

Who Knows?

by Ray C. Stedman

This past week the whole Free World rejoiced at the fact that the family of Alexander Solzhenitsyn was able to join him in Switzerland and escape the tyranny and persecution of the Soviets. Solzhenitsyn has become a hero of our day. The whole world has admired him for his stand alone against the power of a godless state, and the way he has exposed so courageously its hideous evil. It has been noteworthy to see how he has been hated and persecuted, and yet protected, for God's hand has been upon him and has kept him safe in the midst of grave and terrible dangers. He is in many ways a modern picture of what Jeremiah was back in the days of Judah -- this brave prophet, standing almost alone before a very godless government, enduring continual threat to his life, yet courageously speaking the message God had for him to give.

Today we come to Chapters 26-29 of this prophecy. These are not arranged chronologically. They gather up several experiences of the prophet over a period of about twelve years of his ministry, as the nation was gradually moving toward certain and ultimate disaster. They are assembled by the prophet in this order, I think, to show us the atmosphere of confusion, of uncertainty, and of conflict which inevitably prevails when a nation is falling apart. As we have seen, there are many parallels to our own time within this study of the prophet Jeremiah in the kingdom of Judah. In fact, the parallel to our time is very evident in Chapter 26, for here we have an account of the impeachment and trial of Jeremiah. That is how up-to-date this book is!

Verse 1 of Chapter 26 tells us that it was in the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, that this word came from the Lord. Jeremiah is looking back to the days when Jehoiakim first came to the throne. An incident occurred then which he had not recorded for us earlier, but which he now brings before us. God had sent him to this godless king, this weak and vain king, with another message of warning about the coming destruction that would await a nation which did not repent. Yet hidden in it is that heartbeat of God which longs to have a people delivered, to find for them a way of repentance. You see this in Verse 3. God gave this message to Jeremiah:

"It may be that they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the evil which I intend to do to them because of their evil doings." {Jer 26:3 RSV}

God does not delight in judgment. He longs that his hand may be lifted, that a people will turn and listen, will repent, so that he may sigh with relief (which, as we saw in an earlier message, is the meaning of the word "repent" as it applies to God), and will not have to come through with the harshness of judgment. But then he goes on in Verses 4-6:

"You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law which I have set before you, and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not heeded, then I will make this house like Shiloh [a city north of Jerusalem which by this time was barren and desolate], and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.'" {Jer 26:4-6 RSV}

These are not empty threats. God means what he says. He is sovereign in the affairs of men. He governs the relations of nations -- and he still does! One of the encouraging messages of this book to our day is to remind us again that God is in control of the nations. They will do what he tells them to do, they will go where he sends them to go, whether they like it or not. Nations are not independent, sovereign states, as we often term them. They are sovereign as far as men's affairs are concerned, but not under God. God is sovereign. His threats will be carried out exactly as he said. In the verses which follow, you have what we might call "the impeachment of Jeremiah."

The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the

people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant'?" And all the people gathered about Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. {Jer 26:7-9 RSV}

This is an official gathering, a trial being held. Jeremiah has been impeached by the people. And the religious authorities of the nation, the priests and the prophets, are behind this. They have laid a serious charge, a charge of treason, against the prophet. These people felt that because the temple was God's house, God would defend that temple no matter what happened within it. They had an idea which many have today -- that if something belongs to God, or he has said it is his, he will never let anything bad happen to it. They thought the temple was inviolate, and that the city was protected, because it was the city of God. They could look back over hundreds of years of history when God had indeed protected this city. So this idea had spread widely. Here was a people who were saying, "It can't happen here!" But Jeremiah said it would happen. So they laid against him a charge of blasphemy and treason against the temple of God and the city of God. The rest of the chapter, beginning at Verse 10, gives the account of his trial. It was to be held before the princes of Judah:

When the princes of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the Lord. {Jer 26:10 RSV}

This was the judgment chamber where this trial was to be held. Among these princes undoubtedly were Daniel and his three friends, Mishael, Hananiah, and Azariah, for these were all nobles of the house of Judah, and this episode occurred before they were led captive into Babylon. So there were some godly men among these princes.

