

Jeremiah 34-39

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[0:00] Jeremiah 34 to 39. Again, usual drill. If you've got a Bible, turn to it. One theme, one word, really, to listen, to obey.

At some point when the dust settles after exile, Jeremiah, or conceivably his P.A. Barak, sits down and carefully puts these chapters together.

They highlight the most important question of all, are we listening to God speak through his word? It's not really surprising, is it, that Jeremiah was concerned about this.

No book shaped Jeremiah's thinking more than Deuteronomy. And enshrined at the heart of that book is that God's people are a listening people. That's the summary of Deuteronomy.

The standout feature of Moses' God in Deuteronomy 4 is that he is a God who speaks. He talks on Mount Sinai. God speaks, his people listen.

[1:23] And as God's people are entering the land in Deuteronomy, God speaks to them. And it's at that point Moses introduces what we looked at this morning, the national slogan of Israel, Deuteronomy 6.

This is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land which you're going over to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and commandments which I command you all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.

Hear, therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and might.

And these words I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall listen. Listen. Israel's primary calling was to listen. And when everything else is stripped away, this is what they got wrong.

They refused to listen. And I suspect there's no greater danger for us as a church that we stop listening to God as he speaks through the scriptures.

[2:28] Sometimes it's familiarity, isn't it? It's just another Sunday night going through the motions. Sometimes it's the sheer busyness of life that takes the edge off listening to God's word.

Sometimes it's the pressure of life. It's easy to stop listening. Sometimes we don't like what we're hearing. Whatever the reason is, it's not good for our spiritual health, and so we need to run the diagnostic, which is Jeremiah 34 to 39, on the operating system of our lives and hearts.

What is our default response to the speaking God? These chapters give us three options. The first is in chapter 34 and 35, and it is this, short-lived repentance.

Short-lived repentance. Do you remember last week, chapter 30 to 33, the bright new tomorrow that Jeremiah promised? But here Jeremiah dumps us right back into the middle of the siege of Jerusalem in 588 BC.

King Nebuchadnezzar and his chums are knocking at the gate, and there's rather a lot of them.

Chapter 34 verse 1. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion.

[3:40] And all the peoples were fighting against Jerusalem and all of its cities. And even that slightly reassuring note at the end isn't all that reassuring, because according to verse 7, all its cities has been reduced to Lachish and Azekah, and they're about to fall to Babylon too.

So it's fair to say that things are not looking good. At which point, God gives Jeremiah a word for the idiot king, Zedekiah. Zedekiah is Josiah's son, but he is neither godly nor intelligent.

And after being appointed by Nebuchadnezzar as the puppet king of Judah, about 10 years before, he has begun to play a very dangerous game of chicken with his boss.

Zedekiah, instead of just shutting up and putting up with Babylon rule, is constantly flirting with the Egyptians, their neighbors, in the vain hope that the Egyptians might come and set his kingdom free.

I don't want to spoil the end of the story, but this isn't going to end well for him. As you may have picked up from chapter 39, God tells Zedekiah up front in verse 3, can you see it?

[4:51] You shall not escape from his hand, but you shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand. You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye, and you'll speak to him face to face. And that was not going to be a pleasant encounter.

Incredibly, graciously, God speaks again to Zedekiah. Verse 4, he makes him a great offer. If you obey, you shall not die by the sword. You shall die in peace.

And as spices will burn for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people should burn spices for you, and lament for you, saying, alas, Lord, for I have spoken the word. Listen, Zedekiah, here's the deal, the deal of the century at this late stage.

You can submit to judgment, take your medicine, and enjoy the rest of your life. It's a great offer. It's a ridiculous offer. But what does Zedekiah do when he gets this offer?

Well, you can see chapter 34, verse 8. He actually responds. He made a covenant with all the people of Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female.

[5:56] Verse 10, they did it. They obeyed. Everyone did it. There would be no slaves. They obeyed and set these people free. There's something a little bit odd about this, how the Babylonians are at the gates like masked orcs about to crush Jerusalem.

And Zedekiah thinks it's about time that he started obeying one aspect of the law. Jeremiah doesn't explain to us whether this was economically motivated. There's a siege going on. A few less mouths to feed is convenient.

You're on your own now. Or whether it's spiritually motivated. Well, Zedekiah can remember Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15. He seems to get a little bit mixed up.

But for better or worse, he pulls it off. Verse 10 until verse 11. But afterwards, they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they'd set free and brought them into subjection as slaves.

