

Last time we heard about Baruch,
the scribe who wrote down the words that the LORD spoke to Jeremiah.

And so now we will hear the story of Jeremiah –
a story that we should presume was mediated through the pen of Baruch.

Last time, we heard the story of the burning of the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah.
That had taken place in the year 604 BC –
the year after the battle of Carchemish –
at a time when the power of Babylon was on the rise –
and the power of Egypt was failing.

Introduction: The Politics of Babylon (37:1-2)

37 Zedekiah the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim. ² 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.

The text of Jeremiah demands that we pay attention to this political background.
What had happened to Jehoiakim?

Well, Jehoiakim died in the middle of the siege of Jerusalem in 598 BC –
and they tried to make his son, Coniah, king in his place,
but Nebuchadnezzar took Coniah (also called Jehoiachin) captive,
and replaced him with his uncle Zedekiah.

This made Zedekiah the *third* son of Josiah to reign in Jerusalem.

Jehoahaz had reigned for three months after the death of Josiah.
Then Pharaoh Neco of Egypt replaced him with Jehoiakim (11 years).
Jeremiah had told Jehoiakim that none of descendants
would reign in Jerusalem (36:30).

But when they tried to make Coniah king in place of his father,
Nebuchadnezzar intervened and took Coniah captive –
making Zedekiah king (597-586).

But while verse 1 is important for understanding the context,
verse 2 is the crucial one.

No one *listened*.
No one *obeyed*.

Some have noted an apparent tension between verse 2 and the rest of chapters 37-38.
Zedekiah spends the whole of chapters 37-38 *inquiring* of the LORD!
And yet, verse 2 says that neither Zedekiah nor his servants, nor the people,
listened to the words of the LORD.

Plainly, as our text shows us, Zedekiah went to great lengths to *listen* to Jeremiah.
Zedekiah *heard* a great deal of what Jeremiah had to say!

At least – he heard – he listened – to the words.

But he did not *obey*.

This is the word “shema” – “Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one...”

This is the great *shema* of Deuteronomy 6.

Did Moses mean that so long as Israel believes that God is one,
nothing else really matters?

No! the Shema goes on to say,

“love the LORD your God with all your heart...”

But no one listens – no one hears – no one obeys the voice of the LORD –

“the words of the LORD that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.”

Why do I spend so much time on the *stories* of the Old Testament?

Because all of this is written down by Baruch *for you*.

This is written down as a warning to us – on whom the ends of the ages have come –
as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10.

Zedekiah is the king of Judah.

In one sense, as the son of David, he is entirely unlike us.

And yet, in another sense, he is exactly like us.

The word of the LORD comes to Zedekiah – just like it comes to us.

The three inquiries of Zedekiah form a pattern for us:

First, “please pray for us to the LORD” – Lord, have mercy on our situation.

Second, “Is there a word from the LORD?” – what does God say about our situation?

And third, what must we do to be saved? – what does God call us to do in our situation?

And as we’ll see throughout our text,

Zedekiah is an *excellent* example for us in every way – *except one*.

There is only one problem with Zedekiah.

He doesn’t *do* what Jeremiah says.

We live in a day when Babylon rules once more.

And there is a way in which Jeremiah’s message to Zedekiah
is crucial for us to understand:

“Surrender or die!”

We are not called to defeat Babylon.

King Jesus is the one who has defeated Babylon –

and he will rule until all things are brought under his feet.

The only way that we can *properly* seek the ‘peace of Jerusalem’
is by seeking the peace of Babylon.

Do not confuse Jerusalem with Babylon!

The peace of the earthly city is not the same as the peace of the heavenly city!

But so long as you live in Babylon –

so long as Babylon remains the dominant power of this age –

you are not called to overthrow Babylon!

1. Zedekiah's First Inquiry: "Please Pray for Us" (37:3-10)

³ King Zedekiah sent Jehucal the son of Shelemiah, and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseiah, to Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "Please pray for us to the LORD our God." ⁴ Now Jeremiah was still going in and out among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison.

⁵ 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.

The first thing Zedekiah does is send a messenger with one the priests asking Jeremiah to pray to the LORD.

This is good.

And we are told that at the same time,

the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) who were besieging Jerusalem

withdrew – because they heard that the Egyptian army was coming.

Perhaps Zedekiah might be tempted to think that his prayers were answered!

