

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 34

Day 1

Jeremiah Chapter 45. There are times when all of God's people seem to be walking through a valley. Doubts assail us and we need God's encouragement to go on. Sometimes God encourages us directly, sometimes through the Scriptures and sometimes through the words of a friend. Baruch served Jeremiah faithfully and wondered if hard times were to fall on him as they had on the nation. He had witnessed terrifying judgments at the hands of the Babylonians. What reassurance God gave him through Jeremiah! God knows who is faithful to Him.

Chapter 46. Jeremiah was appointed as a Prophet to other nations, not only to Judah (Jeremiah 1:5). He was called from his mother's womb and prepared for ministry even as a young man. He was born at the time when God was bringing His Word to bear on the nations of the world, centred first on Judah. Now was the time for God to proclaim judgment on Egypt. The Babylonians were soon to invade the land of Egypt. They were to know that this was God's judgment and not a human conflict alone. How often do we consider the world's affairs as the interactions of men alone, and fail to see that God is at work? The world will witness God's judgments again in the coming days: *once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven*, wrote the Writer to the Hebrews, reminding us of Haggai's prophecy which is yet to be fulfilled (Hebrews 12:26, Haggai 2:6). Let us remember the days of Jeremiah when these things begin to happen. What a wonderful promise was also confirmed to Israel. God may make an end of some nations, but a remnant of the Tribes of Israel will always be preserved (see also Revelation 7:1-8).

Chapter 47 and 48. Here are the coming judgments on the Philistines and the Moabites. Read the details carefully. They speak of the past and also the future. Moab is in the region of present-day Jordan. There is a promise for the last days (Chapter 48, Verse 8).

Day 2

Chapter 49. Recall that the Tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh had their inheritance on the East of the Jordan River in the areas of Moab and Ammon. It is interesting that both Ammon and Moab were promised by God that in the latter days the captives will return. When the Northern Tribes were dispersed, the Eastern Tribes were also lost. God has a long term plan of restoration, which He spoke again, as recorded at the end of the Book of Daniel. Modern-day Jordan has a special place in the end-time purposes of God.

In Chapter 49, judgment is spoken over Ammon, Edom, Damascus, the ancient Capital City of modern-day Syria, on Kedar and Habor, and on Elam (in modern-day Persia, or Iran). Again, there is a promise for Elam in the last days. The detail of the judgments on all these nations is hard to assess. They all lie to the East of the Promised Land and are prominent in our day. The history of these nations could be studied; all the details in the Bible will be found accurate. God acted on account of the sins of these nations and stirred up one against another. The Prophecies are still relevant today. Read the details carefully and come back to study them again in the future.

Chapter 50. Babylon was God's instrument for disciplining Judah, but it was a ruthless and idolatrous nation. The Babylonians took advantage of the situation and rejoiced over exiled Judah (Verse 11). Jeremiah prophesied the fall of Babylon under the Persian Empire when Judah came to the end of its exile. A remnant from the exiles would be restored to their Land because of God's perpetual Covenant (Verse 5). The fall of Babylon was accomplished around 539 BC under Cyrus, King of Persia just prior to this return to the Land of Judah. It is important to understand that God still has a plan for the Children of Israel that will be fulfilled in the end time. The return from exile was a precursor to this. Similarly, Babylon will rise again in the end times, not necessarily by name, but a world Empire will arise in the end-times demonically linked to the antichrist and misled by the false prophet who will arise. Babylon represents the foundation on which this last world system will be built, incorporating also the characteristics of Persia, Greece and Rome. We will return to this subject when we study Daniel. This also prepares the way for our understanding of Revelation. Study Chapter 50 carefully.

Chapter 51. *Flee from the midst of Babylon, and everyone save his life! Do not be cut off in her iniquity.* (Verse 6) This is echoed in Revelation 18:4: *Come out of her My people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.* Again, we see that God prepares us for the end times through the experience of His people in Babylon, the idolatrous world power of the day. Study the Chapter carefully, so that firm foundations of understanding are put in place. *You are my battle-axe,* said God to Judah. It seemed that the nations of the world were God's battle-axe to destroy Judah for her sins, but the reverse is true in the end. The evil nations are the means by which God disciplines His people, but the central thread of God's plans for the world are through his Covenant with Abraham. Therefore, though Israel and Judah were oppressed by the nations,

in turn the nations will be judged for the harm they did to the Children of Israel. Like an ax striking a tree, though the blow is felt by the ax, the tree itself falls. Babylon and all the nations of the world will come under God's judgment for the way they treated His people. Again, this Chapter points to the end time. Nebuchadnezzar is a shadow of the world rulers who will come in those days. God will finally destroy all idolatry in the world, when the full restoration of His Covenant people takes place. The Covenant purposes are centred on Jacob's physical seed who come to faith in Yeshua. Gentiles, who also come to faith, are joint heirs of the Covenant with them (Ephesians 2). All that Jeremiah foresaw pointed to the circumstance of his day and also points to the end time purposes of God.

