

Jeremiah 38:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thus saith the LORD, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live.

Analysis

Thus saith the LORD, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live. This prophetic oracle exemplifies Jeremiah's consistent message during Jerusalem's final siege: surrender brings survival; resistance brings death. The threefold judgment formula—"sword, famine, and pestilence"—recurs throughout Jeremiah (14:12; 21:7, 9; 24:10) as covenant curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:21-22, 25-26).

The phrase "he shall have his life for a prey" (vehayetah-lo nafsho leshalal) uses military imagery—gaining one's life as war spoils. This paradoxical language (losing everything yet gaining life) anticipates Jesus' teaching: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). Submission to God's revealed will, even when it appears to bring loss, actually preserves what matters most.

Theologically, this verse teaches:

1. God's sovereignty over historical events—He determines outcomes, not human military strategy
2. obedience to God's word brings life even when it contradicts human wisdom

3. covenant violations bring divine judgment through natural means (enemy armies)
4. God's mercy persists even in judgment—a way of escape remains for those who heed His word.

The Reformed doctrine of providence affirms God's control over political and military events to accomplish His purposes.

Historical Context

This prophecy came during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (588-586 BCE). Military logic dictated resistance—surrender meant national extinction and personal humiliation. Yet Jeremiah declared God's will contradicted military wisdom. This placed him in an impossible position politically, appearing as a traitor to his nation while actually offering the only path to survival.

History vindicated Jeremiah completely. Jerusalem fell in 586 BCE after a brutal siege. Those who remained died by sword, famine, or disease; those who defected to Babylon survived. The archaeological record shows destruction layers from this period across Judean cities—Lachish, Azekah, and finally Jerusalem—confirming the biblical account. Jeremiah's contemporaries who rejected his counsel paid with their lives; the few who heeded survived. This demonstrates the practical wisdom of obeying God's word even when it defies conventional thinking.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. When has obeying God's clear word required you to act contrary to human wisdom or popular opinion?
2. How does the promise that obedience preserves 'life as prey' encourage faithfulness even when it seems costly?

3. In what ways does this passage challenge nationalistic or political loyalties that might conflict with God's revealed will?

Interlinear Text

כֹּה	אָמַר	יְהוָה	הַיֹּשֵׁב	בְּעִיר	הַזֹּאת	וְתָמוּ
H3541	Thus saith	the LORD	He that remaineth	in this city	H2063	shall die
	H559	H3068	H3427	H5892		H4191
בַּחֶרֶב	בַּרָּעָב	וּבַדָּבָר	וְהֵינִי	אֲלֹ		
by the sword	by the famine	and by the pestilence	but he that goeth forth			
H2719	H7458	H1698	H3318			
הַכַּשְׂדִּים	וְחָיָה	לְוַ	נַפְשׁוֹ	לְשָׁלַל		
to the Chaldeans	and shall live	H1961	H0	for he shall have his life		for a prey
H3778	H2421			H5315		H7998
וְחָיָה						
and shall live						
H2421						

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 39:18 (Word): For I will surely deliver thee, and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in me, saith the LORD.

Jeremiah 34:17 (Word): Therefore thus saith the LORD; Ye have not hearkened unto me, in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother, and every man to his neighbour: behold, I proclaim a liberty for you, saith the LORD, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth.

Jeremiah 45:5 (References Lord): And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the LORD: but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest.

Jeremiah 42:17 (Word): So shall it be with all the men that set their faces to go into Egypt to sojourn there; they shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: and none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them.

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