

Isra'el Will Serve the King of Babylon Seventy Years

25: 1-14

DIG: The dovetailing of the two events in verse one dates this prophesy in 605 BC. How long has God been speaking through Jeremiah? Through other prophets (see 7:25)? How must Yirmeyahu and God be feeling at this point? Why does God call a pagan king His servant? What purpose will he serve? Is it fair to punish Babylon for performing God's will? What principle is at work here? What do you suppose was their crime? In retrospect, which of Jeremiah's predictions have come true? Why does God reveal the length of the coming exile?

REFLECT: Why did God warn the people for so long before taking action? Why did God's patience finally run out? How long would you persist in a task without seeing any success? Do you ever wonder about a direction you once took but abandoned? Is God warning you about anything? Are you paying more attention than Judah did? How so?

605 BC during the eleven-year reign of Jehoiakim

"Experienced mountaineers have a quiet, regular, short step . . . on the level it looks unimportant; but then this step they keep up, on and on as they ascend, while the inexperienced amateur hurries along, and soon has to stop, dead tired with the climb. Such an expert mountaineer, when the thick mists come, halts and camps out under some slight cover brought along for that purpose. Only moving along when the mist is cleared away. You want to grow in virtue, to serve God, to love Jesus? Well, you will grow in, and attain these things if you will make them a slow and sure mountain step plod. Willing to have to camp for weeks or months in spiritual isolation, darkness and emptiness at different stages in your walk and growth. All demand for constant light, forever the best - the best to your own feeling, all attempt at eliminating or minimizing the cross and trial, is so much soft foolishness and childish playing."

By Baron Friedrich von Hugel ¹⁹⁹

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is, said Mark Twain, the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. A single word, if it is the right word, can illuminate and strike fire all at once. In **Jeremiah 25**, spoken midway through his prophetic ministry, there is one of these right words: **persistently**.

The word came to Yirmeyahu concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year (March/April 605 BC to March/April 604 BC) of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign as king of Babylon (see [Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)). This is the first exact date we are given in **Jeremiah** and he will do more of this from this point on in the scroll (**36:1, 28:1, 32:1, 39:1**). It was also a critical year because in this year Jehoiakim would burn the first scroll that **Jeremiah** dictated his prophecies to Baruch. That year also marked the turning point for **Judah** because many of the initial prophecies of **Jeremiah** were on the verge of fulfillment. The completion of his prophecies would not be realized for another twenty years. We also learn in these verses that **Jeremiah** was faithful in spite of the opposition to him. Where earlier the prophet expressed degrees of doubt, it will not happen from now on. He will be a fortified city. His opposition will be false prophets, evil priests and wicked kings.

So **Jeremiah** the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: For twenty-three years - from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day - the word of ADONAI has come to me and I have spoken to you **persistently** (25:1-3a). This summarized his ministry up to this point. **Jeremiah** had been faithful to his calling, but the people had not listened to him.

Jeremiah points out that he began prophesying in the thirteenth year of Josiah when **Jeremiah** was appointed as a prophet to the nations (627 BC), to the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 BC) is only twenty-two years. Then why did Yirmeyahu say he had prophesied for twenty-three years?

The ancient Israelites employed an *inclusive* system of counting, which assigns each and every unit a number. The first unit counted is called both "one" and "first." Today we occasionally do this too: for example, when I say, "I was sick for three days," I am probably counting *inclusively* (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday). However, we moderns do not always assign the number one to the first unit in a sequence. When it comes to measuring a distance between two points in time, for example, we count the units *exclusively*.

In an exclusive count, the first unit is assigned no number (the ancient Israelites had no zero). Thus, in measuring the time between today and a day in the future we do not count today at all but start with tomorrow. Tomorrow is one day from now, the day after that is two days from now, and so on. This is NOT how the Israelites counted. They counted *inclusively* even when measuring two points in time. According to their view, exactly one week from today would be eight days, while for us it would be only seven days. Consequently, another way of saying this would be that **Jeremiah** *inclusively* included the year in which he was speaking (March/April 605 BC to March/April 604 BC) as the **twenty-third year**.²⁰⁰

As Eugene Peterson describes in his book *Run with the Horses*, the word **persistently** has a picture behind it. The Hebrew word *shechem* means *shoulder*. At the center of Palestine there are two massive *shoulder* mountains - Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. The village nestled between these two massive *shoulders* is named Shechem. When the Israelites first came into the Land after their forty years of wilderness wandering, **Joshua** led them to Shechem, lined them up on the slopes of the two *shoulder* mountains, half on one slope and half on the other, and reviewed the word of **God** that had directed them there. From one *shoulder* the blessings that would come from a life of worshipful trust were called out; from the other *shoulder* the curses that would come from a life of rebellious self-centeredness were called out. Shechem was the center where the word of **God** was spoken and listened to.

