

Jeremiah 34-35

Home Group Notes

Advance warning: Ash Wednesday 17th Feb 8pm in StM (Holy Communion with imposition of Ash). Also Thursday 11th March 7pm, starting at 7.30-9pm A Lenten Evening (not a course as such), with Newick and Chailey invited. Speaker: Reader in Training Chris Lear on *Christian Heroes*. Bring a friend!

Worship: Try Psalm 16, try singing,

Welcome & Word: Usually we have these the other way round but I wondered if it would help to swap it this week, so I've sort of woven it into the Word section.

1. What's been a good moment this week?
2. What Hymn would you like sung at your funeral? Feel free to let me know, I won't hold you to it, your tastes might have changed!
3. Read Jeremiah 34.1-11
4. Are you the kind of person who finds the archaeology stuff curiously interesting (eg Lachish letter about fire beacons)? Who in your group has been there! (there's at least two groups with people who've been to Lachish – ask them to show you their photos!)
5. What do you think of Zedekiah's motives? Deathbed conversion or Cynical money saving device?
6. Is there anything that you ought to be getting on with instead of waiting for your deathbed moment? You might not want to say this aloud but have a pause and think about it, esp in prayers later and maybe ask One other person to help you in that task.
7. To make a covenant (either with God or as a business transaction) was to cut an animal in half and then walk between the pieces as if to say May this happen to me if I don't keep my side of the bargain. Now Read Jeremiah 34.12-22.
8. Vs16 to call them hypocrites seems too small a word, what would you use?
9. Vs21 two ways of viewing history – Babylonians withdraw because of Pharaoh Hophra, or Babylonians withdraw because of God's mercy. Which version do you find more helpful?
10. Read Jeremiah 18.
11. Who might the Recabites be today? (There are lots of answers to this so with each answer say: What can we learn from them?)
12. What would help a new / young Christian to stick with the faith?

Works: Pray – esp re Qn6

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3 points for you this morning: Deathbed Conversion, Divine Sarcasm and Determined Obedience.

Deathbed Conversion – Zedekiah is king of Jerusalem, he had been paying **tribute** to the King of **Babylon** but recently decided not to and to seek help from Egypt.

Egypt and Babylon are the two super powers, though frankly its pretty clear that Babylon is a much bigger **super super power** than Egypt. But the pro-Egyptian Lobby have been recently encouraged and have won over Zedekiah. So they stop paying tribute to Babylon, so down comes the Babylonian army. Its about a year before the final fall of Jerusalem in 586bc (18th July).

Now there are 2 ways of seeing what comes next and to begin with I'd like us to take the more **kindly charitable interpretation**. Zedekiah makes a law that all Hebrew slaves are to be **released**. And he makes all the rich people come to the temple and swear an **oath** before the LORD God and release their slaves.

Now that has to be a **good thing**. It's in keeping with the Sabbath year and the concept of Jubilee, the idea that Slaves were to be bought and sold as you might with shares in a **Stock Exchange** – every 7th year the

slaves were to be set free and so the cost of a slave would be proportionate to how many years are left until the next year of freedom.

There is an right repugnance in us, these days, **against slavery** and that's very good. It might help to understand that the Israelites had a very different attitude towards **slavery than the Romans** for example. The bible is full of the **Rights** of Slaves, the word used for Slavery – Ebed – we might more easily translate Servant, or Minister. So it is used of the Ministers who work for the King, it is used of the king and his relationship to God and it is used of people who have had to sell themselves into slavery. It's not really used in the **Roman sense** of being a **Talking Tool**, a chattel, with no rights at all.

So this is a good thing, to release all the slaves. It is in keeping with the Torah and the seven year rule. Well done. At last a bit of obedience. God says Good for you, it's **been a while** coming but well done. Now its hard not to wonder if the fact that Jerusalem is **surrounded** by an army, we're all about to be invaded and **dragged off** into slavery ourselves, **now is the time** to be known for doing something good.

