

Sabbath School Lesson #12 – Back to Egypt – 12-18 December 2015

Christ was gracious to ancient Israel, yet often they refused to believe His providence and relied on their vain promises to do His works. “Then they said to Jeremiah, The LORD be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not even according to all things for the which the LORD thy God shall send thee to us” (Jeremiah 42:5) – they failed.

At the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, about 588 BC, he gave directions to Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, to free Jeremiah, telling him: “If it seems good unto thee to come with me to Babylon, come; and I will look well unto thee:” but if not, “behold, all the land is before thee: whither it seemeth good and convenient for thee to go, thither go;” or stay with Gedaliah in “Judah, and dwell with him among the people: or go wheresoever it seemeth convenient unto thee to go” (Jeremiah 40:4-5). Jeremiah had love for the people of God left in Judah, and rather than go to Babylon to be looked after, he went “unto Gedaliah the son of Ahikam to Mizpah; and dwelt with him among the people that were left in the land” (verse 6), for Gedaliah was made governor of the land (verse 7), wherein Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left certain of the poor of the land for vinedressers and for husbandmen. And when “all the Jews that were in Moab, and among the Ammonites, and in Edom, and that were in all the countries, heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant of Judah, and that he had set over them Gedaliah the son of Ahikam the son of Shaphan; Even all the Jews returned out of all places whither they were driven, and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah, unto Mizpah, and gathered wine and summer fruits very much” (verses 11-12).

Shortly afterward, a certain apostate Jew named Ishmael, who was the servant of Baalis, king of the Ammonites, murdered Gedaliah. Then all the people who had been left in the land, and who had returned from the surrounding countries to dwell in the land, fearing that they would be held responsible for the murder of the governor, departed from the land, and set to go back to Egypt (Jeremiah 41:17-18). The people came to Jeremiah to ask counsel of the Lord, but given their Old covenant mindset they did not believe the Lord. They said to Jeremiah, “pray for us unto the LORD thy God” (Jeremiah 42:2). They no longer knew the Lord as their God, but Jeremiah’s. Then they repeated the Old covenant promise, “That the LORD thy God may shew us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do” (verse 3) – promising to do whatsoever Jeremiah’s God shows them. The Lord promised His people in answer to Jeremiah’s prayer that if they stay in the land, He would protect them (verses 10-12). Jeremiah told the people that, “The LORD hath said concerning you, O ye remnant of Judah; Go ye not into Egypt” (verse 19). But the people refused the answer of Jeremiah’s prayer. “So they came into the land of Egypt: for they obeyed not the voice of the LORD: thus came they even to Tahpanhes” (Jeremiah 43:7). Yet when, against all the protest, all the people of the land, “every person,” determined to go to Egypt, Jeremiah and Baruch went with them. Jeremiah stayed with the church that was in apostasy that he might continue to be the voice of reproof and rebuke, for peradventure some of them repent.

Indeed, as Jeremiah stayed with the church in apostasy, the Lord spoke through him. “Then came the word of the LORD unto Jeremiah in Tahpanhes, saying, Take great stones in thine hand, and hide them in the clay in the brickkiln, which is at the entry of Pharaoh’s house in Tahpanhes, in the sight of the men of Judah; And say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will set his throne upon these stones that I have hid; and he shall spread his royal pavilion over them. And when he cometh, he shall smite the land of Egypt, and deliver such as are for death to death; and such as are for captivity to captivity; and such as are for the sword to the sword. And I will kindle a fire in the houses of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them, and carry them away captives: and he shall array himself with the land of Egypt, as a shepherd putteth on his garment; and he shall go forth from thence in peace. He shall break also the images of Bethshemesh, that is in the land of Egypt; and the houses of the gods of the Egyptians shall he burn with fire” (Jeremiah 43:8-13). These came to pass, and the people suffered the consequence of going back to Egypt.