And so if this is repentance, it is shallow and short-lived. And in that, they are absolutely typical of God's people throughout the Old Testament. Look at what God says, verse 13.

[7:06] He says, Verse 15.

You recently repented. You did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty. Verse 16. Then you repented. Can you see the play on words? They repented of their repentance.

And they profaned by name. And so God says, Enough is enough in the face of their covenant faithfulness. His faithfulness, his justice comes back to bite them. 34 verse 17.

I proclaim to you liberty, to the sword, to pestilence and to famine, declares the Lord. And I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. God then takes them back to Genesis 15.

Andrew spoke about it a few weeks ago. Do you remember that he told Abraham to cut an animal into two and to make a bloody corridor through which both the sign of God's presence and Abraham was supposed to pass through?

[8:15] As a way of saying, isn't it? And if I break this covenant, what's happened to the animal may be happened to me. May I be chopped up like this animal if I don't keep my side of the bargain?

The issue is God's people find themselves in exactly that position. Verses 18 and 19. The curses of the covenant fall on them.

Verse 22. The Babylonians will come and take the city and burn them with fire. And God says, I'll make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant. The sham of Zedekiah's covenant and accompanying repentance is seen for what it is.

Short-lived, short-term, skin-deep repentance. And it leads to no change and no real difference in the life of God's people. The thing about real repentance is that it always leads to change and to transformation.

Let me read to you from the Westminster Confession of Faith on Repentance. By it a sinner out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in

Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sin as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

[9 : 40] What the confession is getting at there is that repentance leads to changed behaviour because it goes deep. And you see, repentance isn't a quick fix. It's one of the hardest distinctions to get, I think, to live for Christ, is that repentance is not the same thing as saying sorry, to get it over with as quickly as possible.

Repentance isn't, I've said I'm sorry. I've said I'm sorry, and the implication of that is, why are you continuing to give me a hard time over this?

Repentance actually takes time. As the reality of our sin seeps into our skulls, as we start to realise the danger that we are in, the twistedness of our behaviour, and that we then find new mercy in Jesus, and the result that comes from that, from the Holy Spirit, is that real repentance goes deep. And I think we often want to say, don't we, it's okay, it's over and done with. I've said sorry. And we're terrified.

We don't want to wallow in it. But we need to face up to the fact, don't we, that my arrogance is deadly. My self-confidence is an affront to God. And that when we are hypocrites, it is toxic.

[11 : 10] And that our attempts to make ourselves look slightly better than we are, or to massage the truth, are ultimately hell-deserving. It is one thing, isn't it, to admit we're wrong.

It's one thing to admit we're foolish. But real repentance leads us to Christ and to change. It's when someone who falls into grave sin, and when they fall, and when they stumble, and when they repent, that is not a quick process.

Of course they are gloriously forgiven. But we must be really careful of thinking that repentance is just a quick and a surface thing.

We'll shift the picture. Listening leads to obedience. That's what chapter 35 is saying. At this point, we're unexpectedly introduced to a group called the Rechabites.

I knew nothing about the Rechabites until this week. Jeremiah has met them about 10 years earlier in 598. And you can see in this section that we shift backwards and forwards in time.

[12 : 17] Baruch has put the two together to make a really clear statement. Why do we get this odd meeting out of sequence? Because the Rechabites are the perfect example of the repent of repenting pattern.

The Rechabites take their name from their father Jonadab, according to two kings, of one of Jehu's brutal sidekicks. And Jehu was appointed to bring judgment on the house of God, the house of Ahab, and he did it really effectively, but with a little bit too much relish.

And now the Rechabites are his descendants. And they are hardcore worshippers of the Lord who hated idolatry. They loathe the health, wealth, and sex prosperity gospel of Baal.

And they'd managed to stay faithful to Jonadab's five commandments, which you see in verses 6 and 7, for about 250 years. 250 years of faithfulness. It's not a small achievement. 250 years of consistency.

In recent years, they'd compromised a little bit in the face of the Babylonians, and they'd retreated into Jerusalem, which is when, interestingly, chapter 35, verse 2, God tells Jeremiah, invite them to the temple and give them a glass of wine.

[13 : 32] It's interesting because they were teetotal. And I'm not sure that Jeremiah realized this. Or perhaps he did, and he was mischievous. Either way, you'll see what happens in verse 5, then I set before the Rechabites pitches full of wine and cups and said to them, drink wine.