Then, as words do, *shechem* developed another meaning. When you went on a trip in those days you loaded supplies for the journey on your donkey's *shoulders*, or put them on your own *shoulders*, and set out. So the noun, *shoulder*, became a verb that meant *load the shoulder of beasts for a day's journey*. In a hot country like **Isra'el** it was important to get in as many miles as possible before the sun came up and wore you out, so such journeys usually began long before dawn. Eventually the word **persistently** (Hebrew: *hashkem*) came to describe people who got up early before the sun in order to have as many hours as possible to travel.

Jeremiah used the word **persistently** throughout his lifetime (7:13, 7:25-26, 11:7-8, 25:3, 25:4, 26:5, 29:19, 32:33, 35:14-14 and 44:4). For twenty-three years - from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day - the word of **ADONAI** has come to me and I have spoken to you **persistently**, but you have not listened (25:3). For twenty-three years Yirmeyahu got up morning after morning and listened to the **LORD's** word. For twenty-three years the prophet got up morning after morning and spoke **YHVH's** word to the people. However, for twenty-three years the people slept in, sluggish, lazy and heard nothing. We know that **Jeremiah** suffered a great amount of abuse through those years. **He** faced mockery and rejection and imprisonment. **He** wrestled discouragement and despair and probably thought of quitting. What difference did it make anyway? Why not give them what they want to hear?

The word **persistently** has a sunrise in it. **The priest from Anathoth** was up before sunrise to do his work. Every day **he** anticipated listening to **Elohim's** word and then speaking **Elohim's** word. **He** undoubtedly knew **Psalm 108**, probably using it as a morning prayer. **My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready! I will sing, I will sing praises! Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake at dawn (Psalm 108:1-2 RSV)**. It wasn't that **Yirmeyahu** clinched his teeth and resolved to stick it out for twenty-three years, no matter what. **The prophet** simply got up every morning with the sun. The day was **God's** day, not the people's. **He** didn't get up to face rejection . . . **he** got up to meet with **the Creator**. **He** didn't rise to put up with another round of mockery, **he** rose to be with his **LORD**. That was the secret of his persevering pilgrimage - not thinking with dread about the long road ahead but greeting the present moment, each present moment, with obedient delight, with expectant hope: **My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready!**

We all know people who spend a lifetime at the same job, or the same marriage, who are slowly, relentlessly devalued in the process. They are persistent in the sense that they keep doing the same thing for years and years. But we don't especially admire them for it. In fact, we feel sorry for them for having gotten stuck in such a boring rut with neither the energy nor imagination to get out.²⁰¹

But we don't feel sorry for **Jeremiah**. **He** was not stuck in a rut; **he** was committed to a purpose. The one thing that the prophet showed, was no evidence of bored drudgery. Everything we know about **him** shows that after **twenty-three years** his imagination was even more alive and **his** spirit even more resilient than it was in **his** youth. **He** wasn't putting in **his** time. Every day was a new episode in the adventure of living the life of a **prophet of God**. The days added up to a life of incredible tenacity . . . of amazing stamina.

Where did **Jeremiah** learn **his persistence**? How did **he** get the word into **his** head? Certainly not by observing the people around **him**. **He** learned it from **ADONAI**. **Yirmeyahu** learned to live **persistently** toward **God** because **God** lived **persistently** toward **him**. The five poems-prayers in **Lamentations** (written in the tradition of **Jeremiah**) express the suffering **Ha'Shem's** people endured during and after the fall of Yerushalayim. At the very center of this dark time, and placed at almost the exact center of these five poems that lament the sin and suffering, there is this verse: **The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22-23 NKJV)**.

There it is - **new every morning . . . great is Your faithfulness**. **God's persistence** is not a dogged repetition of duty. It has all the surprise and creativity, yet all the certainty and regularity, of **a new day**. Sunrise - when the spontaneous and the certain arrive at the same time. This was the source of **Jeremiah's persistence**, **his** creative constancy. **He** was up before dawn, **listening** to **God's** word, Rising early, **he** was quiet and attentive before **his LORD**. Long before the yelling started, the mocking, the complaining, there was this centering, discovering, exploring time with **ADONAI**.