Then the priests and the prophets said to the princes and to all the people, "This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears." {Jer 26:11 RSV}

This is, therefore, a very serious charge. Jeremiah is on trial for his life. In Verses 12-15 we have Jeremiah's defense, and it is a very interesting one:

Then Jeremiah spoke to all the princes and to all the people, saying, "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will repent of the evil which he has pronounced against you." {Jer 26:12-13 RSV}

Notice that there is not the slightest deviation on his part. This would have been the time, if he were so inclined, to have said to these people, "Now just a minute. I want to make one thing perfectly clear! I have indeed prophesied, but I didn't mean to have it taken as seriously as you are doing. I'm sure that if you'll let me off, I can intercede before God on your behalf, and perhaps he'll change his mind." But he does not say that. He does not alter his word one bit: "Amend your ways and your doings, and the Lord will repent of the evil which he has pronounced against you." This took courage! Then he speaks about himself:

"But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears." {Jer 26:14-15 RSV}

Jeremiah does what the people of God have been exhorted to do all through the Scriptures at times like this: leave it in God's hands. The battle is his. If you are charged unjustly with something you are not guilty of, do not try to defend yourself. The battle is God's. Leave it to him. He will work it out. Put yourself in the hands of God, and he will see you through. This is what Peter says about the Lord Jesus: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted in him who judges justly." This is what Jeremiah does. So often we are so concerned about defending ourselves, vindicating ourselves. We are so concerned lest somebody think something wrong about us. It is perfectly all right to explain things as far as possible. But when it is evident that nobody is willing to listen, then just put it in God's hands. He knows

what he is doing. In Verses 16 and following, we get the verdict of the trial:

Then the princes and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God." {Jer 26:16 RSV}

That was the official verdict of this trial. He was acquitted. God moved in the hearts of these princes. And I am sure that if Daniel and others like him were among them, they were taking the leadership to see that God's will was done.

Then certain of the elders stood up, in the way the Jews had, to confirm the sentence of the court by the actions of God in history. They reminded the court of two incidents -- one in the past, and one very recent -- which confirmed the action that was taken. One concerned Micah the prophet, whose book we have in our Scriptures. Micah had stood before King Hezekiah and had said words similar to those of Jeremiah, had predicted the judgment against Jerusalem and the land. And Hezekiah had repented, had turned from his evil, and God had spared that land, in line with his promise. So this confirmed the action they were taking with Jeremiah.

Then there was a more recent incident concerning a prophet named Uriah, a man about whom we know nothing else, who had stood before King Jehoiakim himself and had said similar words. (This indicates that Jeremiah was not alone in the land in those days. There were other voices. Habakkuk was also ministering in the land at this time.) The king was very angry and ordered Uriah to be put to death. Uriah fled to Egypt. The king pursued him, brought him back to Judah, and slew him. King Jehoiakim had refused to repent. So the word of the elders is, "We are about to bring great evil upon ourselves." Thus they confirmed the verdict of the court. So the last verse tells us the outcome:

But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death. {Jer 26:24 RSV}

This story is told us now, though it occurred several years earlier, in order that we might understand something of the opposition which was hardening against the prophet, and the confusing voices which were beginning to speak up in those days.

In the next chapter we leap over a period of about twelve years to the time of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar has already come up against Jerusalem when Zedekiah is put on the throne, and has made him a vassal-king, serving under his authority and power, and has taken Daniel captive to Babylon. But now a council of the nations surrounding Israel sent ambassadors to Jerusalem to plot a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. On this occasion God has another word for Jeremiah to give to the king, and it is accompanied with one of those vivid visual aids which God employs throughout this book to heighten the impression that the message makes:

In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus the Lord said to me: "Make yourself thongs and yoke-bars, and put them on your neck." {Jer 27:1-2 RSV}

This time Jeremiah had to go down to the carpenter shop and have made for himself large wooden yokes of the kind they used to have in the days of the Old West to yoke a team of oxen together. He wore this around his neck, evidently for months at a time. He also had others made and sent by the ambassadors back to these surrounding countries -- Tyre and Sidon and Edom and Moab, and all the other countries around Judah -- that they might wear them. For God was seeking to impress upon these nations a tremendous fact which he declared in a message accompanying these yokes, beginning with Verse 5:

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes [God has a time of judgment for the nations he uses to judge, as well]; then many

nations and great kings shall make him their slave. {Jer 27:5-7 RSV}

But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, says the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand.

This is one of the things which has given puzzle to many people in history past. Why does God raise up a godless people, a cruel and sometimes vicious people, and call them his servants, and give them authority and power which nobody can contravene, let them move out in depredation and violence against other people, sometimes godly people who are turning from their godliness and need to be caught up short? Why does God do this? History records that it happens again and again. God is doing it again in our own day. This is why we see the sudden, remarkable rise of godless communism in our day -- God's hand, to judge his own people, wherever they are -- and the Communists are allowed to rule and to reign and to do certain things, and God insists that his judgments be carried out this way. One of the great lessons we can learn from this book is that God is in control.