The LORD was delivering Jerusalem from the Babylonians –

just like he had saved Jerusalem from the Assyrians

in the days of Hezekiah.

But then comes verse 6:

⁶ Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet: ⁷ "Thus says the LORD, God of Israel: Thus shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to me to inquire of me, 'Behold, Pharaoh's army that came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land. ⁸ And the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against this city. They shall capture it and burn it with fire. ⁹ Thus says the LORD, Do not deceive yourselves, saying, "The Chaldeans will surely go away from us," for they will not go away. ¹⁰ 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.'" "

The king who relies on Egypt will find that his hand is pierced by a broken reed.

(That was what Isaiah had said to Hezekiah).

Egypt will not save you!

But at this point, *nothing* will save you.

There is no way to defeat Babylon.

Even if you defeated the whole army of the Chaldeans –

even the wounded remnant of Babylon would destroy this city!

Jerusalem must be destroyed – burned with fire – because of her idolatry and wickedness.

Now, this sort of message does not tend to make a lot of friends at the palace!

So when the Babylonians withdraw,
and Jeremiah sets out to go to the land of Benjamin,
he is immediately detained as a deserter – and a traitor!

2. Zedekiah's Second Inquiry: "Is There Any Word from the LORD?" (37:11-21)

a. Jeremiah Imprisoned as a Deserter (v11-15)

¹¹ Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's army, ¹² Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people. ¹³ When he was at the Benjamin Gate, a sentry there named Irijah the son of Shelemiah, son of Hananiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "You are deserting to the Chaldeans." ¹⁴ And Jeremiah said, "It is a lie; I am not deserting to the Chaldeans." But Irijah would not listen to him, and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. ¹⁵ And the officials were enraged at Jeremiah, and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, for it had been made a prison.

What is Jeremiah doing?

Back in chapter 32, Jeremiah had purchased a piece of land from his relative.

Now he wants to go take possession of it.

Of course, the LORD had told him already that Babylon was coming back.

Jeremiah *knows* that he will never take possession of the land he purchased.

Why is he going to Benjamin?

Why not?

Jeremiah may be living in the last days of Jerusalem.

But he continues to do all the ordinary things that a faithful Israelite would do.

And so, having redeemed the land for his cousin,

he will go and take possession of it –

knowing full well that he will never enjoy possession!

But his actions will be interpreted by the officials of Jerusalem
in the light of his opposition to the King.

And so Irijah the sentry would not listen –

“shema” – he would not hear – he would not obey.

If you are going to speak against the dominant ideology – the dominant power – of your day,
then don't be surprised if your actions are interpreted as hostile –
even when they are innocent.

Notice that Zedekiah has nothing to do with this.

The officials are acting on their own –

and from Zedekiah's words and actions,
it would appear that he has little power to control them.

The last son of Josiah – the last son of David before Jerusalem's fall –
has fallen far from his calling to do justice in Israel!

And yet Zedekiah still wants to hear from the prophet:

b. Zedekiah's Secret Inquiry and Provision (v16-21)

¹⁶ *When Jeremiah had come to the dungeon cells and remained there many days, ¹⁷ King Zedekiah sent for him and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house*

Think of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night.

Except here it is the King who is acting secretly.

Perhaps Zedekiah understands that his officials are wrong.

Perhaps Zedekiah *wants* to believe that Jeremiah is right!

You can easily sympathize with Zedekiah.

He has watched two brothers and a nephew be dethroned by the powers of his age.

For more than 30 years – in other words, for Zedekiah's whole life –

Jeremiah has repeatedly been proven to be true.

and said, "Is there any word from the LORD?" Jeremiah said, "There is." Then he said, "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon."

In other words, "nothing has changed, O king"!

Jerusalem is still doomed – and you have no future here.

But then Jeremiah appeals to the King:

¹⁸ *Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, "What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison?" ¹⁹ Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, 'The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land'?*

Why am I in prison?

I said that the king of Babylon would come against you – and he has –
but I am in prison.

Your prophets told you the king of Babylon would *not* come –
so why aren't *they* in prison – since they deceived you!

But of course, Jeremiah is not really interested in an answer to his question.

He is not trying to get the false prophets arrested.

He simply wants to get away from those who wish to kill him!

And so he asks:

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.” ²¹ 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 bakers' street, until all the bread of the city was gone. So Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

In other words, Jeremiah is not released –
he is simply transferred to the court of the guard –
a location more directly under the protection of the king.

