

Chapter 45 Jeremiah 39-45

Resisting Renewal

“We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord!” Jeremiah 44:16

It was not Jeremiah’s fault that the gospel of hope fell on deaf ears. His reputation as the weeping prophet stemmed not from his personality, which I doubt was melancholy, but from the people who remained doggedly resistant to the word of the Lord throughout his long ministry. Jeremiah was not by nature an uptight, downcast individual who needed positive feedback to function. If anything he was a flinty, square-jawed prophet who refused to give in or give up. He delivered the word of the Lord straight-up, without equivocation or compromise.

As we have said, the highpoint of the book of Jeremiah comes with the description of the New Covenant and the promise of restoration. The two sections that follow bring the book to completion. In chapters 34-45, various incidents are described that illustrate Judah’s stubborn refusal to follow the word of the Lord. In chapters 46-51, we have a compilation of Jeremiah’s messages of judgment against the surrounding nations. The historical appendix (52:1-34) concludes both sections by describing the fall of Jerusalem and is also found in 39:1-14 and in 2 Kings 25:1-30.

What appears at first to be a miscellaneous collection of unrelated incidents is actually a careful study in blatant, inexcusable rejection of God’s will for his people. The chronology of events is not nearly as important as the chronicle of stubborn, hard-hearted resistance to the word of the Lord. There appears to be a parallel pattern in the presentation of cases that reinforces the message.

(1) Zedekiah presides over the Broken Covenant (34:8-22)	(4) Zedekiah’s false appeal for spiritual direction (37:1-38:28)
(2) The Recabites and simple obedience (35:1-19)	(5) Gedaliah’s obedience without vigilance against evil (40:1-41:17)
(3) Jehoiakim burns the scroll (36:1-32)	(6) Johanan and people reject the word of the Lord (42:1-43:13) (7) The people embrace pagan practices in Egypt (44:1-30)

Picture a prosecutor systematically laying out his evidence for a conviction. These historical episodes are Jeremiah’s case studies. They boldly demonstrate the forbearance of God’s grace and the necessity of divine judgment. They make the case for God’s righteous justice and the need for judgment. In any era, including our own, these case studies in disobedience provide a

wake-up call for the people who profess to follow the risen Lord Jesus Christ. There is no secret to true spiritual renewal. It consists of true freedom, basic obedience, sensitivity to the Word of God and openness to God's will. It means vigilance against evil, living by faith instead of fear and practicing the true spiritual disciplines. This may sound like a tall order, but the cost of *not* following the Lord God is always greater than the cost of simple, whole-hearted obedience.

Seven Signs of Spiritual Renewal

The keys to spiritual renewal are no mystery and the path of obedience is not nearly as complicated as it is often made out to be. It is usually not that difficult to understand what God wants from us. In fact, it often takes considerable effort, along with wilful self-deception and wrong-headed activism to resist the will of God. In the seven cases presented by Jeremiah the people were *blessed* with clear, unambiguous spiritual direction. They knew the will of God, but they chose to do otherwise. It was the strategies of self-deception, the rationalization of power and the motivation of fear that proved to be much more complex than the will of God which was straightforward. Each case also alerts professing believers to the deceptive nature of spirituality. There was a great deal of discussion among the people and the leaders about covenant-keeping, fasting, intercessory prayer, and the will of God, but all of this "spirituality" amounted to only a religious performance. It was a thinly veiled spiritual veneer covering up selfishness, wilful resistance to God's will and worldly strategies of self-preservation. These seven negative case studies warn us of some of the obvious pitfalls on the path to obedience. A careful study of them yields seven positive signs of spiritual renewal. Although the people of God failed miserably, their negative example can become an incentive and a guide to spiritual renewal. Jeremiah's chronicle becomes an important advisory to all those who are serious about building up the Body of Christ today.

Spiritual renewal works for social justice (Jer 34:8-22).