But (then speaking to the people) **you have not listened (25:3b)**. In effect, **the prophet** was saying, "**You** never listened or paid the slightest attention." Here, then is the clue to our erratic life patterns, our inconsistency, our unfaithfulness, our stupid inability to distinguish between fashion and faith. We don't rise up early and listen to **God**. We don't daily find a time apart from the crowd, a time of silence and solitude, for preparing for the day's journey wherever it takes us. We must carve out a time to reflect and study and pray. **Jeremiah** did that and it was not because there were no other options open to **him**. It was that **he** had chosen what **Yeshua** would later call **the good part, which shall not be taken away**, sitting at the feet of **the Master** . . . listening attentively and believing in **Him**.²⁰²

Furthermore, the people had received messages from the prophets who preceded Jeremiah's ministry and they didn't listen to them either. And though Ha'Shem has sent all His servants the prophets to you **persistently**, you have not listened or paid any attention. They said: Turn now (**shuwb**), each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and the key benefit was that you can stay in the Land the LORD gave to you and your fathers for ever and ever. As a result of the Abrahamic Covenant, Israel's possession of the Land is eternal. But according to God's Covenant with Moshe, enjoyment of the Land is based on obedience. Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not provoke Me to anger with what your hands have made. They were not only to turn (**shuwb**) away from sin, but also turn (**shuwb**) to ADONAI. Following other gods only provokes YHVH to anger. If they would keep this part of the command, again, ADONAI says: **Then I will not harm you (25:4-6).**

But you did not listen to Me, declares ADONAI, and you have provoked Me with [the idols] your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves (25:7). Again (surprise! surprise!), the reason for the LORD's anger was spiritual adultery. They had not heeded the words of the prophets. The means of YHVH's discipline would be Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. **To go against God's will is to court disaster.**

Therefore, here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: Because you haven't paid attention to what I've been saying, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, declares ADONAI. He was God's servant in the fact that Ha'Shem was using the pagan king to accomplish His purposes. Ha'Shem will use him to fulfill the prophecies of Yerushalayim's destruction and Judean captivity. God will call Nebuchadnezzar, My servant two more times in this scroll (27:6 and 25:9). Another place where we find the LORD calling a pagan, unbelieving king His servant is Cyrus in Isaiah (see the commentary on Isaiah IB - **Cyrus is My Shepherd and Will Accomplish All That I Please**). But in contrast to Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus would be used to release the children of Abraham from the Babylonian Captivity.

As God's servant, in this sense, Nebuchadnezzar's task would be to come against Jerusalem and Judah; but he would also come against the nations surrounding Judah as well. **And I will bring them against this Land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. They would also become an object of horror, something to whistle at, a spectacle, and scorn, and an everlasting ruin (25:8-9).**

The results of the Babylonian invasion are given. **I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and groom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp lit for special occasions. "This whole country will become *cherem*, or devoted to destruction, a desolate wasteland, and Isra'el will serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (25:10-11).** Jeremiah prophesies that Judah and the surrounding nations would

serve Babylon for seventy years. But, Jeremiah doesn't say that the forced deportation of Jews from Judah would last seventy years. The captivity is something that grew out of Babylon's domination of Judah. The domination was supposed to span seventy years, but Jeremiah never said that the captivity itself would span seventy years (see Gu - [Seventy Years of Babylonian Rule](#)).

Ha'Shem uses Gentile nations to punish the northern kingdom of Isra'el and the southern kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 28:11-12; Jeremiah 5:15; First Corinthians 14:21). But in carrying out the principle of Genesis 12:3a: I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, eventually that Gentile nation will receive divine judgment. So in verses 12 to 14, Jeremiah, inspired by the Ruach HaKodesh Himself, turns to the divine judgment of Babylon.

The prediction of Babylon's downfall interrupts the continuity of the passage. Nevertheless, its insertion here is natural; it tells how Judah's exile will come to an end through Babylon's collapse. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will make it desolate forever (see Ez - [A Message Against Babylon](#)). In 539 BC Cyrus the Great, king of the Medo-Persian Empire would conquer Babylon. But God does not limit His divine discipline to Babylon, saying: I will bring upon that land all the things I have spoken against it, all which is written in this book and prophesied by Yirmeyahu against the nations (see Dg - [Prophecies Concerning the Gentile Nations](#)). They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them a curse for a curse, according to their deeds and the work of their hands" (25:12-14).

This sets the stage for God to pour out His cup of wrath against the Gentile nations.