

# AM Jeremiah 24 The Sweet and the Sour Figs

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 28 July 2024

Preacher: Mr Michael Topple

[ 0 : 00 ]     God's Word this morning, friends, is taken from Jeremiah, the book of the prophet Jeremiah, at chapter 24 in our church Bibles. That can be found on page 789.

And this is God's Word, and so we hear it, we pray in the same way that we considered earlier. That this Word may become to us, the burning bush, the way in which we can encounter the Lord.

After Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen and the metal workers, and had brought them into Babylon, the Lord showed me this vision.

Behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like first ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.

And the Lord said to me, what do you see, Jeremiah? And I said, I said, figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.

[ 1 : 34 ]     Then the word of the Lord came to me, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place, into the land of the Chaldeans.

I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down. I will plant them, and not pluck them up.

I will give them a heart, to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. For they shall return to me with their whole heart.

But thus says the Lord, Like the bad figs, that are so bad that they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah, king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them, and their fathers.

[ 2 : 58 ]     This, friends, is God's word. Let's pray. Grant Almighty. This morning's reading, friends, from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, we are transported back to the year 597 BC to see a vision given the prophet from the Lord himself.

The vision related to an invasion, which had occurred between 598 and 597 BC, when the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, sacked Judah and took away many of her people into exile.

In one of the most specific illustrations I think I've ever read in a Bible commentary, we are told that the city surrendered to the Babylonians on the 15th or the 16th of March in the year 597 BC.

Now, bearing in mind I often forget my father's birthday, I think the way that they've remembered and worked out that date is quite amazing. Now, we can read of the invasion that took place in Two Kings.

Two Kings, chapter 24. It's a very chapter 24 day today. Two Kings, chapter 24, from verse 10, where we can read, At that time, the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged.

[ 4 : 27 ] And Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to the city while his servants were besieging it. And Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother, and his servants, and his officials, and his palace officials.

The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign, and carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which Solomon, king of Israel, had made, as the Lord had foretold.

After this surrender, a number of key people were taken away into captivity in Babylon. And as we heard in Jeremiah, these people were the king, so the king's son, Jeconiah, who was Jehoiachin's son, together with the officials, the craftsmen, and the metal workers.

Basically, the key people in any ancient civilization. Without these people, of course, they had no, what we would know as civil servants.

Without the metal workers, they would have no currency, they would have no gold for making temple items. And yeah, they were pretty stuck without these people.

[ 5 : 49 ] And having taken these people away, King Nebuchadnezzar installed a puppet monarch in the form of Mataniah, who was Jehoiachin's uncle, and changed his name to Zedekiah.

Again, we can find that in 2 Kings, chapter 24. The invasion and the captivity, we can read later on in Jeremiah, took place because of the sins of the people of Judah.

And so, in an attempt, or in a way of punishing these people, the Lord used Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who he describes in chapter 25 as my servant, to sack the city, to deport its key people, leaving only the poor.

Even the king's son was taken, and he was descended from the house of David. The exile, we would later read in chapter 25, would last for 70 years.

However, in this morning's vision, in chapter 24, which we heard read, the Lord showed Jeremiah these two baskets of figs, standing before the temple of the Lord, as though they were before the altar itself.

[ 7 : 02 ] Now, the people of the time believed that it was the temple where God manifested himself. So, we can understand this to mean that the two baskets of figs, which were placed before the temple, were being looked over and judged by God, in the same way that a judge would sit in judgment in a courtroom.

The Lord was judging the contents of these two baskets, one basket containing good figs, and the other, a rancid or bad ones. The good figs, said the Lord, represented the exiles, the people who had been taken away from their homeland, whereas the bad figs, which we can read in 24 verse 8, were so bad that they cannot even be eaten, represented Zedekiah, the puppet king, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remained there, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

We sang, didn't we, in our second item of praise this morning, from Psalm 18, those words, With faithful people you keep faith, and to the blameless you are good.

With pure men you yourself are pure, but with the crooked you are shrewd. The Lord was enacting his judgment upon these people, because for so long they had been disregarding his ways.

The Lord then goes on to explain how these good figs, the exiles taken into the land of Judah, sorry, taken into the land of Babylon, captives, had only been taken there because he had willed it.

