

## **WHY WAIT FOR WHOM YOU WILL NOT OBEY?**

**Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 42-44**

**Extracts:**

Now *all the captains of the forces, ... and all the people, from the least to the greatest, came near and said to Jeremiah the prophet, "Please, let our petition be acceptable to you, and pray for us to your God, for all this remnant (since we are left but a few of many, as you can see), that the Lord your God may show us the way in which we should walk and the thing we should do."* ... And it happened *after ten days that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah ... and (he) said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel to whom you sent me to present your petition before Him: 'If you will still remain in this land, then I will build you and not pull you down, and I will plant you and not pluck you up.'*" ... Now it happened, when Jeremiah had stopped speaking... that Azariah... and all the proud men spoke, saying to Jeremiah, "You speak falsely! The Lord our God has not sent you to say (so)." ... So they went to the land of Egypt, for they did not obey the voice of the Lord [Jer. 42: 1-3, 7, 9-10; 43: 1-2, 7]

*Between 1989 and 1993, the then Nigerian military Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida, crafted a transition programme intended to lead to viable and enduring civil governance. He spent huge sums of money as he experimented with numerous political party formations and voting systems. Then, on June 12, 1993, he succeeded in organizing what is still regarded as the freest and fairest Presidential elections ever held in Nigeria. But to everybody's surprise, Babangida annulled the results! The political crisis that followed led to his downfall and the end of military rule in Nigeria.*

*Why did Babangida spend so much time and money to organize free and fair elections only to reject the dream outcome? To this day, he has not given the world the reason(s) for his action. But are we different? Everyday, we go on our knees or to prophets to seek God's face about our pressing problems or our future. We are prepared to wait and wait. We are ready to fast on end until our petitions are answered. Then, when God finally speaks to us, we refuse to obey Him! So, what is the waiting all about? Why wait for whom you will not obey?*

*In today's lesson, the remnants of the people of Judah went to prophet Jeremiah to seek the Lord's face on their behalf. When he brought them back God's word, they refused to obey! Let us learn something from today's story for our spiritual growth.*

## 1. Background story: Waiting for what?

The remnants of the people of Judah, especially those in the capital city of Jerusalem, were deeply worried about their future. Their number had been depleted due to invasions from Babylon. Many of their sons and daughters had been carried away into exile. Some had escaped to nearby territories, especially Egypt. So, the remnants came to Jeremiah the prophet to plead their cause before God, “that the Lord your God may *show us the way in which we should walk and the thing we should do*” [Jer. 42: 2, 3]. Let us learn a few principles from their approach:

### a) *They went first to God, not human experts*

All the captains of the forces and all the people from the least to the greatest went to a prophet because “surely, the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [Amos 3: 7]. Their request was in the right direction in that they were not going to do anything except which way the Lord asked them to walk and what thing to do for “your ears will hear a word behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left” [Is. 30: 21].

Where do you first turn at the sign of trouble? For most of us, we walk by sight, that is, by logical rational ways. Our first point of contact will likely be the professional expert, such as the doctor or the lawyer. The truth is that human beings can only know in part. That is why “cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength” [Jer. 17: 5]. The remnants did the right thing by seeking God’s face on their problems because “blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord for he shall be like a tree planted by the waters” [vv. 7, 8].

### b) *They pledged to abide by whatever God tells them to do*

The remnants went farther. They gave Jeremiah the following undertaking [Jer. 42: 5-6]:

*Let the Lord be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not do according to everything which the Lord your God sends us by you. **Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we send you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the Lord our God***

God counts your public commitment to do something as a vow which cannot be broken for it is “better not to vow than to vow and not pay” [Eccl. 5: 4, 5]. It is not like the “vow” made by a woman in labour never

to come near her husband again only to show up in the labour ward a few years later! This one is different. For example, Jephthah once vowed to God that if He delivered the people of Ammon into his hands, whatever came out of the doors of his house to meet him on his return would surely be God's and he would "offer it up as a burnt offering." On his return home, the first "thing" to come out of the doors of his house was his only child. He had no choice but to offer her to God as he had vowed [**Judg. 11: 29-40**]. So, if you will not do what God will ask you to do, do not bother to ask Him at all, so that you do not invite more trouble for yourself.