Chapter 52. Jeremiah ended with a summary of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile, how the Temple was plundered and how the exiles were settled into Babylon for a period of 70 years. Read the details again carefully: this record is similar to 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. In 2 Chronicles 36:21, it also said that this 70 year period was so that the law, regarding a Sabbath rest for the land every 7 years, would be fulfilled. The fall of Jerusalem was in 586 BC. It is instructive to consider how long it had been since the Land had been left fallow for a Sabbath rest according to the Lord's instructions through Moses (Leviticus 25:1-7). There were to be 70 Sabbath years. Each one of these would have been at the end of a seven year cycle. Had the 70 Sabbaths been kept, this would have covered a period of 490 years. If we add 490 to 586 we get to the year 1076 BC when, it appears, God's reckoning began. The exact dates of the Judges are uncertain but, according to accepted calculations, this was the beginning of the time when the last recorded Judge began his service. This was Samson of the Tribe of Dan. It appears, therefore, that the Sabbath law was not kept during and after Samson's day. It is interesting that Samson was from the Tribe of Dan. The word *Dan* means *judge*. Genesis 49:16 contains Jacob's prophecy over Dan: *Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent by the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that the rider shall fall backward.* After the days of Samson, Dan went into idolatry. As a tribe of Israel, the actions of Dan showed why God would judge Israel and Judah. It was said of Israel in those days that, *there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (Judges 21:25). After this time, came Samuel and then the period of the Kings. During all these years it seems that the Land was not left to have its Sabbath rest. The word of God to Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:29-31) is a reminder of the principle of the Sabbath year, given in the 14th year of his reign (the end of the second Sabbath cycle of his reign). Behind the principle of the Sabbath rest is faith in God for His provision, the same faith that Israel learned in the wilderness when they ate manna. Surely, God intends us to consider these underlying principles from the Scriptures as we, with Israel, consider the exile. Nothing had gone unnoticed by God all those years Judah had not obeyed His instructions given through Moses, either in the lives of individuals or of the nation as whole. In simple terms, God's people had not fully trusted Him. Beginning in the days of the Judges, there was the tendency to disregard His laws and, thereby, fail to live in faith. By the time of the exile the sin of Dan was manifest throughout all Israel and Judah, as the Children of Israel departed from fellowship with God more and more.

Study these details again and ensure that you have a balanced understanding of the reasons for the exile. Do not forget that the promises of God were secure because of His Covenant with Abraham and also with David. Jeremiah not only brought warning about the exile but also the promise of how God would solve the problem of sin, through the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31). Let us also refer back to the prophecy of Jacob over Dan. After he had spoken the prophecy, there comes a pause and Jacob said: *I have waited for your salvation, O Lord!* (Genesis 49:18). Embedded in Jacob's prophecies over his sons is the promise of the coming Messiah. It is clearest in his prophecy over Judah: *The scepter shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes...* (Genesis 49:10) It is also implied at the end of the prophecy over Dan. The Hebrew for *salvation* is *yeshua*, the Name given to God's only Son, the Saviour of the World. Israel's rebellion and exile was foreseen long before 586 BC. God had also made His commitment to His people so that a remnant would be restored through faith in His Son. God's Light was always to be stronger than the darkness that came upon the world!

