

Jeremiah 34-44

God's Judgement Comes and God's People Deserve It

In terms of the possible objections to the Christian faith, I reckon one of the laziest is the one that just claims I could never believe in your *God because he is an angry god*. You've heard this (or variations) before. *How can God send people to hell?* David shared a story a few weeks ago of an academic who called God *a monster*. *I can't believe in that sky bully* some people claim.

And quite frankly, you could point to passages like today's passage as proof. Because this is the passage where God's judgement comes down. By the end of chapter 39, Jerusalem is destroyed, thousands are dead and the whole city is set on fire. It's complete devastation. And so people could easily look at this passage and say: *It's the angry God hellbent on revenge! He's a monster. A thug.*

The reason I called this objection lazy is that you can only reach this conclusion if you haven't really read what's

going on in the passage. Or just stepped in and out of the passages with fire in them. Because if they had read the passage, they would've heard the surprising voice of someone who offers a summary of God's judgement and why. And it's not the voice you might expect. It's Nebuzaradan, one of the Babylonian commanders who ransacked and destroyed Jerusalem. And his voice is heard in chapter 40: 1–3: **“When the commander of the guard found Jeremiah, he said to him, “The LORD your God decreed this disaster for this place. And now the LORD has brought it about; he has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the LORD and did not obey him.”**

It's remarkable isn't it? This Babylonian commander says the destruction has happened by the hand of YHWH (he uses God's personal name) because you Israelites sinned. Your God warned you it was going to happen and then he made it happen. It's fascinating that he doesn't say we won because we were the better army we are the greater nation. He says God's judgement came on you because



you sinned. And if you like that is the theme of this section. Judgement is here and God's people deserve it.

And so today we're going to look at this large section through the lens of a couple of times God says: "Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says". Where he describes the sin and warns about the punishment. In chapters 34 and 35, the Lord Almighty says you have not obeyed and violated the covenant. In chapters 36–38, God says you have not listened and have not answered my call.

Judgement is here and God's people deserve it. As we look at this passage together, we're going to see things that are true even for us today.

1. You have not obeyed and violated my covenant

Have a look with me at 34:12: **"Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, 'Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrews who have sold**

themselves to you. After they have served you six years, you must let them go free.' Your ancestors, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again." There is a pattern to God's judgement. He says specifically here is how you are sinning. Therefore, He says, this is what I am bringing upon you. God is not some random, unknowable wishy-washy God who does random acts of violence on his people. God has given His Word, so His people know exactly what they are doing wrong and why judgement was exactly deserved. God is not hellbent on sending people to judgement. The people are hellbent on disobeying God.



And this is particularly devastating because God and his people had made a covenant together. God would be their God and they would be His people. They would get all the benefits of having a God who would love and provide and care for them and in return, they were to be faithful and obedient to him. His covenant was formalised at Mount Sinai when the people came out of Egypt as verse 13 says. And God gave them good laws for how to live as his people. The covenant and the law followed the Israelites when they went into the Promised Land and established the land as their own. One such law was that God's people were never going to be slaves again like they were in Egypt. So when an Israelite ran up a debt they couldn't pay back, they could offer their labour to the person they owed money to pay things back. It could've been a month, six months or a year of work. But no matter how big the debt was, it couldn't be more than six years. God's people were not going to be slaves like they were in Egypt.

Here in the passage, God points out that they not been releasing them. Even though that's what the law says and even though they made a covenant with God to obey him.

And in verse 15 God commends what this generation did. They repented from that evil. By repenting, it means saying sorry to God and then returning to the way he wants you to live. So this generation had a big ceremony in the temple courts with a butchered a cow, divided in half and had the priests walk through the middle of it. And then they set the cow on fire to say to God in his house: *We will obey you from now on and if we don't you can do to us what we did to this cow.*

But their repentance is shallow. All too soon, they bring back their former slaves and make them slaves again. We are not told why – maybe the impending invasion meant that people wanted more slaves to protect their property for them. It doesn't matter. They did not obey God and they violated the covenant.

In chapter 35, God recalls an earlier story about 18 years before about the Rekabites. This is a family line who had an ancestor named Jehonadab who commanded his family not to drink wine, not to grow crops and only live in tents. And his family for generations obeyed that



command. God brings them to Jerusalem to shame the people of Jerusalem: *A man made up those commands and people obey them. I'm your God and give you commands and you don't obey them.* Jeremiah 34:17:

“Therefore this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the LORD—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine” Verse 21 **“I will deliver Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. I am going to give the order, declares the LORD, and I will bring them back to this city. They will fight against it, take it and burn it down.”**

Fire. Uncontrollable, absolute destructive. In the land of bushfires, we know this better than anyone. It destroys everything in its path and once it gets going, you can't stop it. God's anger here is likened to a fire like that. But God's anger is not random and uncalculated. It comes in response to sin. God is a fair judge. You can't fool him.

