



The **Fiery** Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

Text

Jeremiah 39:1-18

Topic

Two men - Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech -
are singled-out by God for special treatment in Babylon

Title

"Two Men & a Babylon"

Introduction

See if you recognize this classic bit of movie dialog.

But that don't matter either, you know? 'Cause I was thinkin', it really don't matter if I lose this fight. It really don't matter if this guy opens my head, either. 'Cause all I wanna do is go the distance. Nobody's ever gone the distance with Creed, and if I can go that distance, you see, and that bell rings and I'm still standin', I'm gonna know for the first time in my life, see, that I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood.

Who won that first fight between Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed? Rocky Balboa lost that first fight to Apollo Creed - at least technically. But because he went the distance and was still standing he considered himself victorious. And so did we.

It's good to have a strange sense of what makes you victorious; you're gonna need it as a Christian. God's concept of victory can be very Rocky-esque.

Case in point. After a brutal thirty-month siege Jerusalem falls into the hands of the Babylonians. The princes of Babylon assemble in great pomp in the gates of the city. Jerusalem's Jewish governor, Zedekiah, is captured. His sons are executed in front of him and then his eyes are gouged out. The chief citizens are rounded up, shackled, and deported to Babylon.

In the aftermath of Israel's defeat and Babylon's seeming victory God said something strange; it's in the last verse of the chapter.

Jeremiah 39:18 For I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but your life shall be as a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me," says the LORD.' "

These words are addressed to Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian who had saved Jeremiah from the dungeon in chapter thirty-eight. The phrase that arrests our attention is, "your life shall be as a prize to you." It means that he wouldn't die at the hands of the invaders; but it means something more than that.

The ESV translates it, "you shall have your life as a prize of war." The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates it, "you will keep your life like the spoils of war."

I described the scene inside Jerusalem to you. Who would you say was the victor to whom belonged the spoils of war? Wouldn't you say it was the Babylonians?

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What about us? The world in which we find ourselves has been described over the centuries as a sort of Babylon. There is most definitely a spiritual warfare all around us in which the devil and his followers seem to be victorious while believers are suffering.

With Babylon all around us; with the devil currently crowned as the god of this world; we're going to be defeated if we'd rather be Apollo Creed than Rocky Balboa.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Victory Is Not In The Material Spoils Of The Kingdoms Of This World, but #2 Your Victory Is In The Spiritual Spoils In The Kingdom Of The Lord.

#1 Your Victory Is Not In
The Material Spoils Of The Kingdoms Of This World

(v1-10)

Ask yourself this question: In our chapter would you rather be Samgar-Nebo or Ebed-Melech?

You'd rather be Ebed-Melech, trusting and obeying The Lord and, in so doing, being declared the victor by God to whom go the spoils.

Jeremiah 39:1 In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem, and besieged it.

Jeremiah 39:2 In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, the city was penetrated.

Reckoning by the Jewish calendar this works out to a siege that lasted thirty-months. Famine, disease and pestilence had already taken their toll. The sword came over the wall and through the gates to take an even greater toll.

Jeremiah 39:3 Then all the princes of the king of Babylon came in and sat in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer, Samgar-Nebo, Sarsechim, Rabsaris, Nergal-Sarezer, Rabmag, with the rest of the princes of the king of Babylon.

Gates were the place in ancient cities where the leaders sat to govern. The princes of Babylon were declaring victory and doing it with pomp and pride.

Jeremiah 39:4 So it was, when Zedekiah the king of Judah and all the men of war saw them, that they fled and went out of the city by night, by way of the king's garden, by the gate between the two walls. And he went out by way of the plain.

Jeremiah 39:5 But the Chaldean army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And when they had captured him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, to Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced judgment on him.

Jeremiah 39:6 Then the king of Babylon killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes in Riblah; the king of Babylon also killed all the nobles of Judah.

Jeremiah 39:7 Moreover he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with bronze fetters to carry him off to Babylon.

