

We'll now turn to the book of Jeremiah, which is the part of scripture we're studying on these Sunday mornings. It may seem something of a slow pilgrimage to some of you. We've been going at it since last October. This morning we want to read are into the ***NARRATIVE*** section of Jeremiah, which describes things that ***HAPPENED*** to him, rather than things he ***SAID***.

***ZEDEKIAH*** *the son of Josiah, whom Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, reigned instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim. But neither* ***HE*** *nor his* ***SERVANTS*** *nor the* ***PEOPLE*** *of the land listened to the words of the Lord which he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.*

*King Zedekiah sent Jehucal the son of Shelemiah, and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Ma-aseiah, to Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “Pray for us to the Lord our God.” Now Jeremiah was still going in and out among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison. The army of Pharaoh had come out of Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news of them, they* ***WITHDREW*** *from Jerusalem.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet: “Thus says the Lord, God of Israel: Thus, shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to me to inquire of me, ‘Behold, Pharaoh’s army which came to help you is about to return to Egypt, to its own land. And the Chaldeans shall* ***COME BACK*** *and fight against this city; they shall take it and* ***BURN IT*** *with fire.’ Thus says the Lord, ‘Do not deceive yourselves, saying, “The Chaldeans will surely stay away from us,” for they will not stay away. For even if you should defeat the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you and there remained of them only wounded men---every man in his tent---they would rise up and burn this city with fire.’”*

*Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh’s army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people. When he was at the Benjamin Gate, a sentry there named Irijah the son of Shelemiah, son of Hananiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “You are* ***DESERTING*** *to the Chaldeans.” And Jeremiah said, “It is false; I am not deserting to the Chaldeans.” But Irijah would not listen to him, and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the princes. And the princes were enraged at Jeremiah, and they* ***BEAT*** *him and* ***IMPRISONED*** *him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, for it had been made a prison.*

*When Jeremiah had come to the dungeon cells, and remained there many days, King Zedekiah* ***SENT FOR HIM****, and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house, and said, “Is there any word from the Lord?” Jeremiah said, “There is.” Then he said, “You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, “What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison? Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, ‘The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land?’ Now hear, I pray you, O my lord the king: let my humble plea come before you, and do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary, lest I die there.” So, King Zedekiah gave orders, and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard; and a loaf of bread was given him daily from the bakers’ street, until all the bread of the city was gone. So, Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.*

*Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, He who* ***STAYS IN THIS CITY*** *shall die by the* ***SWORD****, by* ***FAMINE****, and by* ***PESTILENCE****; but he who* ***GOES OUT*** *to the Chaldeans shall* ***LIVE****; he shall have his life as a prize of war, and live. Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be* ***TAKEN****.” Then the princes said to the king, “Let this man be* ***PUT TO DEATH****, for he is* ***WEAKENING*** *the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm.” King Zedekiah said, “Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you.” So, they took Jeremiah and cast him into the* ***CISTERN*** *of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only* ***MIRE****, and Jeremiah sank in the mire.*

*When* ***EBED-MELECH*** *the Ethiopian, a eunuch, who was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern—the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate— Ebed-melech went from the king’s house and said to the king, “My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern; and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.” Then the king commanded E′bed-melech, the Ethiopian, “Take three men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.” So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by* ***ROPES****. Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, “Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.” Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and* ***LIFTED HIM OUT OF THE CISTERN****. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.*

*King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me.” Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I tell you, will you not be sure to put me to death? And if I give you counsel,* ***YOU WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME****.” Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, “As the Lord lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life.”*

*Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will* ***SURRENDER*** *to the princes of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be* ***SPARED****, and this city shall NOT be burned with fire, and you and your house shall LIVE. But if you do not surrender to the princes of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall* ***BURN IT WITH FIRE****, and you shall not escape from their hand.” King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they abuse me.” Jeremiah said, “You shall not be given to them.* ***OBEY*** *now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and* ***IT SHALL BE WELL WITH YOU*** *and your life shall be spared. But if you refuse to surrender, this is the* ***VISION*** *which the Lord has shown to me: Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the princes of the king of Babylon and were saying,*

*‘Your trusted friends have* ***DECEIVED*** *you  
    and* ***PEVAILED*** *against you.  
Now that your feet are sunk in the mire,  
    they turn away from you.’*

*All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon; and this city shall be* ***BURNED WITH FIRE****.”*

*Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words and you shall not die. If the princes hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,’ then you shall say to them, ‘I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’” Then all the princes came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So, they left off speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.*

Hymn Number 56.

*High in the heavens, eternal God,*

*Thy goodness in full glory shines,*

*Thy truth shall break through every cloud,*

*That veils and darkens thy designs.*

***SINGING*** (3 minutes)

***Fascination About the Bible: 1) How it Was Written***

It's fascinating to study the Bible. There are ***TWO*** fascinations about it. There is on the one hand the fascination of ***HOW IT CAME TO BE WRITTEN***, and then there's the fascination of ***READING IT***. The fascination of ***HOW IT CAME TO BE WRITTEN*** is a story in itself. Nobody knew they were writing the Bible. It was written, as I've mentioned, by ***FORTY DIFFERENT PEOPLE*** over at least 1400 years in at least three different languages. And not one of them realized he was writing the Bible ... a shepherd strumming on his guitar, a king writing a passionate love poem, a man whose hobby is collecting folk sayings, an ex-rabbi who loved writing letters. And all these people were putting together the Bible; and here we have this incredible collection. Now, last Sunday morning we were seeing ***HOW*** the book of Jeremiah came to be written---how after 21 years of speaking the word of the Lord, Jeremiah realized that the end was coming and was very near. And he wondered how his word was going to go on being felt and heard. And he remembered that solicitor's Clerk who'd settled the purchase of a field for him back in his home village. And he went to that Clark, Baruch. And he said, *"Would you* ***WRITE DOWN*** *for me everything I've said over 21 years."* And the Holy Spirit brought it back to his remembrance.