There are lessons for us to learn and think on here. Our repentance can't be shallow. It's not real to say 'sorry God' and then run back into the same sin you were just apologising for. And our obedience to God can't be shallow. It's not real just to come along to church and sing the songs and mouth the words of a confession prayer. It's to our shame isn't it that people who don't love God and have causes that we disagree with act with more passion and more devotion and more honour than we do. Put us to shame. And we have the words of eternal life.

Gods people have violated the covenant and have not obeyed him, (the slaves are one example of it) so judgement is here and God's people deserve it.

2. You have not listened, nor answered my call

This brings us to our second point, just before chapters 36–38, God gives his second “Therefore” decree of judgement: 35:17: **“Therefore this is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in**



Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer.” They did not listen and they did not answer my call. This decree leads into a section which focuses on two kings: Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, the third last and last king of Judah. If you want an example of someone who does not listen to God that's Jehoiakim. And someone who does not answer the call of God that's Zedekiah.

Chapter 36 was our first reading today and we're told that the date is the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim which is about 605BC. God asks Jeremiah to write down all the words of the prophecy and bring it to the people. So he does. And he sends his servant Baruch into the temple to read out the words so people can hear. We are not told the reaction that the crowds have, apart from one man who works in the Kings Palace. He goes to the secretary's room, reports what's been said and the officials have gathered then ask Baruch to come to them and read it again. Verse 16 gives their reaction: **“When they heard all these words, they looked at each other in fear...”**

Judgement was coming. Unavoidable destruction was coming. The Babylonians would win. So the officials take the scroll from Baruch and took it to the king.

How would you imagine the king would react when he heard this devastating prophecy? Would he be like his father Josiah who immediately repented and turned back to the Word of God? Would you even be like the foreign king of Nineveh who got everyone in the city to put on sackcloth? How does this king of Judah react?

36:22: **“It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the fire pot in front of him. Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with the scribes knife and threw them into the fire pot, until the entire scroll was burnt in the fire. The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear nor did they tear their clothes.”** Notice the emphasis on who does what: the King listens to the words and then the king cuts from the scroll and the king burns it in the fire. Gary Miller who is the principle of Queensland



Theological College once said that this may be the most defiant act against the Word of God in the Bible.

So when God said *“Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says you have not listened...”* He’s not saying *oh you didn’t pay attention, or I didn’t speak loud enough let me repeat or you misunderstood.* When God talks about not listening, he means a defiant, wilful act of not taking His Word to heart. It’s the opposite of repenting. The people are going to follow the king and the king is going to lead them to destruction. Oh if only they had a king that listened to the word of God and obeyed it!

I think we are supposed to see the irony that the fire that God brings destroys everything, but the fire that Jehoiakim makes accomplishes nothing. No sooner has he burnt the scroll but God gives Jeremiah his Word all over again. There was a remarkable story in 1528 when William Tyndale published the first translation of the New Testament into English. The Catholic Bishop of London, enraged by the English Reformation proceeded to buy all the copies of Tyndale’s Bible as possible and burn them.

When Tyndale was told about this he rejoiced, for he said that the money would allow him more resources for the second edition and more printing presses to get the Word of God out!

You can’t stop the Word of God. This king and a scribes knife is not going to stop what God has decreed! The sheer foolishness of it. What did Isaiah the prophet say: **“The grass withers and the flowers fall but the Word of God endures forever.”**

The Word is a precious gift. Let me ask you: As you read the Word of God here as you look at the details, is God some sky bully, is he just some angry God out for revenge against people? The word of God in front of us is supposed to rouse our emotions as we read a passage like chapter 36, we are supposed to be in despair that this King continues to wilfully say no to God even to the end.

Now Zedekiah is the king who does not answer God’s call to him or the people. I was trying to think about how I could describe Zedekiah’s character through chapters 37



and 38. He's a dying fish. And when it comes to fishing I'm no expert – I'm no dezfthefishermen. Our family went out to a trout farm in the last school holidays and we caught a couple of rainbow trout. When you pull them in and bring them out of water, they are just about to die and they flip from side to side. That's Zedekiah. Judgement is imminent, the Babylonians surround the city and he keeps flip-flopping on what he wants from God.

