

September 16

Scriptures: Read Jeremiah 40, 41 & 42

Key Verse: “If you will still abide in this land, then I will build you and not pull you down, and I will plant you and not pluck you up...” (Jeremiah 42:10)

Overview

It appears that after Jeremiah had been released by the Babylonian captain from the court of the prison in Jerusalem (39:11-14), he was mistakenly rounded up with the captives who were taken to Ramah (about 8 km north of Jerusalem). The Babylonians may have been organizing them into groups there before sending them on northwards. Here, the same captain freed Jeremiah and showed him respect. He was familiar with Jeremiah's prophecies, probably due to the witness of the many defectors who had taken Jeremiah's advice and surrendered themselves rather than dying (cf. 21:9). The Babylonian captain's recognition of God's purposes being fulfilled upon the people of Judah (40:2-3) was in keeping with the polytheistic belief that every nation had its own territorial god.

Once freed Jeremiah chose to remain in the land to minister among the remnant of Judah, rather than go to Babylon where he would have been honoured and made wealthy. He joined the rest of the remnant at Mizpah, the headquarters of the newly appointed puppet governor Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, Jeremiah's friend (cf. 26:24). Gedaliah accepted the sovereignty of the Babylonians as the will of God, just as Jeremiah had proclaimed. Many of the Jewish refugees who had fled into the neighbouring countries returned when they heard of the appointment of Gedaliah and the leniency of the Babylonians to the remnant in the land. Without using any force, Gedaliah also gained the support of the guerrilla bands that had been roaming in the wilderness (except the band led by Ishmael who only feigned loyalty). He wisely put them all to work to gather the remaining produce from the fields before the colder weather came (40:10,12).

As we see in chapter 41, Ishmael was a great deceiver. Gedaliah had believed his lies of loyalty and it cost him his life, as well as the lives of the Jews who were with him and also the Chaldean guards. Since Ishmael was a member of the royal family, he may have killed Gedaliah to show his opposition to the Babylonians who had killed and mistreated his kinsmen, Zedekiah and his sons (cf. 2 Kings 25:25; 39:6-7). Ishmael also deceived the group of the eighty mournful pilgrims (from the former Northern Kingdom) who were making their way to the burned-down temple in Jerusalem. Whatever the motive, Ishmael was ruthless and killed all but ten who promised to give him their hidden treasures (41:8).

Ishmael's greed is again evident, for if Johanan, a military officer who had supported Gedaliah, had not intercepted Ishmael, he would have sold the remnant of people, including Jeremiah, as slaves to the Ammonites. Everyone was glad to see Johanan and looked to him for leadership. He and the people, except for Jeremiah, were afraid that they would be blamed and punished by the Babylonians for the deaths of Gedaliah and the Babylonian soldiers, therefore, Johanan decided to take the remnant to Egypt for protection (41:17). They decided to stop near Bethlehem to make plans and ask Jeremiah to seek the Lord's will for them. Their words were beautiful — if only they were sincere. Their promises to obey whatever God said did not come from their hearts,

for they had already decided to do their will, and that was to go to Egypt. While waiting on the Lord for an answer, Jeremiah discerned that their request and promise to do the Lord's will was hypocritical (42:20).

One would think that the people of Judah would have learned the importance of obedience to God from the recent destruction of the city. Also, they should have known, by his track record, that Jeremiah was a true prophet and should have heeded his words; yet they did not. Although the Lord had given them a second chance, their continued disobedience would now lead to their deaths in Egypt (42:21-22). God was willing to save, deliver, plant, and build them in Judah, if only they had obeyed Him (see Luke 16:31).

Prayer

Oh Lord God, Your patience with us is beyond all understanding. May we never take You for granted and turn our backs on You.