Now a member of the congregation has been doing a bit of homework for me since then, and gave us some interesting things to show you today. So, let's show you these straight away. ***FIRST*** of all, Baruch wrote with a pen and ink. And this is a ***REED PEN***. You can just see it's almost like bamboo, and it's just been carved with a pen knife. And that's how they made their pen. This one is simply split once (as a modern nib is); but in fact, in ***BARUCH'S*** day it was split many times and formed a little brush. And he would use the little brush end to write. And here's a pen case and an ink well, such as a scribe would use even today in the Middle East. This one is actually about a hundred years old and comes from Egypt. And you can see that the pen pops in there, and the ink is there. And you will see a professional letter writer (or scribe) in the streets with this. This one has Arabic on it and the word *'Muhammad'* somewhere on it. So, certainly it doesn't come from the Bible days. But you've got the idea.

And then the member of the congregation (who is in fact Norman Prescott) also gave me a ***SCROLL*** to show you what kind of a thing Baruch wrote on. So, let's have a look at that. This in fact is a scroll of Esther and is read on one of the Jewish festivals. And you can see how made up of parchment---made up of the skins and stuck together---the writing is on columns. And so, as each column was read, King Zedekiah took his pen knife and slit that column off and burned it on the winter fire in his palace.

Does that give you the ***feel*** of it? And so, our Bible came to be ***WRITTEN***. And when Baruch had finished writing down all Jeremiah's prophecies ... and again I've been corrected. I said it would probably take him days, but in fact somebody's worked out that it could be between five and six hours, provided they kept at it. I hardly think either that Jeremiah could cope with that... or Baruch. But at any rate, probably about ***EIGHT HOURS*** solid work was put into that. And chapters 1 to 25---or some scholars say 1 to 35--- got written down at that time.

And then Baruch had to be ***DEALT WITH*** by the Lord (I'm just recapping from last week for those of you who were not here). And there's a word in chapter 45 from the Lord to Baruch to deal with ***TWO THINGS***. ***FIRST*** of all, his ***AFFLICTION***, which was that having written it all out once, it was burned, and he had to start all over again. And he was fed up with writing out the prophecies. And then God had to deal not only with his affliction. And God dealt with it so beautifully, remember, by saying, "Baruch, I have to deal with discouragement. I have to start all over again. I planted Israel, and now I'm having to pluck Israel up. I built Israel up. Now, I'm having to break them down. Do you not think I feel like that sometimes? So, Baruch, let’s have less complaining." And then the word of the Lord came to Baruch on another (***SECOND***) issue, the issue of ***AMBITION***. *"Seek great things for yourself, do you? Seek them Not. It is a sufficient blessing in these days simply to be alive."*

And so, God dealt with these two problems in Baruch's life. And he must have ***ACCEPTED*** this. ***FIRST***, because he wrote it down for us---and if he hadn't accepted that word, he'd never have written it. But ***SECOND***, I know that he dealt with this matter of ambition, because he began to do something else. Having finished writing out the prophecies, he now began to keep a ***DIARY*** so that he could complete the story of Jeremiah. And it's interesting that at this point where Baruch enters the picture, Jeremiah is mentioned from now on in the ***THIRD PERSON*** singular and not in the first person. No longer are the words *"I",* but the word is now "***HE***."

And so, Baruch set himself to do for Jeremiah what later Boswell did for Dr. Johnson, and was content to be in the background keeping a diary---as later Dr. Luke was content to keep a diary about Paul's missionary journeys. Thank God for those in the Bible days who kept diaries about other people----and that's how we got so much of our Bible -- who were content not to have great experiences themselves, but were ***CONTENT*** to write down the experiences others had of God. And so, we can share them.

***Fascination About the Bible: 2) Reading it***

Well now, that's the fascination of the writing of the Bible. But for us personally, there's even more fascination in ***READING THE BIBLE***. And I think the fascination in reading this book ... I ***NEVER*** get tired of it. I hope you don't.

***Insight into God's Nature***

The fascination for me is ***TWOFOLD***. 1) On the one hand, this book tells me more about the ***DIVINE NATURE*** than any other book. If I want to know what God is really like, or---I hope it isn't an irreverent phrase---what makes God tick? How does he really react to things? How does he really feel? Most people believe there is a God, but that's not an important question. The ***IMPORTANT QUESTION*** is: if there is a God, ***WHAT IS HE LIKE***? Does he like me, or does he not? Does he love me, or does he hate me. Or doesn't he care anything about me? I must know what God is like. And the more I read this book, the more I get into his heart; the more I understand how he reacts to me, to the world that he's made, to the things that happen in it. And therefore, the more I can begin to ***ANTICIPATE*** how he will act, what he will do, how things will turn out. And I find ***SECURITY*** in finding out more and more about God and understanding him. That's one side of the fascination of reading this Bible.

