

THAT BAD NEWS MAY BE FOR YOUR GOOD!

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 27

Extracts:

Thus says the Lord to me: “Make for yourselves bonds and yokes, and put them on your neck, and send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, by the hand of the messengers who come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. Command them to say to their masters ... ‘I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant... So all the nations shall serve him and his son’s son, until the time of his land comes... And it shall be, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Nebuchadnezzar ... I will punish... but the nations that bring their necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let them remain in their own land, ... and they shall till it and dwell in it’” [Jer. 27: 2,3,4,6,7,8,11]

Antoine Walker is a professional basketball player in the highly competitive American NBA.¹ He joined the Boston Celtics during the 1996-97 season. Although the Celtics have won sixteen NBA championships, its last win was in 1986. Nine days to the beginning of the 2003-04 season, Walker was traded to the Dallas Mavericks. Then, on 8 August 2004, his new team traded him to the Atlanta Hawks. Just as he was trying to settle down there, he was traded back to the Celtics. To add salt to injury, on 2 August 2005, in a 5-team, 13-player deal, the largest trade in NBA history, Walker found himself with the Miami Heat, the team with such big names as Shaquille O’Neal and Dwayne Wayne. On 20 June 2006, the Miami Heat won its first NBA Championship. In the final game of the series, Walker contributed 14 points and 11 rebounds for the first championship ring of his professional career!

Walker’s transfer from the Celtics to the Miami Heat was bad news for him at the time. A year later, he became a champion, a feat that he could not have dreamt of if he had remained with the Boston Celtics. Therefore, that bad news in your life right now could be for your own good. That conclusion will become more obvious as we study the subject in today’s lesson.

¹ Based mainly on ‘Antoine Walker,’ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org>

1. What is bad news?

When a young wife who has been looking for a child for some time receives the doctor's report that *she* is pregnant, it is good news. However, when a 14-year old high school student receives similar news, it is bad. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison after almost 30 years' detention in the hands of the apartheid regime in South Africa, it was good news for all freedom lovers. However, if a sex offender on life imprisonment were to be pardoned and released, that would not be good news for his neighbours. Therefore, news can be good or bad depending on who is affected and what its net impact is. In that context, let us look at the following possibilities:

a) *Even good news can hurt!*

We may find ourselves in situations to celebrate good news. For example, we have just got our first job or been promoted. We have just won a landmark case or been released from an unjust imprisonment. We have just passed a difficult professional exam or escaped death in a major road accident. In *most cases*, such news makes us glad because we believe that it will make our future situation better off. For example, as soon as the UN-procured ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah took effect, many Lebanese citizens whose homes had been completely destroyed came out to celebrate and began to move back into their ruined homes.

A good example from the Bible can be found in the story of the famine in Samaria, which was imposed on King Ahab and his kingdom by the Syrian king [2 Kg 6: 24-33]. The hunger was so bad that women began to kill and eat their children. The king and the people fasted and prayed for divine intervention. Prophet Elisha promised them that there would be an abundant supply of food by the following day [2 Kgs 7: 1]. Four starving lepers at the city entrance decided to move towards the camp of the enemy rather than stay in Israel and starve to death. As they approached the Syrian camp, they were surprised to find no one there "for the Lord had caused the army of the Syrians to hear the noise of chariots and the noise of horses- the noise of a great army; so they ...left the camp intact ... and fled for their lives" [vv 6, 7]. After eating to their fill, the lepers brought the good news back to Israel. The people rushed there and in deed, within one day, there was abundant food supply for all [vv 8-16]. The good news ameliorated their hardship and it was out of divine *mercy*.

However, we may sometimes find that our celebration of good news is short-sighted or short-lived. We may have received a Trojan horse as a gift. In other words, what we may have thought as the chance for victory or peace has become nothing but a clever trick to make our situation worse. The war between the Philistines and Israel in the days of Samuel is a good example.

When the Philistines heard that their enemy had brought the Ark of the Covenant into the battlefield, they “were afraid, for they said, ‘God has come into the camp!’ And they said, ‘Woe to us!’” [1 Sam. 4: 3-7]. Nevertheless, they attacked the army of Israel, defeated the Israelites and seized the Ark of the Covenant [vv. 10-11]. To them, that was great good news. However, when they put the ark in the house of their idol, Dagon, a series of plagues struck their kingdom for “the hand of God was very heavy there” [1 Sam. 5: 1-13]. Out of desperation, they had no choice but to return the ark to Israel [1 Sam. 6: 1-21]! Good news can sometimes hurt, especially where *God’s glory* is at stake.

b) *Just as bad news can be for good!*

In general, bad news hurts. For example, I am yet to overcome the death in an auto accident of my 21-year old younger brother even though the event occurred in 1979. The Jews cannot forget the holocaust perpetrated against them by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, 1939-45. A good example from the Bible is Joshua’s defeat at Ai [Josh. 7: 1-7]. Still basking in the euphoria of a spectacular victory in Jericho, Joshua sent in a small army of about three thousand men to fight against Ai, a country of a few people. However, “the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six men, for they chased them . . . and struck them down . . . therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water. Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell on the earth on his face before the Ark of the Lord, until evening (and he and all the people of Israel) put dust on their heads.” Later, God revealed to them that their defeat was self-inflicted, in that one of the people, Achan, had stolen valuable things from Jericho, against God’s command [vv. 8-26]. In this case, the bad news that hurt the people came from *disobedience*.

