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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOUSES, FIELDS, VINEYARDS”
Jeremiah 32:1-44; Jeremiah 37:11-21

☑ In 1896 the Florida East Coast Railway was completed from Jacksonville in the north to Miami in the south. It opened up the whole east side of the peninsula, and the real estate rush was on.

One developer offered land at incredible prices, far below what anyone else was charging. This company displayed maps, showing exactly where the land was located. Their literature described spacious lots with gorgeous views and simmering, subtropical sunsets.

Northern buyers snapped them up, sight unseen. But when the new owners came south to claim their property, they discovered that it was permanently submerged under three feet of water.

The swindle was repeated so frequently that by the 1960s a new idiom entered our language: “If you believe that, I’ve got some swampland in Florida to sell you...”

☐ But what if God is the one telling you to buy it? Jeremiah chs 32 and 37 involve a land deal which, at first hearing, sounds like a scam. Please turn to Jeremiah 37.

🕒 A word about dates: the events of chapter 37 probably take place in the spring or summer of 588 B.C., while the events of chapter 32 occur sometime in the twelve months after that. So although the 37th chapter follows the 32nd on the page, it precedes it in time.

The contents of the book of Jeremiah are not all in chronological order. How did that happen?

★ 1st, the prophet did not set out to write a book; his objective was to record the words and deeds of the LORD as they happened. Consequently, the book is a collection of prophetic sermons, historical reports, personal journal entries, and a letter or two.

★ 2nd, the book was compiled after Jeremiah’s death, most likely by Baruch. He deliberately assembled the original documents in the sequence we have now.

Why didn’t he put them in chronological order?

There are several hypotheses. I find two of them more convincing than the others.

✍ The rhetorical theory contends that the book was organized to send a powerful message of God’s goodness and sovereignty despite the Exile. The compiler knew the real-life sequence of his source documents, but he did not arrange them that way. He put them into poetic order for maximum theological impact, structuring the book as a giant chiasm, with prophecies of Israel’s renewal at the crux of the X.

✍ The four book theory argues that the source documents were initially gathered into four separate books. Each had a distinct emphasis, and circulated on its own for awhile. Each was in chronological order *internally*; but there was overlap *between* the books. E.g., Book I (chapters 1-24) covered events from 626 B.C. to 597 B.C., while Book II (chapters 25-34) covered events from 605 B.C. to 587 B.C. So Jeremiah preached chapter 25 eight years before he preached chapter 24. When the compiler unified the

books he did not correct the overlap; he simply laid them out in order: I, II, III, and IV.

The ordering was not the product of ignorance, or an accident; it was intentional. We might wish Baruch had arranged the book differently; but since he was a 7th century B.C. Judahite, and most of his readers have not been 21st century North Americans, for us to dismiss this book on that basis would be highly egocentric.

🕒 Back to chapter 37: in 589 B.C. King Zedekiah violates his oath of loyalty to Babylon and initiates a military alliance with Egypt.

🕒 In 588 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar gets wind of his treachery and puts Jerusalem under siege. Zedekiah sends an S.O.S. to Pharaoh Hophra in Egypt. Hophra hears Zedekiah's cry for help, and 3 months later the Egyptian navy lands on the coast. Nebuchadnezzar lifts the siege and withdraws his army in order to deal the Egyptian threat.

■ That brings us to verses 11-14. After the Babylonians withdraw, "**Jeremiah [starts] to leave the city to go to the territory of Benjamin to get his share of the property among the people there. But when he [reaches] the Benjamin Gate, the captain of the guard... [arrests] him**" and accuses the prophet of "**deserting to the Babylonians!**" **'That's not true!**' Jeremiah [says]. **'I am not deserting to the Babylonians.'**" But the man refuses to listen.

Jeremiah is fiercely loyal to God and Judah. If he were not, he would have quit his prophetic ministry long ago: he would not have borne the 38 years of

misunderstanding, abuse and death threats that his people have heaped on him thus far.

What is more, after the city falls the Babylonians will authorize Jeremiah to go anywhere.

Nebuchadnezzar will even offer to protect him and provide for all his needs in Babylon. Yet Jeremiah will choose to stay in the deserted, burned-out, corpse-strewn heap of rubble called Jerusalem.

This prophet is no deserter. He is a true patriot.