***Insight into Human Nature***

But as I read these two chapters this morning, that was not the fascination of these two chapters. It was the other one. And that is, 2) that when you read this book, you discover more about ***HUMAN NATURE*** than from any other book. You discover more about yourself and about other people. No psychologist has ever been able to produce a book which helps people to understand themselves as well as this book. And all our modern insights into human behavior---whether as individuals, as groups, whether in psychology or sociology---all that is nothing compared with this book. This is the ***ONE BOOK*** that enables you to see yourself as you ***REALLY ARE***---to see human nature in the raw, to see real people behaving as I would behave in that situation. And, therefore, this book becomes not only a window through which we see ***GOD***, it becomes a mirror through which we catch a reflection of ***OURSELVES***. And you see ***BOTH*** at the same time. It's like walking past a shop window. You see what's behind the glass, and you see yourself in front of it. And as I read this book, I see the ***GOD*** who is behind everything. It opens a ***WINDOW*** in heaven, and I can see: "So, that's what you're like God." And then as I look, I see a reflection of ***SOMEONE ELSE***.... And the word becomes a ***MIRROR***! And this very book says that if you read the law of God, it's like looking into a mirror. And tragic is that man, *"Who looks into the mirror, sees what he's like, and then goes away and forgets what he has seen ---- for the mirror has been a waste of time!"*

***The Jews are a Mirror to Mankind***

Well now, this section we've just read (37 and 38) is a ***MIRROR*** to mankind. And I may have told you that I once asked an elderly Jew, "Why is it that the world has such strong reactions to your people? Why is it that antisemitism has been known for 4,000 years? Why is it that wherever you go, you are never finally accepted?" And he came out with this answer.... He said, "Well..." He said, "We Jews are only human --- only ***MORE*** so." And I said, "What do you mean by that?" "Well," he says, "If there are ***VIRTUES*** in human nature, we have them---only ***MORE*** so. If there are ***VICES*** in human nature, we have them---only ***MORE*** so. If there are ***TALENTS*** in human nature, we have them --- only ***MORE*** so."

Now, is that not true? You look at any profession: music, architecture, philosophy, science.... You'll find a ***JEW*** right at the top of it! And to go to that land and see the ***CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT*** in Israel, as they've gathered the talents from the four corners of the earth. You saw some paintings in this building last week by that Jewish impressionist artist, Eugen Spiro. And you saw a photograph of Albert Einstein, that great genius--- the genius who opened up the Atomic Age with that very simple formula **E = mc2**. So simple… and yet nobody had ever seen it before, until that Jewish scientist saw it.

And yet, if they have ***VICES***, they have them --- ***MORE*** so. There is ***GREED*** in human nature, and the Jew has that greed --- only ***MORE*** so. There is a desire in us to strike a hard bargain. It is a vice in us to 'get the better of someone else' in business. And the Jew has that --- only ***MORE*** so. And therefore, the Jew is a ***MIRROR*** to mankind. It's as if God took this people and held them up to us and said, "***THERE***! I have caricatured the rest of mankind in this nation. I have ***EXAGGERATED*** the ***VIRTUES*** and the ***VICES***. I have shown the heights of ***BLESSING*** to which you can rise, and the depths of ***CURSE*** to which you can sink. And I hold up this people as a ***MIRROR*** to mankind. ***THIS*** is what will happen to you when you ***OBEY*** God, and ***THIS*** is what will happen to you when you ***FORGET*** Him." And we do not like looking in the mirror. And to Hitler, the Jews were a ***MIRROR***. And he didn't like what he saw, so he hated them.

I think that was a profound explanation. And this book not only holds up ***GOD*** to you, so that you might measure yourself by his standards. This book holds up ***ONE NATION*** to you, that you might look in the ***MIRROR*** and see there the strengths and weaknesses of your nature ***CARICATURED*** (almost in a distorting mirror, that makes both look ***MORE*** than they are), so that you can see clearly the folly of ***DISOBEDIENCE*** and the blessing of ***OBEDIENCE***.

***Zedekiah (Man of the WORLD) versus Jeremiah (Man of the WORD)***

And so, as we read chapters 37 and 38, I'm not going to talk about God much. I'm going to look at the ***TWO MEN***, who have a strange love-hate relationship --- the two men whose natures reflect everybody in this building this morning. You are either nearer to ***ZEDEKIAH***, or nearer to ***JEREMIAH*** this morning. And in one, you will see ***ZEDEKIAH***, a man who is typical of a man of the ***WORLD***---even though he believed in God...even though he went to church...a man of the ***WORLD***. And in ***JEREMIAH*** you will see a man of the ***WORD***... a man of the Word. And what we are going to see is this: in Zedekiah, his ***FEARS*** overcame his ***FAITH*** --- and that put him on one side of the picture. And in Jeremiah, we're going to see a man whose ***FAITH*** overcame his ***FEARS*** --- and that put him on a totally different side of the picture. I want you to notice they ***BOTH*** had ***FAITH***, and they ***BOTH*** had ***FEAR***. But in one, his ***FEAR*** overcame his ***FAITH***. And in the other, his ***FAITH*** overcame his ***FEAR***. And that splits the human race right down the middle.

And that's the difference between the ***WORLD*** and the **CHURCH**. It's ***NOT*** the difference between those who don't believe in a God and those who do. It's ***NOT*** the difference between those who go to church, and those who don't. It is the difference between those whose ***FEARS*** overcome their ***FAITH***, and those whose ***FAITH*** overcomes their ***FEARS***. And so, we're looking in the ***MIRROR***, and we're seeing ***TWO*** people. And we are going to identify with one or the other this morning.