If I live through this **siege**, if I am made a slave myself, then it would be nice to know that in the last few months of my freedom **I did the right thing**. So you have here a bit of a **deathbed conversion**. And it got me wondering whether if I knew that my time was up later on this week, is there anything that I'd like to sort out first?

A letter to someone I've not spoken to for too long. I'm sorry I didn't have more time, I'm sorry we didn't get to make up, I'm sorry I held that grudge for so long. I hope you get to read this letter and to know that I forgive you, that I'm sorry for what I did - there are so many more important things to get worked up about. You get the idea.

Herod the Great was worried that no one was going to be sad when he died so he arranged for certain prominent people to be arrested just before he died and then to be executed when he did die so that at least there would be **mourning** in Israel on the day he died. As it happened, people were arrested but his orders were not carried out (I think it was his wife who cancelled them).

Now I don't know if my time is coming up this week, so I will have a think about it and try to make sure that I am **keeping short accounts** with all people. This sermon isn't really about **making the most of** the time you have left – its more about wondering **how you will be remembered** when you're gone. And you have an opportunity to put that right. To say sorry if you need to, perhaps to **party and be generous** and muck in.

Zedekiah realises that his time is almost up, how will the history books remember me? And he takes this **good step** to see that all the slaves are released and set free. Good for him. The Deathbed Conversion. I don't mean that literally, Zedekiah doesn't die, he will live, and this isn't what we would call a conversion as such, but it's a sudden strong desire to do the Right thing for once. Good for him.

Some **scholars** can't help themselves but be **cynical**. Here you are under siege. No food is coming in, limited resources. You have a responsibility for everyone under your roof, slaves included, **so now would be a good time to let them go so that you don't have to feed them! Ha cunning eh** – Not only do I get to look good but I also save myself some precious food! Now that's a bit mean isn't it. Only the **tabloids** of today could come up with something like that – Jesus walking on the water and the headline reads – **Son of God can't swim!**

But unfortunately the scholars might be right this time. We see it in the **Divine Sarcasm**. So Zedekiah and the ruling elite take a **vow** and release their slaves. And then suddenly the Babylonian army retreat. (34.21)

You might think that God had been good to you because you had finally done something good yourself. You might make a connection between **your obedience to God's will** and a **sudden withdrawal** of your enemy. Your doom is no longer hanging over you, did that happen by Chance or did God bring that about?

We're not too sure what happened there, it could be that **Pharaoh Hophra** in Egypt (He's only been Pharaoh for a year) came out in 588 to see if he could help. So maybe that's why Nebuchadnezzar's army withdraws. It doesn't really withdraw it just goes off to **deal with another problem**. And whilst they were dealing with Hophra they also sorted out the cities to the south of Jerusalem.

There were two important cities, **Lachish** and Azekah. We read in these chapters that these were the last two cities to **hold out**. There's an impressive ramp built up against the outside wall of Lachish and even more impressively is a ramp built on the inside of the wall so as to repel the invaders – its very impressive and if you don't believe me ask the people who **came to Israel** with me last time!

Lachish and Azekah were both under siege and they communicated with each other using a **fire beacon** at night. Archaeologists have found a letter written to the man in charge of Lachish – the last bit says: Be aware that we are watching out for the fire signals from Lachish according to the signs that you've given, because **we cannot see Azekah**.

I like these obscure bits of **archaeology** and I loved visiting Lachish itself because for me it helps me to see that these were real people who were really scared and doing the best they could to hold on. We may **struggle to pronounce** their names and we may not be sure what **lessons** we're supposed to learn from something that happened 2,600 years ago but they were **real** people.

Zedekiah has had his deathbed conversion and released all the slaves. And the **challenge for us is to think about how we want to be remembered**.

Then comes the **cynicism**, they only did it because they didn't have enough food for their slaves, so actually it looks spiritual – and **God is pleased** – but maybe their motive wasn't the best.

And God's sarcasm comes biting in as the elite **renege on their vow** and take back the slaves. Now that the **imminent threat of slavery** and death has passed, it's back to life as normal.

And God says Well if that's your idea of **Freedom** then **here have some!** I give you your freedom to fall by the sword, **freedom to die** by plague and famine. You want to give others this freedom well have some of your own medicine.

