

Identity Crisis

Today In Your Reading...

We came to the end of the warnings about the fall of Judah and it finally happened. Jeremiah was the prophet alive at the time; he, unfortunately, witnessed it all. "I will hand the people of Judah over to the king of Babylon," says the Lord. "He will take them captive or run them through with the sword. I will let her enemies plunder Jerusalem. All the famed treasures of the city will be carried away..." (*Jeremiah 20:5*).

After all of the warnings, the event was described in only two verses in *Daniel*. "During the third year of King Jehoiakim's reign, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it with his armies. The Lord gave him victory... When Nebuchadnezzar returned, he took with him some of the sacred objects from the Temple of God and placed them in the treasure house of his god..." (*1:1, 2*).

Among those taken captive were four young men — Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, otherwise known as Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Did you notice that the King chose them for his service, for the reason that they were "strong, healthy, and good looking, and because they were gifted with knowledge, good sense, and poise"? Then, the king sentenced them, and many more like them, to a three-year indoctrination process, to turn them into good Babylonian boys.

However, Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's food and wine. Because of Daniel's determination not to compromise his convictions, the other three boys joined him; and, because the Lord had blessed them all with knowledge and wisdom, when it came time for the evaluation process, these four youth stood out from the others. In fact, "the king found the advice of these young men to be **ten times better!**" (*1:20*).

Daily Reflection

It must have been tempting for these boys to give in to the hospitality and education of their captors. At least they were alive and being treated well, right? While that may be true, Daniel saw through the charade. He discerned what was happening, that by catering to the boys' desires, they would let down their guard and accept whatever propaganda they were fed. They were even given new names, to reflect their changed identities.

But, you will notice that Daniel refused his new name; for the rest of his book, he will refer to himself by his Jewish name. In other words, although the Babylonians did their best to change his identity, he remained faithful to the Lord's will and ways. As a result, he would influence not only his friends but the entire kingdom.

Do you see any similarities to the enemy's strategy with God's people today? What are they?

Your spiritual enemy despises the fact that you are a follower of Christ. He will do everything in his power "to take you captive" by his world system and by his warped way of thinking. **His ultimate goal is to change your identity** into one who forsakes the Lord to serve his own purposes. You must resist him at all costs!

Faithfulness to the Lord's will and ways, however difficult it may be, will prove to be **ten times better in the end!** You must not forsake your identity in Christ for the pleasures or philosophies of the world. Be faithful to the true King and refuse to give in to enemy schemes.

Stand Up, Stand Out

August 7 — *Daniel 2:1-3:30; Jeremiah 7:1-8:3*

Today In Your Reading...

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar has risen to world power, conquered Judah, and taken captive some of the people. Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were among them. However, though the Jews were under Babylonian authority, the Lord quickly reminded the Babylonians that they were under His authority. He did this with two events.

First, He disturbed Nebuchadnezzar with a dream that only He could interpret (2:1-49). It was a dream of a giant statue of mixed metals. The head was made of gold, the chest and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron, and the feet of iron and clay. In short, the Lord revealed to the King the four great empires of ancient history — the Babylonians (the head of gold), the Medo-Persians (chest and arms of silver), the Greeks (belly and thighs of bronze), and the legs of iron (Romans). The rock that fell from heaven and struck the feet of iron and clay is the Kingdom of God that will be established by Christ in the end times.

The second event occurred when Nebuchadnezzar built and dedicated a statue to himself. At the dedication, he demanded that all people bow before it. Of course, doing so would defy the first commandment, of having no other gods but the One True God. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down, they were cast into a fiery furnace, only to be rescued by the Lord. It was the second time that Nebuchadnezzar had a run-in with our God.

As great and powerful as he was, **he discovered that there was a higher power than him, the God of heaven and earth.** Daniel wrote, "Praise His name forever and ever, for He alone has all wisdom and power. He determines the course of world events; He removes kings and sets others on the throne" (2:19, 20).

Daily Reflection

While it is an honor to serve our God, it is never easy, especially when the world wants to "tear us limb from limb" or throw us into "a furnace." **Standing up for the Lord among the cynical skeptics of the world demands a great deal of courage and faith.** Have you ever faced such a decision, when you were forced to choose God or going with the flow? Explain.