***Zedekiah: Fear Overcomes Faith***

Well now, we look first at ***ZEDEKIAH***. I've said a little about him in an earlier study. Let's just summarize. The last king of Judah...not fit to be a king really; indeed, he had no royal blood. He was just chosen as a puppet king. The Babylonians had already been, and taken Jerusalem once. They had taken away some 10 or 12,000 of the top people---all the aristocracy, even the skilled craftsmen---and they'd left the *'nobodies'*. And from those *'nobodies'* they chose a *'nobody'* to be a puppet...a kind of caretaker. And they (the Babylonians) called him *'King'* just to give him a little incentive to look after the rest for them. And this was Zedekiah: the last king of Judah; a weak irresolute man; a politician---a petty politician---who lived by ***EXPEDIENCY*** and not by principle. He was somewhat like an African president we have heard quite a bit of recently in a little landlocked land, thinking he could play off big power against big power; and in a sense he could have done. The only mistake he made was to choose the ***WRONG*** big power---which is a pretty big mistake! And Zedekiah, like many big men (and big fish in little ponds) ... a little power went to his head. And Zedekiah decided that he would get his independence, and that he would become the *'big man'*---the *'big daddy’*. And so, Zedekiah said, *"I'm going to appeal to Egypt,"* (which was the Western power*) "to come and get rid of this big Eastern power, Babylon."* Even though he owed his position to Babylon, he turned against them. President (Idi) Amin owed his military training to Israel, you know, and wears on his uniform the wings of an Israeli paratrooper. Well, Zedekiah turned against those who had put him there, given him his position. And he said, *"I'm going to back Egypt against Babylon."* And he got involved in political intrigue and he played off one against the other.

And it was this weak, irresolute politician---this petty puppet of Babylon---who is the one figure on the side of the mirror, that we're looking into this morning. The biggest gamble he took was to ask Egypt to come against Babylon. And Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (his name was Nepheribre) at the time...he ought to have known better. The silly fool went and did it. And he marched against the Chaldeans... or the Babylonians. They are Chaldeans from Babylon actually; but the names are interchangeable. And he marched against them. And the Babylonians were, by this time, besieging Jerusalem for the second time to bring Zedekiah to heel. And when they heard the Egyptian army was on the move, they left Jerusalem and went to meet them. And Zedekiah said, *"There, my politics has paid off... the siege is lifted; we're going to be free... we're going to be independent."* And Jeremiah said, *"Zedekiah, you're absolutely mistaken. The Chaldeans have just* ***WITHDRAWN****, and they will deal with the Egyptians, and they'll be back within weeks, and this city will be* ***BURNED****."* And Jeremiah is absolutely right.

Now let's look at Zedekiah in this situation, for what we've read takes place during that ***INTERVAL*** while the siege was lifted and the Babylonians were away. Sorry about all this history, but I want you to get the feel of the situation. I think that's all I need tell you. So, in the middle of this siege being lifted, Zedekiah and Jeremiah had quite a few chats, and it is in these conversations that we see the men as they ***REALLY ARE***.

***Zedekiah: A Worldly Man***

Now let's take ***ZEDEKIAH*** first. We won't go through the conversations. I just look at each man and his side of the conversation. Look at Zedekiah. There was no doubt that he had a faith that he believed in God, that he believed in the power of prayer. It may not have been a ***STRONG FAITH***, but after all, he was King of Judah and he believed in the true God of Israel. And here is a man whose faith is strong enough to go to Jeremiah and say, *"Will you* ***PRAY*** *for us? Will you* ***PRAY*** *that this siege being lifted will be permanent? Will you* ***PRAY*** *that they will not come back? Will you* ***PRAY*** *for us?"* And a man would not say that unless he had some faith. But isn't it fascinating? He believed in ***PRAYER*** but he didn't believe in ***PROPHECY***, and that shows how far his faith went... or rather how far it ***DIDN'T*** go. Putting it simply. He was perfectly willing to talk to God and to have others talk to God for him. He was not willing to ***LISTEN*** to God, and did not want God to talk to him. And that is the picture of a ***WORLDLY*** man.

Worldly people will pray. I've spoken to people in Guildford who never go near a church. The last person was a housewife. She said, "I pray every night. I know I don't go to church. I pray every night." I said, "You read your Bible?" "No." "How does God speak to ***YOU***?" That's the question. Look, it says in the almost the same verse, listen to this: *"Neither Zedekiah nor his servants nor the people of the land* ***LISTENED*** *to the words of the Lord which he spoke."* Then the next verse, *"Zedekiah sent to Jeremiah, 'Pray for us to the Lord our God.' "* Now that's the kind of one-way conversation that belongs to ***WORLDLY*** religion. It's the outlook that wants God to ***SERVE*** us but doesn't want God to ***SAVE*** us. It's the outlook that wants to get out of distress and disease, but doesn't want to get out of disobedience. It's the outlook that wants to be saved from ***SICKNESS*** but doesn't want to be saved from ***SIN***. It's the outlook that wants material prosperity from God but not moral reformation. And you can see it all there*..."Pray for me, but don't preach to me. Speak* ***TO*** *God, but don't speak* ***FROM*** *God. I'm not listening. I want to talk."* And it is the mark of a ***WORLDLY*** person---even if they believe in God and go to church---that they are praying for themselves and want others to pray for them, but ***LISTENING*** to what God has to say to them and ***DOING*** what God tells them is ***UNKNOWN*** to them.

