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**“BUT AFTERWARD...”**

**Jeremiah 34:8-22**

**“But”** and **“afterward”** are simple words. Though useful, neither conveys very much on its own. Put them together, however, and they are pregnant with meaning.

*“At first, I couldn’t make heads-or-tails of slope intercept, but afterward I caught on and aced the test.”*

*‘They fought like cats and dogs for the first year, but afterward they were the happiest couple I knew.’*

*‘It was touch and go for awhile, but afterward Dad pulled through, and now he’s in great health.’*

On the heels of a negative statement, **“but afterward”** celebrates a happy, even glorious reversal. It conveys hope, relief, success, triumph, or joy.

Yet when it follows a positive statement, **“but afterward”** laments a disappointing or disastrous setback, conveying despair, regret, failure, loss or sadness.

*‘He was full of promise in high school; but afterward he fell in with a bad crowd and dropped out of college.’*

*‘They were all smiles on their wedding day; but afterward things fell apart and they divorced within a year.’*

*‘Going in, the surgeon was confident they would get it all; but afterward he told us he had been unable to remove the entire tumor.’*

**“But afterward”** is sometimes the sweetest, sometimes the bitterest phrase to be said. It puts the past in perspective and determines the future. It signifies either salvation or damnation.

□ Please turn to Jer 34. Zedekiah is the current King of Judah. He was crowned in 597 B.C. not by his predecessor or his people, but by Babylon. He was put on the throne to serve the empire’s interests.

■ Verses 8-10:

**The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. Everyone was to free his Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Jew in bondage. So all the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free.**

This emancipation of slaves gets to the heart of YHWH’s priorities for his people. About 860 years before this the LORD {Ex 3:7} “[saw] **the misery of his people... heard them crying out [in] their”** bondage, and rescued them from slavery. The Exodus has been *the* defining event of Israel’s history ever since.

Eight and ½ centuries later it is still crucial to the covenant relationship between Sovereign God and Israel. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy he calls himself **“the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt”** literally hundreds of times.

Moreover, the mercy, justice and righteousness demonstrated by God in the Exodus have always set

the standard for Israel's conduct. His agenda of freedom is revealed in several sets of statutes in biblical Law.

One set directly undermines the institution of slavery by demanding the periodic release of slaves. Exodus 21:2, Leviticus 25:39-41, and Deuteronomy 15:12 stipulate that Hebrew slaves are to be treated not as slaves, but as “**hired... laborers.**” What is more they are to be released “**without debt**” after six years of work. Every fifty years (in the Year of Jubilee) all slaves are to be given their freedom, including the individuals who have not yet worked a full six years. These laws prevent the perpetual bondage of individuals and generational bondage of families.

Other laws make slavery less likely to occur in the first place.

One set of statutes concerns provision for the poor. Leviticus 19:10, Leviticus 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:21 obligate landowners not to harvest all their crops, but to leave some in the fields so foreigners, orphans, widows and other needy people can glean them for themselves. Deuteronomy 15:7-8 decrees generosity toward the destitute. These laws protect them from starvation and minimize the need to go into debt.

A second set of statutes regulates the terms of indebtedness. Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:36, and Dt 23:19-20 prohibit Israelites from charging each other interest. These laws protect God's people from accruing so much debt that they cannot get out from under it.

Another statute mandates debt forgiveness. Deuteronomy 15:1-2 commands: “**At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts... Every creditor**

**shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment ...”**

Debt slavery is the dominant form of bondage in the Ancient Near East. Most slaves in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Judah become slaves in one of three ways: either 1) they sell themselves or 2) they are sold by a parent or husband, because there is no other way to pay off a crushing debt or feed the family; or 3) a child is a slave when one or both parents are slaves at the time of their birth. These laws pertaining to provision and debt are crucial to the cause of freedom.

The Exodus was a one-time event, yet it set in motion a process that was meant to continue and expand. Right from the beginning LORD YHWH set limits on servitude, and liberty has always been the ideal. Zedekiah's proclamation is not an innovative idea.

However, it is a radically innovative action that defies the actual status quo. Few in Judah lend to their neighbors without charging interest. Fewer ever cancel the debts that are owed to them. Almost none obey the statutes of release. The evidence points to centuries of greed, opportunism, and economic oppression.

*Why does Zedekiah liberate the slaves?*

It is *not* because he has embraced God's priorities. 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles {36:12, 13b} summarizes his reign by saying, “**He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the**

**LORD. He...hardened his heart and would not turn to the LORD, the god of Israel.”**

In order to understand why he obeyed Scripture in this radical and costly way, we must know the history.