Zedekiah will not obey the voice of the LORD speaking through Jeremiah –
but neither will he allow Jeremiah to be killed.
Perhaps Zedekiah realizes that Jeremiah is, in a way, *on his side*.
No, Jeremiah is not going to change his tune.
Jeremiah is not going to say what Zedekiah wants to hear.
But Jeremiah is the only man in the city
whom Zedekiah can trust to tell the truth.

If you ever find someone whom you can trust to tell the truth – even when it hurts –
stick close to that person!

Zedekiah even orders that a loaf of bread be given to Jeremiah daily –
“until all the bread of the city was gone” –
an ominous warning of the tribulation that was coming upon Jerusalem.

But for Jeremiah it only gets worse.
Because the officials hear Jeremiah's warnings
and all they hear is treason against the king! (read verses 2-3)

3. Zedekiah's Third Inquiry (38:1-13)

a. “Sinking in the Mud”: Jeremiah in the Cistern (v1-6)

38 Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people,
² *“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.”*
³ *Thus says the LORD: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken.”*

So they go to the king with their accusations against the prophet:

⁴ *Then the officials said to the king, “Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm.”*
⁵ *King Zedekiah said, “Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.”*
⁶ *So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the*

guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

They claim that Jeremiah is not seeking the “shalom” – the peace of the city.
He is a traitor against the king and against the people.

Zedekiah realizes that he cannot stand up to the officials –
his words reflect a standpoint of weakness – “the king can do nothing against you” –
so he allows them to throw Jeremiah into a cistern, where he will die.

There is a certain irony in this chosen form of death:
Back in chapter 2, verse 13, the LORD had said through Jeremiah:
“my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

Now, when it comes time to put Jeremiah to death,
they throw him in a cistern that holds no water.

You may have noticed that the house of Shaphan has been remarkably absent from the narrative.
Last time we saw how Jeremiah was repeatedly protected by the house of Shaphan.
There is no mention of them here.

Perhaps they believed Jeremiah – and left the city!
(Certainly, we will hear in the next chapter that Gedaliah,
the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, will be appointed the governor of Judah
immediately after the Babylonians take the city).

It is clear that Gedaliah was at least already in communication with the Babylonians –
and quite possibly already outside the city *with* the besieging army!

But this means that there are no Jews still inside the city who will speak up for Jeremiah.
And so therefore, it falls to an Ethiopian eunuch – Ebed-melech,
whose name simply means “servant of the king.”

And Ebed-melech comes to Zedekiah and says (v9)

b. Jeremiah Rescued by an Ethiopian Eunuch (v7-13)

⁷ *When Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern—the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate—* ⁸ *Ebed-melech went from the king's house and said to the king,* ⁹ *“My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did 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.”*

The same king who was swayed by his officials to permit Jeremiah’s death sentence

is now swayed by his Ethiopian eunuch to permit Jeremiah's rescue.

And the story is told in great detail in verses 11-13.

¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, "Take thirty men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies." ¹¹ 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 there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. ¹² Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, "Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. ¹³ Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

An ordinary man in ordinary health could be rescued by a rope.

But Jeremiah has been prophesying for nearly 35 years.

He is now an old man – and there is no bread in the city –
so he is now a *feeble* old man.

He will not be able to "climb" out –
he must be pulled – lifted.

Why do we get this detail?

Because you need to see the picture of a feeble old prophet
nearly spent with hunger and mistreatment.

Abandoned and alone – with only a foreigner –
only an Ethiopian eunuch who will speak for him.

Here at the end of all things, the frail prophet will speak with the king one last time.

c. "Now Your Feet Are Sunk in the Mud" – Zedekiah's Dilemma (v14-28)

i. You Want to Know – But Are You Willing to Do It? (v14-16)

¹⁴ King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD.

Notice where we are.

The third entrance of the temple for Zedekiah's third question.

I like the way Walter Brueggemann describes this meeting:

"There is a genuine effort by both king and prophet to communicate
and even to accommodate.

The stakes are now too high for acrimony.

Nobody has anything to win in this conversation by abrasiveness.

In the end the prophet and the king share in the struggle
for a truth that will save the city." (364-365)

The king said to Jeremiah, "I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me." ¹⁵ 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."

