

Jeremiah 51:34-46 God vs. An Evil Whale Falls Church AM 8/20/2023

Today we get to talk about monsters in the Bible! Not fake or cartoon monsters from children's books. Military monsters like Babylon.

When Babylon crushed Jerusalem, it was one of the most gruesome and destructive scenes in the history of the world, and then they took prisoners.

When will Babylon give account for the evil that they did? In our passage, God says it is time. **As if in court, God confronted Babylon about their crime of swallowing up God's people like an evil monster or an evil whale!**

Verse 34 says Babylon was "*like a monster*" that swallowed God's people. But skip down to the middle of verse 44 that God "...will take out of his mouth what he has swallowed." We are meant to be reminded of the actual whale that swallowed Jonah, but then spat him out onto land. God used a whale to teach Jonah a lesson, and then God commanded the whale to release Jonah. Similarly here in our study, God used monster-Babylon to teach the exiles a lesson, and then God commanded the evil empire of Babylon to release the exiles.

1. Like a witness in a courtroom, Jerusalem testified about the deportations! (v.34-35)

In verse 34, the first thing we see are quotation marks. That is because suddenly, we are in a courtroom, hearing testimony. The exiles are on the stand, testifying how they suffered in the evil whale Babylon. In verse 34, we can read back the transcript of their testimony, "*Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon...swallowed me like a monster.*" The word monster can be translated as sea monster, or some mythological animal. Same word is used in Genesis 1:21, "...God created the great sea creatures..." So, we can say an evil whale, Babylon!

Their pathway was the same as the pathway of the prophet Jonah. Into the whale, but then right back out of the whale again! Jonah being swallowed was surely fatal – being inside a whale is like being inside your own tomb - yet to the delight of children everywhere, God ordered the expulsion of Jonah back out of the whale, in an unexpected action of God that amounted to a resurrection of Jonah.

It is the same storyline for God's exiles! They went into the behemoth of Babylon; they were snatched and eaten, ending up in the belly of the beast, in central city Babylon. The exiles were goners, surely being inside the monster is fatal! Yet to the delight of God's children everywhere, the expulsion of the exiles back out of the monster Babylon, is a surprise that amounted to the resurrection of the exiles.

It was the same storyline for God's Son! He was crucified, died, then pierced, and finally was buried in the belly of the earth with a large stone blocking the entrance. At the hands of the Roman empire, Jesus was deported to the tomb. Yet the expulsion of Jesus out of the grave, is a surprise that is gloriously

explained as the miraculous act of God in the resurrection of Christ. One greater than Jonah would come.

Verse 35, much like Jonah prayed inside the whale, the exiles prayed from inside Babylon a fierce prayer against their oppressor, asking for God to issue fierce justice. The exiles know from God's teaching about His covenant, that God will put all things right. What was needed was justice and punishment for His enemies, which was the action that would release the slaves. The prayer of the exiles is huge. They were expecting and asking that previous cosmic-scale oppression would be replaced with cosmic-scale reversal, resulting in cosmic-scale rejoicing! God who is truly the king of all will liberate His people, and He would do whatever was required in order to liberate His people. So Jerusalem in exile, and on the stand testifying, is also praying and believing in God's coming reversal.

What animated the prayer of the exiles was their knowledge of God's covenant, and that therefore their pathway and the arc of their storyline was the same for them as exiles, as it had been for Jonah, and would be for Jesus. God would need to act toward Babylon in response for the blood of Jerusalem!

2. Like a defense attorney in a courtroom, God took the case of Jerusalem! (v.36-37)

In verse 36, the LORD God had an announcement to make. He said *Behold*. What was the big announcement? The LORD revealed that He would be their lawyer in court. God Himself would operate as the defense attorney for His people in this case of injustice. The actual quote from verse 36 was that God would "...plead your cause and take vengeance for you..." Here the previous theme of the vengeance of the LORD was now combined with His upcoming courtroom actions.

