

Jeremiah

Chapter 34

Zedekiah to Die in Babylon

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion and all the peoples were fighting against Jerusalem and all of its cities: 2 “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. 3 You shall not escape from his hand but shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand. You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face. And you shall go to Babylon.’ 4 Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you: ‘You shall not die by the sword. 5 You shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people shall burn spices for you and lament for you, saying, “Alas, lord!”’ For I have spoken the word, declares the LORD.” 6 Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, 7 when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained. 8 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, 9 that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. 10 And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. 11 But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves. 12 The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 13 “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, 14 ‘At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years; you must set him free from your service.’ But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. 15 You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name, 16 but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves. 17 “Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, declares the LORD. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. 18 And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts— 19 the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. 20 And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. 21 And Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives, into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon which has withdrawn from you. 22 Behold, I will command, declares the LORD, and will bring them back to this city. And they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire. I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.”

34:1–35:19† The first major division of the book (chs. 2–35) now draws to a close. Jeremiah’s warnings and exhortations to Judah are concluded with a historical appendix (chs. 34–35), a technique used to conclude the third major division of the book (chs. 39–45) as well (see note on 45:1–5). Ch. 52 serves as a fitting historical appendix to the entire book. (CSB)

34:1–22 The chapter divides naturally into two parts (vv. 1–7 and 8–22), each of which dates to 588 B.C. (see notes on vv. 7, 21–22). (CSB)

34:1–7 Jeremiah’s warning to King Zedekiah parallels the prophet’s similar admonition in 21:1–10 (see notes there). (CSB)

Zedekiah did not heed Jeremiah’s advice to submit to the Babylonian invaders (chs 27-28). Jeremiah was sent again to warn the king that continued resistance could only end in the capture of the holy city and its destruction by fire. (TLSB)

34:1 *kingdoms and peoples in the empire he ruled.* Nebuchadnezzar’s empire was vast (see Eze 26:7; Da 3:2–4; 4:1; cf. the similar description of the Medes in 51:28). (CSB)

Literally, "all the kingdoms of the country of the rule of his hand." The heaping of these expressions denoting the overwhelming power of His army, against which all resistance was useless. (Kretzmann)

fighting against Jerusalem. Subject nations were expected to supply troops to fight alongside those of their overlord (see 2Ki 24:2). In a 14th-century B.C. treaty between the Hittite ruler Mursilis II and Duppi-Tessub king of the Amorites, Mursilis says, "If you do not send your son or brother with your foot soldiers and charioteers to help the Hittite king, you act in disregard of the gods of the oath." (CSB)

all of its cities. The cities of Judah were considered tributary to the capital. (Kretzmann)

34:4 *not die by the sword.* Zedekiah himself would be brought face to face with the Babylonian king for sentencing. Though allowed to die a natural death, the prisoner was to escape severe punishment (52:9-11) (TLSB)

34:5 *spices were burned.* The custom of burning aromatic spices, which was observed for the kings and the members of the royal family. (Kretzmann)

Alas, Lord! Words of mourning at the death of a king (see 22:18; cf. 1Ki 13:30). (CSB)

So it was not to be his fate to die in battle like Jehoiakim and to remain unlamented and unburied. Cp. chap. 22, 18. 19. (Kretzmann)

34:7 *Lachish and Azekah.* Solomon’s son Rehoboam had fortified them (see 2Ch 11:5, 9), but Lachish was later besieged (701 B.C.) during Hezekiah’s reign by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (see 2Ch 32:9). A contemporary relief depicting Sennacherib’s conquest states that he “sat on a throne and passed in review the plunder taken from Lachish.” In 1935, 18 ostraca (broken pottery fragments used as writing material) were discovered at Lachish, nearly all of them in the ruins of the latest occupation level (588 B.C.) of the Israelite gate-tower. Ostrakon 4, written to the commander at Lachish shortly after the events described here, ends as follows: “We are watching for the fire-signals of Lachish ... for we cannot see Azekah.” (CSB)

The two remaining fortified strongholds southwest of Jerusalem did not hold out much longer. Notes on potsherds found in the ruins of Lachish tell the story of the hopeless struggle against the Babylonian war machine. (TLSB)

34:8–9 Free men would be more apt to help defend the city. No Hebrew man or woman, sold into slavery for debts, was to be deprived of freedom for more than six years. (TLSB)

