The book of Ecclesiastes talks about a famous king, and then a young man came along, a youth came along, the king was forgotten, and the whole world wondered after the youth, and then the youth himself was forgotten, and dropped out of sight.

[26 : 53] How soon the famous are forgotten, but not forgotten by the Lord. That is, there is a place where true verdicts will be given.

You see, Jeremiah and Baruch had been faithful from the earliest days. Remember, Jeremiah had said when he was called, I'm just a lad, I can't do this.

The Lord says, look, I'm going with you, I'll make you a fortified city. As we'll sing in a few moments now, closing him from the dawning of their lives to the evening of their lives, he remained faithful.

And while in this world it brought nothing but hardship, nothing but disappointment, nothing but disillusionment, in the world to come, there was going to be real reward for them.

Kind of people mentioned in Hebrews 11 who through faith did all these things. That surely is a message for all of us, isn't it? We are human, don't be super spiritual, don't pretend that we understand everything, don't pretend we don't like human praise, we do, but remember there is only one well done that matters.

[28 : 08] As the late William Still used to say, the prize giving is upstairs. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, in our own weakness and fickleness, we recognize the desire to be popular, the desire to be honored, the desire to be applauded.

Help us to look to the day when true verdicts will be given and when the Lord will justly and faithfully reward his servants.

We ask this in his name. Amen.