

Seeking Great Things

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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It's a relatively short story that comes from a chapter of only 5 verses, but one which is filled with meaning for you and me today. Don't let its brevity detract from its relevance! Our study today comes from the 45th chapter of Jeremiah, the first verse of which says, "The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written these words in a book at the instruction of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah." Jeremiah 45:1.

To set the stage, let's consider some of the words and terms of this verse to become acquainted with the background. This story occurred in the years after the kingdom had split into two parts, the northern kingdom of Israel having already gone into captivity in 722 B.C. more than 100 years before this. Judah, the southern kingdom, had been warned faithfully by God's prophets to repent and return to Him, but they had for the most part ignored His messages. Jeremiah was one of those messengers who had pleaded with Judah to turn from evil, but he was treated with apathy or outright rejection.

At this time, the king who ruled was Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah. Josiah had been one of the few "good kings" of Judah, having instituted valuable reforms. You can read about the reforms of Josiah in II Kings 23. But the influence of his worthy work was not lasting, and following his untimely death at Megiddo in 608 B.C., foolishly joining forces with Babylon against the armies of Egypt, his sons reigned in his stead. The first to rule was Jehoahaz, but his tenure lasted a short three months before he was removed and imprisoned by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt and replaced by his older brother, 25-year-old Eliakim ("God sets up"), whose name was changed by Pharaoh to "Jehoiakim," which means, "Jehovah is setting up."

A lot was happening in the political world around Judah. Egypt and Babylon were struggling for supremacy. The forces of Pharaoh Necho II were warring against the forces of Nebuchadnezzar and Judah was caught right in the middle. What Judah failed to see was the "bigger picture," in that God was still on the throne and working through these heathen kingdoms to bring about His purposes.

And one of His main purposes involved the people of Judah. Because of their persistent disobedience, Judah was going to suffer the discipline of destruction and captivity. It didn't have to be that way; God was hoping they would repent and the discipline would be unnecessary, but

that's not what happened. They had turned away from the Voice of mercy, and would now be forced to listen to the Voice of discipline. Because of their rebellion, God was going to "give Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar," as we're told in Daniel 1:2. The truth was that God would have willingly protected them from Babylon's soldiers, but they had pushed Him away and He was not able to cover them like the mother hen covers her chicks.

When Jehoiakim took the throne in 608, he was required to pay a handsome tribute to Pharaoh Necho, an acknowledgement of Egypt's superiority. But then when Egypt was defeated in 605 B.C. at Carchemish by the Babylonians, the tribute went north to Babylon instead of south to Egypt. Later though, Jehoiakim refused to pay the tribute, which brought Nebuchadnezzar's forces back to invade Judah. God's consistent message to Judah had been of two parts: first, repent and return to Him. Second, if they refused, while under the rod of discipline and captivity, they were encouraged to cooperate with Babylon and "seek the peace" of that regime, humbly and patiently awaiting God's providence to restore them to their country. That was the message of the prophets.

This put Jeremiah, God's spokesman, in a very unenviable position. He was considered unpatriotic; he was thought of as being a traitor in giving the counsel to surrender to the Babylonians. It was all because the people refused to listen to the Word of God and understand the causes and effects of their disobedience, and the way that God was still trying to reach out to them through the painful discipline of captivity. This is the contextual time frame in which our passage occurs. The "fourth year of Jehoiakim" would have been 605/604 B.C., just a year after Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion which brought Daniel and his companions to Babylon.

Who was "Baruch the son of Neriah"? He was Jeremiah's secretary. The name "Baruch" comes from the root "to bless." Names coming from this root were somewhat common in their culture. The father of Elihu, one of Job's friends was Barachel, "Blessed of God." The father of the prophet Zechariah was Barachiah, "Blessed of Jehovah." This name may sound familiar today in that the name of our current president, Barack Obama, is associated with this same root.

We're told that Jeremiah "spoke to Baruch," and that the words were written by Baruch "at the instruction of Jeremiah" (literally; "from Jeremiah's mouth"). Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet to take advantage of secretarial help. Paul employed a man named Tertius to do his writing for him. Romans 16:22. On occasion, it was advantageous that Jeremiah had Baruch as his helper, because while Jeremiah was confined in prison, his secretary was able to deliver messages for him.

As Jeremiah's secretary, it is obvious that he would have had first hand opportunity to know what God's intention for Judah was. If there was one person in the whole country who should have "known the score," that person should have been Baruch. The Word of the Lord went from Jeremiah's Spirit-impressed mind and through his lips to the ears and pen of Baruch. Surely he knew what God's plan was, and what lay in store for their nation! It was his own hand that wrote out the messages!