What did you do when you were faced with this tough choice? Did you demonstrate courage and faith or cower to the enemy?

Persecution is quickly becoming a reality in America. Why do you think that is?

With a world system that is bent on plowing under the principles and people of God, it is only a matter of time before the pressure will be put on you to make a choice. **What will you do in that moment, bow down like everyone else or stand up and represent your God?**

Boasting at the Gates

Today In Your Reading...

Jeremiah continued to condemn God's people for their sins, particularly idolatry. "The wisest of people who worship idols is stupid and foolish... Their gods are like a helpless scarecrow. They cannot speak and they need to be carried because they cannot walk... The Lord is the only true God, the living God, the everlasting King! Your so-called gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will vanish..." (10:5-11).

He also continued to forecast Judah's destruction. "I, the Lord, once called them a thriving olive tree, beautiful to see and full of good fruit. But now I have sent the fury of their enemies to burn them with fire, leaving them charred and broken. I, the Lord Almighty, who planted the olive tree, have ordered it destroyed. For the people of Israel and Judah have done evil, provoking Me to anger..." (10:16, 17).

We ran into one of the more familiar passages from *Jeremiah* today, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone, that they truly *know* Me and understand that I am the Lord who is *just* and *righteous*, whose *love* is unending, and that I delight in these things..." (9:23, 24).

Daily Reflection

I find two challenges in this passage. First, when it's all said and done, our life on earth is over, and we are standing at the gates of heaven, what is it that will help us gain access? We might boast in our wisdom, our might, or our riches, but **none of these things will work**. Only those who know the Lord, who have a personal relationship with Him, will enter in. It is not in anything we can do or have done that will gain us access to the gates of heaven. **It is only in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ that any of us can be saved!** Is that your boast?

Second, notice what it is that delights men compared to what delights God. Men delight in wisdom, might, and riches, while God delights in justice, righteousness, and love. Men focus on what they have or what they can do, while **God cares about what they give to others and what kind of people they are**.

As usual, our priorities are misplaced. Our eyes are on the wrong prizes, and our efforts are spent for the wrong goals. What about you? In what do you delight?

Why is trusting in your wisdom, might, or riches a false and foolish hope?

To boast means to advertise, to display, to praise, or to magnify. When you are before others, what is it that you hold up for them to see? What is it that you call their attention to? Is it something you have done, or is it what the Lord has done for you, or in you, or through you?

Be careful what you boast! "Let him who glories, glory in the Lord" (1 *Corinthians* 1:31).

Cling-ons

August 9 — *Jeremiah 12:1-15:21*

Day 221 — 144 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Jeremiah records Judah's terrible drought that resulted from the actions of His wicked people. "You love to wander far from Me and do not follow in My paths. Now I will no longer accept you as My people. I will remember all your wickedness and will punish you for your sins" (14:10).

When Jeremiah began to pray for the people, the Lord refused to let him intercede. "Do not pray for these people anymore. When they fast, I will pay no attention. When they present their offerings, I will not accept them. I will give them only war, famine, and disease" (14:11, 12).

It was pretty clear that the Lord had reached the end of His patience. "Even if Moses and Samuel stood before Me pleading for these people, I wouldn't help them. Away with them! Get them out of My sight! I am tired of always giving them another chance. I will destroy My own people because they refuse to turn back to Me from all their evil ways" (15:1, 6, 7).

To help Jeremiah understand the situation better, God gave him an object lesson. "Go and buy a linen belt," He said, "and put it around your waist." When Jeremiah did as he was instructed, the Lord said, "Take the belt and go to the Euphrates River. Hide it there in a hole in the rocks." Jeremiah did it. After some time had passed, God returned to the prophet and said, "Go back to the Euphrates and get the belt that I told you to hide there." When Jeremiah dug it out of the hole, it was mildewed and falling apart. The belt was useless (12:1-7).

What was the lesson? "My people are like this belt," God said, "good for nothing. As a belt clings to a person's waist, so **I created Judah and Israel to cling to Me**. They were to be My people, My pride, My glory, an honor to My name, but they would not listen" (12:10, 11).