You might think that **sarcasm is beneath God**. It doesn't seem right some how! But it shows the different ways that God endeavours to speak to us, through humour, even slightly sick humour. We're tend to presume that if God speaks then He'll speak in a certain sort of way – all **formal and regal** we don't expect God to use painful sarcasm and irony.

And it makes me wonder, what aspects of **God's presence and protection** do I not see and therefore take for granted. Similar perhaps to those **near misses** you have in your car and you wonder How did that not result in a crash? And sometimes it does and I think more often it doesn't. It ought to **sober** us up. To know that **mercy has come near to you** and then to return to your old way of sinning. Well perhaps that is just normal I suppose but its sad and a sign that we need a lot more grace and mercy and help.

Deathbed Conversion, Divine Sarcasm and Determined Obedience.

The 2nd reading is this bizarre scene with some **ancient Amish** type people. 250 years before Jeremiah (so 2,850 years ago!), there was a violent man called **Jehu** who killed wicked queen Jezebel and plenty of others and he had a side kick called **Jehonadab** (2 Ki10.15) who organised a special Baal service. A big

Baal celebration, Baal Priests only please. Jehonadab got them altogether and then instigated a blood bath. I'm not asking you to approve of the massacre, though rather obviously the people at the time did.

Its this man who for reasons unknown says We really must get back to a simple way of life – let us be Nomads and shun wine, and no growing crops or living in houses. It's a bit weird and not necessary but for the next 4 or 5 generations this is how they have lived. Maybe they were shepherds and goat herders, maybe they were **blacksmiths** – there's reasons for both answers.

Now God tells Jeremiah to get these people together – they have already **started to compromise** their values – because of the Babylonians they have had to come inside the city. Jeremiah gathers them in the temple area.

I tend to picture in my mind a temple looking a bit like a church – **one big room**. But here we are upstairs in the room of an old prophet (Igdaliah), in the next room are the officials who on the whole don't like Jeremiah and down stairs is where the doorkeeper live – I love these little details!

Jeremiah says 'Here have a glass of wine with me'. Its insensitive, embarrassing. It would seem churlish to refuse their hospitality. So the Recabites, with their proud ancient history of a great great great great grandfather who organised a culling of Baal prophets, they have lived with these humanly imposed silly restrictions that were way out of date when they were first spoken but surely we could chill out and relax a little. They are offered a glass of wine and they say No.

God could have said one of two things – He could have been using this moment as a way of challenging the Recabites and say Look you're all worried about not drinking Wine when there are people in this city who are struggling to survive, stop being so pretentiously high and mighty and help out! It could have been a **call to stop straining for gnats** whilst swallowing camels.

But God doesn't say that – He goes the other way and says Look if these people can hold to this 'silly, humanly imposed rule' for **250** years, why can't you hold true to God?

If these people can hold on with **Determined Obedience** to what's been handed down to them – why can't we stick to God, and following God and doing what He says?

These obscure Recabites are to be **admired for their stickability**, their determined obedience.

Perhaps you see people worshipping with their **hands held high** and waving or dancing and you think – that's just not English – but maybe there's a part of you that quietly wishes you could be that **joyful** about worship.

And then you see others **genuflecting** and you think well that's a lot of nonsense but maybe there's another part of you that admires the **earnestness of their faith**. The answer isn't necessarily to become like that, but it is to pick up on what's good about their approach to their faith.

We are to be a **community of Determined Obedience**. The Community is the easy bit – its about looking out for each other. We need that because on our own we are less determined and more easily compromising and shaken. And we need to **stick to what we know** is true and right.

We do not want to hear any **Divine Sarcasm**. It's beneath God and we don't want to give Him cause to stoop that far. And we ourselves should not need to wait for a **Deathbed conversion**. If there's something good and right and proper that we would want to be **remembered** for, then we should crack on with it now. Pay off that debt, be generous, forgive, party. You get the idea.

Deathbed Conversion, Divine Sarcasm and Determined Obedience. Go to it. Amen.