

Home Group study: week beginning 11th January 2021

Loss and Restoration

Most of us have lost things from time to time. What have members of the group lost and then found again? How pleased were they to find them again?

Read: Jeremiah 38: 1-13

Background

This is a key period in the history of God's people. The rot had begun to set in soon after God acceded to Israel's request that they have a King 'so they could be like other nations' rather than being set apart and ruled over by God himself. King David, despite his one major failing, was 'a man after God's own heart': but it was mainly downhill after him.

God's people soon ignored God's commands, married foreign women (David's son and successor Solomon managed to marry 700 of them!) and were tempted away by false religions. The Kingdom itself was split into two and the larger, Israel, finally succumbed to exile under the Assyrians in the eighth century BC.

Judah, which included God's own city of Jerusalem, held out for another 100 years or so, became more and more wicked, until God called time on them. Reading Jeremiah shows how desperate God was for his people to repent; his love for his people never failed but it was inevitable that as they worshipped foreign gods they would have to become subject to foreign powers. He chose Jeremiah as his mouthpiece to make his final appeals to Judah to return to him: he would still save them from exile if they repented. Even if they did not, such was God's love that he wanted them to 'go quietly' into exile, spare themselves being slaughtered by the invading Babylonians, and the promise remained that he would one day restore his people to their own land after the exile.

But Judah would not listen. Jeremiah remained faithful to giving God's message, however repulsive it was to the people and however unpopular it made him as a result.

Finally it was decided, as we see in this passage, that his message to surrender to the Babylonians, who were going to win anyway, was seen as subversive and his death sentence was pronounced.

Discovery

On Sunday Keith said that Zedekiah was a weak king. We first see him in the first few verses of Chapter 37; have a look at Verse 1-4, then the Chapter 38 passage. What evidence is there to suggest he is weak? How does God use Zedekiah's weakness to work out his purposes in this passage?

How desperate do you think Jeremiah must have felt in verse 6? (A bit more background; a cistern was an underground storage pit for water. It had a narrow neck at the top and then widened out. At the bottom of an empty cistern would be mud, four to five feet: so Jeremiah would be up to his neck in mud and unable to lie down.) Speculate on what was probably going through his mind. Do you think he believed God had a rescue plan for him?

Verse 7 tells us the King was 'sitting in the Benjamin Gate'. According to the notes in the NIV study bible, city gateways were often used as court rooms, so as Zedekiah was 'sitting' there, it probably means he was sitting as a judge over legal complaints. Why might this have been a good opportunity for Ebed-Melech to tackle him?

Jeremiah's time in pit must have seemed as if God had finally abandoned him. Look carefully through verses 7-13. How detailed is God's plan to rescue him?

Application

Like Jeremiah in his cistern we are currently in a dark place. The bright light of hope of vaccines coming on stream feels to have been dashed by the emergence of a new strain of COVID that has made things even worse. Has God abandoned us to our fate or has he plans for us?

Can you remember the four points Keith made about how we get through difficult times?

1. Stay close to God

Look at Psalm 145: 17-20 and Psalm 34: 17-18. Who does God stay close to? What are the promises in these two Psalms? Do we sense God's closeness to us all the time? If the answer is no, why do we think this might be? Do the current circumstances we are in make us feel closer to or further away from God?

In Jeremiah 1 we learn that Jeremiah was set apart before he was born to be a prophet to the nations. The message God had given him meant he was despised by everyone and his life was in danger. How easy is it to stay close to God in circumstances like that? What might have been the consequences of him turning away from God?

2. Stay true to God's purposes and His word

What does God say to us about keeping true to him in Deuteronomy 7: 9?

Keith said that God has called all of us to something. As we have seen, Jeremiah's calling was clear and specific. Do we know what our calling is? What difference does it make to our lives if we stick to God's calling?

3. Recognise the importance of the prophetic

Jeremiah brings a prophecy in Chapter 29: 10-11 and 30:1-2. Although Jeremiah is a byword for misery, and the book is probably not well-known because it's considered depressing, there is a real ray of sunshine here. What is the promise to the people going into exile? What does the prophecy reveal about God's purposes? And what hope can we take from Chapter 29: 11? Do you think we can apply that prophecy to our current circumstances? And if so what difference does it make?

4. Recognise the importance of travelling companions

'Travelling Companions', people who share our Christian journey, come in various different forms. In Jeremiah's case he had few friends, but Ebed-Melek arrived just at the right time. He was an unlikely rescuer: we read he's a Cushite and an official in the royal palace. The exact meaning of Cushite is difficult to pin down, but he was almost certainly a black African rather than a local Jew. Is a palace official someone likely to help Jeremiah out? Other Biblical travelling companions might be together over much longer journeys, like David and Jonathan or Jesus and the Twelve.

Who might we regard as our travel companions? How much do they mean to us, and how valuable are they in our walk with Christ? At the moment we might be missing our travel companions and might be suffering loneliness. Just consider the loneliness and despair Jeremiah must have felt when he was down in the cistern: and think about God's timing and what an unlikely companion Ebed-Melek was. Can God do the same for you?

How can we as a group try to be travelling companions to people currently locked down on their own?

Prophecies over Jubilee Church Shepperton brought by Keith Saynor

Sunday 10th January 2021:

- 1.** God will continue this year to challenge us in our faith and as we respond, God is going to show us great favour.
- 2.** Glory of God over Shepperton. Keith shared how he saw lights through the cloud around January 2013 signifying, he believes the glory of God.
We will be increasingly aware of God's presence with us and as a result of that even through the display of God's glory, the kingdom of God will come in and through us in greater and greater measure despite this difficult season.
- 3.** Every one of us is set aside for something in the purpose of God.