c) *They had to wait and wait and wait!*

Jeremiah the prophet replied the people, "I will pray to the Lord your God according to your words, and it shall be that whatever the Lord answers you, I will declare it to you. I will keep nothing back from you" [**Jer. 42: 4**]. Jeremiah waited and waited and waited, and God's response did not come until after ten days [**v. 7**]!

Some of us tend to see God as a light switch or a drive-in hamburger stand. You just press and bingo, there comes His automatic response. It may not always happen like that. *He answers when He chooses to do so.* For example, after Samuel's death, King Saul tried to reach God for guidance on his wars with the Philistines but "the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets" [**1 Sam. 28: 1-6**]. On the other hand, when Judah was invaded by the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Edomites, king Jehoshaphat gathered his people in prayer and fasting before the house of God in Jerusalem. There and then, the Spirit of God came upon Jahaziel who spoke God's response to the king and his subjects [**2 Chron. 20: 1-15**]. So, if you cannot wait, do not bother to come to Him.

Sometimes, God may explain to the prophet why He will not speak to us immediately or at all. For example, when the elders of Israel approached prophet Ezekiel to enquire of the Lord on their behalf, God said, "These men have set up their idols *in their hearts*, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?" [**Ezek. 14: 1-3**]. This is a good hint for us to reconcile (by confession and repentance) with God before seeking His face for our problems or plans.

d) *God's response was not what the people wanted to hear!*

Jeremiah told the people that God had asked the remnants to remain in Judah and not to be afraid of the king of Babylon. He assured them, "If you will still remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you

down, and I will plant you and not pluck you up.” He would show them mercy so that the king of Babylon would show mercy on them and cause them to return to their own land [**Jer. 42: 10-12**]. However, if they chose instead to run to Egypt and dwell there, the sword and famine which they feared in Judah would follow them and kill them there [**vv. 15- 19**].

That was not what the people had expected to hear. So, when Jeremiah stopped speaking, they replied, “You speak falsely! The Lord our God has not sent you to say, ‘Do not go to Egypt to dwell there.’” They alleged that it was their enemies, such as Baruch (Jeremiah’s scribe), who were trying to set them up for destruction. So, they refused to obey God’s word and instead went to Egypt [**Jer. 43: 1-7**].

## 2. Do you want to hear good news or the truth?

The remnants of Judah had pledged to accept *whatever* God told them to do “whether it is pleasing or displeasing” [**Jer. 42: 6**]. But when the response was displeasing to them, they rejected it and did what pleased them. God will always tell us the truth, no matter how bitter! So, before you seek the Lord’s face on your situation, you must first decide whether you want to hear good news or the truth.

### a) *Sometimes, good news may also be the truth!*

Good news can be defined as what agrees with or supports our plans or goals. It may not matter whether those goals are good or bad for us. For example, the absence of adequate security in a bank is good news for a robber but robbery is bad. So, if God were to send to that robber through a prophet not to attack that bank that he was targeting, that would be bad news to the bank thief! That was why, to the proud remnants of Judah (**Jer. 43:1**), remaining on their land amounted to surrendering to the invading Babylonian troops. Therefore, it was not good news for their ego. Yet, the good news that they had expected to hear (to run to Egypt) would lead them to destruction.

Good news may sometimes be the truth. In that case, God’s word confirms our hearts’ desires or plans. For example, David and his men were desirous to recover their families that had in their absence been seized at Ziklag by the Amalekites. When David inquired of the Lord if he should pursue the Amalekite troop and whether he would overtake them, the Lord replied, “Pursue, for you shall surely overtake them and without fail recover all” [**1 Sam. 30: 8**]. Who would not obey that kind of message?

