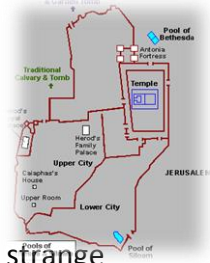


Responding to Crisis (Jeremiah 39-41)



A. Our Relationship to God, His Word and His Servant

1. These chapters seem filled with a random selection of history, difficult names to pronounce, and strange people. What is the point of these chapters? Jeremiah 39-44 records the aftermath of Judah's collapse and different individuals' responses to the national tragedy when it finally caught up with them. (The following 4 chapters in the Bible - Jer 39 & 52, 2 Kgs 25, and 2 Chr 36 - record the fall of Jerusalem, reflecting the importance of this event.)
2. Jeremiah's approach is not to present broad facts of Judah's history, but *individual responses* to the national crisis. How do God's people respond to times of crisis? God's intention in such times is to prosper them and give them hope. *'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.'* (Jer 29:11)

Here seven individuals' responses are recorded. It is difficult for us to imagine the pressure they faced unless we've suffered the invasion and occupation by foreign powers. Their morale was extremely low, and the pressure people felt from their own people was often greater than pressure from the outside. In the 'power vacuum', some say surrender, some say resist, some say fight. The sheer panic and disunity brought greater destruction than from the occupying forces. In such times God says, *'Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!'* (Ps. 46:10 C.f. Ps 131:1-3) In such times, *people's true character and inner motives* are also revealed.

3. The key here was each individual's relationship with God and His Word, and it depended on their relationship with the men and women of God. Jeremiah brought them God's word and the way they related to Jeremiah revealed now they related to God. In every case, the individual's ultimate destiny was decided by their relationship with Jeremiah who brought them the Word of God.

B. Seven Individuals' Response to Crisis

1. ZEDEKIAH

- Zedekiah was very interested in Jeremiah's prophecies. Jeremiah gave him the word of the Lord time and time again, *'Do not be afraid of Chaldeans, but fear the Lord and submit to Chaldeans.'* But to the end, Zedekiah kept the cards close to his chest and did what he thought would give him the best chance to survive. He was a man of sight, not a man of faith, a man gripped by the fear of men rather than of God. He was so interested in what Jeremiah had to say, but *he never did anything about what he heard.*
- When Zedekiah saw the city wall breached from the northern part and Chaldean Generals sitting in the middle gate of the city just as Jeremiah predicted (39:3 c.f. 21:4), he decided it was time to run - precisely what Jeremiah told him NOT to do. He escaped through a southern gate by way of the king's garden, ran across the Kidron Valley, and fled toward Arabah. It was a pathetic picture of Judah's last king deserting his people, running to save only his own life! He could have had a very different ending had he listened to Jeremiah. He could have even saved his throne and later get a royal burial. But he wouldn't and couldn't because he was a man dictated by sight and therefore fear, instead of faith in God and His word.
- Zedekiah was caught on the way to Jericho and Chaldeans brought him to Riblah, 65 miles north of Damascus. There they slew Zedekiah's sons before him before gouging his eyes out so that it was the final permanent image for him to remember as a *'memorable punishment'* for his rebellion. Then they slew his cabinet ministers as a lesson for everyone not to follow a worthless leader. Zedekiah had to live the rest of his life blind because he refused to see what God was showing him through Jeremiah. (C.f. Rev 2:15)

2. NEBUCHADNEZZAR

- We know more about Nebuchadnezzar from the book of Daniel. He was a megalomaniac and somewhat a 'benevolent dictator.' Later he became like a wild animal because power went to his head. *Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.* Even Hitler started well in his early years. Germany owed a great deal to Hitler for solving huge unemployment problem by developing roads and car industry (Volkswagen).