Under pressure from Nebuchadnezzar's besieging army in 587 B.C., King Zedekiah did something right. He led the people in a solemn covenant to emancipate the Hebrew slaves (34:1-22). Apparently the crisis of Babylon's pending invasion produced a crisis of royal conscience and a last ditch effort to win God's favor. Jerusalem's leaders made a public appeal to God. They invoked the divine name, quoted the divine law, and performed a public ritual to solemnize their vow. In a show of corporate solidarity, they solemnly cut a calf in two and the covenant signers walked between the two pieces. The rite signified that anyone who reneged on the covenant would suffer the same fate as the calf (34:18; see Gen 15:10, 17). So the leadership elite, the socially privileged and the economically well off agreed to set their Hebrew slaves free. One can only imagine the joy that these liberated slaves felt. Their indebtedness forgiven and their freedom given back to them. However their feeling of elation was only temporary. They were no sooner released, when the Babylonian army withdrew, the imminence of the crisis passed, and the leadership had a sudden and pernicious change of heart. The brevity of the narrative description is in itself telling. It simply reads, "They agreed, and set them free. But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again" (34:10-11). It implies that their immoral reversal was as easy as flipping a coin. The ease with which the leadership elite broke their covenant testifies to the duplicity of their

motives, the intractable nature of social evil and the power of a social class to reinforce injustice. They knew all along that the Lord commanded the release of their Hebrew slaves, but they refused to obey the biblical commands until disaster bore down on them. Their “tit-for-tat” quid-pro-quo morality was blatantly self-serving. And as soon as they got what they wanted, the power of group-think took over and their pragmatic economic logic kicked in and persuaded them to go back to the way things were. Undoubtedly they felt they had good, sensible reasons for maintaining their social status quo.

The incident testifies to human nature’s inherent moral insensitivity and the tendency to do only that which pacifies the conscience and serves individual self-interests. As was true of Jerusalem’s ruling elite, the impulse to do good is often not based on heart righteousness and a desire to obey God, but on the feelings of the moment, a desire to look good before others, and an attempt to gain favor with God.

We may have come to Christ out of a personal desire to quell a disturbed spirit, to satisfy a restless longing in our soul for God, or to experience an inner peace that we knew was missing. However in coming to Christ we have discovered that the Christian Faith does not stop with inner peace or a private faith. John Wesley rightly held that “Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it.” (*The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol.5, (London: Wesleyan Conference Center, 1878, 296). Jesus leads us into the real world of work and family and society for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom. He tells us to take up our cross and follow Him. Jesus calls us to follow him into our Jerusalem, into our families, work places, and schools, with the soul-saving, life-transforming gospel. The Christian’s personal faith was meant to have public impact everywhere, from our home life to the marketplace. And the challenge to make disciples and set things right is extended to the ends of the earth.

There is no secluded place for a private, individualized, spiritualized religious faith that lets *me* focus on *my* self and *my* religious tastes and spiritual preferences. Jesus says, “Come follow me,” and we know that he is heading toward the Cross. This is why Jesus said, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household’” (Matt. 10:35). This is disturbing news for people who thought Christ would simply make life go better. There is far more to following Christ than we bargained for. “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

Ron Sider’s clarion call for social justice in the 70’s, entitled, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, could be re-titled today, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hungry Christians*, because many who are suffering famine and persecution around the world are our brothers and sisters in Christ. As the Body of Christ has grown so has our social responsibility. The meaning of Paul’s warning shatters our complacency: “For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:29). True spiritual renewal is not simply an inward disposition, a certain attitude, or a pious feeling, but a living sacrifice of all we are to Christ. This kind of offering could only be done by the grace and mercy of Christ. Our

commitment to Christ is grandly inclusive of all we are and have. Thus, we can no longer live according to the self-serving pragmatism of the world. We were meant to live transformed lives. We were meant to live today in the light of the coming Kingdom of Christ. This is why Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).

In the tradition of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul gives a comprehensive picture of Agape love—Christian love (Rom 12:9-21). “Love must be sincere.” Literally, without hypocrisy. Authentic love is not a performance, nor is it a sentiment. “Hate what is evil.” “Love’s hatred of evil expresses an aversion, an abhorrence, even a ‘loathing’, while love’s clinging to what is good expresses a sticking or bonding as if with glue” (John Stott, *Romans*, IVP, 33, 1994). Love is measured inversely according to the degree to which we hate evil. “Love is therefore both sweet and bitter. It can yield; but it can also be harsh. It can preserve peace; but it can also engage in conflict...Only the love which is strong enough to abhor that which is evil can cleave to that which is good. Love forgets—and knows; forgives—and punishes; freely receives—and utterly rejects” (Barth, *Romans*, 454). Paul adds to this love, affection and honor. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Each of Paul’s bullet points could trigger endless debate, legal qualifications, special nuances, and excuses, but Paul is not talking to people who are trying to make a deal with God. Paul is not presenting the terms of a contract. Agape love is the do-whatever-it-takes love of self-sacrifice. It is the opposite of a self-serving, what’s in it for me, self-love. As James put it, “So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don’t do it, you sin” (James 4:17 TNIV).