Does Zedekiah reflect for you something pretty real, something terribly common? Because 65% of this country in the latest Gallup poll said they believe in God... and the majority of those claim that they prayed. But do they ***LISTEN*** to God? Are they interested in the Word of God---what he has to say to them? Not the slightest. Their Bible remains unopened on the bookshelf. The preachers remain unheard.

And Zedekiah had faith. But because it was only a one-way faith---a belief in prayer as a last desperate resort (i.e., *"Will* ***YOU*** *pray to God?”*) ... almost a faith that felt that somebody like Jeremiah's... his prayers would be ***MORE*** effective than Zedekiah's... a willingness to have somebody with a ***STRONGER FAITH*** pray for you. But that is not a strong enough faith to overcome your fears. And Zedekiah's ***FEARS*** were stronger than his ***FAITH*** because his faith was a one-way faith.

***Zedekiah's Fears***

Let's look then at his ***FEARS***. Can I put it this way? His fears were all horizontal. They were not vertical. I mean by that, that all his fears were fears of ***MAN***. He had no fear of ***GOD***, and that's why his fears overcame his faith. The fear of the ***LORD*** is the beginning of ***WISDOM***, and the fear of ***MAN*** is the beginning of ***FOLLY***. And it was the second fear that he had.

Now he had ***TWO FEARS***. The ***FIRST*** was a very understandable one. It was a fear of the ***BABYLONIANS***. In those days, when a nation was defeated, as a symbolic act of degradation its king was brutally mutilated and then executed. And Zedekiah knew that this is what would happen to him if the Babylonians came. He had rebelled. He was in a state of siege, and he knew that the day the Babylonians got inside the city---on that day---he would be tortured and put to death. That was his first big fear, and he had a right to have it.

But the funny thing is that he had ***ANOTHER FEAR*** which came out in one of these conversations. And this was a fear, not of the Babylonians, but of some ***JEWS*** of his own people. It was a fear of Jews who had taken Jeremiah's advice and deserted to the enemy. And it was a fear that if the Babylonians won, they would hand him over to the Jews who deserted and that they would abuse him and mock him and ridicule him and say, *"That's the king who landed us in all this trouble. That's the king who didn't know how to play politics. That's the king who caused the destruction of Jerusalem. Look at him. He thought he was the great clever politician. Look at him now."* And you know he was ***MORE AFRAID*** of the ridicule of his fellow countrymen than he was of the torture of his enemies. But in all his conversations, there is not one trace of ***FEAR OF GOD***.

Jeremiah said, *"If I tell you the truth, you won't listen. You won't do anything about it."* And he was absolutely right. Zedekiah did ***NOTHING***. Do you know there's an intriguing little verse there. I wonder if you noticed it. Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, *"Now come on, tell me the truth. What's going to happen?"* And Jeremiah said this. He said, *"Look, if I tell you, how can I be sure you won't put me to death---because you won't like it one bit. And if I tell you, you* ***WON'T LISTEN*** *to me anyway."* And Zedekiah said, *"I promise you I won't put you to death."* Did you notice he didn't say, *"I promise you I'll* ***LISTEN***." Did you get that little omission? It's the things that are ***NOT*** said in scripture that are just as interesting as the things that ***ARE*** said. And Zedekiah said, *"I promise not to put you to death."* But if only he'd said, *"I promise to do what you tell me."* But he wouldn't. His ears were ***DEAF*** to God; and yet there was that ***FASCINATION***. He was like many people I've known. They're ***FASCINATED*** to hear the Word of the Lord. And yet they're going to do ***NOTHING*** about it. They're ***FASCINATED*** to hear about the future. They're ***FASCINATED*** to hear a preacher unveil what's going to happen, but they're going to do ***NOTHING*** about it. They may promise not to do anything antagonistic, but they won't promise to listen and obey. And yet they're ***FASCINATED***---as everybody is fascinated with the future. That's why horoscopes are so popular.

Well now, this was Zedekiah's position. A man who believed in God and who went to church, but a ***WORLDLY*** man whose faith was a one-way faith and whose ***FEAR OF MAN*** was greater than his ***FEAR OF GOD***. And therefore, the man finished, as you know, taken ***CAPTIVE***. He had his eyes gouged out. He did have his ***LIFE***, but he remained a ***BLINDED MAN*** who had to be led around by the hand for the rest of his life. Oh, it's a wonderful liberation when you can say with that writer in the New Testament (quoting the Old Testament), *"I will not fear what* ***MAN*** *can do to me."* In fact, I was brought up on a little saying. My father kept saying it. He kept saying: "If you fear ***GOD***, you will fear no one else... If you fear God, you'll fear no one else." It's the horizontal ***FEARS OF MAN*** that overcome what faith we have---***FEAR*** of what the neighbors will think, ***FEAR*** of what my friends will think, ***FEAR*** of what my social set will think, ***FEAR*** if I go all the way with God, ***FEAR*** of the way He might lead me, ***FEAR*** that I might suffer, ***FEAR*** that I might lose my friends, ***FEAR*** of all kinds of things. And it's all ***HORIZONTAL FEAR***. And if you are governed by horizontal fear, then your faith will not be strong enough to see you through... and the end is ***DISASTER***, even if you believe in God, even if you go to church.

