

WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are approaching the end of our studies in Jeremiah. These closing chapters move a bit faster than the opening ones, and can be covered more rapidly. The fascinating thing about these studies is the unmistakable parallel to our own time. As we have been going through this book we have seen the approaching death of a nation. And we see many similar signs of approaching death in the United States of America in our own day. In two years we will celebrate our two-hundredth birthday as a nation. But already, signs of severe threat to our national life abound, and they raise many questions for us. More and more we are being faced with the question: What does God require, that a nation might live? What are the qualities he looks for, that permit a nation to survive in the world today? There is a remarkable answer for us in the section we come to today.

Chapters 34-39 of Jeremiah are a series of historical flashbacks. That is, they do not come in any chronological order here, but the prophet is looking back over his ministry, gathering up certain incidents which have not been reported to us before. They constitute a revelation of what God requires of a nation. We will see dramatized in each chapter the failure of Judah to meet a requirement of God relative to the national life.

Chapter 34 goes back to the time of the second invasion of Nebuchadnezzar, after Jehoiachin (otherwise known as Coniah) had been taken captive to Babylon, and Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was made a vassal king under Nebuchadnezzar. The Chaldean (Babylonian) army is approaching the city of Jerusalem once again, and Jeremiah is sent to the king with a message -- yet another prediction of defeat at the hands of Babylon. Apparently Zedekiah was frightened at the approach of the Babylonian army, so he began seeking ways to placate God, so that God would feel more kindly toward him and perhaps spare him.

This is a common phenomenon. I have often observed this in people, and have been guilty of it myself. When trouble strikes, people will often start going to church for the first time in years, thinking that is what God wants. Or they will start tithing, or paying their debts, or doing something else they hope will somehow make God feel a little more favorable toward them, as this king sought to do. He issued a royal edict that all the household slaves of Judah should be released from bondage.

If you look back in the fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, you find that the law required that slaves -- Jewish people who had hired themselves out as servants and slaves -- were to work but six years and the seventh year were to be freed. No Jew could be in servitude more than six years. They could resume the contract if they wished, but they had freedom to choose. No Jew could hold a brother as a permanent slave.

Over the years this law had fallen into disuse, and the people had gotten used to having these permanent slaves in their households. The king evidently felt this upset God, so he issued the edict that the slaves be released. In chapter 37, which was written at the same time, we learn that Egypt sent an army up against Jerusalem to meet the Babylonian army. When the Chaldeans heard that Pharaoh of Egypt was coming up against them, they left the siege of Jerusalem and went out to meet the Egyptians. And when King Zedekiah saw that the Babylonian army had withdrawn, he immediately rescinded his orders to release the slaves. So God sent Jeremiah to him with a new message, which we'll pick up at Chapter 34, Verse 15:

You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name; but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the Lord: "You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine," says the Lord. "I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth." {Jer 34:15-17 RSV}

The remarkable phrase in this passage is, "you profaned my name." This was a serious charge to any Jew. They had been brought up to revere and respect the name of God. The scribes did not even dare to write the name of God without taking a bath and changing their clothes. And they never pronounced it. The four Hebrew letters used for the name of God they called "The Ineffable Tetragrammaton" -- the unpronounceable or unspeakable four letters. They never spoke the name of God. Yet God's charge against this king is, "You have profaned my name." The Hebrew word translated profane, means "wound," "pierce," or "deface." God's charge is, "You have defaced me." How did Zedekiah do it? By failing to respect the human rights of slaves. It is an act of blasphemy against God to treat another person as somewhat less than a person. That is what God holds a nation to account for.

As we think of our own national history, we can see what a heavy charge must be leveled against us. How have we treated the American Indians, the original inhabitants of this land, or the Africans we brought forcibly into our midst, or the Chinese and Japanese, the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans, and other nationalities that have come among us? We have despised them, treated them as less than human. The God of the nations says, "That is a profanation of my name. You have profaned my name when you have done a thing like that." It is always healthy for me to remember that God's view of my spirituality, his judgment of whether I am a spiritual-minded person or not, is based not upon how I treat my friends and those I like, but how I treat the waiter at the table, or the clerk in the store, or the yardman, or the newspaper boy. This is the mark of spirituality. In other words, God requires of a people that they respect the rights of all humanity. And when there is a violation of that, God takes it to account. That is the lesson of Chapter 34.

