



The Fiery Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

Text

Jeremiah 34:1-22

Topic

The Lord asks His besieged people to obey Him in the midst of the crisis

Title

"Let's Put Christ Back in Crisis"

Introduction

By some estimates on the Sunday following the 9-11 terror attacks roughly half of the adult population in the United States attended a religious service. The attendance dropped off starting just two months later in November. According to Barna Research, one year later religious activity was back to just about what it was before the attacks.

A professor of theology explained, "When things are going bad we want to turn to God and want to get right with Him and we want to attend church. When things level out we tend to forget the most important things and drift away."

The citizens who were huddled inside the walls of Jerusalem were in the midst of a crisis. The Babylonians were on the other side of those walls besieging them. The Jews had a rush of obedience towards God. It was, however, short-lived. When they thought the crisis had passed they picked back up right where they had left off disobeying God.

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I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1

There Is Delight In Obeying God In Your Crisis, and #2

There Is Danger In Disobeying God After Your Crisis.

#1 There Is Delight In Obeying God In Your Crisis

(v1-10)

While they were under siege the Jews were told by God through Jeremiah to release their slaves. They obeyed but soon after something happened that made them change their minds. Hearing that the Egyptian army was on the march, the Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem. Thinking the crisis was over, the Jews quickly reclaimed their slaves and returned to disobeying God.

Jeremiah 34:1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army, all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion, and all the people, fought against Jerusalem and all its cities, saying,
Jeremiah 34:2 "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

Jeremiah 34:3 And you shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be taken and delivered into his hand; your eyes shall see the eyes of the king of Babylon, he shall speak with you face to face, and you shall go to Babylon.' " "

The fall of Jerusalem, and the deportation and captivity of its citizens, was certain. Nothing could change it. When the Jews heard that Egypt was on the move, and when they saw that the Babylonians withdrew, they ought not to have thought the crisis was averted. It was merely postponed and prolonged.

Jeremiah 34:4 Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you: 'You shall not die by the sword.

Jeremiah 34:5 You shall die in peace; as in the ceremonies of your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so they shall burn incense for you and lament for you, saying, "Alas, lord!" For I have pronounced the word, says the LORD.' "

Zedekiah would have a rough go of it but, uncharacteristically, he would not be put to death by his conquerors. His exile and relatively peaceful death and memorial would serve as a sign that despite their being conquered by Babylon, God was overseeing all these things for their good and His glory.

Jeremiah 34:6 Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem,
Jeremiah 34:7 when the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.

All the other cities had fallen; only these three fortified cities remained. While the Jews may have held out hope they might outlast the Babylonians, Jeremiah was telling them otherwise.

Their physical defenses were inadequate and since they had refused to repent of their sins, their spiritual defender - God - had become their discipliner.

Jeremiah 34:8 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them:
Jeremiah 34:9 that every man should set free his male and female slave - a Hebrew man or woman - that no one should keep a Jewish brother in bondage.

There were different categories of slaves under Jewish law. Prisoners of war became slaves of the government (Numbers 31:25-47; Joshua 9:23). They were used in building projects and other more regular duties alongside other laborers (1Kings 9:21).

If you were a Hebrew slavery was something very different. You could sell yourself into slavery temporarily to pay off debts. The servitude was initiated by the slave and he was the one who received proceeds of the sale. He was also to be treated well and not like a slave, but as a hired worker or a temporary resident (Leviticus 25:35-43).

Hebrew slaves were to be released after six years of service (Deuteronomy 15:12). The slave had the option of remaining in his masters house; however, this must be completely voluntary. To ensure that the slave was not being coerced, he and his master would have to go before the judge prior to the slave becoming a lifetime servant (Exodus 21:5; Deuteronomy 15:16).

When released, the slave was provided with goods so that he wouldn't be poor (Deuteronomy 15:13-14).

It should also be noted that forced slavery was punishable by death (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7).

In light of the coming captivity in Babylon God through Jeremiah ordered all Hebrew slaves to be immediately released.

Jeremiah 34:10 Now when all the princes and all the people, who had entered into the covenant, heard that everyone should set free his male and female slaves, that no one should keep them in bondage anymore, they obeyed and let them go.

There it is. In their time of crisis they heard the Word of The Lord and immediately, seemingly wholeheartedly, obeyed.

We have a tendency to think of crisis-obedience as convenient. It's been said, "there are no atheists in foxholes." Men and women who are incarcerated often have jailhouse conversions that we are skeptical about.

While it is sadly true that crisis-obedience (or crisis-conversions) can be short-lived and false, that isn't always the case. We should encourage crisis-obedience.

For the most part we do encourage it. We see every crisis as an opportunity for God to be revealed to individuals who previously had no thoughts about God.

If you are in a foxhole, or incarcerated, or in some other crisis, you need The Lord. Who am I to withhold the Good News about Jesus just because your conversion might not be real? Or to assume that once the crisis is passed you will revert to disobeying God?

Bring God into the crisis; preach the Gospel. It's the power of God unto salvation at all times and a crisis might be the best time for it.

Listen carefully. Don't tell people God brought the crisis upon them so that He could save them. It portrays God as one of those crazed caregivers who create a medical emergency just so they can save the person and get all the glory. It's sick.