- Unexpectedly Nebuchadnezzar treated the Jews kindly. It took him altogether 30 months to capture Jerusalem. It cost him a lot of money and time to crush Zedekiah's rebellion. He burned down Jerusalem, slew the 'corrupt ruling class', and carried away the cream of the population, like Daniel. He had an eye for potential leaders. But to the poor and the destitute who had been mistreated by their corrupt leaders, Nebuchadnezzar gave vineyards and fields to work on. God's judgment was on the corrupt system and officials, but the abused people of the land were liberated and prospered under Nebuchadnezzar. He even found a good man among them to govern the land for him – Gedaliah. Nebuchadnezzar said to them, *'This is your land. Just behave, pay your taxes, and you will prosper.'* This was a great favour from a conqueror.
- Nebuchadnezzar was a benevolent conqueror until power went to his head and began to build his statue. Later He became like a wild beast until he acknowledged - with grass in his mouth - the God of Israel. It is interesting Nebuchadnezzar knew about Jeremiah and set him free. Deep down he was a man who recognised God and men of God. He later said to Daniel, *'Your God is the God of all gods. He is the ruler of all kings.'*
- Jeremiah was miraculously set free at Ramah so he could go home where he grew up as a boy. He probably had mixed feelings. He'd never been home in the last 40 years. He'd bought a field, but he never got to see it. How odd Jeremiah must have felt - imprisoned by his own people and set free by the foreign invaders. He preached and worked tirelessly for 40 years to save the city. And now the city was burnt to the ground, the palace was gone, the temple was gone, and the houses were gone. Jeremiah was now 57 years old. The 40 years of his prophetic ministry seems to be a total failure. He'd pleaded, *'It is not your resistance against the Babylonians, but it is your resistance against God - that is your problem!'* But very few listened to him. Now Jeremiah was going back to his childhood home to the little village, thinking his ministry was now over, he could settle down and retire in a little bungalow. But his work wasn't over yet.

3. **EBED MELECH (lit. King's Servant)**

- Ebed Melech was from Ethiopia, today's Sudan. He was a foreigner from Africa. Who would ever protect him? He was afraid and did not know what to do. But Jeremiah had a special message for this overlooked migrant from Sudan while he had nothing further to say to the unbelieving Judah. God said through Jeremiah, *'Ebed Melech, don't you be afraid. You will live.'* Why? *'Because you put your trust in Me.'* (39:18) How did Ebed Melech put his trust in the Lord? He mustered up the courage to go to Zedekiah to save Jeremiah's life when he was slowly sinking in the muddy pit. It was Zedekiah's job as the king to carry out justice for Jeremiah, but he was indifferent. Ebed Melech quickly got ropes and rags and pulled Jeremiah out from drowning in the mud. This act of courage in saving the man of God was tantamount to *'putting your trust in Me'* in God's eyes (39:18).
- So, this African man lived. Three men were set free in Jerusalem and allowed to stay in the land - Jeremiah, Baruch, and Ebed-Melech. Jeremiah had a personal word of protection for Baruch and Ebed Melech. God is no debtor and never forgets even the smallest act of kindness shown to His people. *'Even as you did to one of my brothers, you have done it for me.'*

4. **NEBUZARADAN ('The Captain of the Guard', Lit. 'Chief butcher')**

- Nebuzaradan was no butcher, but one of the finest Chaldean soldiers. Soldiers make some of the finest Christians. They understand authority. Remember the Centurion? *'I also am a man under authority...'* Soldiers respect authority and discipline. It seems Jeremiah was set free in Ch 39, and then recaptured on the way, so he was set free a second time in Ch 40. When the Babylonian soldiers and the Jewish captives reached Ramah, it seems they heard the voice of a mother weeping from her grave. *'A voice was heard in Ramah - Rachel weeping for her children.'* It touched Nebuzaradan and he set Jeremiah free. He gave Jeremiah a choice either to come to Babylon with him or to stay in the land. He offered to look after Jeremiah should he come to Babylon. But Nebuzaradan must have seen Jeremiah's resolution because he told Jeremiah to stay with Gedaliah and set him free with food rations and gifts (40:5).
- Remarkably Nebuzaradan said to Jeremiah, *'It is your God who has done this to your land, is it not? Your God keeps His promises, Doesn't He?'* (40:2-3) This pagan soldier recognised the voice of God in Jeremiah while God's own people failed to do so. He recognised the divine authority in Jeremiah's life, *'You serve the greatest authority. I cannot bind you in chains for serving your God. Go free and serve your God.'*