### b) *Most times, God’s message is couched in unpalatable words!!*

When we are in the wrong, the word of God comes at us like a sharp sword of rebuke. It tells us to do what we least think of doing on the basis of our plans or desires.

Take the case of King Ahab who was planning to attack Syria on account of a piece of Israelite land, Ramoth Gilead, that was then under Syrian control. About 450 lying prophets told him, “Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king.” That was what he wanted to hear but it was a deceptive lie! However, king Jehoshaphat of Judah, who was visiting Ahab at the time, had the spirit of discernment and he asked, “Is there not still a prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of Him?” Ahab replied, “There is still one man, Micaiah, . . . *but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me but evil*” [1 Kgs 22: 1-8]. In deed, through Micaiah, God revealed that Ahab would die in battle if he went to that war. He disguised himself and still went to war. There, he was killed [vv. 13-38]. Truth may be bitter but it is still the truth!

### 3. Implications for our walk with God

When the leaders of the remnants of Judah took them to Egypt, they were looking at the issue from a human perspective. They feared that they would be destroyed by the invading Babylonian forces. God’s assurances through the prophet Jeremiah did not appear reassuring to them because they could not imagine how defenceless Judah could withstand the ferocious enemy. Why not go to Egypt where there were shelter and food? What they did not know was that God would punish those who dwelt in the land of Egypt as He had punished Jerusalem “by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” [Jer. 44: 13]. There would be no respite there.

When hardship dogged them on arrival in Egypt, they rationalized that it was because they had stopped worshipping “the queen of heaven,” saying, “since we stopped burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine” [Jer. 44: 16-18]. That is how children of disobedience read the hardship they face on account of their continuing disobedience. They always have a logical explanation for it. Their enemies are at work. Or, they got careless and got arrested. Or, that deadly sexually transmitted disease could have been avoided if they had used the condom, etc. Why steal in the first place? Why get involved in sexual promiscuity in the first place? In deed, the soul that sins shall die!

What then are the implications of the forgoing for our walk with God? They can be summarized as follows:

- *Without a change of heart, you cannot have a change of mind!* It is with the heart that we believe unto righteousness [Rom. 10: 10] and it is in the mind that we are transformed [Rom. 12: 2]. In the words of Jesus, “out of

the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness (and) blasphemies” [Matt. 15: 19]. If such a heart has not changed, how can the mind be renewed? Underlining the actions of the remnants whether in Judah or later in Egypt was hardness of heart [Jer. 13: 10]. Therefore, they were not ready to repent (change of mind) and obey whatever God had to say to them.

- *The choice is still ours whether to give our hearts and minds to God! He cannot force us to obey Him. However, to obey Him takes our determination. A carnal mind cannot obey God. That is why we are admonished to present our bodies “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” [Rom. 12: 1]*

#### **4. Conclusion: Don’t wait for God if you won’t obey Him!**

If the remnants of Judah were hell-bent on disobeying God, why did they bother to hear from Him? Why did they not go ahead and do what was in their hearts in the first place? Our analysis in the forgoing sections provides some answers. To obey God goes radically against our human nature. The process is hard and its outcomes are far-fetched and most times unfathomable by human reckoning.

In ancient times, God spoke to us through His prophets. Later, He spoke to us through His Son, Jesus Christ [Heb. 1: 1]. These days, He speaks to us *mainly* through His word, the Holy Scriptures, by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, each time you open and read the Bible, God is speaking to you. When you receive good advice and admonition from your spouse, parents and siblings, friends and colleagues, teachers and pastors, bosses and business partners, it could be God who is speaking to you. When you are alone and planning to do something which your conscience immediately tells you is wrong, God is speaking to you. Have you obeyed? If you have, that is good news.

If you are not ready to obey what God will say to you, why bother to pray to Him at all? I wonder!