Then mention was made of the waters associated with Babylon. Babylon believed that the way it came into existence was by conquering the mythical chaos of the sea-waters. Babylon believed that their power came from dominating the chaotic and mythical sea beneath the earth. Knowing that, God said, quote, "*I will dry up her sea, and make her fountain dry...*" Just as Egypt was no match for the LORD God of Israel because God could part the Red Sea, so also Babylon will be no match for the LORD God of Israel, because He could dry up her mythical sea.

The courtroom was an allegory to show God's power and authority over Babylon and her mythical sea. Next, the literal scene of Babylon is given in verse 37, "...and Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, (jackals are scavenging animals only found in broken-down places), a horror and a hissing, without inhabitant." Babylon, that used to have one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world – The Hanging Gardens - in addition to having the ancient world's strongest army and therefore the ancient world's most powerful government,

would suddenly become a place without any human life and therefore without any military or political power. God would bring a decisive end to the empire.

3. Like the judge of the courtroom, God issued the sentence against the guilty, performed their punishment, and told His people to go free! (v.38-46)

Now God took position as judge of the courtroom, and started a slide show of what was going to happen. His first picture in verse 38 was Babylon roaring like a group of hungry young lions, who are eager for food. Our author envisioned Babylon like a hungry lion, desperate for food and drink, ready to capture and eat everyone within reach. However, in verse 39, the LORD instead fed the lions food that had the effect of a tranquilizer that was fatal. The lions would eat and become intoxicated, fall unconscious to the ground, and end up dying. In verse 40, the roaring lions don't seem much like lions anymore, in fact, when they fall down, we are told that God would bring them down like lambs. So this little paragraph from verse 38 to verse 40 began with roaring lions and already was ending with lambs, rams, and goats rendered helpless and then slaughtered by the LORD.

In verse 41, there began a song of gloating over Babylon's defeat and destruction, leading off with the big announcement repeated from chapter 50:2, "*Babylon is taken!*" There was abundant evidence of the reversal – rather than Babylon being victorious over the nations, making each nation a horror again, instead the opposite now happens – it was rather the sight of Babylon that had become a horror to the nations! Babylon had undergone a complete reversal – rather than an object of praise, as verse 41 said, "*the praise of the whole earth,*" instead Babylon had been expeditiously reduced to a graphic scene of defeat and slaughter. Verse 42, they were flooded not with actual sea-water, but rather with an allegorical tidal-wave of enemy troops, who conquered it and left it deserted. As for their status of actual moisture, we read in verse 43, Babylon literally had the opposite problem – Babylon had become "*...a land of drought and a desert,*" and a wasteland "*...in which no one dwells*" anymore. The once productive region was reduced to a lifeless wilderness.

In verse 44, Bel means Lord, and refers to a Babylonian false god. These three words sound similar to each other in Hebrew – Bel, Babylon, and the word 'swallowed,' and so there is a wordplay in verse 44 in order to emphasize the message. Verse 44 reads, "*I will punish Bel in Babylon and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed.*" The message is that the true God will have victory, while Babylon and their false god Bel, who had swallowed the other nations, were about to have the unique experience of the living God intervening during their customary habit of swallowing a nation, in order to reverse their swallowing action this time. To the delight of children everywhere, God would allegorically reach down Bel's mouth, as it were, and remove from his belly, through his throat and mouth, the people that they seized, ate, and swallowed, but apparently had not yet digested!

The evil monster was being forced to relinquish Jerusalem, and was not free to retain and consume God's people. The LORD was snatching the life of His people Zion, out of the jaws of the consuming monster Babylon!

At the end of verse 44, there was a brief and simple mention of the wall of Babylon, despite how significant that was. The wall had been a crucial part of Babylon's success and strength. The wall system was famous and impenetrable. It was built as a double wall. The outer wall was 12 feet thick, followed by 23 feet of ground with a ditch with water called a moat, followed by another wall, and the second wall was 21 feet thick. The moat was located between the two walls – wall, moat, wall. 12 feet, 23 feet, 21 feet. 56 feet of various defenses! Here now in verse 44, God plainly stated that "...*the wall of Babylon has fallen.*" Who could do that? Only God.