Spiritual renewal practices simple obedience (Jer 35:1-19).

If for no other reason than Jeremiah’s persistent ministry, Jerusalem’s leaders had no excuse for breaking their covenant with God and the people. For decades Jeremiah had made the case for biblical obedience in a variety effective ways. One of his unforgettable object-lessons involved the Recabites, a large extended family who had vowed not to drink wine, build homes or farm. They were committed to living in tents and grazing their cattle on the open range ever since their forefather, Jonadab, had pledged himself and his descendants to a nomadic way of life. For two and half centuries they had been resident aliens engaged in an austere effort to avoid social corruption.

Twelve years before the siege of Jerusalem and the episode of the broken covenant, during the reign of Jehoiakim (ca 601 B.C.), Jeremiah went to elaborate lengths to make a case for obedience. He was led by the Lord to set up the Recabites in a compromising situation. The Recabites had been forced to seek shelter in Jerusalem because of the Babylonian invasion (Jer 35:11). One could say that they had been forced into urban exile.

Jeremiah’s invitation to the Recabites to attend a reception in the temple must have come as a surprise. They were certainly not on anyone’s social list nor were they held in high regard. In fact it is more than likely that these country nomads were recipients of charity and were looked down upon by the ruling elite in Jerusalem. When they were ushered into a special room, they

must have wondered why. Important temple officials were in attendance and an abundant supply of wine made the occasion feel not only hospitable, but auspicious. It appears that Jeremiah had done everything he could think of to tempt these Recabites in urban exile to accept his toast and follow his invitation to “drink some wine” (35:5). But together they made a united stand, saying, “We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jonadab son of Recab gave us this command...” (35:6). In spite of all the social pressure Jeremiah had managed to exert, the Recabites calmly declined his invitation to drink the wine and used the incident and the setting to tell their story. Jeremiah must have been pleased. As he had hoped, his sting operation had failed and left him with a powerful object lesson which he immediately used as the Lord directed. His message to the people of Judah was not about wine or the nomadic lifestyle, but about simple, basic obedience to the word of the Lord. Jeremiah asked the Lord’s question, “Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?” and then gave the Lord’s verdict, “But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me” (35:14). For generations the Recabites had obeyed their long-deceased forefather’s one-time command, but the people of Jerusalem had not paid attention or listened to the living God’s on-going revelation.

Spiritual renewal involves taking God at his word and obeying what it says. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31). James warned, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says....Those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it—not forgetting what they have heard but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (Jam 1:22, 25). If people can be committed to professional oaths, fraternity pledges, legal contracts, club rules, and friendship agreements, then the followers of the risen Lord can and should be committed to obeying his commands.

Spiritual renewal takes to heart the Word of God (Jer 36:1-32).

Jeremiah traced Judah’s resistance to renewal to a critical incident that took place some fifteen years before the broken covenant and around three years before the Recabite object lesson. It occurred in the fifth year of Jehoiakim’s reign (605 B.C.) when Baruch, Jeremiah’s trusted assistant, went to “the house of the Lord on a day of fasting” to read all the words of the Lord that Jeremiah had dictated to him. Baruch did just what Jeremiah asked him to do, because the prophet was banned from the temple. Baruch read the entire scroll, which may have contained much of the material found in chapters 1-25, to “all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah” (36:9).

In the audience that day was Micaiah, son of Gemariah and grandson of Shaphan. Shaphan, as you may recall was the official who read the Law of God to King Josiah (2 Kings 22:3-23:3) fifteen years earlier. Now his grandson, who apparently shared his grandfather’s sensitivity to the word of the Lord, asked Baruch to read Jeremiah’s scroll again, this time to all the officials. “When they heard all these words, they looked at each other in fear and said to Baruch, ‘We must report all these words to the king’” (Jer 36:16). After confirming that Jeremiah was the author of the scroll and warning Baruch to take Jeremiah and go and hide, the officials reported to King Jehoiakim what had taken place. The king immediately sent for the scroll and Jehudi

read it out loud to the king. When Jehudi finished with a section, the king cut it off with a scribe's knife and threw it into the fireplace. In spite of three officials, including Gemariah, urging him not to, he systematically cut up the entire scroll and burned it. Then he ordered the arrest of Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. "But the Lord had hidden them" (36:26).