Our Church has gone back to Egypt as well. The faithful Jeremiahs will remain with the disobedient Church. They will not form another denomination. If it becomes necessary, the

faithful may separate to another Adventist Congregation, or may form a distinct Adventist Congregation, as did Paul: “But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9) – “Fearing that the faith of the believers would be endangered by continued association with these opposers of the truth, Paul separated from them and gathered the disciples into a distinct body, continuing his public instructions in the school of Tyrannus, a teacher of some note” {AA 285.3}. But like Jeremiah, the faithful today will not form an offshoot denomination, for all such offshoots are motivated by Old covenant thinking, the self-righteous mentality, and hence they leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church. There is apostasy in the Church. God’s plan is that faithful Jeremiahs remain in His Church and continue to give counsel and counteract the apostasy.

Jeremiah is not the only example of faithful prophets who remained with the Church even in times of apostasy. Elijah too stayed with the Church even when they worshipped Baal. We are in similar apostasy today. After the death of our leading Adventist pioneers, our Church went back to worshipping modern Baal; the faithful Jeremiahs are to counteract this apostasy.

We have in other ways gone back to Egypt – in the old bondage of the Old covenant. We started going back to Egypt on this matter when our leaders back in 1888 rejected the most precious message of Christ’s righteousness, and we have never fully recovered. Largely, in the corporate body, we profess the Old covenant. For example, a statement that was made on the first page of this week’s lesson (Sabbath afternoon): “the Lord spoke to them, *offering* them salvation ...” The idea of the Lord merely offering salvation is closely related to the Old covenant, which we studied last week. The New Covenant is God’s one-way promise to write His law in our hearts, and to *give* us everlasting salvation as a *free gift* “in Christ.” The Old covenant is the vain promise of the people to obey, and it only “gendereth to bondage” (Galatians 4:24). This is in essence turning ‘back to Egypt,’ which is Old covenant bondage.

Old covenant thinking on the part of sincere Adventists who want to follow Jesus only “gendereth to bondage,” and takes them ‘back to Egypt.’ Most of us have remained many years in that bondage, and often we have not realised that the Old covenant ideas that have enslaved our thinking are a counterfeit of the pure, true gospel. We often wonder why our ‘Christian experience’ is so disappointing; we do not know the truth of the New Covenant. We assume that the gospel is impotent, when we have inherited only a distorted view of it.

If, as our Lesson writer states, the idea of salvation being only offered is true, then your salvation is due to your taking the first step to accept it. It depends on your initiative. God’s great mechanism of salvation stands idle so far as you are concerned until you press the switch to get it activated for you – it is when you ‘accept Christ’ and believe and keep His commandments. If you do not take initiative, then Christ died for you in vain, and you have not realised any of the ‘benefits’ He wants you to have. Sounds very good, but is it true?

If it *is* true, then the lost in the final judgment can shake their fist at God and tell Him, ‘You did not do anything for me, all you did was make me an *offer*; You did not actually *give* me anything.’ But the truth is that the very life they have had while they “enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25) has been a *gift* that God has *given* them by virtue of the sacrifice of Christ. They are already infinitely and eternally in debt to Jesus for their food, the pleasures of life, and yes, for their next breath. They have already realised the ‘benefits’ of the cross of Christ. He “maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45), blesses them, shields them from ruin, sends angels to care for them, and they have received all these ‘benefits’ with unthankful hearts.

The people in Jeremiah’s time made the same ‘promise’ to God as did the people in the time of the Exodus: “Whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God, to whom we send thee; that it may be well with us” (Jeremiah 42: 6). Under the Old covenant at Mount Sinai, Israel’s leaders voted to respond to the Lord’s Good News Gospel declaration of what *He* would do for them, “And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8) – in matters of days they were worshipping a golden calf! Unlike the ‘remnant’ in Jeremiah’s day that went ‘back to Egypt,’ the Lord is raising up a ‘remnant’ that have overcome the old egocentric motivation of self-righteousness, and have received in their hearts joyfully the new motivation of grace.