The problem is that Zedekiah has never listened before!

Oh, sure, he “listened” – but he did not obey – he did not *do* what God said!

And so far, every time that Jeremiah has spoken,
maybe Zedekiah didn’t *order* his death –
but Zedekiah was willing to *allow* his death!

¹⁶ *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 hand of these men who seek your life.”*

I wonder what Zedekiah’s question was!

Because no sooner does Zedekiah promise to protect Jeremiah,
then Jeremiah launches into his final oracle!
Zedekiah never gets around to asking the question!

You must remember this!

You may think that you want to know.
You may think that you want to hear the word of the LORD.
But unless you a-re willing to *do* the word of the LORD,
unless you are willing to *obey* –
the word of the LORD will remain obscure.

And so Jeremiah doesn’t wait for the question!

He repeats the basic core of what he has said to Zedekiah for more than a decade:

ii. Whom Do You Fear? Whose Word Matters Most to You? (v17-23)

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 this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. ¹⁸ But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.”*

You haven’t listened yet – but fine, I’ll say it one more time!

Surrender, or die.

The message of the prophets is that Jerusalem must perish.

The only way for Israel and Judah to live
is for them to pass through death and exile.

If you surrender, then it will be better.

If you resist, then it will be worse.

Notice, that I said nothing about “easier.”

Death and judgment is never easy.

Exile and death is *hard*.

But if you surrender it will be *better*.

And if you resist it will be *worse*.

This is what we learn finally in the cross of Jesus.

There was nothing “easy” about “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”
But it was better!

Because in the cross of Jesus – for the first time! –
a Son of David willingly and freely listened, heard, and obeyed the Word of God
from first to last!

Zedekiah was not willing.

¹⁹ *King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.”*

In other words, I’m afraid of the house of Shaphan!

They were right – I was wrong – how do I know that they won’t deal cruelly with me?
And Jeremiah says, in effect, “Trust me – and better yet, trust the LORD.
Please, for the first time in your life, *obey – hear – listen* to the voice of the LORD.

Surrender OR DIE.

²⁰ *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.*

And then he reveals the vision of the destruction of Jerusalem:

²¹ *But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the LORD has shown to me:* ²² *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;
now that your feet are sunk in the mud,
they turn away from you.”*

²³ *All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city shall be burned with fire.”*

You trusted your friends – the very same officials who have tried to kill me.

Why do you keep listening to lies?
Why do you keep hearing lies?
Why do you keep obeying lies?!

I need to ask you the same question!

Whom do you fear?
Whose word matters most to you?

What is getting in the way of hearing the voice of the LORD?

Whose words matter to you more than the word of God?

Zedekiah was one who eagerly pursued “hearing” the word of the Lord –
and yet refused to “hear” the word of the Lord.
He would not do what God said.

What do you do with someone who will not listen – who will not obey?

iii. What Do You Do with Those Who Will Not Listen? (v24-28)

²⁴ Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. ²⁵ If the officials hear that I have spoken with you and come to you 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,’ ²⁶ 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.’” ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

Zedekiah knows that the officials will hear of this secret talk,
and so he tells Jeremiah to keep secret the majority of their conversation.

And Jeremiah does as the king had instructed him.

When they ask Jeremiah about the conversation,
he says, “I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back
to the house of Jonathan to die there.”

There is a measure of truth here.

After all, Jeremiah did ask the king to spare his life.

But at the same time, Jeremiah does not tell the *whole* truth to the officials.

They do not deserve the whole truth.

They would use the truth to destroy life and harm God’s people.

The ninth commandment – “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” –
does not require you to tell everyone everything that they might wish to know!

Zedekiah’s three questions provide us with a tragic model of what God’s people *should do*.

First, “please pray for us to the LORD” – Lord, have mercy on our situation.

Second, “Is there a word from the LORD?” – what does God say about our situation?

And third, what must we do to be saved? – what does God call us to do in our situation?

I call it a tragic model – because Zedekiah did not follow through.

This is why we need a better Son of David.

We need Jesus – the great King who listened to the word of God –
he heard and he obeyed.

And because he was obedient – even unto death –

therefore he was raised by the Father into everlasting life.

And for those who are in Christ,
we should indeed *pray* that God will have mercy on our situation;
we should *inquire* what does God say about our situation?
and we should *seek* what God calls us to *do* in our situation.

Psalm 40