The parallels between Josiah's hearing of the word of the Lord and Jehoiakim shredding the word of the Lord are striking. In each case, the word of the Lord was read three times, first in the temple and then in the palace. When Josiah heard the word of the Lord he tore his robes (2 Ki 22:11), but when Jehoiakim heard the word of the Lord he tore it up (Jer 36:23). Josiah himself read the Book of the Covenant in the presence of all the people and "renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord" (2 Ki 23:3), but Jehoiakim sought to destroy the word and capture those who delivered it. If Jehoiakim had handled the word of the Lord faithfully it may have been a turning point for Judah that would have led to renewal. As it was, the king's reaction emboldened the officials who despised the word of the Lord, and discouraged those officials who might have responded obediently.

The picture we have of Jehoiakim entertaining his court officials with his brazen disrespect for the word of the Lord is not unlike today's biblical critics who build their reputations on disparaging the word of the Lord. They don't cut it up with a scribe's knife, they slice it up with their speculation and sophistry. Like Jehoiakim, they sit in judgment on the word of the Lord. They "burn the scroll" and feel they can get away with it without suffering judgment, but their rejection of God's word serves only to seal their fate.

Spiritual renewal accepts the plan of God (Jer 37:1-10,16-17; 38:14-39:7).

Jeremiah's chronicle of resistance returns to King Zedekiah in order to illustrate a much less brazen rejection of God's word than Jehoiakim had displayed, but no less real. In the end, it was just as devastating. Zedekiah and his attendants refused to pay any attention to the words of the Lord, but they continually sought Jeremiah's spiritual support and counsel (37:2). What is especially interesting in Zedekiah's case is that his quest for divine support and his appeal to the Lord's prophet was not for show. When he said to Jeremiah, "Please pray to the Lord our God for us," he truly meant it (37:3). His private consultations with Jeremiah and his assurances of protection confirm that he honestly wanted to know whether there was a word from the Lord (37:17). Three times in this section, we are told that Zedekiah sought the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. "I am going to ask you something," Zedekiah said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me" (38:14). But on all three occasions, Zedekiah heard a word from the Lord that he refused to accept. He wanted a word from the Lord that preached success, not judgment. He wanted a word that was compatible with his hopes and dreams, instead he received a message that confirmed that Judah was under judgment.

One of the factors that dissuaded Zedekiah from accepting the word of the Lord was his fear of what others thought of his authority and rule. If his secret meetings with Jeremiah proved that he was serious about knowing God's plan, they also indicated that he feared what others thought of him. For Zedekiah to accept God's word meant he would have to surrender and be perceived as a coward. Jeremiah said to the king, "This is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says,

‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down; your yourself will not escape from their hands’” (38:17-18). In the end, Zedekiah tried to escape, but he and his family were caught. He was forced to witness the execution of his sons before his eyes were put out and he was taken to Babylon in shackles (39:5-7).

The tragedy of Zedekiah is that he desperately wanted the will of God to conform to his own self-image and how he thought life should work out. He wanted the plan of God to be compatible with the cultural forces that demanded certain things from him. Most of all, he wanted success. He wanted assurance that he could follow his own plan and God would bless it. The dilemma of earnestly wanting the will of God to conform to our own hopes and dreams, but knowing that it doesn't, faces many professing believers today. People feel that they are sincerely turning to God, but they are not being honest with themselves. What they really want is for God to bless their hopes and plans. Imbedded in their sincerity is a duplicity that refuses to accept the will of God. They may be unaware of the negative spiritual dynamics at work in their souls, because their rejection of God's will is more by default than defiance. Zedekiah was not asking, “What is God's program on earth and how do I fit in?” Instead, he was asking, “How does God fit into my life?” His demise demonstrates that “God's will is not my culture, it is not individually tailored to fit the assumptions I hold dear in life.” In other words, “God's will does not ratify my present lifestyle” (John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution*, 35-36). “The world and its desires pass away,” wrote the apostle John, “but the person who does the will of God lives forever” (1 Jn 2:17).

Spiritual renewal resists evil (Jer 40:7-41:17).