It is in order to make a comment about the judgments of God. A superficial reading of Scripture results in a variety of conclusions. Those who doubt the authenticity of Scripture prefer to ignore God's judgments. They see the Bible as full of myths and picture language that comes from an ancient people who do not know what we know today. They even reject the idea of our Sovereign God, preferring to appraise every event on this earth as due to mankind or the forces of nature, in which chance plays a part. Paul has a strong warning for such people in Romans Chapter 1. We, who take the Bible seriously, know that God is Sovereign over all things. Nothing escapes His attention. Yet we must be careful about the conclusions we draw concerning His judgments in the earth. We know that He *does* judge the earth: the evidence of Israel and Judah are central to our understanding of this. Nevertheless, we must also be careful not to look at every mishap as if God has done it to us for some sort of sin. We certainly sin: this is a result of the freewill that God gave to us. Freewill does not deny the Sovereignty of God. In His Sovereignty, He allows us free will, so that we are both free to make decisions and, eventually, exercise our freedom to submit to His Sovereignty by becoming disciples of Yeshua. When hardship comes to the world we must be careful not to always jump to the conclusion that this is a direct action of God. Sometimes, it is due to the effects of a fallen world that God has allowed to be so. Sometimes it is due to the sin of man, a result of the free-will actions that God allows us to make. Famines and plagues have often beset a nation due to mismanagement and sin. If we do not take care of our environment then we open the door for disease to enter in. Plagues have beset nations over history. For example, when vermin was not kept under control, it led to great plagues in Europe. This does not go unnoticed by God but it is not necessarily His doing, or His judgment on the sin of those affected by the neglect of others. When Judah went to exile, one of the main sins they committed was neglect of the poor. The neglected poor may have wondered why God was punishing them, but the reason was the neglect of the leaders, not of God. Indeed, judgment fell because of the neglect of the leaders. We learn from the Bible that there are times when God sends His judgments to the earth. At such a time we must listen for the prophetic word of warning. At other times, though He is still Sovereign, there are other reasons for difficult times, including the sin of mankind and sometimes the schemes of satan, who finds doors of opportunity.

Day 3

After all we have studied, what stirs in your own heart for Israel and Judah? The Assyrians and Babylonians delighted in their conquests of the Tribes of Israel. Some Christians have neglected careful study of the Scriptures and, to some extent, have misjudged what God was doing and what His heart attitude was to His people. He did not compromise in His discipline: neither did He compromise in His love. The mourning of Jeremiah is a manifestation of the mourning of God. Jeremiah lamented throughout his 42 years of warning his people and lamented again over the fallen City of Jerusalem. This was like Yeshua's weeping over Jerusalem prior to His crucifixion that preceded the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. If you have been inspired by the Holy Spirit through your careful study of the decline of Israel and Judah, you, too, will find yourself mourning. You will look back to the glorious days of David and Solomon and contrast this with the utter ruin now upon Judah. Remember that believers from the Gentile world have been grafted into the believing remnant of Israel. Therefore, as Ruth said when she came back from Moab with Naomi, after a type of exile, *your people will be my people and your God my God* (Ruth 1:16). Jeremiah was a Prophet and an Intercessor. An intercessor identifies himself with his people and suffers as they suffer, turning the suffering into prayer. How then is your heart stirred for Israel and Judah, through what you have read? God is calling us to carry the love He has for His people into our ministry of intercession for the last days. It may be a new beginning for you through our studies of Jeremiah. Let us now, therefore, allow God to move us by His Spirit as we read the Book of Lamentations.

Lamentations 1. Psalm 119 is called an acrostic Psalm. It has 22 sections, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the sections has 8 verses. Each of the first set of 8 verses begins with the letter Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the second set begins with Beth, the second letter, then a set beginning with Gimmel, and so on right through the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is a meditation on the beauty of the Torah of God, with memorable verses extolling the author's love of God's laws. The author carefully constructed the Psalm in this way to show that every letter and every word should emphasise the beauty of God's Torah.

By contrast, it was neglect of Torah that sent the Children of Israel to exile. The Book of Lamentations is from the heart of Jeremiah who, for 42 years, had warned his people, through tears, that they had rejected God's laws and thereby rejected God. As in Psalm 119, Lamentations is in an acrostic form. There are five sections, each of whose 22 verses begin, one by one, with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We must be careful not to go to extremes in the study of numbers in Scripture, because it is easy to make errors of judgment, pushing the subject too far into areas of mysticism that God never intended. Nevertheless, some numbers are used over and over again, establishing patterns, and having symbolic meaning in the Scriptures. Perhaps Jeremiah had Psalm 119 in mind as he mourned over the exile of his people and the destruction of Jerusalem. Five is a number that is used frequently in the Bible. We cannot be sure of the symbolism. Some people have associated the number with grace, so perhaps Jeremiah also had the grace of God in mind as he constructed his poems of mourning, a kind of funeral song for his people. Perhaps he had the Books of Torah in mind, so that we might remember the purpose of

each of the Five Books of Moses. That which God had built up He destroyed: those whom He brought from Egypt He banished to Babylon: the order of the Temple and the Priesthood was brought to nothing: the numbered families of the people were scattered: the blessing of Torah had been replaced by the curse.