5. GEDALIAH

- Gedaliah was chosen to rule the occupied territory. He was under suspicion from both sides - an unenviable position to fill. But he was a good man. Nebuchadnezzar chose well. Gedaliah's father, Ahikam saved Jeremiah's life earlier (Jer 26:24). Shaphan, his grandfather was involved in discovering the Deuteronomy scroll in Josiah's days (2 Kgs 22:8-10). Gedaliah agreed with Jeremiah's word at every point. He understood the only way forward was to co-operate with the Chaldeans. He did not try to rebuild Jerusalem as Chaldeans would simply knock it down again. He went a few miles north to Mizpah, and there he began rebuilding with a team of people, *'Let's not fight the Chaldeans but work with them. Let's rebuild our nation together starting from this hill of Mizpah.'* That year they had a great harvest of wheat and grapes. God blessed them abundantly because they were following the word of the Lord (40:12). Gedaliah was not from the royal bloodline, but he listened to the word of the Lord, and God blessed the remnants of Judah abundantly.
- But Gedaliah had one fault that proves fatal – *naivety*. Many good men believe everybody is noble and good as they are. Jesus did not make this mistake. *'But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.'* (John 2:22-23) We can be either too naïve or too cynical about human nature. Gedaliah ignored Johanan's warning about Ismael, one of the seven guerrilla leaders who came under Gedaliah's leadership. Ishmael was, in fact, paid by Baalis, the Ammonite king, to assassinate Gedaliah! Ishmael was the enemy's implant (40:14). Gedaliah refused to believe it, *'No, he wouldn't do that to me.'* (40:16) Gedaliah was brave, but he failed to see that the best guarantee of his people's safety was his own safety. There will always be people who do wrong and damage the community God is building. God's people must not be naïve.

6. ISHMAEL

- Ishmael came in by deceit and killed Gedaliah, and Gedaliah was Judah's best ruler in decades! What was Ishmael's motivation? *'He had royal blood in his veins.'* (41:1) Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, was a descendant of David (2 Sam 5:16). He must have thought, *'Why should Gedaliah, a peasant, rule while I am the one with the royal blood?'* Satan must have worked on his jealousy and unbridled ambition. He teamed up with Israel's worst enemy to kill Gedaliah who was their best chance to succeed as a nation.
- In the ancient middle east, hospitality was a sacred duty. To kill your honoured guest in disguise of hospitality was the worst crime of all. Two days later he killed further 70 innocent pilgrims from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria who came to worship the Lord with offerings and incense. He threw their bodies over the cistern which King Asa has dug to preserve life (1 Kings 15:25). Ishmael defiled it with corpses (41:9).
- What was Ishmael's relationship to Jeremiah? None. Jeremiah is not even mentioned once during the entire sordid story of Ishmael. This man had no relationship with God and His word whatsoever. Ishmael was a man used by the devil to wreck the community God was building.

7. JOHANAN

Johanan was another guerrilla leader like Ishmael. But he supported Gedaliah and warned him of Ismael's plot to assassinate him. After Johanan learned what Ishmael had done he came to fight Ishmael at the pool of Gibeon. Ishmael ran away with his eight accomplices, leaving Gedaliah's captives behind. Fortunately, Johanan recovered the royal captives – some women, children, eunuchs, and some soldiers from Gibeon. But now what was Johanan to do? He had to decide either to go back to Mizpah with the terrible report for the Chaldeans or to run. If he went back to Mizpah 4-5 miles away, he may have to face the Chaldean's wrath. Their own appointed governor was murdered along with their own soldiers (41:3), and the murderer Ishmael got away. Johanan was going to flee to Egypt, but thankfully before he did, he thought to ask Jeremiah first. Consulting the Lord in the day of distress is the recipe for success.

Even though the judgment of God brought Judah's collapse, yet amid the chaos the mercy of God was still at work. (i) The poor were set free, and the oppression of the corrupt leadership was removed; (b) Gedaliah, a good leader was given to them; (iii) a plentiful harvest; (d) Ebed Melech, Baruch, etc were set free.

When under great pressure God wants His people not to panic but know that He is in control and to obey His voice – the key to prosperity and life. How do we respond in the days of crisis? In faith or panic?