The strength of Babylon was gone. The safety of Babylon had evaporated. The exiles could walk out and go home. Formerly, the false god Bel had been credited with Babylon's victory over Jerusalem and over the God of Israel, but here our LORD God was revealing that He had not been defeated by Bel. Rather, The Lord had used the Babylonian military system to chastise His people, and God was showing that the false god Bel did not exist at all. Babylon's glory days were ending. As verse 44 says, nations were no longer flowing to Babylon. Instead, nations were destined to begin flowing to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the worship of God from every nation! God would rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild His temple, send His Son, and in His Son, build His Kingdom and church around the world.

In verse 45, God repeated His message to the exiles to be ready to flee! Note that God referred to these abused exiles as "*My people.*" God's fierce anger no longer punished His own people, but instead God had pardoned them for their sins, and God's anger was being turned against Babylon. The exiles were being admonished to depart the empire that God was dismantling. 'Run for your lives!' is the idea in verse 45. In verse 46, reports and rumors would start to swirl, probably about the rising coalition of armies led by Persia, the exiles would be tempted to be afraid regarding the status of the Babylonian empire, its resulting violence, its apparent instability and its patterns of this ruler turning against that ruler. However, God was clear in His repeated instructions for His exilic people – *Let not your heart faint, and be not fearful!* Do not get caught up in the drama and turmoil. Do not pay attention to such perennial pre-reporting of such gossip. The only thing to remember and focus on is that Babylon will be defeated by God, which means that the exiles are free to go home! Be ready to make a run for it!

Conclusion:

1. Remember that we deserve God's wrath, but we get God's mercy.

As we study such chapters of God's judgment on big bad evil Babylon, we must always guard ourselves against pride and self-righteousness by remembering that formerly, we used to be enemies of God. When our case is tried in the courtroom of heaven, we also deserve the wrath and curse of God!

Our personal sins may not be as bad as the imperial ambition and cruel war crimes of an ancient superpower like Babylon, but we also cannot avoid the indictment that we share in the rebellion of the human race since Adam.

We deserve the wrath of God. Why don't we receive the wrath of God? Only because of the mercy of God!

Ephesians 2:3-6, "*we all ...were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Christ and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places...*"

Studying God's fierce judgment of Babylon should leave us grateful for God's mercy to us.

2. Remember that God wins. God wins over ancient Babylon. God wins over the Roman empire that ruled at the time of Jesus, and had a hand in crucifying Jesus. God wins over all advances and evils of all nations.

The exiles went home. Jonah went on his assigned preaching journey. Jesus went back to heaven and was seated on the throne. And all of us will worship and serve God in our assignments, until that day when we will go home to heaven to be ushered to our own honored seats at heaven's banquet with Jesus. God wins over evil, which means we get redeemed.

The next time you are singing the Hallelujah Chorus, recall the context that God wins. The themes of Jeremiah chapters 50 and 51 about the downfall of evil, and the salvation of God's people are repeated in Revelation 18 and 19. After saying that Babylon has fallen, and after saying that Christ has tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty, then Christ is exalted as *King of Kings and Lord of Lords*, then our cry goes up – Hallelujah!

3. Just like the exiles, we pray while waiting for our coming restoration.

We taught to pray while we wait. Listen to how the exiles prayed to God in verse 34, "*he has devoured me, He has crushed me...he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me like a monster...he has rinsed me out.*" And again in verse 35, "*The violence done to me...be upon Babylon...*" Christ taught us to pray in The Lord's Prayer, '*Thy kingdom come...They will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...*' We are praying for God to go ahead and win. We are praying for God's kingdom to come to advance, to prove victorious for His people, His church.

We pray victoriously. God Himself encourages us as exiles in this world in verse 36, "*I will plead your cause...*" and again in verse 46, "*Let not your heart be*

faint, and be not fearful... ”Similarly, Jesus said John 16:33, “...in the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Just like the exiles, we pray while we wait for our certain restoration.