As you read the 22 verses of Chapter 1, let the Holy Spirit move you as Jeremiah was moved. You will be moved by the sadness of God on account of the circumstances He brought on His people. God is not only just. He is also merciful. Can you find shadows of Yeshua in the words that you read? Verse 12, for example, could be said of Yeshua when the crowds gazed at Him suffering on the Cross. Just as Jerusalem fell for the transgressions of Judah, so Yeshua took the transgressions of His people upon Himself. Can you see Him there on the Cross through the eyes of the Spirit: *Is it nothing to you all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which the Lord has brought on me, which the Lord has inflicted in the day of His fierce anger.*

Lamentations 2. Here is a second acrostic poem. Jeremiah once had walked through the streets of Jerusalem, to see if there was anyone righteous, so that God would turn back His judgment (Jeremiah 5:1). Now he walked through the desolate streets with sadness at what he saw of the destruction and slaughter. Note how he turned this to prayer.

Lamentations 3. This is the central poem of the five. It takes a new form with additional emphasis. Instead of 22 verses we have 66 verses. Each consecutive set of three verses begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first three verses begin with Aleph, the second three with Beth, and so on. Jeremiah had the number three in mind as well as the number five. In our day we often associate the number three with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We do not know why Jeremiah used the number three in this way. Perhaps he did not know Himself, because Lamentations is inspired by the Holy Spirit as much as it is the words of mourning of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's Prophecies were messages of warning but also of hope. Hope springs forth from time to time through his long Book, a hope that is eternal, while the suffering will be temporal. Such hope and faith spring forth from the centre of this third section of Lamentations. We might say that the despair that engulfed Jeremiah is but a backdrop from which hope and faith are expressed: *Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (Verses 22-23)* When we next sing the popular hymn beginning, *Great is your faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee*, perhaps we will remember the origin of this praise: Judah's low moment of history. The hope of Israel points to Yeshua HaMashiach and Jeremiah's statement of faith points to Him. It is recorded that the hope expressed in these words was a comfort to many Jews who were sent to the gas chambers by the Nazis. Over the centuries what God expressed through Jeremiah has been a comfort to His people and they will continue to be so into the last days of human history.

Lamentations 4 and 5. These are the final two acrostic poems, the result of Jeremiah's meditations concerning the fall of Jerusalem and exile of Judah. Read them slowly and prayerfully.

The final acrostic poem in Chapter 5 is different from the previous ones. This time the 22 verses do not begin with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One is left to wonder whether there is a coded message in the choice of the initial letters of the verses. If we write them down in order we can puzzle over these letters to see if they form words. Remember that there were no written vowels in the Hebrew language at this time so we have only the consonants to consider. A plausible sentence emerges on translation of the 22 initial letters grouped as words, if one ignores two letter *ayins* prior to the last word. The plausible sentence is, "*the apostates a people I spurn he punishes as your God laments*". The two *ayins* come before the word *your God* like a pause. In the Bible translation of the verses each of the two *ayins* begin the word which translates *because*. In Hebrew, the letter *ayin* is used for the number 70. Perhaps it is a reminder of the number of years of the captivity. Whether this is the most accurate interpretation is not clear but one can suppose that Jeremiah wove a coded message similar to this in his final poetic meditation.

Day 4

When Judah was exiled the people would remember the good days. They would recall the days of the good Kings, when God blessed the nation. They would recall the Temple where the Tribes gathered for worship. Jeremiah lamented as he walked through the ruins of Jerusalem. God lamented for His people from the High Heavens. Among the exiles were those who longed to be restored. Let us, therefore, read some of the Psalms that would have been recalled by these exiles over the years of the captivity.

Psalm 43. This is a prayer for deliverance from an ungodly nation, and to be revived within, with hope in God and a desire to praise God for all He has done.

Psalm 44. The Psalmist remembered what God had done for his people, but now they are shamed by their enemies. There is recognition of failure but also a resolution not to lose heart. Verse 22 recognises that God has a purpose in the suffering of His people. This verse was quoted by Paul in recognition of his own suffering on account of the Gospel (Romans 8:36).