But they answered, we will drink no wine. For Jonadab, son of Rechab, our father commanded us, you shall not drink wine. Verse 8, we've obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, our daughters, and not to build houses.

It's pretty impressive. God's point in dragging them into the narrative, verse 14, the command that Jonadab, son of Rechab, gave to his sons, drink no wine has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command.

I've spoken to you persistently, but you've not listened to me. In that previous chapter, they had given up on obedience after a day. The Rechabites are still going after 250 years.

They are the model listeners. Verse 15, I sent you all my servants, the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, turn now every one of you from his evil way, but you did not incline your ear to me or listen to me.

[14:44] The sons of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, have kept the commandment their father gave to them, but these people have not obeyed me. That is why, according to chapter 35, verses 17 to 19, while Judah is about to be destroyed, Jonadab, the son of Rechab, shall never let a man stand before me.

The point is not that we should become teetotal. The son of Rechab, the son of Rechab, the son of Rechab, the son of Rechab, the son of Rechab, the son of Rechab, but we should all listen and stick to God's word in the way that the Rechab, stuck to Jonadab's word. You see, Jeremiah 36 underlines the message of the 35. When God speaks, short-lived repentance is not enough. We are aiming for, we are looking for long-term change.

And when God speaks, do not settle for short-term repentance. Or do you go for the second option? The second option is I'm cold-hearted defiance.

That's chapter 36. Do you remember, those of you who were in school, writing lines? Writing lines, it was a standard form of punishment.

[16:00] You homeschoolers, I hope that, start introducing, start introducing writing lines. I remember being stuck in a classroom, writing this. I promise not to use my calculator as a remote control to turn off Mr. Matty.

I had to write it 150 times. I promise not to use my calculator as a remote control to turn off Mr. Matty. I finished it. After an hour and a half, I took it to Mr. Matty, he grinned at me and he ripped it up in front of my face.

And watching him rip it up was deeply frustrating. That's nothing compared to Jeremiah 36. And we're back in history again, this time to 605.

Jehoiakim is on the throne of Judah. And the new kid on the block is the Babylonian upstart called Nebuchadnezzar. He's just defeated the Egyptians and the Syrians putting him in charge of the whole white known world.

And things are looking ominous for little Judah which is on the road from Egypt to Babylon. And at this point, the earliest version of the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah Mark 1, is born in the fourth year.

[17:15] In the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I've spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations from the day I spoke to you from the day of Josiah until today.

So that when they read it, they might repent. It's basically chapters 1 to 25 of Jeremiah. It would have taken a long time to write it out, wouldn't it? It would have been a substantial piece of parchment and the plan, according to verse 4 to 6, is for Baruch to write it and then to read it at the temple on a public holiday and the goal, verse 7, is that it may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord, that everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people.

So Baruch gets writing and several months later and a very sore wrist later, he gets reading and the response is instant. It causes a massive kerfuffle.

A relative of one of Jeremiah's few supporters called Micaiah hears the reading, runs to the palace and says, what are we to do? Get the guy in here, read it to us.

Verse 16, when they heard all the words, they turned to one another in fear and they said to Baruch, we must report all these words to the king, they asked, where do these words come from? Jeremiah dictated them, verse 19, and the officials said, to Baruch, go and hide, you and Jeremiah and let no one know where you are.

[18:36] The tension's mounting. The civil servants guess, rightly, the king is going to flip when he reads this word. So they engineer deniability so they can say, well, we don't know where he's gone, he's in hiding.

It's nothing to do with us. And then they tell the king and what happens next is the most blatant defiance of God's word anywhere in the Bible. Chapter 36, verse 22, just look at that verse. It was a nine month and the king was sitting in the winter house and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him as Jehu read three or four columns, which is about as much as you can read at a time. It's, you know, got a scroll, you need both hands to open the scroll. And as he did, what happened? The king cut off the columns he read with a knife and he threw them into the fire pot until the entire scroll was consumed by the fire in the fire pot.

Neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments. even when Elnathan and Deliah and Gamaria urged the king not to burn the scroll, he

would not listen to them and the king commanded his men to seize Baruch the secretary and Jeremiah the prophet, but the Lord hid them.

The king burns God's words. He tears the words of the living God. He tears them up, which is a ridiculous thing to do.

[20 : 02] Straight away, God tells Jeremiah, do it again. So 26, 28, write, take another scroll and write it, write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll. And you add, you may add some more things detailing what will happen to Jehoiakim.