God's plan had been spelled out clearly from the very inception of Jeremiah's ministry. The words and phrases which express that plan find their way into the message God had for Baruch personally in the chapter we're looking at today. At Jeremiah's commissioning he was told by the LORD, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:9, 10. Those things that were in opposition to God's plan were to be removed, leaving the door open for a "building" and "planting" that would come later. Judah, if she did not repent, would be "rooted out and pulled down, destroyed and thrown down." Desperate measures would have to be taken to save her! God had a plan for this operation, and His plan would most definitely come to pass.

The words and phrases of this initial commission are found throughout the book of Jeremiah, appearing like a thread that ties his messages together. Let's look at a few of the passages that contain this language. "And it shall be, if they will diligently learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, "As the LORD lives," as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they shall be established in the midst of My people. But if they do not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation,' Says the LORD." Jeremiah 12:16, 17.

God's promises have always been conditional, and this concept is expressed in no clearer manner than in the 18th chapter. Notice carefully the tie to Jeremiah's original commission. "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it." Jeremiah 18:7-10.

Notice what the Lord said to Jeremiah in the vision of the basket of figs, concerning the return from the captivity. "I will set My eyes on them for good, and will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up." Jeremiah 24:6. Again, promising the restoration after the captivity, He said, "Behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to throw down, to destroy, and to afflict, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,' says the LORD." Jeremiah 31:27, 28.

Do you see that word "watched" in that passage? It's not the first time we have come upon that word, though it was translated differently before. It also draws our attention back to Jeremiah's first being commissioned. In chapter one, we read, "Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying 'Jeremiah, what do you see?' And I said, 'I see a branch of an almond tree.' Then the LORD said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word.'" Jeremiah 1:11, 12. The words "almond" and "ready" in chapter one are the same in Hebrew as the word "watched" in Jeremiah 31.

With this theme in mind, that God had a specific purpose toward Judah that involved her “being plucked up and thrown down,” going into the discipline of captivity, and being aware of the historical context of chapter 45 of Jeremiah, occurring in Jehoiakim’s fourth year, just after Nebuchadnezzar’s first invasion, let’s read the remaining verses in this short chapter. Remember that they have a deep significance to us in 2010!

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: ‘You have said, “Woe is me now! For the LORD has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.”’ Thus you shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Behold, what I have built, I will break down, and what I have planted I will pluck up, that is this whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh,” says the LORD. “But I will give your life to you as a prize in all places, wherever you go.”’”

What was happening here? It is clear from the content of the message the Lord had for Baruch that the prophet’s secretary was cherishing great plans for himself that ignored the central message the Lord had for Judah. It was as though he sensed the meaning of the messages, but he intentionally fought against it. It’s tiring to fight against God’s plan; to try to force our plans forward when we know His plan. Jesus told Saul of Tarsus that it was hard to kick against the pricks of conscience. Acts 9:5. Baruch felt sorry for himself that what he had planned for himself might not have the chance of becoming reality. The Lord quotes him saying, “Woe is me now! For the LORD has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.”

He was nursing a picture of life for himself that was contrary to the expressed design as delivered to Jeremiah. Somehow he became sidetracked and was planning “great things” for himself that essentially ignored the Word of the Lord. The message God had was, “Don’t get too tied to what you see around you now Baruch, because it’s all going to be destroyed. It’s going to be plucked up and removed.” But the essence of this message was lost on Baruch. For him, the vision had faded. Though he was writing the very words down that came from Jeremiah’s mouth, they hadn’t penetrated his heart! The words flowed from Baruch’s ears to his pen, but didn’t stop in his own mind! Of all people in the country who should have been aware of God’s plan for Judah and should have been willing to bow to His wisdom, it should have been Baruch! Yet he was spending his time dreaming up “great things” for himself that didn’t take into account the plan that God had graciously revealed to His prophet Jeremiah. What a mistake! He was becoming like those who were eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage without respect to God’s plan in the days of Noah, which featured a world-wide flood. They also were seeking “great things for themselves.”

Here’s the question for us. Could it be that we are like Baruch today? Of all the people on planet Earth who should know “the score,” it should be God’s people today. We have the benefit of fulfilled prophecy throughout Scripture. Someone did a study and concluded that of the 800 or so prophetic passages in Scripture, 90% have already been accurately fulfilled, leading us to believe that the remaining 10% will surely be fulfilled soon.