To seal their victory kings would capture and humiliate the conquered monarch. The Babylonians left no doubt who had won and who had lost.

Jeremiah 39:8 And the Chaldeans burned the king's house and the houses of the people with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 39:9 Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive to Babylon the remnant of the people who remained in the city and those who defected to him, with the rest of the people who remained.

Line upon line in this narrative you see how complete was the victory of the Babylonians.

Jeremiah 39:10 But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left in the land of Judah the poor people, who had nothing, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.

How very Robin Hood of them - to give the poor land and such. It would endear those left behind to their conquerors.

In every way possible you see that Babylon was victorious over Judah. At least they were from a purely material point of view.

Spiritually speaking we know something else was going on. God had raised-up Babylon as a tool in order to discipline His unrepentant people. From that point of view this wasn't a victory for Nebuchadnezzar. His involvement was incidental to the deeper purposes of God.

We need always to bear in mind that God Who has begun a good work in us will continue to conform us into the image of His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Since we are in the world, currently ruled by the god of this world, we can expect Babylon to seem victorious yet all the while we know God is overruling for our good and His glory.

Think of it this way. There was one moment in time, in human history, that seemed to be the devil's greatest triumph - his moment of absolute victory over God. It was at the Cross when Jesus Christ was crucified.

From the beginning of human history he had tried to stop Jesus from coming by murdering. We're told that Cain "was of that wicked one" when he slew his brother Abel. Or how about Pharaoh's order to the midwives to kill all the Jewish baby boys? Then there was King Herod's massacre of the children after the Magi told him the King of the Jews was born.

With Jesus on the earth Satan turned his efforts towards murdering Him. Satan possessed Judas; he filled the Jewish leaders with hatred; he pressured Rome to cooperate, until the sinless Son of God was tortured and dying on the Cross. Psalm twenty-two indicates that demons were there, around the Cross, tormenting Jesus and claiming their victory.

One Roman centurion summed up the feeling when he said, "Truly this **was** the Son of God" - speaking of Jesus in the past tense as if all hope for humanity had been lost.

Was the Cross Satan's finest moment? Was it his great victory? Quite the opposite. It was there God resolved the problem of sin and separation from His creation once and for all. It was there that Jesus became the Savior of all men - especially those who believe. It was by being lifted-up on the Cross that He can draw all men to Himself offering salvation.

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Jesus went the distance on the Cross, saying, "It is finished!" He was victorious and we along with Him.

But it also puts us on notice that our victories against the devil, in everyday Babylon, will be similar in that we must take up the Cross, die to ourselves, trust and obey God. Victory is in going the distance - or we would say, in enduring to the end.

#2 Your Victory Is In The Spiritual Spoils In The Kingdom Of The Lord

(v11-18)

Let the Babylonian princes sit proudly in the gates as if they had won this victory. We turn our attention to those who received the true spoils of the Babylonian conquest - Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech.

Jeremiah 39:11 Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, saying,

Jeremiah 39:12 "Take him and look after him, and do him no harm; but do to him just as he says to you."

Jeremiah 39:13 So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard sent Nebushasban, Rabsaris, Nergal-Sharezer, Rabmag, and all the king of Babylon's chief officers;

Jeremiah 39:14 then they sent someone to take Jeremiah from the court of the prison, and committed him to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, that he should take him home. So he dwelt among the people.

We'll see in chapter forty that initially Jeremiah was shackled and carried off but, during processing, he was set free.

Jeremiah had been telling Jews to defect to Babylon and they would be spared. Nebuchadnezzar had heard of him through these defectors. We'd also factor-in God working upon Nebuchadnezzar's heart to show favor to Jeremiah.

If you've been through all or most of our studies thus far in Jeremiah you know that his entire life is a case study in what constitutes real victory, spiritual victory.

Put in almost anywhere, in just about any chapter, and it looks like Jeremiah is being defeated while his enemies are victorious. But you know in your heart, in your spirit, that victory - real victory - is in trusting and obeying God.