[ 8 : 40 ] The Lord God himself had, in effect, sent them into exile. Everything that had happened, the fighting, the destruction, the ransacking of the temple, the exile, had all happened as part of the Lord's plan to bring his people to repentance.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, did not win the battle because of his strength, or the strength of his armies, but because the Lord was using him as his servant, his chess piece, if you like, in the game.

However, the exiles, from this vision, should be encouraged, because, said the Lord, one day, they would return to their native land. One day, as we know, even the temple of the Lord would be rebuilt.

This, of course, we can read of in the book of Ezra, chapter 2, where king Cyrus decided, after this period of captivity, to release the captives, to send them back to their homeland with all the treasures that had been looted from the temple.

This change in fortunes, however, would not come about because of the exile's power, or their strength, or their might, but because they would experience a change of heart.

[ 10 : 04 ] They would repent. God says, in chapter 24, verse 7, I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord.

Now, this shows us two things. Firstly, we can recognise that their restoration would only come about through repentance. The exiled people of Judah could only return to their homeland once they realised the gravity of their sin and truly repented.

The word repent, as used in the Bible, means to turn around, to change course, to change direction. And until the exiles did this, there was no hope for them in the eyes of God.

We can see something of this from the prophet Hosea, who pleaded, Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

Take with you words and return to the Lord. It was the people's iniquity, the people's sin, that had caused their destruction and their stumbling.

[ 11 : 11 ] For too long, they had been walking not with the Lord, but away from him. And now their sins had finally caught up with them. If they ever hoped to return from their enforced exile, they would have to repent and come to the Lord seeking his mercy.

The second thing we can learn from I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord is that this heart of repentance could only come about thanks to the Lord's action in their lives.

Note how God did not say, and they will have a heart to know that I am the Lord, but rather, I will give them a heart. It was only through God's gracious working in the lives of these exiles that they would find it in their hearts to turn away from their wickedness and cleave to him for forgiveness.

Without the Lord God making the first move, they would have remained in their defiant ways. They would have been ever lost to darkness. In Deuteronomy, chapter 30, at verse 6, we can find these words, It was only through loving the Lord that the people could live, and it was only through the Lord circumcising their hearts and the hearts of their offspring, literally cutting away all that was sinful and cankerous that they could ever love the Lord at all.

In Christian theology, this concept of God moving first is known as prevenient grace. It's the teaching that before you and I were ever able to know God, to love him, to come to him, he had first made a move in us.

[ 13 : 07 ] He had chosen to reveal himself to us and plant that seed of love in our hearts. This, friends, is why some people, try as you might with evangelism or encouraging them to come to the Lord, will never respond.

It is not down solely to yours and my bad evangelism, although, let's face it, many of us, myself included, have much room for improvement there. But for reasons best known only to God, he has not placed that spark of faith in their hearts.

The people of Judah, who had been taken away into exile, could not return until they had repented. They could not repent until the Lord had changed their hearts. Once he'd done this, once the people's hearts had been changed and once they were truly seeking the Lord's forgiveness, then they could follow the pattern laid down in Joel, chapter 2.

Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster.

Return with your heart, rend your heart and not your garments. It was not a material repentance that the Lord needed from these captives, but their hearts to be changed.

[ 14 : 36 ] Reading this promise here and now, indeed, maybe hearing it even shared at the time, the exiles would have jumped up and down with joy at the prospect of being returned to their native land.

After all, they had been dragged away from it, maybe kicking and screaming for all we know, and here was a chance for them to get back. We all know the sorrow expressed in Psalm 137 as the psalmist remembered his homeland by Babel's streams we sat and wept when Zion we thought upon.

In midst thereof we hanged our harps the willow trees upon. Oh, how the Lord's song shall we sing within a foreign land if thee, Jerusalem, I forget, still part from my right hand.

But for them to focus on their promised return to Judah alone would be to only understand half of the promise. Yes, the promise was there that one day they would again inhabit the land the Lord had given them that they would one day be home, but there was something else, something far more important.

Let's read the promise again, Jeremiah 24, verses 6 to 7. I will set my eyes on them for good. I will bring them back to this land, I will build them up and not tear them down, I will plant them and not uproot them.