In Chapter 35 another matter is brought before us. Here we have the story of the Rechabites, a tribe of people who were somewhat related to Israel by marriage. These were descendants of the Kenites, the tribe of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Some three hundred years before Jeremiah's time, one of their number, Rechab, was an associate of Jehu, king of Israel, at the time of Elisha. Rechab's son was Jonadab, and this account tells us that Jonadab grew tired of life in the city and longed for a simpler way of life. Many of us feel that way, wish there were some way we could get out of the rat race and get back to nature. Jonadab evidently felt so strongly about it that he commanded his sons to drink no wine, to build no houses, and to have no vineyard or field or seed. They were to live in tents as nomads all their lives. The sons heeded their father's commands and for almost three hundred years the tribe traditionally had followed these admonitions. When Nebuchadnezzar came up against Judah, the Rechabites took refuge in the city of Jerusalem, and Jeremiah now is sent to them by God.

The chapter opens with God's command to Jeremiah to go to the Rechabites, bring them into the temple, and offer them wine to drink. Now, this has nothing to do with the question of whether or not one should drink wine. It is clear that God never tempts anyone to evil. These Rechabites were commended not necessarily because they did not drink wine, but because they were faithful to the command of their father. (This is a great Father's Day text, by the way, although I am not going to dwell on it very long.) When Jeremiah offered them wine they refused to drink it, as God knew they would. Then God sent Jeremiah to the nation of Judah with these words, beginning with Verse 12:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words? says the Lord. The command which Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept; and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, 'Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to you and your fathers.' But you did not incline your ear to listen to me. The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have kept the command which their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me." {Jer 35:12-16 RSV}

It would be very easy to misread this passage -- as though God were simply commending these Rechabites for their fidelity to their father's wishes. He does do that. Later on in the passage he promises them that they "shall never lack a man to stand before" him. I wonder if this does not suggest that it is possible to trace the origin of

Gypsies back to these Rechabites, because they live exactly this way today. At any rate, the real point of the passage is not so much that the Rechabites were commended for keeping their father's command, but rather that Judah is reproved because the nation would not obey God. In other words, the power of tradition has greater force with men than the revelation of the living God. The Rechabites were under the grip of their father's whim, and were obedient to his request three hundred years after he had made it. "But," God says, "I who am among you as a living God, speaking to you through the prophets persistently, trying to correct the evils in the life of this nation, am paid no attention whatsoever." The evil reflected here is the power of tradition, holding men's minds in its ironclad grip, rather than allowing them to respond to the revelation of a living God.

The dead hand of the past is with us yet today in many, many ways, still holding us in that grip. On the national level it is apparent in that politicians are afraid to move unless a precedent has been established. Have you noticed that? They look about for a precedent, and if there has been none, they lack the courage to stand for right against wrong. So they seek ways to compromise and to make it appear they are doing the right thing when they are not. This is because man loves tradition above anything else.

The church is gripped by it as well. As I have traveled about the country I have seen hundreds of churches which are so held in the iron grip of the past that they feel unable to obey God in what he is saying to them in the present hour. The power of tradition sits as a great blight upon Christian people across this land. In a cartoon I saw recently that portrayed the dead church, written across its tombstone were these words -- the seven last words of the church: "Nothing like this has ever happened before." That is the power of man's tradition. Thomas Dixon once said,

Tradition was the most constant, the most persistent, the most dogged, the most utterly devilish opposition the Master encountered. It openly attacked Him on every hand, and silently repulsed His teaching. Even the Samaritan woman He finds armed with the ancestral bludgeon, "Art thou greater than our father Jacob? Our fathers worshipped in this mountain." Without departure from customs there could have been no Christian church. The great soul-winners of the past had to shake off the shackles of over-conservatism in methods -- witness Melancthon, Wesley, Edwards, Finney. The church grows by iconoclasm. Its first work is to set aside false gods.

