



## Jeremiah's Last Words (Jeremiah 42-44)

A once prosperous and free nation has been reduced to a handful of remnants. They are now gathered in Bethlehem, contemplating what to do. They could either run to Egypt or go back to Mizpah and face the Chaldean authorities' anger for failing to capture Ishmael who killed Gedaliah, the new governor over Judah. They were fearful and their natural instinct was to run. If they chose Egypt, they would go as 'political refugees' to start a new Jewish colony there. The problem was they would be not only *going down* to Egypt as asylum seekers, but it was also going back to the starting point, undoing all that God has done for 900 years. Think about all the trouble God went through to get them out of slavery in Egypt!

Will they make the right choice at this time of panic? The choice was between safety or spirituality; a sense of security or moral purity; material prosperity or the divine purpose. *'When your ship faces storms and waves, your best chance to survive is to face it and sail directly into it.'*

### A. Decision Time in Bethlehem (Jer 42:1-22)

1. They all knew one thing. They needed divine guidance. One wrong step here, and the last remnant of Judah might be extinguished. The guerrilla army leaders such as Johanan, Jezaniah and Azariah (Jezaniah's brother) asked Jeremiah to ask the Lord for His will. *'Will you ask for us the Lord's will in this? There is so few of us left and we cannot afford to make any more mistake now. Whatever the Lord says through you, we are ready to obey.'* (42:1-3) Maybe they saw Gedaliah's success was in consulting and following the word of the Lord. Have they have learned their lesson of obedience? Jeremiah said, *'Okay I will enquire of the Lord for you. But you must be prepared to obey because I will declare to you whatever the Lord says. I will keep nothing back.'* (42:4) And they promised Jeremiah, *'Whatever the Lord tells you, we will do exactly that, whether we like it or not. God will bear witnesses if we don't obey (x3).'* (42:5-6)
2. Jeremiah went to prayer in Bethlehem.
  - i) God took 10 days to answer Jeremiah. Knowing the will of God is not an instant event. Beware of the people who always know God's will instantly. They likely are suffering from super-spirituality or an overactive imagination. The devil doesn't want us to wait on God. He pushes us into major decisions. *'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.'* It takes time to discern whether a certain impulse or impression is from the Lord, or the devil, or our fleshly desires and fears. Fleshly impulses tend to be short-lived. God wants us to learn to wait on Him (C.f. Is 64:4). Out of time spent waiting on God, we sort out a lot of fears and desires, and come to a place of greater dependence and consecration. Self-will gets us nowhere.
  - ii) God told Jeremiah, *'Tell them to stay where they are. Tell them not to fear Nebuchadnezzar for I will give them a favour. Tell them they are safe here with Me than in Egypt without Me.'* It was the fear of men (Nebuchadnezzar) that was driving them toward Egypt. Jeremiah prophesied very clearly with two scenarios, *'If you stay where you are where I have called you, I will bless you and protect you. However, if you decide to go down to Egypt against My will, My fury will be poured out on you the day you set your foot in Egypt and all of you will die.'*
  - iii) Jeremiah reiterated in strongest terms in closing, *'O remnant of Judah, do not go to Egypt! Or at least know for certain that today I have warned you against this move. Indeed you were 'hypocrites' because when you sent me to enquire of the Lord, you had no intention to obey the voice of the Lord, just as you have not obeyed in anything the Lord has spoken to you all these years. You were only waiting for a confirmation of what you have already decided. Therefore, if you go down to Egypt, you will die a tragic death by a sword, famine, and pestilence.'* How often are we like this when we are seeking divine guidance from the Lord for marriage, job, etc?
3. How did they respond? The 'proud leaders' said (42:1-7), *'Jeremiah, I don't believe you heard it from God. Your old unstable mind is influenced by your secretary, Baruch who is now running the show.'* They have not only rejected the word of the Lord, but they are now assaulting Jeremiah as weak and old, possibly even senile. This is how they justified their response - discredit the man of God. They made their way to Tahpanhes (c.f. 2:6), an Egyptian frontier town on the northeast of the Nile Delta, to obtain permission (visa) to settle in Egypt. Jeremiah and Baruch were dragged along to Egypt (42:13-18).

