

JEREMIAH 29

TWO LETTERS TO THE CAPTIVES

Nebuchadnezzar had taken King Jeconiah to Babylon in 597 BC, and established Jeconiah's uncle Zedekiah on the throne of Judah. Some of the false prophets were among those people who were also taken into exile at that time, while Jeremiah still remained in his own country. These false prophets had suffered the fate of their nation, but they immediately endeavored to raise the hopes of their fellow-exiles by prophesying a speedy return. "It is of no use," was the essence of their words, "to build houses, or plant gardens, or enter into marriage-relationships; for in a short time, we shall all be back again in Jerusalem!" The ringleaders of these false prophets were two men named Zedekiah and Ahab – men whose lives were grossly immoral, and who were made an example of by being roasted alive (verses 21-23). Nevertheless, these deceitful words had a bad effect upon the Jewish exiles who heard them, for they refused to settle down in contentment with the conditions of their captivity.

Jeremiah, therefore, wrote a letter; and he entrusted its delivery to two men of high rank – Elasah and Gemariah – who were apparently on friendly terms with him. King Zedekiah sent these men to Babylon, probably in order to give Nebuchadnezzar assurances of his submission; and they took Jeremiah's missive along with them, which was addressed to the Jewish exiles there in Babylon. "Yield to the will of God!" was the theme of this letter. Kindly but firmly, the prophet told these people that their captivity would not soon terminate, as the false prophets among them wished them to believe. Therefore, he advised them to build houses, settle down, plant gardens, and raise families. As for the false prophets among the exiles, this letter warned the people against them (verses 8-9); for they predicted a speedy return to the land of Judah, even though God's determination was that the captivity would last for 70 years. At the end of that period, however, He would surely cause them to come home again (verses 10-11); for even in their distress, His thoughts toward them were not thoughts of evil, but of peace. And if they would only return to Him with all their heart, He would be found by them; and He would turn again their captivity, just as He had promised to do! (verses 12-14)

How full of tenderness and compassion were those words! And they are still applicable to ourselves, even today! God's thoughts to us are not – as false teachers of false religions frequently affirm – thoughts of evil; but rather, they are thoughts of goodness and blessings. Although He sometimes chastises His children for their sins, He will at last fulfill their highest expectations and hopes!

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ A letter to the captives who were already in Babylon, in which they are exhorted to be patient and composed – verses 1-19
- ❖ Another letter, in which judgments are denounced against the false prophets who deceived them – verses 20-32

He will not fail to do this for all those who – in repentance and faith – earnestly seek Him. He will blot out their transgressions, receive them into His favor, and bring them into a peaceful land where they shall dwell securely forever.

This letter from Jeremiah caused great excitement among the exiles. When Shemaiah, one of the false prophets in Babylon, heard this letter, he wrote in hot haste to Zephaniah, who was the high priest back in Jerusalem. He complained that Zephaniah and the other priests were not restraining Jeremiah as they should have been doing (verses 24-28). He demanded that the prophet of God should be set in the stocks, with his head in a collar, like a madman; for in his opinion, Jeremiah was nothing but a crazy lunatic, whom Zephaniah ought to have shut up in prison long before. However, when the high priest received this letter from Shemaiah, he contented himself with merely reading it to Jeremiah (verse 29). And then the Word of the Lord came to the prophet immediately – bidding him to reply by sending a second letter to the Babylonian exiles (verses 30-32). In this letter, the Lord declared that Shemaiah had uttered



falsehood and taught rebellion; and it was stated that he would be punished in such a way that he would not live to see the good things that God would do for His people, and that he would not have so much as one son to perpetuate his name among his people.

While Jeremiah was exercising his ministry of destruction, in utter loneliness and isolation, his heart must have often misgiven him. He loved his country with all the passionate patriotism of which the Jewish nature was capable, and which expresses itself so plaintively in the Book of Lamentations. For forty years, he was constantly in antagonism with the sins and vices of his people; but the fountain of tears within his soul seems to have never dried up or become frozen over. He preached the terrors of Sinai with all the pathos of Calvary! It was because Jeremiah loved his people so much, that he felt grief over their souls so keenly. And the Lord provided Jeremiah with an ally and a comrade! In the midst of the exiles who were already in Babylon, Ezekiel arose and uttered the same messages – although they were clothed in the superb imagery of his gorgeous imagination. He, too, denounced his people's sins, advised them to settle in the land of exile, and spoke of the certain doom of the people and the city of Jerusalem. In the mouth of these two witnesses, every word was established! Like well-tuned instruments, they symphonized – just as our Savior said that kindred souls must do when they unite together concerning some heavenly gift. And the devil made war against them both, just as he will always do against the Lord's faithful witnesses. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had no easy task, for they were hated by those whom their words tormented. But God has long ago called them to His heavenly throne and bestowed upon them His welcome and reward!

Lord, we praise You that despite all our rebellious ways, yet Your thoughts toward us are not like our thoughts; for they are thoughts of peace, and not of evil! Amen.