[ 15 : 56 ] I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord and they shall be my people and I will be their God for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

This was, if you like, an exodus, covenantal return to the Lord building on those themes that we had seen earlier in the Old Testament. Not only did the Lord promise to return them home, but he promised to change them inwardly.

In many ways, this, friends, is the most exciting bit of the promise. Yes, returning to the land is good, but, says John Calvin, their much more excellent favour is that the Lord would inwardly change and reform their hearts so that they would not only return to their own country, but would also return to him.

The exiles, through their enforced time away from the land of Judah, were being punished for their sinfulness and were being transformed more into the likeness of God. On their return, they would return with changed hearts and spirits.

But also found within Jeremiah's vision was that basket of bad or sour figs. These figs represented the people who remained, the ones who were not dragged away into exile.

[ 17 : 20 ] These people, as I've said, included the puppet king, Mataniah, who was renamed Zedekiah, the people who were left living in the destroyed city, and those who, on seeing the oncoming storm, had fled into neighbouring Egypt for safety.

These people, said God, were bad figs. They were good for nothing but throwing out. Last Lord's Day at Down and Vale, I went downstairs into the hall with the church officer after evening worship and discovered that we'd been infested with a plague of flies.

They were buzzing all around our heads. If you've been in the church hall, you'll know there were big pillars. They were crawling up and down the pillars. We couldn't work out from where they had come, but they were everywhere.

Upon further examination, we found that somebody had left a piece of cabbage in a paper recycling bin and it was slowly rotting away and, of course, the flies were loving it. When I foolishly opened the bin lid, the flies all swarmed out and buzzed past me and into the hall.

I'm reminded of that when I see this description of these bad figs. We don't know especially why they were bad, but given that they were standing in the open in the temple, we can perhaps imagine those flies buzzing around them, the stench as he went near them.

[ 18 : 36 ] This is not the sort of thing that God would have wanted in his holy place. So why then were these figs so bad? Why then were these people so bad? Was it because they'd done something more sinful than those who were taken away?

Well, friends, the word of God doesn't say that. But what we can see is that whereas the exiled Judeans would one day repent and return to the Lord, those people who were left apparently had no sense of repentance or guilt for the sins that they had committed.

Don't forget, as we can see in Jeremiah chapter 21, it was their collective or combined sin that had led them to this destruction in the first place. On seeing their friends and kindred being dragged away, these people should have put on sackcloth and ashes and repented, imploring the Lord to have mercy upon them for their sinfulness.

They should have been shaken awake from their spiritual apathy and returned to the Lord. But they didn't. Those who were left assumed, I suspect, that because they weren't taken away into exile that they had somehow been favoured or been spared.

Surely the favour of the Lord is upon us, they may well have said. We weren't taken away like they were. And yet, friends, spared, they were not. Because as we can read only a little later in 2 Kings, and this is a slightly long reading, so please do follow it.

[ 20 : 07 ] It's 2 Kings chapter 25, verses 1 through 21. We will see what happened to those who may have felt they were fortunate in being left behind.

And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came with his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it.

And they built siege works around it. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, who, let's not forget, was the one who was installed in the first invasion.

On the ninth day of the fourth month, the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by way of the gate between the two walls by the king's garden.

And the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah, but the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him.

[ 21 : 12 ] Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, Zerudan, the captain of the bodyguard and servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

And he burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem, every great house, he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem and the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserted who had deserted to the king of Babylon together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, carried into exile.

But the captain left some of the poorest in the land to be vinedressers and plowmen. And we could read on as there is yet more and more destruction. God was true to his word, friends.

Those who remained, those who did not repent or change their ways, became, as in verse 9 of the prophecy, a reproach, a byword, a curse.

[ 22 : 35 ] Incidentally, all of those four words has its own special significance. Each of them looked back to a time in the life of the people of Israel and each of them should have served as a warning to those who remained.

Calvin explains it by saying, the meaning of this vision is that there was no reason for the ungodly to flatter themselves that they stayed in their wickedness even though God did bear with them for a time.