Here's my 1 minute summary of Chapters 37 and 38:

- Neither Zedekiah nor the people pay attention to the Word of God.
- When the Babylonians leave Jerusalem for a moment to fight the Egyptians, Zedekiah asks for a Word from the Lord to see if this will last.
- God says Babylon will come back and destroy you.
- The officials put Jeremiah in jail.
- Zedekiah sneaks a meeting with Jeremiah and asks for a Word from the Lord.
- Jeremiah says Babylon will destroy you.
- Zedekiah lets Jeremiah go free.

- Jeremiah preaches to the people that in these last days God will give salvation to those who surrender to the Babylonians.
- Zedekiah allows the officials arrest Jeremiah and throw him into a pit.
- Another official Ebed-Melek says to the King they need to save Jeremiah and so he does.
- Zedekiah allows officials to arrest Jeremiah again.
- Zedekiah sends for Jeremiah again.
- Jeremiah tells him again for the last time: Surrender to Babylon or be given into their hands when Jerusalem burns.
- Zedekiah says he is too scared of the officials and other exiled Jews. Flip flip flip flop.

It's a tragic tale. God has said over and over again: *My people have sinned and they deserve my judgement.* They have rejected me, violated my covenant, refused to listen to me and not answered my call. And just in Ch 34-28 alone, God has told his people 8 times what is coming and why: Babylon will destroy you.



So is God just an angry God? Full of revenge? A bully who lives in the sky? That's what some people will say is a barrier to them exploring the Christian faith. But is that the God you read here in these words? Is he a feckless thug? Or has he been an incredibly patient, personally connected, relationally focused God for his people? Waiting for his people to answer his call, to repent and approving of them when they do? You would have to be particularly blind not to see even in the last chapter before Jerusalem falls, God is offering his people salvation from the disaster that is looming. The fire will come and the question that is offered: *Will you surrender your life and trust God to save you through the flames.*

As Christians, we are not supposed to miss the pattern here that points forward into the New Testament. Where God is preparing a place for his people more permanent than the Promised Land. More secure than Jerusalem. Where the sin that destroys the relationship between God and his people will itself be destroyed in judgement forever. And all people – every person on earth is invited

to heed God's call to repent of their sins and receive salvation.

Well in the land of bushfires, we know what to do when one is upon us. The safest place in a bushfire is the place that has already been burned. Because when the fire reaches the place that has already been burned, it can't go any further. If you can make it to the place that has already been burned, you will be safe.

The fire of God's judgement for sin has been poured out on Jesus at Golgotha, and so there is now a burned out area in the shape of a cross. Anyone who stands in Jesus will be safe from the fire. We stand there in Jesus when we trust Him, repent of our sins and surrender our lives to him. Those that ask, receive God's salvation and know his forgiveness forever. You see, every sinner who comes to Jesus in faith is someone snatched from the flames. Just as the God's people needed to humble themselves to leave Jerusalem, so too every Christian must have the attitude of humility. Not one of us can boast about our salvation – it is all God's work. Our job now is to take on



the role of spiritual firemen – in the words of the Apostle Jude: **“Save others by snatching them from the fire”**.

3. The judgement comes

And so as we finish our time today we finish with the terror of Jeremiah 39, where God unleashes the judgement, just as He said he would: **“In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. 2 And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah’s eleventh year, the city wall was broken through... 4 When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled; they left the city at night by way of the king’s garden, through the gate between the two walls, and headed toward the Arabah.**

But the Babylonian army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They captured him and took him to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. 6 There at Riblah the king of

Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and also killed all the nobles of Judah. 7 Then he put out Zedekiah’s eyes and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon. The Babylonians set fire to the royal palace and the houses of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem.” These are terrible words but they are words which bring us hope and assurance. Because God is faithful in bringing about the judgement he promised, he will be faithful in bringing about the salvation he promised too. At the end of the chapter 39, two names are mentioned among those saved: Jeremiah (the prophet who had faithfully held to the Word of God) and Ebed-Melek the only official to stand with Jeremiah at the end.

Our God is a God who saves from the flames. So how do you answer the one who says – *“I can’t believe in your angry God”*? Knowing their need before God, I think you push back. That’s just lazy. You only believe that because you haven’t read it yourself. I tell you what, why don’t you read the bible with me and I will find out the answer to any challenge you raise. Who knows – maybe they will read



the Word of the eternal God, listen to his call and answer
Him.