Remember, Zedekiah is a puppet. In the year 597 B.C. he swore loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the east. Meanwhile, Egypt to the west, has been rebuilding its military. By 590 the pharaoh believes he is strong enough to go head-to-head with Babylon. Zedekiah agrees, and he makes an alliance with the nation that inflicted brutal bondage on his ancestors for 400 years.

Nebuchadnezzar learns of it, musters his troops, and lays siege to Jerusalem in January, 589. This is when Zedekiah frees the slaves. It is foxhole religion, a self-serving effort to earn God's protection (and probably to induce the ex-slaves to defend the city, as well).

Even so, this covenant rivals Josiah's revival as the best royal decision of the past 100 years. It honors Scripture, it serves God's agenda of liberation, and it could be the impetus for true repentance that will enable Israel to be transformed and saved.

■ Jeremiah 34:11: **“But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again.”**

There is a close parallel in our history. Southern slave owners were compelled to free their slaves when the Confederacy lost the Civil War. But afterward, many Whites reenslaved their ex-slaves through a system of debt slavery called sharecropping.

**“But afterward...” Why do they do it?**

Zedekiah sends an SOS to Egypt and the pharaoh comes to Judah's aid. Nebuchadnezzar withdraws from Jerusalem to deal with Egypt. The slave owners presume that the temporary emancipation is enough to satisfy God and they can go back to business as usual. They are fatally mistaken.

■ In verses 12-16 the LORD convicts the slave owners of breaking their covenant. Not only is this an unconscionable injustice against the slaves; it is also a deed of outrageous irreverence to Holy God: you have **“profaned my name”** (v 16), {NLT} **“defiled my name.”**

The adjective *ḥālāl* (**“profaned”** or **“defiled”**) is used in only 3 other texts. In all 3 it describes the spiritual degradation and social dishonor suffered by prostitutes. To violate a covenant made in God's name is to drag his name through the sewer.

■ In verses 17-22 YHWH hands down the sentence: **“You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for [them]. So now I proclaim ‘freedom’ for you... – ‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine.”**

Babylon soon returns and resumes the siege. Conditions in the city are horrific – thousands, maybe tens of thousands **“fall by ... plague and famine.”** Thousands **“fall by the sword”** trying to hold off the attack. Then, in 587 B.C. Babylon breaks through the walls and who knows how many more thousands are annihilated. Most of the survivors are deported. The nation of Judah is erased.

Jeremiah was not written *to* us, but it was written *for* us. What is the Living God saying to us through his living Word?

Our God is a God of freedom. Deliverance is a priority for him, and to receive salvation is to enter into a covenant of freedom with him.

This is a spiritual reality: as we give ourselves to the Lord, he saves us from slavery to sin, death, and the Devil, by grace through faith in his Son Jesus.

This is also a material reality: Old Testament obedience and New Testament discipleship alike are a call {Mic 6:8} **“to act justly and to love mercy”** and {Lk 4:18-19} **“to preach good news to the poor,” “proclaim freedom for... prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed”** and **“proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”** to all who are in bondage.

To live in this covenant is to receive freedom ourselves and to actively seek it for others: *from* guilt *for* forgiveness, *from* sinfulness *for* righteousness, *from* falsehood *for* truth, *from* self-centeredness *for* God-and-other-centeredness, *from* injustice *for* justice, *from* economic and political oppression *for* opportunity, *from* brokenness *for* wholeness, *from* violence *for* peace, *from* compulsion and addiction *for* self-control, *from* death *for* resurrection, and so forth.

It follows that to submit to bondage oneself, or to inflict bondage on others, be it emotional, political, economic, bodily, or spiritual – is not only to be outside God’s covenant of freedom; it is to stand in direct

opposition to his agenda of liberty. And if we do this while claiming to be covenant people who know and love God, then we are also guilty of profaning his holy Name.

I have been well aware of God’s priority of spiritual freedom since I was a young boy. But for much of my life, I was ignorant of God’s commitment to material freedom for everyone.

I knew about the Exodus, of course. Still, I assumed that its primary meaning was spiritual.

I heard a great deal about political freedom. Yet I thought of it less as a gift to be shared *with* others, and more as a possession to be protected from others – by violently denying their freedom, if necessary.

I was oblivious to economic freedom, at least not as it applies to the vulnerable and the needy.

I am no longer that uninformed. Neither are you.

That no longer matters. What matters now is our **“but afterward.”** Those words put our past in perspective and determine our future.

When our histories are written, will **“but afterward”** celebrate a happy reversal? Or will **“but afterward”** convey despair, regret, failure, loss and sadness? Will **“but afterward”** sound sweet or bitter? Will **“but afterward”** signify salvation or damnation?

Jeremiah 34 is the word of the LORD.