This chapter of Jeremiah reveals -- that God requires of a nation, or of a church, a continual review of the methods of the past in the flashing light of the revelation of God today. If we are not going back over and over, reviewing what has been done in the past, and asking ourselves, "Is this in line with what we understand now to be the truth, to be reality as God has revealed it?" we are certain to sink more and more into the ooze and mire of tradition, to be lost in its swamps.

In Chapter 36 there is another revelation of what God requires of a nation. Here we have the story of how this book of Jeremiah came to be written. It takes us back to the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, about the midpoint of Jeremiah's ministry. God commanded the prophet to write down in a book all the things he had been saying. He had been giving oral messages to the people, but now God commanded him to write them down in a book. So he called his secretary Baruch, and dictated the messages to him. Then, since he was a prisoner and unable to go himself, he sent Baruch to read this in the temple.

Baruch waited until all the people from the cities around Jerusalem had come to the temple on a day of fasting, and read to them the words God had given Jeremiah for them. Jeremiah and Baruch hoped the people would repent and turn, and then God would restore the nation. One of the princes heard Baruch reading this book, and told the other princes what he had heard. They gathered together and sent for Baruch to read it again to them. The account says that when they heard it, they trembled in fear because of what God had said, and said to each other, "We must report this to the king." We take up the account at Verse 20:

So they went into the court to the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and they reported all the words to the king [Jehoiakim]. Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the princes who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month [December], and the king was sitting in the winter house and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the

king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. [Here was the first destructive critic of the Scriptures!] Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was afraid, nor did they rend their garments. Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king's son and Saraiah the son of Azriel and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel to seize Baruch the secretary and Jeremiah the prophet, but the Lord hid them. {Jer 36:20-26 RSV}

Because of this contemptuous act of defiance, in which King Jehoiakim brazenly cut the scroll to pieces and threw it into the fire as it was read, he was condemned. Later in this chapter Jeremiah is sent with the message that he was condemned to destruction and to humiliation. His body would be thrown out to the heat of the day and the cold of the night, to be eaten by dogs. Jeremiah was told to write the words again, Verse 32:

Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them. {Jer 36:32 RSV}

Instead of eliminating the Scripture, the king had only added to it. That is the way God works. And this scroll is now the present book of Jeremiah.

The point this passage makes is that judgment came against this king not simply because he acted foolishly in burning the Scriptures but because of the condition of heart which that action revealed. This is given to us in one flaming sentence in Verse 24: "Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was afraid, nor did they rend their garments." These men had lost the fear of God. And when a nation or a people or an individual loses the fear of God, they are on their way to destruction. For the fear of God is based upon the sovereign power which he exercises in life. These men were shown to be stupid and senseless men who had lost their sense of reality entirely, because they had lost the fear of God.

There is one great fact everywhere revealed -- in Scripture, in history, and even in nature -- which has been called "the law of retribution." That is, there is an inevitable consequence for doing wrong, and there is no way to escape it. Even an atheist, who does not believe in God at all, must admit that when he examines the laws of nature he is faced with the conclusion that you either obey the laws of nature and live, or disobey them and die. One or the other. And man is helpless to change that. We are in the grip of forces greater than we are, and everything on every side testifies to this. That is why we learn respect for the laws of electricity. You do not fool around with 10,000 volts of electrical potential, thinking you are going to make up the laws as you go along. You had better find out what they are first, for you disobey them to your peril and death.

This is what God has implanted in every part of life. How foolish and utterly stupid is the person who seeks to ignore that fact. God requires of every nation that there be the recognition of his sovereign government of men, and the law of retribution for evil. History has testified again and again that God always accomplishes what he says he is going to do. God rules in the affairs of men. Napoleon, at the height of his career, once very boldly said, "God is on the side that has the heaviest artillery" -- his cynical answer to someone who asked if God was on the side of France. Then came the Battle of Waterloo, where he lost both the battle and his empire. Years later, in exile on the island of St. Helena, chastened and humbled, Napoleon said, "Man proposes; God disposes." This is the lesson with which life seeks to confront us. God is able to work his sovereign will -- despite man. Therefore the basic, elementary knowledge of life with which everyone ought to start is the fear of God. "The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom," Proverbs {9:10} says.