Daily Reflection

As God's people, you and I are "cling-ons."

No, we are not like the humanoid Klingons of Star Trek, who have those dreadful lobotomy scars on their foreheads. We, like the people of Judah and Israel, were made to cling to the Lord, to represent Him on the earth, to be His glory and to be an honor to His name.

Sadly, though, when we distance ourselves from Him and neglect our relationship with Him, **our belt loses its clinginess**. We slip and fall away from our purpose. As Jeremiah said, "A belt that no longer clings is useless."

How are you doing at clinging to the Lord? Are you holding to His plan and purpose for your life or are you clinging to your own way?

What does it take to be a good cling-on, to fulfill your purpose as God's representative on earth?

We are Christ's cling-ons, His ambassadors, and God is using us to draw others to cling to Him. Be faithful to develop your personal relationship with Him. Stay true to His cause and purpose for your life; and, in the words of the most famous Vulcan, "Live long and prosper."

The Ultimate Solution

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August 10 — *Jeremiah 16:1-18:23; 35:1-19*

Day 222 — 143 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Jeremiah continued to warn God's people of their impending doom, if they did not repent of their evil ways and return to Him. In one of his most well-known passages (*18:1-10*), the prophet was given an object lesson. The Lord said, "Go down to the shop where clay pots and jars are made. I will speak to you there."

Jeremiah did as he was told and found the potter working at his wheel. But the jar he was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so the potter squashed the jar into a lump of clay and started again. Then the Lord said to Jeremiah, "O Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand."

Then, the Lord gave Jeremiah one of the most insightful messages of his ministry. "If I announce that a certain nation is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, but then *that nation renounces its evil ways*, I will not destroy it as I had planned; and, if I announce that I will build up and plant a certain nation or kingdom, making it strong and great, but then *that nation turns to evil and refuses to obey me*, I will not bless that nation as I had said I would."

In this message is the key to a nation's stability. In it, we find that **the key to a nation's stability is morality**, doing right by God. Nineveh, for example, was an evil nation which God had announced that He would destroy it. However, after sending Jonah to preach to the people there, they repented of their evil and God spared them. But, God built up Israel and Judah and promised to sustain them and bless them; yet both of them turned to evil and incurred the wrath of God. Why had God removed the tribes of the Canaanites at the time of Joshua? Those tribes were committing atrocities in the sight of God; they were immoral and, therefore, evil.

A message like this causes me to think of our country. America was founded on biblical principles, on the tenets of Christianity, and, as a result, God has blessed our land like no other. However, **as a nation, we have turned our back on the Lord and chosen to do evil**. It does not take a genius to see that we are suffering from moral rot; and our national stability is teetering because of it. How much longer can God hold back His wrath? How much longer until He squashes us as the potter squashed his clay?

Daily Reflection

"Cursed are those who put their trust in humans and turn their hearts away from the Lord. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future; but **blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made Him their hope and confidence**. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green and they go right on producing delicious fruit" (*17:5-8*).

The key to our nation's future strength and stability is not military might, a political party, or more economic opportunity. Our future rests in our obedience or disobedience to the Lord's statutes. **A nation that chooses to glorify and sanction immorality cannot expect the blessings of heaven.**

How do we turn a nation back to God? We can change laws, to make people comply with the laws of God, but that is a partial solution. **That is an external fix to an internal problem**. A better solution is to work from the inside out, to deal with the hearts of people. "The heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who knows how bad it is?" (*17:9*). **The only thing that will change the heart is the Gospel of Christ**. *He is our hope for ultimate change!*

As Wicked as Sodom

Today In Your Reading...

King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem for a second time and captured it (597 BC). He de-throned Jehoiakim, King of Judah, and exiled him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also took with him treasures from the Temple and placed them in his palace. Meanwhile, Jehoiachin was placed on the throne of Judah; he was eighteen years old and, basically, Nebuchadnezzar's puppet.

All of these things took place because of the people's sin against God. They were wicked idolaters, lovers of evil, who had broken their covenant with Him. Jeremiah and others had warned the people that this would happen; their reality gave credence to Jeremiah's words, who also had warnings for surrounding locations like Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, and Hazor.