If you compare this with the book of Daniel you find that, in Chapter 2, Daniel tells of the great image which Nebuchadnezzar saw in a dream, of which he was the head of gold, and depicting all the nations that followed him in descending order of value, reaching clear down to the end times. It was at this time that this dream was occurring to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Daniel had been taken captive to Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar was given this dream indicating that he would be the head of all the nations of that day.

This is the beginning of what Daniel calls "the times of the Gentiles." Remember that Jesus said that the times of the Gentiles would not end until Jerusalem would be taken again by the Jews: "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," {Luke 21:24 RSV}. In June of 1967, Jerusalem, the old city, was recaptured by the Jews. For the first time in all the centuries since Nebuchadnezzar's day, the old city was back in the hands of the Jews, under the sovereign authority of the Jews. This marks, I believe, the last of the times of the Gentiles, the last of those strange periods of history God has marked out in which his people would be subjected to slavery under the nations around them, until God's purposes are fulfilled. This message is followed now by the prophet's personal admonition to these kings:

So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, "You shall not serve the king of Babylon." For it is a lie which they are prophesying to you, with the result that you will be removed far from your land, and I will drive you out, and you will perish. {Jer 27:9-10 RSV}

This is the key to this section. God is saying that in the days when a nation begins to disintegrate and lose its national coherence, false prophets will arise who will try to confuse people by conflicting words. And especially there will be the rise of the occult. Notice how these are related to the occult: "... your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers..." They will prophesy lying dreams and say that things are going to happen which do not happen. Some prophecies will come true, but some will not. These, he says, are lies. He reaffirms this to Zedekiah personally in Verses 12-15. In Verses 16 and following he reminds the priests and all the people:

"Thus says the Lord: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, 'Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon,' for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you. Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live." {Jer 27:16b-17a RSV}

Is that not amazing? Think of the courage it took for this man to stand up and say, when the nation was being threatened by enemies around, "Go out and surrender to the king of Babylon. Serve him, and you'll survive." No wonder they laid a charge of treason against him! And yet Jeremiah is uttering the word of God concerning the nation.

All this is significant because it indicates the tendency, in times of crisis, and in the time of a decline of a nation's power, for these false prophets to arise. Jesus said that in the last days there would arise false teachers

and prophets who would predict events which would not come to pass, which were untrue. And in this day we are beginning to see this kind of phenomenon occurring again.

In Chapter 28 we have a very clear picture of the power and effect of these false prophets. One of them is singled out for us. His name is Hananiah. In the first four verses of Chapter 28 this false prophet directly challenges Jeremiah:

In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." {Jer 28:1-4 RSV}

That was an optimistic message -- just what they all wanted to hear. Notice how this prophet speaks: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel..." -- the same formula Jeremiah himself uses. Can you imagine the confusion which must have spread among the people and among the rulers and prophets and priests when they heard both these prophets saying that they spoke by the power of God, both claiming that it was the Lord who had given him the message, and yet delivering two absolutely contradictory messages? Jeremiah was saying they would be there for seventy years; Hananiah now says they will be there for two. Which one is right? Who knows? Notice how Jeremiah replies:

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord make the words which you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. ["There's nothing I'd like better," says Jeremiah. "I wish it were true. I wish you were right. But..."] Yet hear now this word which I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet." {Jer 28:5-9 RSV}

He does what all the prophets have done. The only way you can ever tell that a man is from God, and does not represent some other voice, is that his prophesies must be 100% true! He is allowed no margin for error, no guesswork. If a prophet's predictions are ever erroneous, that man is marked as not a prophet of God. That is a very important precept to learn from this account. Jeremiah says, "We'll wait and see! Two years are not too long to wait. Let's just wait and see. You say it's going to happen in two years? All right; the man whose prophecy comes true is the true prophet of God." But notice the arrogance of this man Hananiah, Verses 10-11:

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke-bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, and broke them. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." {Jer 28:10-11a RSV}

Thus he emphasized the false message he had given by this dramatic action, took the wooden yoke from around Jeremiah's neck and broke it in two, and said, "That's what God is going to do to the yoke of Babylon." Well, what did Jeremiah do?

