

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles

Our daily readings over the last few days have taken us through the difficult circumstances surrounding Israel, as they were to be led into captivity because of their rebellion against the Almighty. Jeremiah, though a faithful prophet, suffered personally because of the message that he gave. He warned of coming judgments at the hands of the Babylonians, but chapter 28 of the prophecy that bears his name describes how for this, he suffered at the hands of a false prophet who spoke of peace, and not destruction. Chapter 29, however, describes how Jeremiah wrote (as he was moved by the Holy Spirit), to the exiles who had already been carried away into the land of Babylon. In this letter, he warned the Jews to make preparation for a long stay in the land of captivity, yet be ready to leave at the “expected end”, when a period of 70 years would be accomplished. In some measure their circumstances are similar to ours: they looked to the time when the kingdom of Israel would be restored – and so do we. Living in Gentile nations – as did they – we embrace the hope of Israel, which is the hope that Israel will be reconciled to their God, and restored to their land. We recognise that judgments will surely come, but we look beyond them to the glory and state of blessedness which will fill the earth. This being so, we can take to our hearts the words of Jeremiah's letter, to apply them to our similar circumstances.

In the first instance, it is interesting to note exactly who it was that the letter was addressed to: “...unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and **to the prophets**, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jer. 29:1). Who were these “prophets” to whom Jeremiah wrote? We know that Ezekiel and Daniel (with his three brethren) were both contemporary with Jeremiah, and in the land of Babylon with the exiles. Daniel is particularly interesting to consider in connection with Jeremiah, for the record of Daniel's prophecy specifically informs us that he was personally acquainted Jeremiah's writings. Daniel 9 recounts Daniel's words:

“... I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, **whereof the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah the prophet**, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem ...” Dan. 9:2)

Daniel then, knew from Jeremiah that there would be a 70 year period of captivity, and it is significant to note that Jeremiah 29, addressed to the “prophets” amongst others, mentions this seventy years in verse 10: “For thus saith Yahweh, That **after seventy years** be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place” (Jer. 29:10).

Verse 28 states that “this captivity is long” – as we have seen, it was for seventy years. That being the case, the people were to make preparations to remain in Babylon for a long duration. So the Prophet wrote to them: “Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them: take ye wives and beget sons and daughters: and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands that they may bear sons and daughters; that they may be increased there, and not diminished” (Jer. 29:5-6).

In these things, we have examples for our situation. We, as they, have to live in Gentile lands awaiting the restoration all things to Israel. Unlike them, we do not know the precise time when our Lord shall come to accomplish this work, but the principle remains the same: we need to make provision for ourselves whilst within this evil world. As we await the promised time, we must be

ready to leave and be joined with our Master when required – but until that time come, we must make provision for our mortal requirements, trusting that the Lord will provide all that we need. As the Master expressed it: “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat. 6:33). We seek after the re-establishment of the ancient Davidic seat of power, to be the nucleus for Divine world government, but until that time come, our mortal needs will have to be met.

The people were given the command that after the 70 years had ended; they would turn and pray to their God for deliverance:

“ … then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you” (Jer. 29:12)

Returning to the example of Daniel, we find that this is precisely what he did. As alluded to above, Daniel 9 shows that he understood from Jeremiah that the 70 years had almost been completed. In response to that recognition, we read:

“I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth and ashes: and I prayed unto Yahweh my God …” (Dan. 9:3-4).

Daniel was truly a man of faith and prayer. Each day, three times a day, he kneeled upon his knees, “and prayed, and gave thanks before his God …” (Dan. 6:10). This he did “in his chamber towards Jerusalem”, that is, with a constant yearning for the captivity to end.

In fact, this action was following Solomon’s prayer, as described in 1 Kings 8:

“… if they shall bethink themselves whither they were carried captives, and repent, and make supplication … and so return unto thee with all their heart and with all their soul, in the land of their enemies, which led them away captive, and pray unto thee **toward their land**, which thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for my name” (1 Kings 8:47-48).

This was “the hope of Israel” at that time, and it leaves us with an example. Do we earnestly desire the kingdom to come like Daniel did? Do we pray for it daily – let alone 3 times a day? Only we can individually answer for ourselves.

Interestingly, the Jews were told to pray for the city of Babylon, where they were exiled:

“seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto Yahweh for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace” (Jer. 29:7).

Notice the reason for this prayer: “in the peace thereof shall ye have peace”. We are given a similar commandment: “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; **that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life** in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). We know not how long it will be before we are brought before Christ, but before that time comes, we must seek to “lead a quiet and peaceable life”, and pray that the authorities will allow us to have it so.

