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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE END”
Jeremiah 40:1-43:7

“And they all lived happily ever after.”

Wouldn't it be lovely if good always won and evil always failed, if every crisis was solvable and every solution self-evident, if all our endings were happy ones?

○ It is right to yearn for this, for **“we were saved” “in this hope”**: **“that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage...”** (Romans 8:24, 21).

○ Indeed, {Rev 11:15} **“The kingdom of the world”** will **“become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.”** For he {1 Th 4:16} **“will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God.”** {Php 2:10-11} **“Every knee [shall] bow...and every tongue”** will **“confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”**

○ {Rev 20:11-15} All whose names are **“found written in the book of life”** will enter paradise and we will see {Rev 21:1} **“the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven”** as God the Father integrates it with the new earth.

○ Then {Rev 21:3-4, NV / NLT} **“The dwelling of God [will be] with his people, and he will live with them....He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.”**

We will get our happy ending! But not yet.

Please turn with me to Jeremiah 40. {Jer 39:1-10} The Babylonians are rounding up survivors to deport them.

Jeremiah is seized, put in chains, and marched with the others to a collection point at Ramah, 5 miles north of what was Jerusalem.

■ That brings us to verse 1. The leading Babylonian general finds **“Jeremiah bound in chains among all the captives,”** evidently recognizes him, and releases him as a reward for urging surrender during the siege.

■ He also announces (verses 2-3) that **“The LORD your God decreed this disaster for this place. And now the LORD has brought it about; he has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the LORD and did not obey him.”**

This is not a statement of personal faith. The commander of the imperial guard is devoted to idols. But he believes that the gods of other cultures do exist, and he interprets Babylon's victory as a sign of the LORD's displeasure with Judah. Still, it is amazing to hear a pagan war criminal say these words!

■ In verses 4-5 he adds, **“I am freeing you from the chains on your wrists. Come with me to Babylon, if you like, and I will look after you; but if you do not want to, then don't come. Look, the whole country lies before you; go wherever you please.”**

Of all the survivors, Jeremiah alone is free to determine his own future by deciding where to live!

☺ Babylon is an attractive option. The city is intact. It is home to the brightest and best Israelites, who were exiled in two previous deportations. In

obedience to the God of Israel {Jer 29} they have settled down and sought Babylon's "**peace and prosperity**" – and they themselves are prospering. Many hold positions of political influence and all are, for the most part, free to practice Judaism.

Best of all, the exiles are undergoing spiritual revival. Merciful God is redeeming the trauma of displacement to open their eyes and soften their hearts. They have repented of their sin. The focus of their religion is shifting from Temple ritual to engagement with, and obedience to, God's Word. The community in Babylon is growing vibrant, hopeful and responsive to the LORD.

☹ Judah is anything but an attractive option. The major cities have been reduced to rubble. Most of the survivors who will not be deported are uneducated, unskilled, impoverished. Most have never owned property, managed a business, or exercised public leadership.

Worse, most have a nasty habit of rejecting Jeremiah, his message, and (by extension) the one who put it in his mouth. Their spiritual eyes are still blind. Their hearts are still hard. Many have not repented of their sin. The community is weak, despairing, and unresponsive to the LORD.

Babylon is the obvious setting for a happy ending but Jeremiah does not go there. He stays in Judah "**among the people who [are] left behind.**"

✍ Consider: the Sovereign LORD sent Daniel and Ezekiel to Babylon in the first deportation of 598 BC, though each preferred to remain in Judah. Jeremiah might well prefer Babylon, yet the Almighty keeps him in Judah. Let us find our happy ending in obedience to God and

service to neighbor, regardless of our place and circumstances.

Back to the text: the Babylonians select Jeremiah's long-time supporter Gedaliah to be the territorial governor. Verses 11-12: "**When all the Jews in Moab, Ammon, Edom and all the other countries**" to which they fled before the siege hear about Gedaliah's appointment "**they all [come] back to...Judah... And [harvest] an abundance of wine and summer fruit.**"

The true prophet, good governor, and bountiful harvest are YHWH's gifts. He is giving his people everything they need for a happy ending right here.