***Jeremiah's Fears***

But now let's turn over from Zedekiah to ***JEREMIAH***. Now, Jeremiah was not very good for public morale. A remarkable parallel is John Knox. Are there any Scots here? Let's see the Scots, where are you? Not so many. Well now, do you remember the occasion when John Knox was in St. Andrews in Scotland and the French were besieging that town? Have you read all that up? Do you know his words are almost ***IDENTICAL*** with Jeremiah's here? John Knox said, "The only possible course to save your lives is to surrender to the French. You will be taken into exile into France." And indeed, John Knox himself was, as you know. He said, "You'll be taken into exile, but you'll save your lives. And it's no use calling on England to come and save us. England will not come and will not be able to save us. And why?" said John Knox? "Because the lives of the citizens of St. Andrews are ***CORRUPT***." Now it's intriguing. He was almost ***REPEATING*** Jeremiah word for word. It was a parallel situation. And John Knox was as unpopular with the leaders of St. Andrews in Scotland as Jeremiah was unpopular with Zedekiah and the princes. It's bad for public morale when you're fighting for your lives---backs to the wall.

What the Jew responds to, and what every human being with any guts responds to, is the call of ***MASADA***. "We will go down dying. We'll fight to the last ditch if it means the death of all of us." That stirs the ***HEROISM*** in us all. But a Jeremiah going around saying, *"If I was you, I'd get out."* He literally was saying that! When the king wouldn't listen to his advice, he went around to individuals in the streets and he said, *"If you want to save yourself, desert to the enemy; get out, go to the Babylonians and you'll live."* And it was these ***DESERTING JEWS*** that Zedekiah was so afraid of. But many took Jeremiah's advice. And so, he was regarded as a ***TRAITOR***.

You imagine if during the war a preacher had gone round every town in England saying, "Give in to the Germans, give in to the Germans." Do you think he'd have been left alone to do that indefinitely---a nation under threat, determined to fight on the beaches? Do you think that that's gonna be a ***POPULAR MESSAGE***? No. And Jeremiah was lowering public morale. But I must say this for Jeremiah: he did not desert himself. He could have gone; but he was going ***STAY***. And until the very last he was going to tell people, *"Get out, get out, desert."* And so, we can say Jeremiah was no coward---he was gonna ***STAY*** to the bitter end. And ***STAY*** he did. In fact, he was in ***PRISON*** for the last year or so of the siege, as we shall see in a moment.

Now the Bible is an ***HONEST*** book; hallelujah for that. And it portrays Jeremiah here with ***FEARS***...with fears. It doesn't say Jeremiah was a great hero---was afraid of nothing and no one. It doesn't say that. And indeed, one of the marks of ***INSPIRATION*** is that an account of heroes will be ***TRUTHFUL***. When imprisonment happened to Jeremiah; and he didn't like it. Indeed, he was ***AFRAID*** of it. It got him down... got on top of him. And I'm so glad the Bible tells us that when he got the chance to ***PLEAD*** with Zedekiah---he ***PLEADED*** with him...he went on his knees and he said, *"Please, please don't send me back to that."* And Zedekiah put him back in the ***COURT*** of the guard under surveillance. I'm glad that Jeremiah is revealed as a man who hated every minute---who couldn't cope with it and has said, *"Please get me out."*

But there was ***ANOTHER FEAR*** that Jeremiah had even deeper... and it led Jeremiah to tell a ***LIE***. It was the fear of a ***VIOLENT DEATH***. And it came out when he'd been in the ***DUNGEON***, then back to the ***COURT*** of the guard, then they put him in the ***CISTERN***. It was the ***POWERFUL PRINCES*** who'd now got on top of Zedekiah. And they came to Zedekiah and said, *"This man must be put to death. He must be put out of the way altogether."* And Zedekiah, like the weak king he was, says, *"Well, I can't stand up against you. He's in your hands."* And so, they threw him into that slimy ***CISTERN*** to die. And it was an Ethiopian eunuch who took pity and pulled him out with the ropes under his armpits. Fancy that; not even a Jew at all. Jeremiah was put into dungeon, into the court of the guard, into the cistern by his ***FELLOW JEWS***. He was brought out of them by an Ethiopian eunuch. Truth is stranger than fiction. But Jeremiah was afraid of being put into that cistern, because he knew that sooner or later he would get so tired he'd slip down into that slime and ***SUFFOCATE***. And it led him to tell a ***LIE***. And Zedekiah, after one of those secret interviews when Zedekiah again asked him, *"Have you any word of the Lord?"* And Jeremiah told him the truth yet again. Jeremiah said, *"I can't face that cistern again."* And Zedekiah said, *"I'll tell you what then, don't you dare to mention what we've talked about. They will ask you what we've been talking about when they find out you've been. Tell them that you just came to plead with me to get out of the cistern. Don't tell them what you've said."* And it says in the Bible in the end of chapter 38 that they did ask Jeremiah, *"What did you talk about?"* And Jeremiah said, *"Well I only asked him if I could be out of the cistern."* Now there are many people who feel uncomfortable at this point, and they say, "Oh dear, I'm sure there must be some explanation as to why Jeremiah said that. I'm sure it was love for Zedekiah, to protect Zedekiah's life". Nothing that... we can't get round it. The simple fact is that Jeremiah, to save his skin, told a ***LIE***. And I want you to notice ***TWO THINGS***. 1) God didn't tell him to tell that lie. So, we are not being encouraged to do the same. It is not being told to us as an example. And I want you to notice that 2) God didn't reprove him for telling the lie. God is a very understanding God and He knows when someone's really being pushed to their limits. And God didn't rebuke him. Doesn't say it's right. This part is put into us, neither to say that telling lies to save your skin is right nor wrong. It is put there to tell you that Jeremiah was a ***REAL MAN***---a man of like passions to ourselves; a man who couldn't take it, and a man who, therefore, entered into complicity with the king and ***LIED***.

