

Sunday school notes 6 October: God looks after Jeremiah (Jeremiah 37; 2 Chron 36:15-20)

The last story we focussed on was how King Jehoiakim casually cut up the scroll that Jeremiah had dictated. By doing so, he was suggesting that those messages were not worth bothering about – even though it was clear that the messages came from God.

Yet God's warnings were important. God was going to use Nebuchadnezzar to teach his people some important things. Shortly after King Jehoiakim's death, Nebuchadnezzar's army came up to Jerusalem and invaded it for a second time, taking away treasure and about 10 000 captives to Babylon, their capital city. Nebuchadnezzar appointed a 'puppet king' to rule Judah for him. King Zedekiah promised to rule Judah for him, but eventually broke his promise of loyalty and Nebuchadnezzar's army arrived back at Jerusalem, intent on total conquest.

However, there came a day when the people of Jerusalem celebrated! From the walls of the city they could see the enemy army was moving away! They didn't know was that the Babylonian army was just withdrawing to fight an Egyptian army and that it would be back soon! They thought that Jerusalem was safe after all and that Jeremiah had been wrong!

Jeremiah's enemies took the chance to spread the word that Jeremiah was simply a spy, a friend of the enemy. And when Jeremiah tried to go out of the city gates to visit his family, he was arrested on the grounds that he was escaping to join the Babylonians! He was flung into a dungeon and left to die, without any food or water!

But God was there for him, just as he had promised in Jer 1:8. God did not leave him to die. As the Babylonian troops moved back into place, setting up a siege so no-one could leave the city or get any fresh food in, everyone began to panic. The king Zedekiah was desperate for help and wanted people to pray to every god they could! He looked for Jeremiah to pray and find out what was going to happen, so he brought Jeremiah out of prison and into the palace.

Jeremiah prayed, but God's message had not changed. There was no comfort for Zedekiah, but this was the how God had planned to help Jeremiah. Jeremiah begged the king not to send him back to the dungeons where he knew he would starve to death. The king therefore gave orders that Jeremiah was to be confined in the courtyard of the palace guards and to be given a loaf of bread each day.

Jeremiah's enemies (the false priests and prophets who kept on telling people everything would be fine!) weren't very happy with this new arrangement. They worked hard to persuade the king to allow them to deal with Jeremiah. Then they threw Jeremiah into a deep, muddy well in the courtyard. They hoped he would starve to death there and stop contradicting their peaceful, hopeful messages.

Once again God looked after him. A faithful friend went to the king and got permission to pull Jeremiah out. He and two helpers lowered down old sheets and rags with the ropes they were going to use to pull Jeremiah up. That way Jeremiah would not be hurt even

though the mud was sucking him down as they pulled him up. Once again Jeremiah was saved to warn the people of God's justice and to tell them that if they turned to God, he would forgive. But very few listened! And Jeremiah remained imprisoned in the palace.

He was still there when the Babylonians made a hole in the city walls and entered the city, burning as they went. Everyone except the very old and very weak was lined up to be marched to Babylon in chains. Imagine Jeremiah's amazement when he heard that the chief of the enemy army was looking for him by name! King Nebuchadnezzar had heard of Jeremiah and wanted him to be looked after. Once again God was taking care of him – the long walk to Babylon would have been too much for Jeremiah who was probably weak from his imprisonment. This offer would have meant Jeremiah would have gone in a carriage or on horseback and then been cared for in Babylon.

But Jeremiah knew God really wanted him to stay in Jerusalem with the abandoned people there so he refused the honour. And the rest of his life was spent sharing God's wisdom with those left-over people. Sadly, even though they had seen that Jeremiah had spoken God's truth, they still didn't listen to him.

(The history that follows is perhaps too complicated for youngsters to absorb quickly. The new puppet king that Nebuchadnezzar appointed to govern Judah after Zedekiah was assassinated by rebels. Fearing reprisals, the few remaining Jews in the country fled to Egypt, thinking they would be safe there. Even though Jeremiah warned them not to go, they forced him to go with them. However, they did not find peace in Egypt. The Babylonian armies conquered Egypt too. The small Jewish group settled in one of the frontier towns was wiped out, just as God had said they would be if they didn't accept Babylonian rule.)

I wonder: are we Jeremiahs listening closely to God and trying to do what he wants, even though it means life will be easy? Or do we simply ignore the fact that God is our Lord and set out to please ourselves?

Jesus preached the same message as Jeremiah. He warned that those who scramble to save their lives and to do what they want will have no future. However, those who trust their situations to God will have life everlasting with God. (John 12:29)