In Chapters 37 and 38, which we will take together since they are one account, we find another thing God requires of nations. This is the story of the persecution of Jeremiah. Again, it is set early in Zedekiah's reign, when the Babylonians had withdrawn from Jerusalem to face Pharaoh's army. God sent Jeremiah to Zedekiah to say that Nebuchadnezzar would return, that the armies of Babylon would be back again at Jerusalem. Verses 11 and following give us an incident concerning Jeremiah:

Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's

army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people. When he was at the Benjamin Gate, a sentry there named Irijah the son of Shelemiah, son of Hanaiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "You are deserting to the Chaldeans." And Jeremiah said, "It is false; I am not deserting to the Chaldeans." But Irijah would not listen to him, and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the princes. And the princes were enraged at Jeremiah, and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, for it had been made a prison. {Jer 37:11-15 RSV}

This is the account of how Jeremiah first became a prisoner. A little later, at the request of King Zedekiah, he was permitted to be a house prisoner, given a little more liberty. Chapter 38 tells us how the princes became angry, as Jeremiah continually counseled surrender to the Babylonians. Beginning at Verse 4 the account says,

Then the princes said to the king, "Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mire, and Jeremiah sank in the mire. {Jer 38:4-6 RSV}

We might well say that this was the low point in Jeremiah's career! Down in the mud and gloom of that dank, dark cistern, with no food and no water, no adequate clothing, he was covered over and left alone to die. As far as he was concerned, he thought he would die, for these heartless men had thrust him there. But God had not forgotten his prophet. What a revelation this incident is of how foolish we are when we think that being faithful to the ministry God has given us will guarantee that we will be delivered from all troubles. Here was a man who was faithful to do what God had said, but God allowed him to be put into the cistern.

Jeremiah thought it was all over for him, but God has his men, and there in the court of the king was an Ethiopian eunuch, a black servant, whose name is given here as Ebed-melech. But Ebed-melech, in Hebrew, means "the servant of the king". So I do not think this was his name at all. It is not a description of who he was, but of what he was: the king's servant. He was a nameless man. "Hey, you," they must have called him. And God sent "Hey you" down to deliver Jeremiah. He went before the king, Verse 9, and said,

"My lord the king, these men have done evil in all they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern; and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." Then the king commanded Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies." So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. Then Ebed-melech said to Jeremiah, "Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. {Jer 38:9-13 RSV}

What tender, loving, compassionate care this dear man manifested toward the prophet! Lest the rope injure Jeremiah as he was lifted up, he provided rags to cushion it. And Jeremiah spent the rest of his time in the court of the guard, until Jerusalem was taken.

The account goes on to say how King Zedekiah, aware that Jeremiah indeed was a true man of God, sent for him and asked for a word from God. This weak and vacillating king nevertheless wanted to hear what the prophet had to say. Jeremiah assured him of safety if he would but surrender to the Babylonian army. But the king was afraid. Like Pilate, many centuries later, he did not have the courage of his convictions. He was too afraid of those around him. So the king sent Jeremiah back to the court of the guard.

What does this reveal about what God expects of a nation? Well, God requires that a nation listen to the

authorized spokesman of God. How many times in Scripture you find God identifying with his people! When young Saul of Tarsus asked, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus said, "I am Jesus whom thou art persecuting," {cf, Acts 9:5}. Paul was persecuting Christians, but Jesus said, "You're persecuting me." When Jesus sent his disciples out, he told them to go into all the cities of Israel. And he said, "If they receive you they have received me," {Matt 10:40 RSV}. Later Jesus himself wept over the city of Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" {Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}. God holds to account a nation that rejects the authorized voice of God in its midst.

