

August 14

Jeremiah 34

Hey everyone, Online Campus Pastor Robert Murphy and once again I have the privilege of doing the Project 4:4 Daily Accelerator for today, August 14. Today we read from a few chapters from the Book of Jeremiah, but I want to focus in on Jeremiah 34, and the topic of slavery, since we've covered the coming judgment of Babylon in yesterday's Accelerator.

Chapter 34 gives us a pretty good picture into the state of things in Jerusalem during the last 15 months or so before the walls fell. Nebuchadnezzar's army was swallowing up Judah. Only three cities, Jerusalem, Lachish and Azekah were still holding out and they had siege works laid up against their walls. Things got so bad in Jerusalem, that in preparation for the final stage of the conflict, an edict was issued from the king that all the slaves were to be freed. I am pretty sure there would have been two motives for that action. First, Zedekiah was probably hoping that if he started acting in accordance with righteousness, God would change his mind and spare Jerusalem. Second, he probably hoped that free men would fight harder in defense of the city than slaves and in that hope he was probably correct. So the emancipation proclamation was issued- more for political than moral reasons and lo and behold a very strange thing happened...the Babylonian siege was lifted. Nebuchadnezzar withdrew his armies and marched them south- not because he cared a fig about what the Israelite king was doing with his slaves, but because the Egyptian Pharaoh- still recovering from the defeat Nebuchadnezzar had given him a few years before, had ventured out of his cave and was posing a military threat on the southern frontier of Nebuchadnezzar's empire.

Figuring he could deal easily enough with Judah later, Nebuchadnezzar moved his army south and sent a letter to the Jewish king promising that he would return soon enough. He had already decimated the country and was merely marking time until he starved Zedekiah out of his city.

Now if you were the Jewish king, what would you do next? Affirm the freedom of the slaves and thank God that he had responded to your sincere act of repentance, right? If you'd ever read the Book of Exodus that's what you would do. But maybe Zedekiah and his advisers had never done that because they acted instead like the Pharaoh with whom Moses had so much to do. As soon as the immediate threat was gone, they backed the promise and put the slaves back into bondage. That is the background of the message Jeremiah brings in chapter 34. Mosaic Law provided for the possibility of a man falling so badly into debt that he had nothing left to sell but the service of his own body. The law strictly prohibited what we would call permanent slavery. However, it stipulated that after the man had worked off his debt he was to be freed. In no case could such an indentured servitude last longer than seven years. After that the slave had to be freed. That was the law of God, but that is not what the Jews were practicing. They had instituted a full-fledged system of slave labor. As far back as Solomon's day it had been coming. His public works projects demanded more labor than could be mobilized. Without forced labor and in the days of Rehoboam his son, the system was institutionalized slavery came in. It continued throughout the period of the Hebrew kings in both the northern and southern kingdoms.

Understanding the context, and translation, is vital when it comes to understanding what the

Bible has to say about slavery. It is safe to say, though, that God does not bless, nor approve of, slavery as most Americans know of it.

I know some people have a hard time accepting Christianity because of their limited, or wrong, understanding of God's stance on slavery. I'd encourage you to check out our Spiritual Discovery page on the website. We have a number of videos posted there dealing with tough questions, and this is one

The Bible never tells us this, but some think that in this chapter we are witnessing the very last chance Judah had to repent. They take one baby step in the direction of righteousness and repentance- probably for all the wrong motives- but almost immediately Nebuchadnezzar has a road call to make a hundred miles to the south. Was that a coincidence? Not if you believe in the sovereignty of God.

Now for the big question- the one the Bible never addresses except in principle- what would have happened if Zedekiah had kept his word and left the slaves as freemen? One can only wonder if Nebuchadnezzar might not have gotten another road call this time a thousand miles from Jerusalem. But it didn't happen because Zedekiah broke his word to the slaves and put them back in bondage and Jeremiah says- God is going to give the order and bring the Babylonians back and this time they will finish the job. Zedekiah, you are finished. "I will lay to waste the towns of Judah so that no one can live there."

God gave Judah numerous chances to repent. He warned them time and time again. And yet, when it looked like they might have turned back to God, and a reprieve was provided, Judah squandered their opportunity and it was the final nail in the coffin for them.

It reminds me of the cross. When Jesus was crucified, two thieves were also crucified with him. Despite only being hours from death, one of the thieves asked to be remembered by Jesus. Jesus told him he'd be with him in paradise. It was not too late for the thief. God wants us to live and will give us opportunities to respond to him.