Verse 13 gives a promise: “ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart ...”. Here, the allusion is back to Deuteronomy chapter 4:

“And Yahweh shall scatter you among the nations ... but if from thence ye seek Yahweh thy God, ***thou shalt find him, if thou seek him*** with all thy heart and all thy soul” (Deut. 4:29).

Here is the promise: if we turn from our ways of folly, and seek Israel’s God, then we will find him also. Notice the point, however: there is no virtue in a half-hearted attempt. We must seek Yahweh with “all” of our heart, with “all” our soul. In fact, this is the prerequisite for Baptism. So Philip discoursed with a certain Ethiopian:

“as they went on their way, they came to a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest ***with all thine heart***, thou mayest ..” (Acts 8:37).

A whole hearted service is what our Master requires from us. Like the burnt offering under the Law, every aspect of our lives must be laid down in service to our Heavenly Father. So the Apostle exhorts elsewhere “... present your bodies a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). The point is clear, but like so many other things, what is easy to understand is hard to actually do. We must believe and do, believing in the saving power of Messiah to save us from our sins. It is possible to have an outward show of righteousness, with a corrupt heart. Such is the servant in the parable that Christ taught: “... if that evil servant ***shall say in his heart***, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of ...” (Mat. 24:48-51)

Returning to Jeremiah 29, the prophet describes how that the exiles were without excuse, with regards to the judgments that came. Warnings were given, yet went unheeded: “Because they have not hearkened to my words, saith Yahweh, which I sent unto them by my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, but you would not hear, saith Yahweh (Jer. 29:19).

Notice one of the points here: “rising up early”. Jeremiah 7 reads likewise: “... I spake unto you, ***rising up early*** and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not”. And again: “Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets, ***daily rising up early*** and sending them” (Jer. 7:13, 25).

This aspect of “rising up early” emphasises the principle that from the very beginning of the day, from the moment we awaken, we must be devoted to service. It is significant that Yahweh himself is spoken of here as “rising up early” to send the prophets. Not that the Almighty needs rest, or has to rise up from sleep as we do. Rather it is, from the time of the suns’ rising, prophets were being sent to admonish the people. And it logically follows that if the prophets were delivering their messages early, then the people had to be up and ready early, to listen.

There is much benefit from rising early, to pay attention to the Word. As we waken from sleep, our first thoughts should be towards the things of the spirit, and reading a portion of the Word helps to direct our minds and thoughts to accomplish this. “I love them that love me; and those that seek me ***early*** shall find me” (Prov. 8:17) is the cry of wisdom. If we would be wise, we must begin our day with the Word, to set us up for the day ahead.

The testimony of Peter applies the example of things passed to things present:

“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you ...” (2 Pet. 2:1).

Jeremiah 28 provides an example of this, with Hananiah, the false prophet, who claimed that Israel would be back in their own land, dwelling peacefully and safely within two years. Jeremiah himself testified that it would be much longer, 70 years. Of course, Hananiah’s message was much nicer and more palatable, and this is the danger of false prophets. They teach in such a way that their message is nice and sweet – but because it is false, such as these are no more than blind leaders of the blind, with both falling into the ditch.

The promise of liberty and freedom is a strong one. Especially for Israel who were desiring liberty and freedom from the Babylonians. But in the long term, things that sound nice and palatable to the carnal mind, can lead to death and destruction. As Peter spoke again: “while they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption ...” (2 Pet. 2:19). Time goes by, “prophecies” go unfulfilled, and the false prophet himself shall descend into the grave, with no God and no Hope.

As we mentioned earlier, our situation is similar to that of the Jews living in a Gentile land. The hope they had was for the kingdom to be restored to Israel – and that is our hope also, and the extent of the dominion of Israel’s King – the Master Jesus Christ - shall be global. In that day, for those who repent and seek Yahweh: “I will be found of you, saith Yahweh: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith Yahweh: and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive” (Jer. 29:14). That is the day for which we so earnestly long for. Just as Daniel prayed for the kingdom to be restored, so Psalm 122 exhorts us to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee” (Psa. 122:6). That is where our heart is: in the restored, peaceful haven of Jerusalem, the “city of the great king”. We must therefore give ourselves wholly to the service of Yahweh, with all of our hearts, seeking wisdom early, let we leave it too late. And if we do this, just as Israel had the certainty of being restored, so we have an appointed end, that we also might be delivered, and become part of that glorious new kingdom to come.

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