## B. The Last Portrait of Jeremiah in Egypt (43:8-44:30)

- Jeremiah does his last prophetic act in Tahpanhes (43:8-13; c.f. 13:4-7; 19:1-13; 27:1-28:16). He got up one morning and took some large stones and brought them in the courtyard of Pharaoh's house and buried them. (Pharaoh had a royal residence in Tahpanhes and Elephantine ~Aswan.)

- Jeremiah prophesied, *'One day Nebuchadnezzar will come and put his throne and his royal canopy over these stones.'* (44:10) He laid the foundation of Nebuchadnezzar's future throne, *'Nebuchadnezzar will capture Egypt as easily as a shepherd puts on a cloak and depart in safety.'* (Another rendering - it would be like for Nebuchadnezzar a *'shepherd picking his cloak clean of lice.'*) Then you who have fled Judah will truly suffer the full force of Nebuchadnezzar's might.



Less than 20 years later (568-567 BC), Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt and defeated Pharaoh and many perished. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an archaeologist, Sir Flinders Petrie found Pharaoh's palace, the large pavement, and the large stones!

- Jeremiah also prophesied that one day Nebuchadnezzar will come and burn down the Egyptian temples and break down their sacred pillars (c.f. 'obelisks') that stood on Beth Shemesh. Just as the Lord humiliated the gods of Egypt with the ten plagues in Exodus, so He would use Nebuchadnezzar to humiliate the idolatrous nation once again. In Beth Shemesh, there was a famous temple of a sun god, 'Amon-Re'. Beth Shemesh means 'House of the Sun' (Gk. 'Heliopolis') about 5 miles northeast of Cairo. They built two rows of obelisks to worship the sun god, but Nebuchadnezzar came in and destroyed them. Today, only one obelisk stands there as a memorial. (There is one in Central Park in NY and another on Thames Embankment in London. These obelisks are phallic symbols from Canaan.)



- The hard-heartedness of God's people continued in Egypt. Jeremiah 44:1-30 contains Jeremiah's last known words, dated ~580BC. Four Jewish colonies are mentioned. The Jewish refugees did not all stay in *Tahpanhes*. Some moved on to *Migdol* (~25 miles northeast of Tahpanhes); *Noph* (Gk. Memphis, ~13 miles south of Cairo, chief city of lower Egypt); the territory of *Pathros* (Lit. land of the south, southern Egypt).

- The Jews from the four centres got together at certain times of the year for religious festivals. To Jeremiah's shock and dismay, they did not meet to worship the *'King from heaven'*, but they worshiped the *'Queen of heaven.'* Pagan religions often paint God as 'she' – In Babylon 'Venus'; In Canaan 'Astarte'; In Ephesus 'Artemis/Diana'. Today, we speak of 'mother earth', or 'Gaia'. It is all the same demonic identity, including idolatrous worship of 'Mary' as the 'Queen of heaven.'

Over 40 years ago Jeremiah rebuked the Jews in Judah, *'The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead the dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven and they pour out the drink offerings to other gods, to that they may provoke Me to anger.'* (Jer 7:18) Jeremiah thought, 'Surely this nonsense has stopped by now.' The Jewish refugees not only kept up their pagan Canaanite idolatry, but they also exported it to Babylon! The whole Jewish community in their religious reunion was baking cakes with the image of the queen of heaven imprinted on them! Archaeologists have discovered that their cult consisted of a mixture of Israelite and Canaanite religious elements.