In the opening words of Chapter 39 there is a very brief account of the actual overthrow of the city:

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; in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. When Jerusalem was taken, all the princes of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate: [their names are then listed]. When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled, going out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls; and they went toward the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, at Riblah, in the land of Hamath; and he passed sentence upon him. The king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes; and the king of Babylon slew all the nobles of Judah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters to take him to Babylon. The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the house of the people, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. {Jer 39:1-8 RSV}

In the further historic detail given in the last chapter of Jeremiah, we are told that they burned the temple of God as well. The long-delayed hour of judgment came at last. The city was taken. The women were ravished. The temple was burned. The king's eyes were put out. As you read this account you can see a certain poetic justice which is always characteristic of the judgments of God. The city that refused God, God refused. He granted them their own desires, in other words. The temple that burned incense to idols was itself burned. The king who would not see had his eyes put out. The people who held their slaves captives were themselves led captive by the Babylonians. This is always the way God works. His judgment is to give you exactly what you are asking for, to let you finally have your way -- but to the fullest extent, beyond anything you would desire.

So the last requirement of God visible in this account is that a nation must never forget that, ultimately, the judgment of God will come. "The mills of God grind slow, but they grind exceeding small." Sooner or later judgment will fall. God himself said, in Ezekiel, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn, till he shall come whose right it is to reign." No nation has the right to continue to exist as a nation when it continually violates these requirements of God's justice. Therefore the hand of doom rests upon any nation that deliberately refuses to hear and heed the will of God. Ultimately, judgment will come. No political manipulation will avert it. No partial compromise will delay, no defiance will evade what God has said. It will come at last -- some eleventh year, ninth month, and fourth day, when a breach is made in the walls of the city, and judgment and destruction can no longer be averted.

I want to gather up four things from this account which are of significance to us today. We find here four ways by which individuals and nations seek to turn aside the will of God, and all are present in our nation today:

- First, a people can ignore and refuse to listen to God, and give themselves over to things that help them forget -- to a life of debauchery and revelry, refusing to hear and heed the Word of God. That is happening in America, as you well know.
- Second, a people can persecute the prophets of God, and hinder the message of God. Perhaps that is more visible in the Communist world today than it is here, but it is happening in America too -- increasingly so. There is developing a callous attitude against the preaching of the Word of God.
- Third, a people can seek to circumvent the catastrophe which is coming by political maneuvering and

manipulations. That is the whole story of Watergate -- an attempt to escape the ultimate judgment of moral wrong by cover-ups and pretenses and bribery. But it cannot work.

- And, finally, a people can compromise in outward ways, but fall short of real submission to God. That is when a people become outwardly religious -- learn the "God-words" and practice civil religion -- but their hearts remain unchanged.

There is only one attitude that will avert the coming judgment of God: repentance, deep humiliation before God, acknowledgment of guilt, a willingness to recognize that we have lost our right to exist as a nation, and a cry to God that he will heal us and change us and forgive us and heal this land. When that occurs, God himself assumes responsibility to recover the nation. Despite all the damage which has been done, he will restore the years that the locusts have eaten, and the nation will come again to power and righteousness and leadership in the affairs of the world. But if a nation ignores God, it goes down into the dust of history, as hundreds of kingdoms and nations before us have perished. "Lord of hosts, be with us yet, lest we forget, lest we forget."

Prayer:

Our Father, these words of the history of Judah have sobered us. We see so much threatening our own beloved nation today, and other nations of earth as well. We pray that as a people we will not point the finger of self-righteousness at others and say, "It's their fault," but rather will acknowledge, with all the saints of God in the past, our own complicity and evil -- the ways that we have failed in this respect: the way we have denied people their rights and treated them as less than persons; the way we have refused to give heed to your Word, have clung to traditions from the past, and have shut out the light of revelation; the way we have despised and condemned messengers of God, have not listened to those who have spoken at your command. Lord, we ask you to heal us as a nation. Heal our land, and turn us from evil. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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