However, we do know that some bad news actually turns out to be good for us, as in the example of Walker the American basketball player cited earlier. We may be expecting something which does not come when we expect it and we may feel bad about it. Later, we wind up thanking God for the delay! I remember a close Nigerian friend of mine who went for a language course in France in the 1980’s. He carried the fee and allowances in a bank draft, issued by a Nigerian bank and payable by its French respondent bank in Paris. However, as soon as he was airborne, the Nigerian bank went on strike and there was nobody to confirm payment. My friend was stuck with a piece of paper and he had to live on the goodwill of the course organizers for a few days. He then traveled to England to attend his daughter’s graduation ceremony. On his return to Heathrow Airport, London, he missed his flight to Paris and had to spend an extra night in the UK. He felt so bad. However, on going directly from the airport to the Paris bank the following afternoon, he was told that the

clearance to pay came in just five minutes earlier! The bad news of the day before turned out to be for his good.

The best example of bad news turning out to be great is the crucifixion of Jesus. When He died on Friday afternoon, His followers were downcast and afraid. However, He rose from the dead on Easter Sunday and it was joy all over. That is why today we call the day of His crucifixion ‘Good Friday!’ In general, where bad news leads to joy, *God’s purpose* is at work. That was why Joseph told his brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt, “You meant evil against me, but *God meant it for good in order to ... save many people alive*” [Gen. 50: 20].

From the forgoing analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

- ***Bad news may hurt us largely when we live in disobedience of God’s word; and***
- ***Bad news is for our good when it is in furtherance of God’s purposes.***

Let us see how those conclusions hold up against the issues raised in today’s study.

2. The bad news of invasion from Babylon

God commanded the prophet Jeremiah to make bonds and yokes and send them to several kings in the then Middle east that surrounded the kingdom of Judah. They symbolized bad news which contained the following details [Jer. 27: 6-11]:

- God had empowered king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to conquer their territories and make the people his servants;
- The servitude would take a long time because “all the nations shall serve him and his son and his son’s son.”
- Nations and kingdoms that refused to serve king Nebuchadnezzar and would not put their necks under his yoke, God would punish “with the sword, the famine, and the pestilence.”
- But nations and kingdoms that heeded God’s command by putting their necks under Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke and serve him would God allow to remain in their own land, “till it and dwell in it.”

Should they refuse to learn from the experience of the people of Judah, God reminded them that painful exile in Babylon awaited them [vv. 19-22].

For unbelievers, that was a difficult situation to face. Logic dictates that any nation, no matter how weak, should defend itself against external aggression. National heroes are those who refuse to bow their heads even when they are bloody. History glamourizes war commanders and leaders like Winston Churchill who turned a blind eye to danger and won incredible victories against superior

enemies. In today's study, the direct opposite was demanded of Judah's neighbours, who were largely idol worshippers. They were told to lay down their arms, surrender peacefully to the king of Babylon and serve him. Why would God command that 'cowardly' act?

God said to the people through Jeremiah, "I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My power and by My outstretched arm, and *have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him*" [vv. 5-6]. Clearly, God's *purpose and glory* were at stake.

In the first place, the earth and all that are in it were made by God for His own sole glory. Therefore, just like clay in the hands of the potter, God can use us as He deems fit. Secondly, we are also created for God's purpose. So, just like bait on the fisherman's hook, so are we as God's bait to catch His enemy, Satan, and his evil agents. This point is well illustrated in God's judgment against Assyria, as recorded in the book of Isaiah [Is. 10: 5-12]:

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger, and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly people; against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.... But it is in his heart to destroy, and cut off not a few nations.... Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Lord has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that he will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks."

In deed, Nebuchadnezzar had his territorial ambitions to annex the Middle east into his vast empire. He thus became a tool in God's hands to punish His disobedient chosen people of Israel and to destroy their ungodly neighbours. We know that in due course, Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated [Dan. 4] and his Chaldea dynasty overthrown by Darius the Mede [Dan. 5: 31].

The forgoing enables us to reaffirm our earlier conclusions, as follows:

- God made provision for the clay and baits that He used for His purpose. In other words, for those who would agree to be subject to king Nebuchadnezzar's rule, God promised safety and prosperity in their own countries [Jer. 27: 11]. That is, bad news that comes to us while *we are obeying God's word and purpose* is for our own good because He will never forsake those who obey Him.
- However, those who disobeyed God's command would face dire consequences, such as famine, pestilence and war [v. 8]. That is, bad news that comes *as a result of our disobedience* can never be for our own good.

3. Conclusion: Reexamine your present situation!

It is possible that you are currently hurting from bad news. No matter its form, you now know better that it could be for your own good. To be sure it is so, you need to reexamine your situation by asking yourself the following questions:

- Am I living in disobedience?

Examine your relationship with God. Do you have unconfessed sins? Are you practising partial obedience, such as making the right turn in the wrong place or at the wrong time? Does your private life match your public self? Have you forgiven all those who have offended you, even when they have not apologized? Have you paid your tithes and vows? Have you truly accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour? Once you are sure that you have restored your fellowship with God, then you will no longer be afraid of bad news.

- Am I hurting because I am a tool in God's plan?

Once you are sure that you are not living in disobedience, then that bad news may have to do with your being clay in God's hands. In that case, you can count it all joy that you have been found worthy to be a labourer in God's vineyard. You have obeyed Him. Therefore, you have provided Him with a vessel on which He will soon pour abundant blessings. He will set a table for you in the presence of your enemies. He will set a table for you in the wilderness. Your lack will be other people's aspiration!

That bad news may in deed be for your own good!