In each case study presented by Jeremiah there was potential for spiritual renewal. God's blessings were evident in specific, practical ways: the law of God against slavery was proclaimed, the Recabites exemplified simple obedience, the word of the Lord was made known publicly, and the guidance of God was given personally. Following the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, appointed Gedaliah, Shaphan's grandson and Micaiah's cousin to be governor. Gedaliah represented God's blessing in a time of crisis. He stepped into a leadership vacuum and followed Jeremiah's counsel. He did what Zedekiah could not bring himself to do. He advised the people, “Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you” (40:9; 2 Kings 25:24). Gedaliah's sensible, selfless leadership brought stability to the region and encouraged many of the Jews who had fled to other countries to return to Judah. Their homecoming was marked by security and success, and we are told that “they harvested an abundance of wine and summer fruit” (40:12).

However, Gedaliah's leadership suffered a fatal flaw. He was naive about the forces of evil plotting against him. Johanan, one of the guerilla fighters still operating in the open country, came to Gedaliah at Mizpah to warn him that Baalis king of the Ammonites had sent Ishmael to assassinate him (40:13-14). Johanan requested permission to kill Ishmael. He reasoned with Gedaliah, saying, “Why should he take your life and cause all the Jews who are gathered around you to be scattered and the remnant of Judah to perish?” But Gedaliah refused to even consider

the possibility, saying to Johanan, “Don’t do such a thing! What you are saying about Ishmael is not true” (40:15-16). If Gedaliah had not so quickly dismissed the threat, but had sought the Lord’s guidance and consulted with Jeremiah, he might have spared not only his life but the lives of many others (41:2-7). Gedaliah was guilty of wanting to believe the best about everyone, so much so, that he forgot that he was in a life and death power struggle.

Spiritual renewal heightens our awareness that we are in a struggle that is not just against flesh and blood, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and the against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). It is wise to be discerning and not naively trusting in people. Jesus exemplified this cautious reserve when he refused to entrust himself to people, because he knew human nature (Jn 2:24). The apostle Paul emphasized that the grace that brings salvation teaches us to say “‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope...” (Titus 2:11). This requires diligence to uphold what is good and vigilance to put down what is evil. For the sake of others, as well as ourselves, we cannot afford to be like Gedaliah. Jesus’ warned, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16). We need to be on guard and heed the apostle’s admonition, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21).

Spiritual renewal follows the will of God (Jer 42:1-43:13).

The man of the hour was Johanan who rescued all of the people that Ishmael had captured at Mizpah (41:11-17). Fearing retaliation from Babylon for Ishmael’s assassination of Gedaliah, Johanan planned to lead the people to Egypt. But before leaving, he “and all the people from the least to the greatest approached Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, “Please hear our petition and pray to the Lord your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. Pray that the Lord your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do” (42:2). Unlike Gedaliah who did not consult Jeremiah when he should have, Johanan took the initiative to ask for prayer and to seek the Lord’s will. Jeremiah took their request seriously, saying, “I have heard you. I will certainly pray to the Lord your God as you have requested; I will tell you everything the Lord says and will keep nothing back from you” (42:4). They appear to respond with utmost sincerity, saying, “May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the Lord your God sends you to tell us. Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the Lord our God, to whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the Lord our God” (42:5-6). Tragically, however, their piety was a cover for wilful disobedience. They approached Jeremiah with all the right words, but it soon became evident that their minds were made up. For ten days Jeremiah prayed and the people waited for a word from the Lord. Johanan must have felt that with each passing day the danger increased of the Babylonian army overrunning them. Finally on the tenth day, Jeremiah called the people together and delivered what the Lord had made clear to him. The message of the Lord Almighty was emphatic, “Stay in this land...Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon.” The warning was absolutely clear, “All who are determined to go to Egypt to settle there you will die by the sword, famine and plague” (42:7-22). By the end of the message it became clear to Jeremiah that the people were determined to go

to Egypt. They wanted the will of God in theory but not in practice. Instead of trusting that the Lord would protect them, they wanted to escape to Egypt. The drive for self-preservation and the appeal of the land of Egypt was too great for them. In their arrogance, they accused Jeremiah of being set up by Baruch. “You are lying!” they said. “The Lord our God has not sent you to say, ‘You must not go to Egypt to settle there.’ But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonian, so that they may kill us or carry us into exile into Babylon” (43:2-3).

