

## THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART NINE – CHAPTERS 37-44

### A DOUBLE MINDED KING

King Zedekiah can not make up his mind about Jeremiah and his God. In public he rejects Jeremiah's message and sets the example for his government. In private he wonders if Jeremiah is right and sends secretly to him to ask him to pray for him. For the moment he must have thought his requested prayer was being answered when an Egyptian army headed for Israel to challenge the Babylonian rule causing the Babylonian army to withdraw the siege of the city of Jerusalem to deal with this new threat.(37:1-5) Jeremiah warns him that the relief will only be temporary and the siege will continue and succeed.(37:6-10) Zedekiah's men take their opportunity to make up a charge of treason against Jeremiah when he tries to visit his family land. Zedekiah is still in two minds when he brings Jeremiah out of prison wanting answers from God about his future. Jeremiah gives him the bad news and asks for a better jail.(37:11-21)

### THE LAST OPPORTUNITY FOR A KING

Zedekiah's advisors make one last desperate effort to keep up morale among the besieged Jews by silencing the voice of God through Jeremiah. They plan to kill him by leaving him to rot in the mud at the bottom of an empty water cistern. The king is wavering about Jeremiah's message and gives in to their demands.(38:1-6) But God raises up a friend in Jeremiah's time of need. Ebed-Melech is not even a Jew but an Ethiopian. God knows his heart and uses him accordingly, first to persuade the king and then quietly to find help and rescue Jeremiah.(38:7-13) Even now Zedekiah cannot resist asking God's advice through Jeremiah. Jeremiah gives him a choice, surrender to the Babylonians and live, or resist them and see his city destroyed. Zedekiah reveals his real fear, abuse by his own people who have already surrendered, if he too is in Babylonian hands. Jeremiah continues urging him to choose wisely for the sake of his family as well as himself.(38:14-23) Finally the king begs Jeremiah to keep their conversation secret from his officials. As the king has dithered in fear and indecision it is they who are really in charge now.(38:24-28)

### THE PROMISED DAY FINALLY ARRIVES

The Babylonians break into the city and are in control. The siege is over. The Jews are defeated exactly as God said would happen. Zedekiah and the remnant of his army make a run for it but are captured and brought back to the king of Babylon who kills Zedekiah's sons in front of him and then blinds him. He now takes Zedekiah as a prisoner to Babylon together with all but the poorest of his people who are left behind in the land, presumably because he knew they would give him no trouble.(39:1-10) Nebuchadnezzar orders his men to treat Jeremiah well and leaves him in the charge of Gedaliah who is to be the governor of Judah on behalf of Babylon. Jeremiah in turn urges that Ebed-Melech, his Ethiopian rescuer, also be protected as reward for his faithfulness.(39:11-18)

### A NEW BEGINNING – AND A NEW THREAT

The Babylonian commander frees Jeremiah and gives him a choice. Come with the rest of the captives to Babylon or stay in any part of Judah he chooses. Jeremiah's decision is to stay with Gedaliah presumably to be able to have a spiritual influence on the new administration.(40:1-6) Gedaliah begins his government assuring the people who remain that he will represent their best interests with the Babylonians. Jews who had scattered among the neighbouring nations trickle back to their country now it is safe to do so.(40:7-12) One of his commanders comes to the new governor to warn him of a plot by the king of Ammon to assassinate him, but he does not believe him.(40:13-16)

## TREACHERY AND MURDER

After Zedekiah has been deposed by the king of Babylon and Gedaliah appointed governor, a group from the former royal family and those who surrounded them remain ambitious for power and revenge. Ishmael, though a Jewish leader, is a secret agent of the king of Ammon. He leads an execution squad to murder Gedaliah and his immediate supporters and then kills a group of men who have come to worship God, who arrive just after the murders, sparing only a handful who bribe the killers. He kidnaps the rest of the royal family and is preparing to escape to safety in Ammon.(41:1-10) Johanan leads a rescue mission who free the captives but Ishmael, the ring-leader, eludes them. Now order is restored but will the king of Babylon believe the loyalty of the Jews or will they be punished for the rebellion? Egypt looks the safest haven.(41:11-18)

## A FINAL OPPORTUNITY TO LISTEN TO GOD

As so often before when faced with difficult crises the people turn to Jeremiah, the one man they can trust to listen to God. He promises to pray for wisdom and they promise to follow that wisdom.(42:1-6) Ten long anxious days pass before God answers. He commands them to stay in the land and promises His protection and blessing. If on the other hand they go to Egypt they will miss out on His presence and be destroyed. Jeremiah urges them to listen to God as they had promised they would.(42:7-22)

The same leaders who had been part of the move to ask Jeremiah to find the will of God now lead the people to reject Jeremiah as a liar, ignore his message and take them to Egypt, supposedly out of fear of revenge from Nebuchadnezzar.(43:1-7) Jeremiah responds with another of his visual aids to predict how the Egyptian Pharaoh from whom they are seeking protection will himself be defeated by the Babylonians and the Jews will face captivity or death.(43:8-13)

Jeremiah continues his warning about the consequence of going to Egypt instead of trusting God by revealing the real reason they want to go, idolatry.(44:1-14) Suddenly the truth comes into the open. The women have been secretly worshipping a goddess, probably an Egyptian one like Isis, and so corrupting family life. Their husbands have been going along with the idea. Egypt would have seemed the logical place to seek refuge. They are not going to give up this practice.(44:15-19) You are going to find out which God, or goddess, is true, says Jeremiah, when this Pharaoh is defeated very shortly.(44:20-30)

## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Why should we bother to share Christ with those in secular leadership?(I Tim.2:1-4)  
In what similar ways will we find those in authority swinging between listening to our message and making life difficult for us?(chapter 37)
2. Recall examples in your own experience of God providing someone to stand with you in difficult situations of unfair treatment from those in authority in society.(Jn.15:12-15) What does this story show us about true friendship?(chapter 38)
3. When God's promises finally happen and those of us who trusted Him are proved right what should be our response? What emotions do you suppose Jeremiah felt at this time?(chapter 39)
4. At times when there are major changes in the secular societies in which we live what opportunities are presented to us as Christians? What dangers also exist?(chapter 40)
5. How in modern world events does revolution also lead to widespread violence? Why does God let such bad things as the killing of a good man like Gedaliah happen?(chapter 41)
6. Why do people ask Christians what God says on a topic and then do the opposite? What does this story reveal about the hidden motives which shape human behaviour? How should we respond when we see such things happening?(chapters 42-44)