34:8 *proclamation of liberty. fiftieth year.* Possibly a fallow year in addition to the seventh sabbath year, or perhaps the same as the 49th year (counting the first and last years). Jewish sources from the period between the Testaments favor the latter interpretation. (CSB)

34:9 *freedom for Hebrew slaves.* In accordance with the general provisions of the law of Moses (see Ex 21:2–11). (CSB)

According to the Lord's ordinance which permitted the Hebrews to keep the members of their own nation as bond-servants for only six years, since in the seventh year they must all be given their liberty, Ex. 21, 22; Deut. 15, 12. (Kretzmann)

This Law concerned only fellow Jews, not the slaves of another nationality. (Kretzmann)

34:10 *set free his slave.* To gain God's blessing, and/or in the hope that the freed slaves would be more willing to help defend Jerusalem. (CSB)

34:11 *afterward.* When the Babylonian siege was temporarily lifted due to Egyptian intervention (see vv. 21–22; 37:5, 11). (CSB)

When the Chaldean invasion was upon them, they pretended a meek submission under the will of the Lord, but when the danger seemed to be past, at the temporary withdrawal of the invading army, they once more brought their servants under the yoke, thus proving that their conversion was not sincere. Like the hypocrites of our day they feigned submission in order to gain their end. (Kretzmann)

34:13 *house of bondage.* Lit. "house of slaves" (see Ex 13:3, 14; 20:2; Dt 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5; Jos 24:17; Jdg 6:8). The Israelites were to free their slaves because God had earlier freed the Israelites (see Dt 15:15). (CSB)

34:14 *End of seven years.* A loose quotation of Dt 15:12. (CSB)

This was the so-called Sabbatical Year. (Kretzmann)

your fathers did not listen – They paid not the slightest attention to His command. (Kretzmann)

34:16 *you have ... profaned my name.* By breaking the Lord's covenant. Zedekiah was a man whose word could not be trusted (see Eze 17:15, 18). (CSB)

34:17 *sword, pestilence and to famine.* Curses for violating God's covenant (see Lev 26:25–26); the first occurrence of this triad, which occurs 15 times in Jeremiah. (CSB)

Punishment for the crime, which profaned God's name though actually committed against fellowmen, is ironically called a liberation. Freedom from serving God is an independence that foregoes His protection. (TLSB)

a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. The Hebrew for this word is translated “a thing of horror” in the parallel in Dt 28:25. (CSB)

34:18 *transgresses my covenant.* The Hebrew root underlying both words is the same, again providing an ironic play on words. (CSB)

make ... cut. The Hebrew for the two words is identical. In ancient times, making a covenant involved a self-maledictory oath (“May thus and so be done to me if I do not keep this covenant”), which was often symbolized by cutting an animal in two and walking between the two halves. (CSB)

In making (lit, “cutting”) a covenant, the contracting parties passed between two halves of a slain calf, thereby declaring that they deserved to be cut to pieces if they broke the contract. (TLSB)

between its parts. Of the slaughtered animals (v. 10). In ancient times the parties solemnized a covenant by walking down an aisle flanked by the pieces of slaughtered animals (see Jer 34:18–19). The practice signified a self-maledictory oath: “May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge.” Having credited Abram’s faith as righteousness, God now graciously ministered to his need for assurance concerning the land. He granted Abram a promissory covenant, as he had to Noah. (CSB)

34:20 *food for the birds ... of the earth.* The birds and beasts of prey would feast on their carcasses - a gruesome meal. (Kretzmann)

34:21–22 Because of the arrival of the Egyptians on the scene, the Babylonians in 588 B.C. temporarily lifted the siege of Jerusalem. (CSB)

34:22 *I will bring them back.* The punishment of the Lord is sure to find the offenders against His holy Law, and hypocrites particularly are an abomination in His sight. (Kretzmann)

Ch 34 When the Babylonians temporarily withdraw and it seems the danger is past, the rich once more enslave the servants they have freed. This reveals the unbelief and rebellion at the heart of God’s people. Still, God does not reject them forever; He plans for their discipline and restoration. He is faithful to all His promises. To free us, He sent Christ, who is ever faithful. • Teach us, O Lord, to see others as You see them—through the eyes of Christ Jesus, our Savior. Stir our hearts to desire God-pleasing liberty for ourselves and for all people. Amen. (TLSB)