And so Jeremiah tells poor old Baruch get started and he did and we have the ultimate result in front of us on Jeremiah Mark 2. But the point here is the cold-hearted defiance.

It is never a good idea when it comes to God. Ignoring God is a disaster. But could it be that it's a possibility for us tonight? That we hear the voice of God but we're ignoring him.

Our conscience is hardened and seared. And when we ignore our conscience again and again and again, it leads to cold-hearted defiance. It is awful, isn't it, when God exposes our hearts and he exposes our sin.

It's really painful. But unless we listen at that point, it becomes easier and easier and easier to hear hard truths until it washes over us. Like water off a duck's back.

[21 : 19] And we continue living our uninterrupted life. I'd say maybe tonight, there have been times when under the preaching of God's words, you've felt the heat of God's spirit as he applies deeply into your life.

And you've ignored it. And what you've found is that Sunday by Sunday it's easier to ignore. And so you can sit through and actually the word never penetrates you.

Or it may be something tonight for some of you that God is asking of you in his word and you simply just ignore it. And so tonight, if that's you, recognize that.

Tonight would be a great night, would be a great time to listen and to repent and to do what he says. Short-lived repentance, cold-hearted defiance.

And there's one more possible response to God's word and that is deceitful delay. Look at verses 37 and 38. But back when said, again, it's quite confusing, isn't it? His reign is summed up in verse 2 of 37.

[22 : 20] But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet. There's the headline, he did not listen. But it's a bit more complicated because in these chapters, Zedekiah doesn't leave the nation in shallow repentance, again, or he doesn't completely defy God like Jehoiakim, he just prefabricates, he hums and he haws.

Maybe I will, maybe I won't, until tragically it's too late. And God's people, Zedekiah has been meddling in the power politics of the Middle East.

He's asked the Egyptians to come and distract the Babylonians, which they did, and in the middle of this chapter of 37, verse 3, Zedekiah sent to Jehuchal, to Jeremiah, please pray for us, to the Lord our God.

It's hard to know whether he's being sincere at this point. He probably was, but that doesn't mean he was praying for the right thing. Jeremiah, in his unusual and diplomatic and sensitive way, breaks the bad news to the king.

Look at verse 7, Thus says the Lord the God of Israel, Thus shall you say to the king of Judah, who sent me to inquire of me, Behold Pharaoh's army that came to help you, is about to return to Egypt to its own land, and the Chaldeans shall come back and fight against the city.

[23 : 39] They shall capture it and burn it with fire. No reprieve, no shock to Jeremiah. Chapter 7, chapter 11, chapter 14, do you remember? God had said years before, do not pray for these people.

The Babylonians are coming. So what does Jeremiah do? Well, he decides now would be a great time to set up a family property business. Verses 11 to 15.

Jeremiah goes to sort out some land issues. Back home, and he's suspected, not surprisingly, of defecting to the Babylonians. And he's thrown in jail, and then the really interesting thing is what happens next, verse 16.

When Jeremiah had come to the dungeon cells and remained there many days, King Zedekiah sent for him and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house and said, is there any word from the Lord? Jeremiah said, there is. Then he said, you shall be delivered into the hand of the

king of Babylon.

Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, what wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people that you've put me in prison? Why am I here? Verse 21, so Zedekiah gave orders and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard, and a loaf of bread was given to him daily from the baker street until all the bread of the city was gone.

[24 : 52] It's like Herod, it's like John the Baptist, it's like Paul with Agrippa and Festus. Zedekiah keeps bringing Jeremiah back to tell him the same thing again and again, but he never actually listens.

And the problem is this situation never lasts. It may be a single cell, and he's got fresh bread every morning for now, but at this point, some of Zedekiah's advisors pop up, and they point out that Jeremiah's defeatist talk isn't exactly helping the war effort.

And they argue that desperate times call for desperate measures, so let this man be put to death, for he's weakening the hands of everyone. And then in true pilot fashion, Zedekiah drops Jeremiah right in it, literally.

But behold, he's in your hands. For the king can do nothing against you, so they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malachiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes, and there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

And remember, this isn't just mud. So children, you might want to ask mom to know what was in there. Well, we know what was in there, don't we?

[26 : 01] Now, at this point, a giant Ethiopian Sudanese, it's more accurate, Sudanese eunuch, Ebed Malach, turns up. And which of us has ever met a Sudanese eunuch that you can't trust?

38, verse 8, Ebed Malach went to the king's house and said to the king, they've done evil, let's get him out of here. Which is what happens, verse 12, put the rags and clothes between fire up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern.