We have the advantage of seeing how the statue dream of Daniel 2 has been precisely reflected in history and that we are now living in the very toes of the image. We are living in the “days of these kings,” awaiting the kingdom of the Stone that will usher in God’s everlasting kingdom. We have the benefit of seeing the beasts of prophecy that have marched across the screen of Daniel 7, with history testifying their precise fulfillment. We have Matthew 24 which reads like today’s newspaper. We have II Timothy 3 which reads like the grocery store tabloids.

Of all the people on earth, Seventh-day Adventists should know “where we are” and what is soon to come. We stand in the sandals of Baruch, having first-hand access to information from God as to the operation of His plan and the next developments soon to break forth on this world. He has revealed through His Word the substance of His plan, that just as He allowed Jerusalem to be “plucked up and thrown down,” so regarding this whole earth He says today, “Behold, what I have planted I will pluck up, that is, *this whole land.*” When He spoke to Baruch, the phrase “whole land” referred to Judea and its immediate environs. Today that phrase, “the whole land,” encompasses the entire globe.

God most definitely has a plan for this planet. We know from Scripture that He created a perfect world, but that sin marred it. Our kind and gracious God put into operation His plan of redemption and restoration, which resulted in His becoming a part of the human family to reveal in a clearer way the loving character of God and dying on a cruel cross to save us from sin. All of these things are historical facts. Every time someone dates a document he confesses the proof of the historical Jesus. This is the year 2010. 2010 from what? From the coming of Jesus to this earth the first time.

God must deal with sin, and He has! He condemned sin in the flesh, that is, in the victorious life of Jesus in battling against the devil. Just as surely as He came the first time in humility, He will come the second time in glory. The signs that this event is just about to take place are clearly seen by the seeking eye. Even atheists and agnostics are troubled by what they see in today’s world, the problems for which they are unable to find solutions. But you and I know the answer! We know God’s plan for this planet! Of all people on earth, with the benefits of God’s Holy Bible and the aid of the messages given through his prophet Ellen G. White, we should know where we stand; we should have a grasp of God’s plan for this earth.

The question is, knowing all this, are we like Baruch? Has the information filtered from our ears to our hands, but not stopped and penetrated our hearts? Are we, like Jeremiah’s secretary of old, “seeking great things” for ourselves on this earth, unmindful that soon everything we see about us will be “plucked up and destroyed”?

Whatever Baruch’s “great things” were, we are not told. Maybe that’s just as well. The point is that he was not to plan for his “permanent abode” in the land, as he knew it. He was to recognize and take to heart God’s larger plan, and make sure that His plans were in accordance with God’s program.

So it is true for us today! It doesn't make sense to plan "great things" for ourselves that do not acknowledge God's greater plan for this world. Soon the entire globe will be visited by destruction far larger in scale than what Nebuchadnezzar brought to Jerusalem. That event was only a dim foreshadowing of what will happen when God comes to this planet in glory. The earthquake that will cause "every mountain and every island to move out of their places" will bring to naught all the "great things" that have occupied the minds, resources and energies of those who willingly turn their attention from God's plan.

It was in kindness that God spoke to Baruch. He said, "Baruch, don't let your life become crowded with plans and schemes which will only turn out to be worthless, given what is soon to happen. Refocus your attention in the direction of My plan." Notice the comforting words of encouragement that the Lord gave to him. It may be that the "great things" for which he had made extensive plans would evaporate, but something more valuable than "great things" would be his if he trusted in the Lord. Let these words sink deeply into our hearts today. "'And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh,' says the LORD. 'But I will give your life to you as a prize in all places, wherever you go.'"

You've probably seen the commercials that picture someone opening the door of their house and receiving news of a million-dollar prize. Bouquets of flowers; tears of joy; expressions of jubilation. None of this can compare to the "prize" that will be given to all who love, believe and follow Jesus! The "prize" that will be given to the faithful one will be a "crown of life" which doesn't fade, unlike the all-too-temporary chaplet of apple leaves bestowed on the victorious athlete.

God's Word speaks to us today. What we see about us is soon to change. This is no time to "seek great things" for ourselves on this earth. It is soon to pass away. This is no time to lose our focus on what is important, to become foggy regarding the certainty of God's plan. This is the time to come close to the Lord and ask Him to forgive and cleanse us, to give us the "faith of Jesus," to strengthen us and fortify us for what lies ahead, that we may faithfully represent Him in every aspect of our lives. May it be that soon we will be the blessed recipients of His promise, that even though the so-called "great things" will not be ours down here, that He will give to each one of us life, eternal life that measures with the life of God, to us as a prize.