■ Still, you can understand the captain's position. Jeremiah has been announcing: {Jer 21:8-9} "**This is what the LORD says: I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live.**"

■ In verses 15-16 Jeremiah is beaten and cast into a dungeon. It is a place of horrible brutality and hunger.

■ Later, King Zedekiah has him brought to the palace for a private consultation. Verse 17: "**Is there a word from the LORD?**" he asks. "**Yes,**" Jeremiah replies, "**you will be handed over to the king of Babylon.**" This is not what Zedekiah wants to hear! But in verses 18-21 Jeremiah points out that his prophecies are coming to pass. He also pleads not to be sent back to the same prison "**or,**" he says, "**I will die there.**" The king moves him to the courtyard of the guard and orders that he be given bread "**each day until all the bread in the city [is] gone.**"

□ Please turn to chapter 32.

- Verses 1-5 review what we have just covered.

- Verses 6-7: **“Jeremiah said, ‘The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.’””**

This is the deal to which I earlier referred.

Consider: Jeremiah will be a prisoner for the duration of the siege. Who knows when he will be allowed to see this property?

Consider: Jeremiah has a bull’s-eye on his back. As we will see next week, his enemies are plotting his murder. He might not survive long enough to take possession of the field.

Consider: Anathoth is only 3 miles northeast of Jerusalem. The Babylonians invaded from that direction. If they did not trample the field on their way in, they have pillaged it for food and firewood. It will take a lot of hard work to get it to produce anything.

Consider: Judah will soon cease to exist as an independent nation. Most of the people will die, but every survivor with any useful skills will be exiled to Babylon. Only the weak and uneducated who are of absolutely no use to the empire will be left behind. Who wants to own a piece of that?

And yet Sovereign God says, **“Buy the field with silver and have the transaction witnessed”?!**

- Jeremiah does. In verses 8-12 his cousin comes as the LORD foretold, saying: **“Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.”** So he buys the field.

It is as sensible as giving your savings to a man on the street who offers to sell you a bridge in Brooklyn. It is as prudent as buying oceanfront property in Arizona.

- Why does YHWH command this? Verses 13-15: **“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, say: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”**

- Jeremiah’s evident folly is wisdom. It demonstrates faith and hope in the promises of God: in verses 42-44 the LORD promises social and economic restoration; and in verses 38-40 he pledges spiritual transformation:

“They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.”

Jeremiah chapters 37 and 32 were not written *to* us, but they were written *for* us.

Following Jesus is not always easy or predictable. Just when you think you've got it down pat, the Lord calls you to do *something*, go some *place*, invest in some *relationship*, or bear up under some *hardship* that you did not foresee and would never have chosen. From a worldly perspective, saying "yes" to God often appears to be naïve, futile, even irrational, like sinking your 401K into swampland.

But consider Jeremiah. From the start the LORD warned that the kings, officials, priests and people would "**fight against**" him, but he also assured his prophet that they would "**not overcome**" him. "**For**", he said, "**I am with you and will rescue you.**"

For forty years Jeremiah trusted the LORD. He listened, obeyed, and preached his Word. He invited his people to repent, promising mercy if they did and judgment if they did not. After they passed the point of no return, he foretold restoration and blessing. Most rejected him as a kook, and a Babylonian collaborator.

Yet Jeremiah was vindicated when the prophecies came to pass. Better than that, he had fellowship with the Living God, fellowship that purified his heart, renewed his mind, and sustained him in hard times. (And, as a side benefit, his heirs held legal title to land that would be of great value after they returned from Exile and economic life resumed.) Sovereign God was, as always, entirely true to his Word.

Now consider the kings, officials, priests and people. For decades, most of them refused to believe the warnings of judgment, and consequently refused to repent and seek God's mercy while there was still time.

They put their trust in material wealth, social status, power of all kinds, military alliances, the Temple, false ideas of YHWH, and outright idolatry. Alas, to no avail! None of those things provided even the smallest measure of physical protection, emotional consolation, or spiritual strength when the hammer fell.

They thought they were so wise and sophisticated. But tens of thousands, if not more, perished by {32:24} "**the sword, famine and plague**" as a direct consequence of their folly and naiveté.

So *who, in Judah, was scammed?* It wasn't Jeremiah!

I encourage us to remember that the next time the Lord calls us to do *something*, go some *place*, invest in some *relationship*, or bear up under some *hardship* that we did not foresee and would never have chosen.

God is God! And God is good.