***How Jeremiah Overcame His Fears***

I mentioned that to show you that there were ***REAL FEARS*** in Jeremiah's life. Real fears. He was afraid of the ***DUNGEON***, he was afraid of ***DEATH***. But Jeremiah stands as a man of the ***WORD***---not because he didn't have fears, not because those fears didn't lead him to do things that were wrong---but because faith in God was ***STRONGER*** than the fears. Because his faith was the kind of faith that ***LISTENED*** to the Word of God... that spoke what God had to say, that didn't bring a lot of prayer requests to get outta trouble, but said *"God is going to bring trouble,"...* the kind of faith that stood in the council of the Most High and ***LISTENED*** to what God had to say and then ***TOLD IT*** the way it was... the kind of faith that was built on ***TRUTH***, and not on illusion... the kind of faith that said, *"God, what are You going to do? What do you say about this?"* And then, the kind of faith that faced facts and faced reality---however ***UNPLEASANT*** it was to face it and to share it. And that's the kind of faith that will ultimately triumph over the fear and produce a man of the ***WORD***---the man of God. It's the difference between hell and heaven. The man whose ***FEARS*** overcome his ***FAITH*** is the man heading for ***HELL***. The man whose ***FAITH*** overcomes his ***FEARS*** is the man heading for ***HEAVEN***.

A man once said this to me (I forget the circumstances. I think it was, we'd been discussing a particularly brave act that had been mentioned in the newspapers, something like that---maybe even during the war.) ... But this man said to me, he said, "You know, some people never feel fear. They'll go over the top at the drop of a hat. They'll... they'll go out into the middle of machine gun bullets and they... they just don't feel fear." But he said, "I don't think such men are brave." He said...yes, I recall it now... he was an ex-officer who was in the war. He said, "I know," he said, "the men who had courage were the men who were ***MOST AFRAID*** and who went over the top in spite of their fear." Do you understand that? So, the men of God are not those who ***DON'T*** have fears. They're the men who are ***AFRAID*** but whose ***FAITH*** is on top of it. And that's Jeremiah. His faith was in God, who said, *"This city will be burned."* And so, his faith stood ***FIRM*** as disaster came nearer. It's the faith built on the ***ILLUSION*** that everything will turn out all right---***THAT*** faith will ***CRASH***. Everything will not turn out all right, this world is not gonna get better and better. It will get worse and worse, according to the Bible. Says Jesus, *"There will be earthquakes and famine on an increasing scale, and nation will rise against nation and there shall be wars and rumors of wars before the end comes."* Now a real faith that ***LISTENS TO GOD*** will not be shaken when these things happen---when China suffers a big earthquake, when famine spreads through the lands. A real faith based on ***LISTENING TO GOD*** will not be shaken; but a faith that is simply, "Pray for us that we may not have any troubles,"--- that faith will ***GO***, and the ***FEAR*** will take over.

And so, Jeremiah ***BELIEVED*** that Jerusalem would fall. He ***BELIEVED THE WORST***; and therefore, he was able to see beyond that and to see the ***HOPE FOR THE FUTURE*** and to see the best beyond... because he was realistic. I'll tell you a little secret, I'm starting to write a book on Jeremiah because I believe it to be so urgent to get this message of this prophet out today as soon as possible. And I've got the title for the book, *'Darkest Before Dawn'*. You like it? *'Darkest Before Dawn'*... and that sums up Jeremiah! ***'DARKEST'***---he faced the darkest facts: *“Jerusalem will be burned, and you'll all be taken away.”* But beyond, he could see that God would not give up, and the ***DAWN*** would come.

The other side to his faith was not just that ***JERUSALEM*** would be ***VANDALIZED***, but that ***JEHOVAH*** would be ***VINDICATED***. And this was the ground of all his ***POLITICAL JUDGMENTS***. I've made some political statements from this pulpit over the last year. Some of you have questioned them, and I don't claim to be infallible. We are free from believing in infallibility... except in Jesus. But some have objected: "What have ***YOU***, what right have ***YOU***, what authority have ***YOU***, what knowledge have ***YOU***... to make political pronouncements. The CBI says things are picking up again what right have ***YOU*** to say they will ***NOT*** pick up. ***YOU*** don't know about finance; ***YOU*** don't know about business. What right have ***YOU*** to say that Britain is on the brink of ruin. People are not as pessimistic as that, who are really right in things." Well, I tell you: the same ground as Jeremiah, which is not based on ***POLITICAL*** knowledge or acumen, it is not based on ***FINANCIAL*** genius. It is based on one simple ***FACT***: that ***GOD IS GOD***!! And the kind of God he is means that a nation that turns ***AWAY*** from God is ***FINISHED***. It is a faith that history is *'his story'*. It is a faith that, in the last analysis, government is in the hands of ***GOD***. And I was intrigued to listen to Alistair Cook---just 10 days ago---say that all the marks of the decline and fall of the Roman empire are to be seen in Western British/American civilization today. Alistair Cook is saying that from his ***OBSERVATION***. But I say it, not from observation, I say it because ***GOD IS GOD,*** and he will be ***VINDICATED***. And if God is ***JUST***, then, *"Without a vision, the people perish."* If, *"****RIGHTEOUSNESS*** *exalts a nation,"* then it's ***OPPOSITE*** degrades it. ***IF*** ***GOD IS GOD***---that was Jeremiah's faith... *"Let God be* ***TRUE*** *and every man a* ***LIAR***." But God is ***TRUE***, and that's what ***OVERCAME*** his fears.

