

HUMAN SIN AND THE WORD OF GOD (Jeremiah 32)

Because of the terrible effects of human sin, those who speak the Word of God often meet with difficulty. Jesus called Jerusalem the city that murdered the prophets. Many of the prophets had to do strange and personally unpleasant things, and suffered because of the Word that they proclaimed. God told Jeremiah to tell the leaders of Jerusalem to submit to the king of Babylon. As a result, Jeremiah was treated as a traitor. He was regarded as weakening the morale of his own nation during a time of war.

The section Jeremiah 32:1-15 is set in a complicated series of events that affected Jeremiah personally. At first he was imprisoned in the open space of the prison that the guards occupied. He could not leave, but any of his friends were allowed to visit him (32:12). The resistance of the leaders at Jerusalem to God's Word is astonishing. Jeremiah had been predicting that the Babylonians would attack Jerusalem. When the city came under siege, as God's Word had predicted, rather than repent and ask for mercy, they imprisoned God's messenger.

King Zedekiah refused to believe the Word that Jeremiah spoke to him. However, the fact that he was able to sum up the thrust of it himself (32:3-5) indicates that he was already familiar with what the Lord was saying (21:3-7).

Jeremiah chapter 32 describes what happened to Jeremiah when the Babylonians began the siege of Jerusalem. After Jeremiah had been in a kind of limited imprisonment in the court of the prison, the approach of the Egyptian army under Pharaoh-Hophra led the Babylonians to break off the siege for a time. Jeremiah belonged to the family of priests. His home had been in Anathoth in Benjamin. Descendants of Levi were not allowed to sell the land for up to half a kilometre around their cities to people from other tribes in Israel. At this point Jeremiah was told to buy a field at Anathoth from his first cousin Hanamel. Hanamel may have been old, and may have wanted to ensure that the field remained in the immediate family. God wanted Jeremiah to buy the field as a sign that, after the Babylonians had captured and destroyed Jerusalem and carried its people away into captivity, people would once again buy houses, fields, and vineyards in Judah. He promised that normal life would resume after the captivity.

Purchase of land in Israel was in effect only until the next year of Jubilee. There was some irony in this here, because this time the land was going to observe its neglected Sabbath rest during the Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah told his secretary and agent, Baruch, to seal up the deeds of purchase in an earthenware jar, because the promise looked a long way into the future. Placing the deeds into an earthenware jar was meant to protect them when the jar was buried for safe keeping during a time of war, when banks were not safe. The parable of Jesus about a treasure hidden in a field reminds us of similar circumstances, when an original owner and his family had not survived a war. It was certainly a mark of confidence during a stressful time of war that Jeremiah should go and buy a field. When people opened the jar many years later, it would confirm their confidence in the truth and power of God's Word. After his threats that the city and the country would be laid waste and that normal life would be brought to an end, Jeremiah's action of buying the field was a prophetic message of hope.

John the Baptist, while in prison, had doubts about Jesus that he wanted to resolve. Jeremiah would have had difficulty believing that he should buy the field when the LORD told him that his cousin would come to him to tell him that he had the right and duty to buy a field. It was such an unlikely action during a time of war. In fact, there was a similar incident in Roman history several centuries later. While Hannibal was besieging Rome during the second Carthaginian war, the very land on which Hannibal's army was camping near Rome was put up for sale in Rome, and found a buyer. It indicated the calm confidence of the buyer that the Carthaginian threat would soon pass (Florus 2.6). Jeremiah had presumably not doubted the Word of the LORD that had come to him about this, but his cousin's arrival confirmed the truth of this unusual and difficult prediction (v. 8).

However, after the purchase of land had been carried out, and Jeremiah was on his way out to Anathoth to participate in a division of property there among the relationship, he was arrested at the Benjamin gate of Jerusalem by a sentry on duty. He was charged with attempting to desert to the Babylonians (37:12-21).

When Jeremiah encouraged the people in Jerusalem to submit to Babylon, officials urged the king to execute Jeremiah for weakening the morale of the soldiers who were left in the city (38:2-3). This time Jeremiah was thrown into a dungeon, where he sank deeply into mud (38:4-6). He was issued a loaf of bread each day until bread ran out in the city during the renewed siege by the Babylonians. An Ethiopian official, Ebed-Melech, intervened to save Jeremiah's life when he pleaded with the king to allow him to lift Jeremiah out of the dungeon. He took some men and lowered ropes and rags into the pit and pulled Jeremiah out. This time Jeremiah was put in the courtyard of the prison again, and stayed there until the capture of Jerusalem. Then he was set free by the Babylonians, and given the choice of going to Babylon or staying with the remnant in Judah. As far as we know, Jeremiah himself never had the use of the field that he had bought at Anathoth, because a group of Jews who were left in the county forced Jeremiah to go to Egypt with them, and he probably died there.

Believers today too are often distressed when they are often confronted by gross unbelief in God's Word and by great wickedness in their society. The prophet Jeremiah could not understand how God's threat to destroy Judah and its chief city Jerusalem and to have its people carried away as captives to Babylon could be reconciled with His

command to buy the land at Anathoth. Could he make sense of the strange thing that God was asking him to do? Although prophets spoke as God's spokesmen, that did not necessarily mean that they always understood the significance of what they had to do and speak. The leaders of the nation should have been upholding God and His Word before the common people, but they were leaders in opposition to God. Jeremiah did what believers of all ages should do when they cannot understand God's ways. He turned to God in prayer. The book of Lamentations is an example of a man in deep distress and perplexity turning to God in prayer. Jeremiah 32:16-44 shows Jeremiah at prayer on this occasion. He began by affirming that nothing is too hard for God and praised God for His power in creation (v.17). He bowed before God's just judgment (v.18-19). Where believers are baffled, God's eyes remain open. Jeremiah remembered God's merciful acts in the past, in saving Israel from Egypt and giving them the land of Canaan (v. 20-22). He acknowledged God's justice in punishing sins of wickedness and unbelief (v. 23).

God still shows His faithful love to thousands (v. 18). Believers today should also pray with hope and confidence. God answered Jeremiah with a promise: "Look! I shall gather them from all the countries to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath, and in great fury. I shall bring them back to this place, and I shall cause them to live in security. They will be My people, and I shall be their God. I shall give them one heart and one path, that they may fear Me for ever, for their own welfare and for the welfare of their children after them. I shall make an everlasting covenant with them, that I shall not turn away from doing good to them. I shall put the fear of Me in their hearts, that they may not turn away from Me. I shall rejoice in doing good to them. I shall faithfully plant them in this land, with all My heart and all My soul" (32:37-41). After the land had been a desolate waste, people would buy fields, sign deeds, and seal and witness them again (v. 42-44).