Psalm 45. Just as a writer might *write* hymns of praise to God, so one might *speak* words of praise to God. This is a hymn of praise to God and of trust for His ultimate plans for His people. Verses 3 to 5 look ahead to the return of Yeshua as conquering King (Revelation 18:11-16). The Psalm looks beyond the Kingdom of Judah as it was before the exile, and even beyond the return from exile. The vision is for a distant future when Yeshua will establish the Eternal Kingdom. Such Psalms surely stirred those in exile who sought God to envision them for what God would one day accomplish.

Psalm 46. This Psalm has brought inspiration to Christians when trouble has stirred in the world, such as in the 2 World Wars. This song of faith was first sung in Judah and remembrance of it would have stirred the exiles to call out to God for help in their difficult circumstances.

Day 5

Psalm 47. What a great song of faith this is, for the triumph of God over all ungodliness! Ultimately, it will be fulfilled through Yeshua HaMashiach. It is out of valleys of difficulty, such as the exile, that such Psalms become full of meaning.

Psalm 48. This Psalm was sung in the good days of Judah, when the Children of Israel could walk about Zion (Jerusalem) and praise God for the blessings He had bestowed on them. To recall this Psalm in exile would have stirred deep mourning for what was lost.

Psalm 49. This is an appropriate contemplation for the days of the exile. Why should God's people fear the days of evil? (Verse 8) What is worldly wealth compared with the eternal purposes of God? There were those in exile who remembered Jeremiah's encouragements and the promises of God, and who would see God's discipline as redemptive of their souls. This Psalm might have been a help for some, as they meditated on God's priorities for their lives.

Psalm 50. Zion had fallen, but God could rebuild the City. Both Isaiah and Micah prophesied that God would establish Zion as the centre of His Kingdom and that in the last days His Word would go forth from there (Micah 4, Isaiah 2). This Psalm points to those days. If the Psalm came to mind during the exile, along with the Prophecies of Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah, hope would be strengthened.

Day 6

Psalm 66. The Book of Psalms has been the Prayer Book of the Jews over many centuries. The Psalms are read in regular cycles. They have learned this over all the years of their journey. A Psalm, such as this, stirs up faith through both good and difficult times. During good times there is remembrance of God's faithfulness. In difficult times there is hope for the future.

Psalm 67. Another song of praise and calling for God's salvation throughout the earth. Yeshua is our salvation and this inspired prayer is fulfilled in Him.

Psalm 71. Out of times of difficulty come prayers of faith from some people, while others become resentful and turn away from God. Jeremiah called these people good and bad figs: the exile would reveal which of the Jews would turn to God in trust and which would turn away from Him. This Psalm might be remembered by those whose hearts were stirred towards God.

Psalm 73. Here is another Psalm that contrasts the tragedy that befalls the wicked with the blessedness of those who trust in God

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

How has your heart been stirred as you have read the account of the exile? The exile was long ago and came to an end after 70 years. We will study the details later of the return from exile. Yet, there is also a sense in which the exile is not fully over until all of God's people are fully restored to Him through faith in Yeshua. The exile brings shades of understanding to the situation of all mankind who are distanced from Him, including the remnant of the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore, there is ongoing relevance for today through our study of Israel and Judah in the days of the Kings and of the idolatrous Empires of the world. God is stirring our hearts to watch and pray for the restoration of His people and for the Gospel to go out to all nations prior to the return of Yeshua. Consider this today. Three more Psalms might be an added stimulus.

Psalm 74. This Psalm might have been written as contemplation of the ruined Temple and City and of the exile. It is a prayer that we can echo as we look around a fallen world under the destructive influence of satan in the lives of many people.

Psalm 79. Again, this is a prayer that followed the devastations of Israel and Judah at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Psalm 137. Hope is stirred through recalling what God has done and what He has promised He will yet do. But there is still the day to day reality of living in a foreign land, disciplined by God and taunted by ones enemies. *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion....How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?* This Psalm was written in Babylon to express the deep sorrow of the exile on days when a person could hardly lift his head in hope. This expresses the valley experience of the exile. Yet, even here there is a hint of resolution on which hope can be built: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth – if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.*

This Psalm is an echo of Jeremiah's lamentations. Both the Psalm and the lamentations are also echoes of God's heart. Read the Psalm as an expression of the sorrow of the exiles. Also read it as an expression of the sorrow of God. Yeshua, the Son of God, had not yet come to the earth as a man. Yet, the sorrow for His people that resulted in His suffering on the Cross can be perceived through the Psalm. How does this inspire you to prayer today?