The problem lies in that it is easier to see Jeremiah's spiritual victory than it is to see our own. For one thing, we see the end of his life and ministry. We see, for example, him finally vindicated as Jerusalem falls into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar just as Jeremiah had prophesied for decades.

Our own lives are far more challenging in that we are asked to trust that God will bring us to a glorious end. Put in at any point along the way, in a chapter of our lives as it were, and we can seem defeated by the world - humiliated, persecuted, imprisoned, even killed.

We must therefore always remember what victory - real victory - looks like. It looks like the Cross; it looks like dying to self and obeying God.

Jeremiah 39:15 Meanwhile the word of the LORD had come to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the prison, saying, Jeremiah 39:16 "Go and speak to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Behold, I will bring My words upon this city for adversity and not for good, and they shall be performed in that day before you.

Jeremiah 39:17 But I will deliver you in that day," says the LORD, "and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid.

Jeremiah 39:18 For I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but your life shall be as a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me," says the LORD.' "

We met Ebed-Melech when Jeremiah was thrown into a dungeon and left to die. Ebed-Melech risked his own life to save Jeremiah's. We saw that Ebed-Melech was a foreigner, a slave, an emasculated harem keeper. He's anonymous in that Ebed-Melech is a title, not a name, meaning, *the king's servant*.

This anonymous foreigner, a slave who had most likely been mutilated to serve in the harem, is the one person in this account of the fall of Jerusalem who is described as having any "prize" or, as we are putting it, spoils.

God reiterated to him that the Babylonian invasion was His doing; it was God's way of bringing the Israelites to their spiritual senses. No matter how pervasive the Babylonian victory might seem, this was God's triumph. Through it He would spare His people and prepare the way of The Lord.

The material prosperity of Babylon would be short-lived. Just like the Assyrians before them, and the Medes and Persians after them, the Babylonians were a blip in the history of nations on the way to bringing the Savior of the world to die on the Cross to gain the ultimate victory for mankind.

Read the New Testament with an emphasis on what constitutes spiritual victory and you find that God's sense of victory involves things like being poor in spirit... mourning... meekness... and being merciful - all while being persecuted for His sake.

His spiritual victories **can** involve subduing kingdoms, stopping the mouths of lions, quenching the violence of fire, escaping the edge of the sword, and turning to flight armies.

Or they can involve being tortured, trials of mockings and scourgings, chains and imprisonment, being stoned or sawn in two or slain with the sword. It can mean wandering about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, and tormented (Hebrews 11:33-37).

The Bible declares that in all things we are more than conquerors (Romans 8:37). What things? Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword... "As it is written: "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE KILLED ALL DAY LONG; WE ARE ACCOUNTED AS SHEEP FOR THE SLAUGHTER" (Romans 8:36).

Our victory isn't that we avoid those things but that we endure them for the sake of Jesus Christ.

My favorite example and explanation of what constitutes real, spiritual victory comes from the mouths of Daniel's three friends as King Nebuchadnezzar is threatening to throw them into a fiery furnace.

Daniel 3:16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

Daniel 3:17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king.

Daniel 3:18 **But if not**, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

'More than conquerors' know it doesn't matter which way things go - life or death - because the victory is in trusting God, in obeying God. These three boys were spared but many after them throughout history, who were every bit as victorious, were killed.

Our victory is at the Cross. It is in dying to self in order to serve The Lord. It's not about anything in the material world; it's not about gaining or getting or looking like we have the upper hand.

We have much in the way of spiritual spoils. All spiritual blessings in heavenly places are already ours to draw from. Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit we can effortlessly produce the fruit of the Spirit.

Why don't we always act and react spiritually? At least one reason might be that we forget God's strange but wonderful sense of what constitutes real victory. We can be too quick to defend ourselves when God is trying to show His strength in our weakness.

Let's quit seeking the kinds of victories the world offers us and instead receive the true spoils of war. Let's be the 'more than conquerors' who know that God will deliver us but, if not, we will go on trusting Him, obeying Him.

Let's go the distance and remaining standing at the final trumpet.