- Jeremiah asked them, (a) 'Why are you hurting yourselves, thus leaving no survivors? Haven't you had enough in your homeland?' (44:7) (b) 'Why are you provoking God to anger?' (44:7) 'So that the Lord could no longer bear it' (44:22); (c) 'Have you forgotten the wickedness of your kings, their wives, yourselves, your wives?' (44:7-9). (d) 'Have you not been humbled enough?' (44:10)

They have not learned a thing from their painful history. *'Therefore, you shall all die from the least to the greatest.'* (44:12) *'You may think of going back one day, but not one of you will return, except a few fugitives who escape to Judah.'* (44:14). Jeremiah's last plea was for them to learn from history.

- iii. Their response to Jeremiah was, *'We will not listen to you.'* (44:15-19) *'So long as we were sacrificing to the pagan gods, we were doing well, but as soon as Josiah abolished the pagan rituals, we began to suffer.'* (44:16-19) What?! How is it possible to arrive at two completely different interpretations from the same history? A smoker can say as he is wheezing, *'I was fine until I saw a doctor and he stopped me from smoking, and then my health deteriorated.'*

There is a time lag between cause and effect. Fools do not learn the lesson because of the time lag. God does not settle account every Friday evening, so we may think we got away with things. The immature only learn from immediate pain, but the mature learn before he has to experience deep pain. *'Until I went into a sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places'* (Ps 73:18) The flesh can only learn short-term lessons. It takes faith to learn long-term lessons. It takes a spiritual man to understand the eternal rewards of living rightly before God. Crime may pay in the short term, but not in eternity before God. Jeremiah asked, *'Haven't you learned the long-term lesson?'* They said, *'No, we only learn the short-term lessons. When we offered the moon cakes to the queen of heaven, the next day we had rain.'*

The world wants instant answers, instant guidance, instant blessings. They said, *'Please tell me what to do I need divine guidance.'* God said, *'I will tell you after 10 days of you waiting on Me.'* They were not prepared to wait on God, nor did they know how to wait on God for 10 days. When Jeremiah brought the word from the Lord, they said, *'Jeremiah, you are too old, too weak, too influenced, too senile, etc.'* God said, *'Give it some years, and I will tell you whose life is truly blessed and whose life is cursed.'*

3. Jeremiah's final words were, *'I will give you two signs with which to determine whose interpretation of history true – yours or mine.*

(i) *'I will cause My name to disappear from your lips.'* (44:26) *'Since stubbornly you refuse to acknowledge Me and you serve other gods, I will erase My name from your lips. I will cause you to forget My name forever.'* Is there anything more tragic than this?

(ii) *'I will deliver Pharaoh (Hophra) to whom you have come for protection, into the hand of his enemies and those who seek his life'* (44:30). In less than 20 years, in a coup d'état Amasis, Hophra's general, replaced him. Hophra was strangled to death when Amasis handed him over to his people.

These are the very last recorded words of Jeremiah. Jer 46-52 are the previously recorded words. Jeremiah said, *'You have vowed to burn incense to the queen of heaven. Get on with it. You will surely keep your vows and perform your vows!'* (44:25). Just as the Lord says in the last days, *'Time is at hand. He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still.'* (Rev 22:11)

4. Jeremiah preached over 40 years, pleading through disaster after the disaster. In the eyes of the world, he ended up a total failure. Jeremiah witnessed his nation disintegrate before his eyes. When he was set free by the Babylonians, he decided not to run but stay and rebuild the broken nation with a small band of remnants. Then Jeremiah was dragged into Egypt against his will. Even there the Jewish communities rejected him and despised Jeremiah's words to his face, and persisted in the same idolatry which got them to this mess! They had a twisted view of history.

Jeremiah's last words were not words of hope but God's final judgment. The bottom line in God's universe is the 'Justice of God.' How would you feel if you ministered for 40 years and finished up as a total failure even among the remnants and survivors? But Jeremiah stands as a giant of a prophet. He was a man called in the darkest days of Israel to oversee the collapse of the nation, and guide the few who were willing to obey the voice of God.

Now we have reached the end of Jeremiah's story. As far as we know Jeremiah died in Egypt. Maybe Baruch was the only one who stayed faithful. He lived to write down all the words of Jeremiah.