

Four Years of Reprieve (Jeremiah 25 - 26)



1. Jeremiah Ch25 and Ch26 are sequentially back to front.

Ch25 took place in the 4th year of Jehoiakim's rule. Jeremiah pronounces God's judgement over Judah. Ch26 took place in the 1st year of Jehoiakim's rule. Here is a flashback. Jeremiah takes us back to the past 4 years when the new king, Jehoiakim, squandered the final opportunity for the nation to repent and turn back God's judgment.

2. The 4th year of Jehoiakim's rule was hopeless. There was no turning back now. The decisive battle of Carchemish between Babylon and Egypt took place. It was the battle between the west and the east. Pharaoh Neco II was routed by Nebuchadnezzar, and the power base shifted to the East. The little Judah was incorporated into Babylonian jurisdiction (2 King 24:1). In the same year, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and deported the cream of the society to Babylon (605BC).

Jeremiah has preached for 23 years now, and God has given Jerusalem every chance to turn back to Him. Their final opportunity to repent is recorded in Ch26. Now it was too late. There comes a point in time when it becomes too late to turn – both individually and nationally. Finally, Judah's exile is certain and its duration is fixed - 70 years.

The keyword in Ch26 is 'LISTEN!' The keyword in Ch25 is 'YOU DID NOT LISTEN!' Let's look at them in chronological order, i.e. in reverse order.

A. LISTEN ! Chapter 26 (609BC)

1. Shallum, the illegitimate king was removed, and a new king was installed. Jehoiakim (609-597BC) was the rightful king according to the succession law. This presented an unparalleled opportunity for the nation to have a fresh beginning with new leadership (26:1). The Lord told Jeremiah to speak in the temple court during a festive season when people from all over the nation came to worship God. Jeremiah was to speak at the most public place and in front of the widest audience (26:2). Jeremiah was putting his life on the line for this assignment. God told him, 'I don't want you to hold back (diminish) one single word.' (26:2). No watering down the message or making it palatable for people. He was to give it straight up.
2. Jeremiah preached the following: (i) Before you entered the land of promise God told you how to live. He gave you the law of Moses. (ii) After you entered the land, God sent you His prophets to warn you. You cannot plead ignorance. (iii) Now here is your new king and here is your choice: '*If you return to God starting with this new king, then God will relent and change His mind about the disaster He is about to bring to this nation. But if you do not listen, then this house and this city will become utterly desolate just like Shiloh.*' (26:4-6; 12-13).

Our relationship with God is a co-operative one with real choices and real consequences. Judah mostly rejected the word. The word 'death' occurs 8 times, all directed against the prophets, mostly Jeremiah.

3. The rulers assembled to hear the case against Jeremiah at the New Gate, which is possibly the upper Gate (c.f. 20:2 c.f. 2 Kings 15:35). The temple authorities (priests and prophets) accused Jeremiah's preaching as treason deserving capital punishment. These religious leaders then tried to get the agreement of the civic authority (princes and elders) to condemn Jeremiah to death. They twisted Jeremiah's words and accused him of speaking against the 'temple of God' and the 'city of God'.

What did Jeremiah actually say? He said, 'If you do not turn to God the temple and the city will be destroyed.' Jeremiah did not speak against the temple or Jerusalem, but the people living in the city. The strength and security of a city are not in its reputation, but in the character of its people. But Jeremiah had no lawyer to defend him. They passed down the verdict first, then the trial was arranged later to justify the verdict at the temple gate (26:10). Jeremiah's life foreshadows the unjust trial Jesus suffers in the hands of the religious leaders many centuries afterward.

4. Jeremiah started as a shy young man who feared people. After 20 years he grew a thick skin, at the halfway point in his ministry. He is no longer afraid of people. (i) 'What I said was, amend your ways...then the Lord will relent from the doom He has pronounced against you.' (26:13); (ii) 'As for me, here I am, in

your hand; do with me as seems good and proper to you...' (26:14); (iii) *'But know for certain that you will have the blood of innocent on yourself and you would have rejected the word of the Lord.'* (26:15)

How far Jeremiah has come in 20 years! What was the verdict from the prince? *'This man does not deserve to die.'* (26:16) Centuries later, the same is said of Jesus. (Jn 19:4) History repeats itself! The difference is, Jeremiah survived, Jesus didn't. In Jeremiah's days, there were some good elders in the land. These godly older people remembered the prophet Micah (c.f. Micah 3:12). They knew Jerusalem would not be there if their fathers did not listen to Micah's words (26:17-19). These elders spoke sense into the princes and people, *'We are doing great evil against ourselves.'* (26:19)

5. *Jehoiakim already killed Prophet Urijah*, Jeremiah's colleague from Kirijath-Jearim, 9 miles west of Jerusalem. The Ark of God was stationed there in the past. Urijah was a true prophet like Jeremiah, but he made one 'fatal mistake'. He was afraid of people, so he ran for his life after speaking the word of the Lord. Jehoiakim brought him back from Egypt and killed him. Jeremiah must have wept for Urijah whose body was probably thrown out to Kidron Valley (c.f. 2 King 23:6). He would have wept more for Jerusalem. Jesus too wept, *'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who stoned prophets, only if you had recognised the time of your visitation.'* (Luke 19:42-44)

Thank God for the good elders! Their words moved the people, and Jeremiah's life was spared.

Where would the people stand 4 years later? Unfortunately, they turned against the Lord, and the nation's judgement through exile was sealed.

