



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Comments Papers

Expounding biblical concepts on the world scene today

August 2013

LIVING VICTORIOUSLY (IN BABYLON!)

At the beginning of this year in my quiet times of intercession the word "Babylon" continually came to me. I knew that the Lord was speaking to me about the difficult times that lay ahead. I wrote a paper entitled "Living in Babylon" which we published in our Biblical Comments Series in March 2013. In this I said, "Many Christians in Britain today are worried that they are seeing the end of our Christian civilisation. One after another the pillars of society, established upon biblical principles, are being swept away." This was in the context of the battle to preserve the biblical foundations of marriage as between a man and a woman which is part of God's act of Creation. I also said that although I would keep fighting against the Same-Sex Marriage Bill, prophetically I knew that it would become law because long ago God had said to our nation, "You have chosen the way you wish to go and I will let you go until you recognise the mess that you have made of everything".

Jeremiah 29

That word "Babylon" has never left me, and recently I believe God has been saying "Teach my people to live in Babylon". I have hesitated in speaking about this publicly until the message became clearer. Last month I felt led to study Jeremiah 29 - the word of the Lord sent to the exiles in Babylon. It was in a letter from Jeremiah who had been prophesying in Jerusalem for some 30 years warning that God would not defend the City unless there was repentance and a total change in the moral and spiritual life of the nation. Jeremiah had stood at the entrance to the Temple describing the sins of the nation which were detestable to God - the lack of trust, the injustice and oppression, the violence and idolatry and immorality among the leaders and the people. There were idolatrous shrines on every street corner in Jerusalem and all the people were involved; *"The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods and provoke me to anger... declares the Lord"* (Jeremiah 7.18).

Let my people go!

The sinfulness of the nation reached such a height that when Jeremiah continued to pray for the people God said to him, *"Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!"* This is a reversal of the command given to Moses to report to Pharaoh, *"Let my people go!"* It was a command to release the people of Israel from slavery. This new command was to send them away **into slavery**. The last chapter of Jeremiah describes the fall of Jerusalem after a long siege when the Babylonian soldiers finally broke through the city defences and began their slaughter and destruction. I find it difficult to read this chapter, it is so terrible. King Zedekiah's family were killed, one after another in front of him and then his eyes were gouged out, so that was the last thing he ever saw upon earth. But Jeremiah had been warning for 40 years that this would happen.

Zedekiah's Revolt

Ten years earlier, Jerusalem had surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar (596 BC) and many of the leading citizens of Jerusalem had been taken into slavery in Babylon. The City was not destroyed on that occasion but taxes had to be paid to Babylon. They did this for about 8 years and then foolishly, Zedekiah decided to revolt against Babylon, with the inevitable disastrous result which Jeremiah had said would happen. He had prophesied that the Babylonian Empire would last 70 years and that the people of Jerusalem should simply accept this and wait for God to overthrow Babylon.

Settle Down

Jeremiah's letter, in chapter 29, was addressed to the first wave of 3,023 captives taken into exile, 10 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. He said that this was a word from the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel who had taken the people of Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. The command was *"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease."*

It would have been so easy for the people to bewail their fate and simply give up hope and die in a foreign land. They were already depressed; their nation was defeated and the enemy was boasting that their gods were more powerful than the God of Israel. The priests and prophets, with the exception of Jeremiah, had told them that Jerusalem had been given to them by God; and God would always defend it because the Temple was the place of his dwelling. Only Jeremiah had warned that God would not defend an un-holy people. Was this now the end for them?

By the Rivers of Babylon

Jeremiah's letter clearly stated that it was God who had allowed the enemy to prevail and it was he who had taken the people to Babylon because of their unfaithfulness. Now they must be faithful to him even though they were surrounded by unbelievers who mocked the God of Israel and forced them to sing their sacred songs for entertainment. *"By the Rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... Our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing as one of the songs of Zion!'"* (Psalm 137) but Jeremiah said it was essential to preserve the faith in a hostile environment. They were not only to build houses and settle down for a long stay but to increase in number and, above all, to teach their children to know the God of Israel, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and would one day overthrow Babylon and bring them back to Jerusalem.

Pray for Babylon

Then came the most amazing statement, *"Pray to the Lord for Babylon"*. **Pray for Babylon?** This was unthinkable. Yet clearly Jeremiah was touching the very heart of God as would be affirmed by Jesus 500 years later when he talked the crowds, *"You have heard that it was said, 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."*

Peace and Prosperity

Jeremiah said, *"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I (God) have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."* In order to make it abundantly clear that this was not just a friendly word from Jeremiah but a command from the God, he added. *"Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says."* He then gave them a solemn promise from God, *"This is what the Lord says: 'When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'."*

The people listened to this promise and obeyed the word of the Prophet Jeremiah and God abundantly prospered them. Ten years later, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of its inhabitants, there were only 832 people left in Jerusalem to be transported to Babylon; although 5 years later another 745 were taken, totalling some 4,600. (Jeremiah 52)

God's Abundant Blessing

But compare this with the number who returned to Jerusalem at the end of the exile after 57 years in Babylon 596 BC to 539 BC. (The 70 years Jeremiah had prophesied was not the duration of the exile but the time the Babylonian Empire would survive from the beginning of its power.) Ezra 64 lists the numbers of those who came back to Jerusalem. *"The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 men servants and maidservants; and they also had 200 men and women singers. They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys."* What an amazing procession this must have been! And what an incredible experience to be part of this huge company trekking 1,000 miles across difficult terrain to reach Jerusalem. But this was the measure of their faith in God in their determination to rebuild Jerusalem in fulfilment of the promises God had given to them.

Community of Believers

The message for us today is that God is warning us that we are heading into days when it will not be easy to be a Christian. We will be surrounded by those who are hostile to the gospel in an increasingly secular-humanist society and we have to learn to live in Babylon. We have to be careful not to give offence but to seek to make our witness by loving those who do not share our faith. The Lord is promising that he will be with his people and will strengthen us in testing times. But we must seek to support one another and ensure that everyone is part of a community of believers; and that these little communities are linked together (Maybe secretly) to share resources and bear one another's burdens as they did in the days of the Early Church when they had to face the cruel persecution of the Roman Empire.

Live Victoriously

The word of the Lord to his people is that they should not be dismayed because he is allowing the secular-humanists to have their way which will increasingly bring judgement upon the nation. But in due time the day of the Lord will come when the man of lawlessness is fully exposed (2 Thessalonians 2.3) and there will be a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God which will bring a great harvest for the Kingdom. In the meantime God wants his people to live victoriously! To live as a company of believers who are already in the Kingdom - knowing that God's purposes will be fulfilled. **His Kingdom will come.**

I don't believe it will happen in my lifetime, but I do believe the tide will turn in the lifetime of my grandchildren. And this is why it is essential that our children and grandchildren should know the word of the Lord and be filled with the power of his Spirit to enable them to stand firm in the faith.

This paper comes to you as part of the Issachar Ministries Intercessory news e-mailing August 2013

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c Dr Clifford Hill

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