■ Alas, in Jeremiah 41:1-10 Ishmael assassinates Gedaliah and kills everyone in his administration at the new capital, "**as well as the Babylon soldiers**" stationed there. The next day he and his supporters slaughter 70 religious pilgrims from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria and make "**captives of all the rest of the [local] people.**"

■ In verses 11-15 Johanan squashes Ishmael's coup d'état. The people acclaim him their new leader.

Ishmael's version of a happy ending requires the expulsion of the Babylonians and the death of any Jew who is working with them. Yet it is YHWH who brought about this disaster in response to Judah's immorality, injustice and idolatry. Ishmael acts in direct opposition to the One who gives {Jas 1:17} "**Every good and perfect gift,**" thereby destroying his chance for a happy ending!

✎ Consider: {Pr 14:12} **“There is a way that seems right...but in the end it leads to death.”** Neither revenge nor treachery, neither violence nor the will to power – nothing that is contrary to the will of Holy God – can secure our happy ending.

■ Verses 16-17: Johanan “[leads] **away all the survivors ...whom he [has] recovered ... the soldiers, women, children and court officials.**” They are terrified that the Babylonians will retaliate for Gedaliah’s assassination by killing every last survivor, and they are **“on their way to Egypt to escape.”**

■ In chapter 42:1-6 the people plead with Jeremiah to pray for divine guidance. He agrees to their request. Then, without any prompting, they make a solemn and binding vow to obey everything the LORD says through his prophet, **“whether it is favorable or unfavorable.”**

■ Verses 7-22: Ten excruciating days later God gives them his answer:

“If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you. Do not [fear] the king of Babylon... for I...will save you and deliver you from his hands. I will show you compassion so that he will have compassion on you.... However....all who are determined to go to Egypt to settle there will die by the sword, famine and plague; not one of them will survive or escape the disaster I will bring on them....‘Do not go to Egypt.’”

The Living God desires to redeem the remnant. He is mighty to create a happy ending for them. The only condition is that they must trust him, remain in Judah, and submit to the Babylonians.

■ Chapter 43:2-3 records their words: **“You are lying! The LORD our God has not sent you to say, ‘You must not go to Egypt...’ ... Baruch... is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon.”**

■ Verses 4-7 record their actions: Johanan leads the remnant of survivors to Egypt. He also compels Jeremiah and Baruch to come along. And so the entire remnant enters Egypt **“in disobedience to the LORD.”**

The word of the LORD comes to pass. Most of the people die in Egypt, some when Nebuchadnezzar assaults it. Only a handful will see Judah again.

✎ Consider: {Mt 7:13-14} **“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”** Our happy ending depends on costly grace, risky faith, and a painful cross, each of which is an unexpected blessing of mercy and kindness bestowed by the Triune God.

So, what is the situation at the end of the book of Jeremiah?

There are two remnant Hebrew communities. One is firmly planted in Babylon. The other begins in Judah but ends up in Egypt.

After the initial shock, those who were forcibly marched off to Babylon thrive and revive. God will lead their descendants to the Land of Promise. Theirs is an unexpected but happy ending!

Those who fled to Egypt will decline and decay. Archaeological evidence indicates that they will build a temple and establish a religious system that blends biblical faith with Babylonian idolatry. Neither they nor their descendants will ever enter the Land of Promise. Theirs is an unexpected and tragic ending.

We are not Judah. Yet we are a remnant. We find ourselves in places where we would not choose to go, circumstance that we would not choose to experience.

The question is: which remnant will we be? Will we submit to God and find our happy ending in obedience to him? Or will we go our own way, seeking our happy ending outside of God's will, only to lose it entirely?

This is the word of the Lord.