After all his years of faithful ministry, impeccable integrity and fulfilled prophecy, how could anyone accuse Jeremiah of lying? He was the one prophet whose word had consistently been proven true. Time and again he delivered the word of the Lord even though doing so endangered his life. Nevertheless he was led away to Egypt to finish his days in a foreign land among a condemned people. But even though the people turned against Jeremiah and made their accusations personal and vindictive, he remained focused on the message of the Lord. Their disobedience, hypocrisy and duplicity did not break his spirit or silent his prophetic voice. Even at the entrance to Pharaoh’s palace in Tahpanhes, Jeremiah was still giving object lessons and declaring the word of the Lord (43:8-13). If there is anyone who exemplifies what it means to seek and obey the will of the Lord it is Jeremiah. While others paid lip service to the Lord, Jeremiah loved the Lord his God with all his heart, mind, strength, and soul. It is so easy to use a show of piety to cover up our selfishness and wilful disobedience that we often fool ourselves.

Spiritual renewal is faithful to the end (Jer 44:1-30).

It is disheartening to contemplate Jeremiah’s final years in Egypt. In some ways the last chapter of his life is reminiscent of the beginning of his prophetic ministry when he attacked the pagan rituals performed in Jerusalem. After all these years the people were still practicing pagan religious rituals and Jeremiah was still tasked with declaring the word of the Lord, saying, “Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!” (44:4). Only now, the people substituted Egyptian paganism for Canaanite practices. More than thirty years of prophetic ministry, followed by God’s devastating judgment against Judah, showed little or no impact on the Jewish remnant in Egypt. If anything the refugees were convinced that their suffering was due to the fact that they had not been “burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her” (44:18). They looked back at Manasseh’s fifty-five year rule as a “golden age” of prosperity, power and pleasure. They became convinced in Egypt that fidelity to Yahweh was a big mistake. It was better to be broad minded and religiously inclusive, than to be narrowly focused on Yahweh. This must have been devastating to Jeremiah, but he did not give up or give in. Even when the Jews throughout Egypt agreed together to reject Jeremiah, saying, “We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord!” the prophet continued to deliver the word of the Lord. Jeremiah had the last word, because he preached the Living Word:

“Go ahead then, do what you promised! Keep your vows! But hear the word of the Lord, all Jews living in Egypt: ‘I swear by my great name,’ says the Lord, ‘that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my name or swear, ‘As surely as the Sovereign Lord lives.’” (Jer 44:25-26).

Jeremiah's life reminds us that *faithfulness to the end authenticates Faith from the beginning*. He ended his ministry in virtually the same way he began, by denouncing idolatry, upholding the truth of Yahweh, and calling for basic obedience.

Baruch means *Blessed*

In a small epilogue at the end of this chronicle of spiritual resistance, Baruch offers a personal note dated from the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.). He records an exchange between Jeremiah and himself that occurred around the time he prepared a scroll of Jeremiah's dictation and read it at the temple (36:1-32). The bond between these two men must have been close. When Jeremiah purchased a field in Anathoth from his cousin, he entrusted the land deed to Baruch as a pledge that God would restore the land (32:11-16). When Johanan and the rest of the refugees rejected Jeremiah's counsel, they blamed it on Baruch, possibly because he had ties to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Baruch's brother was a "staff officer" to the king (51:59). In any case their relationship was perceived as close by friends and enemies alike (43:3). Through the years Baruch had risked his life to deliver Jeremiah's message because he believed it was the word of the Lord. He was a faithful assistant and friend and more than likely had a hand in how the book of Jeremiah was arranged. If anyone has the reputation for enduring a long-term lonely ministry it is Jeremiah, but even he did not go it alone. The Lord provided in Baruch a close friend, a colleague and a fellow-sufferer. In a word Baruch was a blessing to Jeremiah. Together they remind us of Jesus' words, "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20).

Baruch's personal word, here at the end, is both endearing and instructive. He reflects on the time he was at the end of his rope and he complained to the Lord God in the presence of Jeremiah. "Woe to me!" Baruch lamented. "The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest" (45:3). He then recalls Jeremiah's forceful spiritual direction, "This is what the Lord says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the Lord, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life" (45:4-5). Early in their ministry together, Jeremiah reminded Baruch that their lives were part of God's great Salvation History story. They had been given a difficult mission, one that excluded selfish ambition and private agendas. Baruch may have been comparing his role as Jeremiah's scribe to that of his brother who was a public official. Be that as it may, Jeremiah stressed that their personal stories were only important insofar as they related to God's redemptive story. Baruch was being asked to put his life on the line, even as he was being promised that God would protect his life. Jeremiah reminded Baruch that it was not in spite of but because of a long and difficult ministry that he was blessed. The same holds true today for the disciples of the Lord Jesus.