'When a man stands up in the communist or other totalitarian countries today and really speaks of the judgment of God, he gets the same treatment as Jeremiah. Even in the West, the results are similar. Men say, 'You're against our culture, you're against the unity of our culture, you're against the progress of our culture, you're against the optimism of our culture, and we're going to do what we can against you.' Our culture may do little if we preach only the positive message but if we are faithful and also preach judgment in state or church, the result will be the same as with Jeremiah.'

Schaeffer, Francis A. Death in the City. Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969, p60

B. YOU DID NOT LISTEN ! Chapter 25 (605BC)

4 years have passed, and the historic battle of Carchemish took place with Nebuchadnezzar coming out on top. The power base shifted from the West to the East. That year Babylonians invaded Jerusalem for the first time. (2 King 24:1)

1. What has happened during the last 4 years? Did they listen to the word of God? Was there national repentance? No. But once again when all Israel was gathered together Jeremiah spoke to them, *'I have preached the word of God to you for the past 23 years.'* (25:3) Jeremiah was called by God around 627BC. He ministered from the time of King Josiah through Jehoahaz to Jehoiakim, along with the other prophets of the Lord. *'But you haven't listened to any of the Lord's warnings. Therefore, there is no more 'If you will repent' clause. Therefore I will tell you what will happen to you.'* *'You have not listened,'* appears 4 times (25:3, 4, 7, 8).

Ch25 opens with *'You have not listened'* and ends with the *'fierce anger of the Lord.'* (25:38) The theme of this chapter is the wrath of God. This very unwelcome message is presented in a long, repetitive format. It is an earful, so very few preach on these chapters. The gospel is good news for those who believe. But for those who reject the message, it is not. *'The gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes'*, Paul proclaims in Romans, but in the very next breath he says, *'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness...'* (Rom 1:18).

2. Jeremiah pronounces, *God's anger will boil over now because you did not listen to God with 'inclined ear' and 'obedient hands.'* *Your hands kept on making idols, hoping it to save the day. Since you just would not listen to God's servants the prophets (v4), the Lord would send a different type of servant – King Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon (24:9).* For how long? It would be 70 years of discipline under Nebuchadnezzar to bring everything back to a new beginning (25:11).

This is the history written beforehand: (i) The exile lasted 70 years from 605-536BC, i.e. the 1st deportation in the 4th year of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-4) to Cyrus' edict and the temple reconstruction (c.f. Ezra 3:8; Zec 1:12; 2 Ch 36:20-23); (ii) Temple's destruction lasted 70 years from 586-515 BC (2 Kings 25:1-9 to a new temple in Ezek 6:15). God knew exactly how long it would take to shake His people out of their complacency. The Jews had not observed the 70 sabbatical years, so the 70-year exile would give the needed rest to the land as well and reset the soil. (2 Chron. 36:20-22; Dan. 9:1-2)

Now Jeremiah's prophecy takes an unexpected turn from Jerusalem to international focus. He was a prophet to the nations. (i) Nebuchadnezzar too will be punished; (ii) Babylon will be destroyed. (Babylon fell by Medes and Persians in 539BC.) It lies in ruins today just as an archaeological site.

3. God's judgment will move out to all nations and all kingdoms and all people, to the end of the earth (25:15-38). This is a compact snapshot vision of the last days which Jeremiah unpacks later in Ch41-51. The spiritual principle here is - God begins the judgment with His own people in His own house, but He won't stop there. He will extend the judgment to the rest of the world. *'For the time has come for the Judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Pet 4:17).*

There is the cup of God's anger. Jeremiah takes this cup and gives it to Judah first. After Judah has drunk it, it will be given to all other nations to drink. (Isa 51:17, 22, Jer 13:12f; 49:12; Zec 12:2, Rev 14:8-10; 16:19; 18:6) It starts geographically from the south, then it sweeps through the holy land to the north, then turns east all the way out to the ends of the earth. The last kingdom to be judged is 'Sheshach' which is a code name for Babylon. The divine judgment will begin with God's people, then it will ultimately sweep across all the nations of the earth. None can refuse to drink the cup. The Armageddon battle is shown here.

4. The epic battle of Carchemish (605BC) took place in the Euphrates and the powerbase of the ancient world shifted from Egypt to Babylon. This was the hinge in the ancient world, which signalled the ending of the western power. That very year Jerusalem would be invaded by the Babylonian armies. Judah would just survive by agreeing to be a vassal state, but they would not last much longer.

At this point, the prophetic picture changes from a 'cup' to a 'lion' that got in among the sheepfold. In those days lions would sometimes jump into the fold while the shepherd slept at the gate. Who is the lion that got in? *'It is the LORD Himself. He jumped into the fold like a roaring lion.'* (25:30-38) *'Watch out, all you sleeping shepherds (rulers & kings)! The Lord will roar mightily among the grapes as the grape treader!' (25:30 c.f. Rev 14:17-20) *'And on that day the slain of the LORD shall be from one end of the earth even to the other end of the earth.'* (25:33)*

The Lion of Judah is going to jump into the international scene, and He will tread on the grapes while the grain harvest is being gathered. The Lion of Judah is also the Lamb of God who drank the cup of God's wrath for all of us, so we don't have to drink the cup of God's anger. Jesus prayed, *'Father, if it is possible, please take this cup away from Me. Nevertheless, not My will Yours be done.'* (Lk 22:42)

Whoever does not come to the Lamb of God in surrender and in humble faith will have to face the roaring Lion treading on the wicked nations in judgment. Have you come to the Lamb of God who has drunk the cup of God's wrath for you? Just as in Jeremiah's days, each person's life, as well as the destiny of the nations, are in the balance. Are we listening to God's voice and responding rightly to Him? Will there be four more years of God's grace? Are there still good elders in the land? Or is the time up?

Let's turn to the Lamb of God and be saved.