What happens next? Well, do you notice there's no mention of Jeremiah's state of mind? There's lots in Jeremiah about his angst, but there's nothing of that. He's suffering for the gospel here big time, but there's not a mention of that.

They just throw him in the pit and they pull him out. Because the focus is on whether Zedekiah will listen to the word of God. Verse 14, King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord.

The king said to Jeremiah I will ask you a question, hide nothing from me. It's not been a problem for Jeremiah so far, has it? Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, if I tell you, will you not surely put me to death?

[27 : 06] And if I give you counsel, will you not listen anyway? Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, even though he seems to get the fact that Jeremiah is not changing his tune.

And he doesn't. Verse 17, if you surrender, your life will be spared. Verse 18, if you do not surrender, everything's going down. You will not escape. Verse 19, I'm afraid of the Judeans who deserted the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.

I wish I could see Jeremiah's face. Nebuchadnezzar and all the armies of the world are outside your gate and you are worried about a few renegade Jews.

Don't you get this? Jeremiah said, you shall not be given to them. Obey, hear, now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you and it should be well with you. But if you will not obey, verse 23, all your wives, your sons shall be let out to the Chaldeans.

You yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon and this city God until the day that Jeremiah was taken.

[28 : 24] Zedekiah ignores the word of God. The clip tones of Jeremiah 39 describe how the Babylonians come rolling in. God has been ignored. His word is fulfilled. It's striking. There's no mention of God anywhere in chapter 39.

It is all the detail of Babylonian military action punishing Zedekiah as the rebel he was by putting his eyes out. Not before ensuring that the last thing he saw was the death of his own son.

Zedekiah is in chains. Jeremiah is free. God's word is not bound. There's a lot of action in chapter 37 to 39 but let's not miss what they are really about.

Zedekiah is battle to hear and obey the word of God. And this time there's no showy response that doesn't last nor is nothing until it's too late.

And I don't know about you but there have been times in my life where I've been very aware that God is addressing an issue in my life. And the problem is as Zedekiah and Herod and Pilate and numerous others demonstrate doing nothing isn't doing nothing.

[29:41] Not making the right choice fairly quickly becomes making the wrong choice. doing nothing tonight isn't doing nothing.

And that's the message of this chapter. When God speaks he instantly throws upon you the obligation to respond. And now that we know that the Lord is speaking definitively in the Lord Jesus and continues to speak to us by his spirit through his word how can we fail to pay attention? Because we know that our response to God's word will ultimately lead either to salvation or to judgment. And for those of us who have heard God's word to us in Jesus our ongoing response of listening will either lead to blessing or to discipline.

And it's a very big deal that is the message of the whole of the Bible. And the writer to the Hebrews picks it up constantly doesn't it? It rams it home to the followers of the Lord Jesus in a way that's impossible to miss.

Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts like in the rebellion. Take care brothers lest any of you with an evil unbelieving heart lead you to fall away from the living God.

[30:59] But exhort one another every day as long as it's called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Today if you hear his of those who have been joined to Christ and to one another by faith is that we listen to God's word.

Listening really really matters. It is the most important the most defining the most satisfying thing in the world and this is what it means from moment to moment day to day to live for the Lord Jesus to listen to him and respond in repentance of faith.

There's one more thing at the end of chapter 39 that we can't leave out. Chapter 39 verse 15. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of guard. Go and say to Abed Malak the Ethiopian thus says the Lord of hosts the God of Israel behold I will fulfill my words against this city for harm not for good and they shall be accomplished before you on that day but I will deliver you on that day declares the Lord and you shall not be given into the hand of the man of whom you are afraid for I will truly save you and you shall not fall by the sword but you shall have your life as a prize of war because you've put your trust in me if we do listen like this giant Sudanese eunuch friend Eber Melech it will mean life and health and peace and it will mean rescue and it will mean salvation and so tonight let us not harden our hearts I love having the children with us

I hope children you know that I believe that children should be with their parents here in God's word and that is a wonderful thing to see your mum and dad here in God's word but with that privilege comes responsibility doesn't it and it is true isn't it that you can sit in church Sunday by Sunday and you can zone out like adults can and you can train yourself that when Paul Levy or Reuben Hunter you need to know children that you need to respond like I need to respond and God warns us and so Sunday by Sunday as we come on the Lord's day we are not to harden our hearts but let us listen to the one whom the father himself introduces like this here is my son listen to him let's pray