Jeremiah also prophesied about the Messiah. "For the time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will place a righteous Branch on King David's throne. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land, and this is His name — 'The Lord is Our Righteousness.' In that day, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety" (23:5, 6). Of course, Jesus is that righteous branch who comes to save His people, although He will not rule the earth until His second coming.

Finally, Jeremiah had some harsh words for the other prophets of his day. They were not true prophets but false prophets, men who told the king and people what they wanted to hear, that everything was going to be okay. "My heart is broken because of the false prophets... They do evil and abuse their power. These people are as wicked as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were... Do not listen to them when they prophesy to you, filling you with futile hopes. They are making up everything they say. They do not speak for the Lord" (23:9-17).

Daily Reflection

Sadly, there are many false prophets in the Church today. They claim to speak for the Lord but their messages contradict His Word and the true Gospel of Christ. Instead of preaching the truth, **they preach what the people want to hear**, filling their minds with futile hopes of health and wealth and a religion of works.

These men and women will not be held guiltless for their actions. What is worse than someone who claims to speak on behalf of the Lord, only to lead the people of God astray? They have angered Him and will pay for their deception.

They are not serving the God of heaven but His enemy, the god of this world.

Even worse than the reality of these false prophets or teachers is that there are millions of undiscerning people who not only listen to them but believe them. Why do you think that is?

With so many preachers and teachers, with so many websites, TV shows, radio shows, and podcasts, with so many books and blogs, how can you protect yourself against the deceptions of false teaching?

"There is a difference between chaff and wheat. Does not My word burn like fire? Is it not like a mighty hammer that smashes rock to pieces?"

It's For Your Own Good

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August 12 — *Jeremiah 23:33-24:10; 29:1-31:14*

Day 224 — 141 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Jeremiah continued his battle with the false prophets of his day. "Stop using the phrase, 'prophecy from the Lord,'" he said, "for people are using it to give authority to their own ideas, turning upside down the words of our God, the living God" (23:36). He even called out a false prophet by name, Shemaiah, and cursed him before the people (29:29-32). Sometimes it is helpful to God's people for the false teachers of our day to be called out by name; so that they will see their work for what it is — deception.

The majority of our passage was consumed with hope. Jeremiah wrote letters to the people who had been carried into exile; and, in his letters, he prophesied of the people's return. "The truth is that you will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope... I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and bring you home again to your own land" (29:10-14).

Before Jeremiah's letter, the Lord had given him a vision of a basket of figs. In the basket were figs that were fresh and ripe and some that were spoiled and rotten. God revealed to Jeremiah that those He sent into exile were the good figs, the people that He would save as a remnant and bring back again to Jerusalem. Those people left behind would be destroyed by war, famine, and disease; they were the spoiled and rotten figs.

While it is difficult to imagine, being exiled for seventy years, as bad as that sounds, was a good thing for God's people. **"I have sent them into captivity for their own good...** I will completely destroy the nations where I have scattered them, but I will not destroy My people. I must discipline them, for I cannot let them go

unpunished" (24:5; 30:11). Captivity is a good thing? Yes, the Lord had to discipline His people without destroying them.

Daily Reflection

I was spanked as a child, and I am glad. I deserved them all. Before my mom would spank me, she always said these words, **"I am doing this because I love you.** It's for your own good. Believe me, this will hurt me more than it hurts you." Have you ever heard words like these? As a child, I did not understand what she meant. What exactly was she saying to me?

Like a good parent who loves His children, **the Lord disciplines those He loves.** Parents understand that rebellious or defiant behavior cannot be tolerated and that disciplining a child is for his good. While discipline can be painful, even embarrassing, it is often the means by which a child comes to his senses, when rebellion is driven out of his heart.

So we, whom God loves, must endure His discipline at times, for the defiance we demonstrate towards His Word and will. While the discipline may be painful, even embarrassing, it is often the means by which we come to our senses, when that rebelliousness is driven from our hearts. Thus, **discipline is for our good.**

You may feel like you are in a period of exile. You know the Lord is "spanking you" for some reason. Don't fight against Him; instead, accept His discipline, learn from it, and try to see the good that awaits on the other side. **Be grateful that He cares enough to spank you!**