And friends, I don't know about you but this leads me to ask myself and indeed ask of you this morning what kind of fear you and I are. I suspect that had you and I been among those who remained in Judah after that Babylonian captivity as we had watched our fellow countrymen being taken away into exile we may have stood there and mopped our brows and breathed a sigh of relief that we were not the ones who had been taken.

I suspect that we like those who remained even though we had seen the signs would have remained ignorant to the warning that the Lord had given.

Even though the Lord had given warning after warning culminating in that ultimate warning or sign of having the city sacked by a foreign power and allowing part of their nation to be taken away those who remained were stubborn.

[ 24 : 02 ] They did not cease to add sins upon sins. The events which should have served as a great warning to those who remained were soon forgotten. As the people continued to get on with their own lives with little interest in what the Lord had said or done the Lord warned Jeremiah that this would happen and as we've heard only a few years later it did.

Friends if you see bad things happening around you I beseech you not to allow yourself to fall into a cruel complacency and think I'm alright Jack and get on as though nothing has happened.

If however you and I had been among those who were taken into exile in Babylon we may well have thought that all was lost we may well have sang with the psalmist how can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land we may have felt that there was no hope for us or our descendants we would have been rightly been punished for the sins that we had committed there was nothing more to it we may have thought and yet this too was far from the case yes the people were facing God's punishment for their sins but there was a great hope ahead of them in fact this time of affliction this time of exile was all part of the Lord's sovereign plan to lead them back into their land and back into relationship with him God had his hand on what was going on he had used King Nebuchadnezzar for his purposes and he had a plan for the exiled community by turning their hearts to repentance the Lord was giving the exiles that prompt that they needed to return to him there is in

Christianity that wonderful word providence which we often use to describe the Lord's will often though providence has a rather positive and almost cuddly connotation doesn't it we think oh in God's providence all will be well and yet this passage of scripture shows us that sometimes the Lord's providence in our lives can be difficult to bear maybe there are those among us this morning who can attest to that truth indeed even in my own as yet fairly short life I've undergone some difficult points in my Christian walk and it is only upon looking back that I realised how the Lord not only had his hand on me but was using the difficult situation and those who were causing me such distress as his servants just as he used King Nebuchadnezzar maybe maybe as we think on this we can consider the lives of Daniel and of

Joseph both men who were forced or sold into slavery and exile and yet in both cases used mightily by the Lord Joseph when the end of his life was drawing near was even given the grace to say to his brothers you meant this for evil but God meant it for good friends if you are in the midst of a difficult trial this morning it is worth reminding yourself that all things are in God's hands and whether we understand it now or not when we come before him face to face all things will be revealed and his providential love in our lives will make all things clear perhaps too we can remember the all too familiar words of Psalm 23 reminding ourselves of how in verse for the Lord is with us his sheep even in the valley of the shadow of death he does not stop us going into the valley he does not swoop in to remove us but instead walks alongside us the king of love alongside us as a friend and travelling companion and I'm sure each point each of us sorry has at one point or another said how come

[ 28 : 39 ] Lord you let so and so get away with that as we can see from these bad fids just because the Lord does not immediately reward us after our sins just because God does not immediately settle the score there is nobody in this life who will escape divine justice as Christians we are so utterly amazingly blessed that when we come before God's divine judgment seat we can plead the Lord Jesus' blood Jeremiah's vision of the good and bad the sweet and sour fids is a startling reminder for us that with God not as all as it seems the bad fids were the ones who in earthly terms at least appeared to have the luck they were not taken away in bondage but instead survived the attack and were left in their homeland as they waved goodbye to their countrymen they may well have felt very pleased with themselves and yet their luck was up those good fids however were those who had suffered in this life but were ultimately rewarded with both restoration to their homeland but more importantly restoration with the

Lord through the renewing of their hearts many good Christian people will in this life suffer great adversity but God has a purpose that will ultimately work for their good for we know to quote Romans 8 that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose what may have appeared to be a catastrophe will ultimately be seen as a blessing friends we should not therefore be overwhelmed when apparent calamity overtakes us but instead remember how the Lord can and does use such situations for his good and as part of his plan let us always trust in his providential love which he promises us in the person of Jesus Christ to whom be glory now and forever amen as we can get let's let's interview a one