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God doesn't create crises to save people from. We live in a ruined, fallen world in which sin abounds and, therefore, crises abound. When the inevitable crisis comes God can make His presence known to those who are suffering through it. He can save them from what mankind's sin has wrought. He can save them from the ultimate crisis - death and Hell.

#2 There Is Danger In Disobeying God After Your Crisis

(v11-22)

At some point after the Jews released their slaves the Babylonian armies retreated. Do you think they might have thought it was on account of their obedience? That God was blessing their obedience?

Surprisingly, I think that they did; which is what makes their subsequent disobedience so illogical.

Sin makes you illogical. It makes you say and do stupid things that make no sense. Your life becomes full of contradictions.

Jeremiah 34:11 But afterward they changed their minds and made the male and female slaves return, whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection as male and female slaves.

Before I was a Christian I had a few negotiations with God. I was in a couple (at least) of real crises in which I promised to obey God if He would get me through them. When I emerged from the crises I thought I had outsmarted God and went right back to my old life - the one that put me in the crises to begin with.

In my years of pastoring I've seen crisis-Christians. Months or years - even decades - go by and you don't see them anywhere near the church. Then they return and you find out it's because they are in the midst of a crisis. They want to meet... To call... To be prayed for... To be visited... To get counsel. We do all of that; gladly, as unto The Lord.

When the crisis passes, they're gone again. Not necessarily into sin but certainly they are no help to the body of Christ.

The real tragedy is on them because they are not staying close to God. They are not learning about Him, growing in Him. He's just there if and when they need Him. They're like the relative who only comes around when he or she needs something.

Jeremiah 34:12 Therefore the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,

Jeremiah 34:13 "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying,

Jeremiah 34:14 "At the end of seven years let every man set free his Hebrew brother, who has been sold to him; and when he has served you six years, you shall let him go free from you." But your fathers did not obey Me nor incline their ear.

Jeremiah 34:15 Then you recently turned and did what was right in My sight - every man proclaiming liberty to his neighbor; and you made a covenant before Me in the house which is called by My name.

Jeremiah 34:16 Then you turned around and profaned My name, and every one of you brought back his male and female slaves, whom he had set at liberty, at their pleasure, and brought them back into subjection, to be your male and female slaves.'

For many decades, maybe even centuries, the Jews had failed to obey The Lord by freeing Hebrew slaves after their six years of service. God had been merciful, slow to anger - even though they were breaking His law in a particularly grievous way.

It's a little off our subject but I'd offer this as a devotional thought for you to consider. When we put burdens upon other believers or when we fail to encourage the work of grace in their lives we are treating them like slaves rather than freed men and women.

Jeremiah 34:17 "Therefore thus says the LORD: 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and every one to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim liberty to you,' says the LORD 'to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine! And I will deliver you to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth.

They would not let freed slaves have their liberty so God would give them the 'liberty' of being enslaved by their enemies. It was a 'liberty' because it resulted from their own free decision to disobey God. They freely chose slavery.

Anytime we sin we are freely choosing slavery. Jesus has conquered sin and we can choose to not sin. Sin binds and enslaves.

Jeremiah 34:18 And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it -

Jeremiah 34:19 the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf -

Jeremiah 34:20 I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

If you've ever bought a house you know there are tons of contracts to sign. It's super tedious.

But it beats the way they ratified contracts in Old Testament times. The parties agreeing to the terms of the covenant - in this case the Jews - would pass between the parts of a slaughtered calf. It signified that if they reneged they would become like that calf - slaughtered!

Jeremiah 34:21 And I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his princes into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their life, and into the hand of the king of Babylon's army which has gone back from you.

Jeremiah 34:22 Behold, I will command,' says the LORD, 'and cause them to return to this city. They will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.' "

The Babylonians had "gone back from" the Jews but would "return" to complete God's judgment.

Obedience would not stop the Jews from being conquered and deported and held captive for seventy years. But it would have lessened the severity of their punishment.

Disobedience brought upon them severe consequences - as it always does.

There is obviously danger in disobeying God after your crisis is ended.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, the crisis brought you face-to-face with your need for God. If you refuse to receive Him, and return to your old ways without Him, you don't know how much longer you have to live. You are in danger of death and Hell. It's a pretty big one as far as danger goes.

If you are a Christian, you don't want to be a crisis-Christian, do you? You certainly wouldn't want anyone to treat **you** that way - showing up on rare occasions with an emergency and asking for help and not a relationship. It's lame on a human level so how much lamer is it towards God.

Even solid believers, who give and who serve, can go through seasons where they draw back from The Lord and from His people. It's not healthy for you or for others in the body of Jesus Christ. We need each other - all the more as we see things deteriorating all around us.

The world we live in is in a constant state of crisis. All creation is groaning as it awaits its final and complete redemption by Jesus Christ *at* and then *after* His return.

People all around you - believers and nonbelievers - are in specific crises. They need you to represent God's love to them. You don't have the luxury of disobedience if you want to be used by God.

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And **you** are either in or will be in a crisis... And another... And another as you await The Lord. Disobedience will only make your crises heavier, sadder, and more lasting.

Obedience will delight your heart and mind with the knowledge you are in a love relationship with the living God Who is able to keep you and to present you faultless before the throne of His Father in Heaven.

It's always crisis season. Let's put Christ back in the crises of life - for our good and for His glory.