But Jeremiah the prophet went his way. {Jer 28:11b RSV}

It was not his problem, it was God's problem. It was up to God to defend his prophet and his prophecy. And if God did not do it -- well, then he had lost the battle. So Jeremiah just waits patiently and does not try to

combat the matter. How does it work out? I would like to skip some of this, but it is too interesting!
Verses 12-13:

Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke-bars from off the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Go, tell Hananiah, 'Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars, but I will make in their place bars of iron.'" {Jer 28:12-13 RSV}

"There is no escape. You cannot beat God. Do you think you can maneuver and manipulate things, work it all out, and evade what God has said? There is no way. You try it, and things just get worse." Have you ever tried that, and found this out? It just gets worse. "I will make bars of iron if you break the wooden ones."

"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke of servitude to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him, for I have given to him even the beasts of the field." [When God does that, no man can contravene.] And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. [Now he is much more bold, for he has a direct word from God.] Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" {Jer 28:14-16 RSV}

This was a prophecy you could check very quickly. "This very year you shall die!" Well, what happened?

In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died. {Jer 28:17 RSV}

God honored his prophet and sustained him in the midst of this test.

In Chapter 29, of which we will read only certain sections, there is a letter which Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon. The problem was as great in Babylon as it was in Judah. These four thousand or more captives who had gone to Babylon also were being troubled by false prophets, who like those in Judah were saying, "This captivity is not going to last very long. God is going to restore you. God will send you back to Judah." Jeremiah, hearing about this, writes them a letter, and this is the message he was given to deliver to them, beginning at Verse 4:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." {Jer 29:4-7 RSV}

"You are going to be there a long time," God told them. "Settle down; accept it. Make the best of the situation, enjoy yourself while you are there to the fullest degree that you can. For remember -- this is what I have chosen for you. It is the best way out. And while you are there, pray for Babylon, seek the welfare of Babylon."

Many of us may be in this same situation. Because of resistance to the will and Word of God in the past, we have been put in a situation we do not like very well. But we cannot change it. What does God say? "Accept it, work for the welfare of those around you. And wait for my time, for it will come." For he says in Verses 10-14,

"For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you," {Jer 29:10-14a RSV}

If you read the closing chapters of Daniel you will find that there came a time when Daniel, grown to be an old man, realized as he read these very words in the prophecy of Jeremiah that God had fulfilled the seventy years of captivity, that he had been a captive in Babylon for seventy years, and the time had come. Daniel obeyed this word and began to pray to God. God gave him the great vision which closes that book, a vision which carried him on down through our own day to the end of time and showed him what would happen. And then God began to move the people of Israel to return to the land of Judah, as he had promised.

The closing words of the chapter are specific prophecies against certain false prophets among the exiles in Babylon. Their names are Arab, Zedekiah, and Shemaiah. We do not have time to read them, but I do want to pick one sentence out of them. In Verse 23, God said,

"... because they have committed folly in Israel, they have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words which I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness [i.e., "the one who speaks"], says the Lord." {Jer 29:23 RSV}

This was a time of terrible uncertainty. People were torn -- "What shall I believe?" There were many conflicting voices, many rival factions. The supreme need of the hour was that someone might know the facts and declare them, and thus give the people an indication of the line of action to take. God says, "I am the one who knows. I know what is going on in the inner lives of these people, and I will make it known, I will bring it out." That is the voice you can trust.

God makes known his way and his will and the truth in three ways in the Scriptures. First, in past history. I would commend to you the reading of history. History records all the errors that we see around us today. And the solutions are also recorded. No new error is introduced into the world which has not already been answered.

Second, in current events. He is always bringing truth to life. That is why we as a nation are going through Watergate right now. For everything that the most powerful men of our nation thought they could keep hidden is being forced into the light. That is the way God works in the affairs of men.

And third, God makes the truth known through the direct revelation of his word, the truth as it is in Jesus, coming to the man of God who speaks it out before the people.

So in this day of confusion, of uncertainty, which voice will you listen to? The voices of the occult world around us? The false prophets who are telling visions which they claim to be coming from the voice of God? The secular voices which tell us that things are not the way the Bible says they are? Which voice will you listen to? Whom will you follow? What will be the guideline for your actions? Well, the message of Jeremiah is: "God rules in the affairs of men. And if you want to know how to behave now, listen to God, for he is the one who knows, and who makes known."

Perhaps in a silent moment of meditation God would say something to you about your need to rethink some area of your life, and adjust to his Word.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, we thank you that you are the One before whom we stand naked, unclothed, with nothing hidden, and that you will make known to us what goes on in our lives, and to those around us, as well. You are the one who exposes and brings to light. We pray that the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart may be acceptable in thy sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his name we pray, Amen.

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