It's time for me to close. I've drawn a ***CONTRAST***. Both believed in God; both went to church. But 1) one (Zedekiah)... ***HIS FAITH WAS WOBBLY***. He believed in prayer, but he didn't like preaching, and his fears of what ***MEN*** would do to him were ***STRONGER*** than his fear of God and what ***GOD*** would do to him. That's a man of the ***WORLD***. And 2) Jeremiah also had his fears, very real fears. He hated prison. He feared death---a violent death at the hands of men who hated him. But ***HIS FAITH WAS IN GOD***, who would vindicate his ***WORD***---a God who meant what he said.

Now my ***LAST WORD*** this morning is this: Could those two swap places, or is fate settling the issue? Must Zedekiah remain a Zedekiah and must Jeremiah remain a Jeremiah? Is our fate ***FIXED***, that certain men are ***LIKE THIS,*** and certain men are ***LIKE THAT***; that by temperament, by heredity, by environment, we can't help being a man of the ***WORLD*** or a man of the ***WORD***? People have said to me, "You only preach because your dad and your granddad were preachers?" Oh, if they only knew! My conscience is ***CAPTIVE*** to the word of God. We've ***GOT*** to preach. Is it that we're just ***BORN*** this way? Well as Shakespeare put it, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ***OURSELVES***." It's not ***FATE*** that determines your destiny. Therefore, don't bother to read your horoscope. It is ***FAITH*** that determines your destiny. And the most ***IMPORTANT WORD*** to me in chapter 37 and 38 is a word of only two letters. Do you know what it is? ***IF***... if. Jeremiah said, *"Zedekiah,* ***IF****... if even now...,"…* though they were in the last months of siege (although the siege had just been lifted temporarily), even though they were within months of the final disaster, Jeremiah said*, "****IF****, Zedekiah...****IF****...,"* it was the ***LAST*** conversation they were to have, *"****IF****... if you will* ***LISTEN*** *and* ***DO IT****, you will live, and your life will be spared and the city will not be burned. And God will see to it, because* ***GOD IS GOD****... if; but if... if you do not---you fear the ridicule of the men who've deserted--- I prophesy that you will be ridiculed by* ***WOMEN****."*

That to Zedekiah was quite an insult. Jeremiah said, *"The* ***WOMEN*** *will laugh at you and say, 'Look, his feet are in the mire. He's got us in this mess.' It's the* ***WOMEN*** *who'll taunt you as a totally inadequate ruler."* And what a lovely little touch. Jeremiah had just been pulled outta the cistern. He was *'mud up to here'*, and he was saying, *"They will say,* ***'YOUR*** *feet are in the mire,* ***YOU'RE*** *in the mess;' and it'll be the* ***WOMEN*** *that'll laugh at you."* And so, with a tremendous appeal to Zedekiah---that must have appealed to him, was afraid of ridicule---and Jeremiah's laying it on thick and saying, *"The* ***WOMEN*** *will ridicule you... never mind the men. And they'll laugh at you: 'Look at our leader. What a mess he's got himself into. He's in the mire now.' "* And Jeremiah is trying to get through to that man with the biggest, ***'IF’*** there is: *"****IF*** *you will* ***LISTEN*** *and* ***OBEY****, everything will be all right. But* ***IF*** *you do not, you remain... a Zedekiah."*

My ***LAST QUESTION*** is this. Jeremiah in chains standing before Zedekiah: who was the ***PRISONER***? Who was the ***PRISONER***? Well, Zedekiah was ***FREE*** ***THEN***, but he'd spend the ***REST OF HIS LIFE IN CAPTIVITY***. Jeremiah would be in ***CAPTIVITY*** for the rest of the days of Jerusalem, and then he'd be set free and would be ***FREE FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE***. And that's the difference. The ***MAN OF THE WORLD*** is free here. He will be in captivity for the rest of eternity. ***THE MAN OF THE WORD*** may be in captivity here, but he knows that in the next world he'll be free... he'll be free.

Let us pray. "Father, every one of us, if we're honest with you this morning, are a mixture of faith and fear. Each of us could make a list of the things we're afraid of. But Lord, you alone know which is having the upper hand. You alone know which is overcoming which. And Lord, we just pray for the faith that Jeremiah had, that we may be able to obey your command to us given so many hundreds of times: "Fear not... fear not." We know Lord, that perfect love casts out fear; and therefore, we know that if we're afraid of anything, we've not yet learned to love perfectly. We pray that as we've looked into the mirror this morning, when we leave this place, we may not forget what we've seen. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Going to ask Harold Wakeford to come to the pulpit now and just say a very brief word and lead us in prayer. Harold, as many of you will know, experienced imprisonment when he was a prisoner of war during World War II. But I've asked him to come and share---not because of that, though I think it's related. God has given him a great burden for those who are in prison for the sake of the word of God and for their faith in Jesus. There's a prayer meeting meets in his home to pray for people they will not meet until they get to glory, but who are in prison. So, Harold, just tell us a little of what's on your heart in a few moments and then lead us in prayer.

***Prayer (4 Minutes)***