

Hananiah's Error

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Many years after the Kingdom of Israel was taken into Assyrian captivity, the time came for the Kingdom of Judah also to be judged by God for its national sins. God used Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, as His instrument of correction, not only against Judah, but also against many of the region's kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar, however, did not simply conduct a grand military campaign that thoroughly subjugated everyone in one fell swoop. Rather, he made multiple incursions, and over time the various kingdoms became overshadowed by Babylon's power.

One of Nebuchadnezzar's incursions took place shortly after Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah and Coniah) became king at the age of eighteen:

At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, as his servants were besieging it. Then Jehoiachin king of Judah, his mother, his servants, his princes, and his officers went out to the king of Babylon; and the king of Babylon, in the eighth year of his reign, took him prisoner. And he carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house, and he cut in pieces all the articles of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord, as the Lord had said. Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. (II Kings 24:10-14)

In addition, after deposing Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, as king (II Kings 24:17). The kingdom of Judah was hanging in the balance: Most of its power and wealth had been carried away, but it was not completely destroyed.

At this point, God told Jeremiah to make a number of wooden yokes for himself and for various neighboring kings (Jeremiah 27:1-11). The yokes symbolized servitude to Nebuchadnezzar, and poor Jeremiah spent many days wearing a wooden yoke as an example. Through this visual aid, God was instructing Judah, and the other kingdoms, to submit to Babylonian rule. Even though doing so would be very humbling for Judah, it would be better for them than to resist Nebuchadnezzar, and thus God's will. He had already sent numerous prophets, with scores of warnings to repent and turn back to Him, and now the time of reckoning had arrived.

Babylon's Yoke Broken?

Not everyone in Judah was ready to accept this reality. Even though God specifically warned against false prophets who spoke against submitting to Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27:9-10), this is exactly what happened in the case of a prophet named Hananiah:

And it happened in the same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year and in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azur the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying, "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of

Israel, saying: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, with all the captives of Judah who went to Babylon,' says the Lord, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (Jeremiah 28:1-4)

Jeremiah had previously prophesied that Judah would be in exile in Babylon for a full seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11-12). He also foretold that Jeconiah (Coniah) would die in a foreign land (Jeremiah 22:24-26) and that the vessels of the Temple would remain there until the day that God brought them back (Jeremiah 27:19-22). Now, though, an obscure prophet named Hananiah came with a message that directly contradicted Jeremiah's prophecies. In Hananiah's vision of the future, Judah's restoration was just around the corner; everything would be back to normal within two years.

Notice Jeremiah's response to Hananiah:

Then the prophet Jeremiah responded to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the Lord's temple. The prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do all this! May the Lord make your prophecy come true! May he bring back to this place from Babylon all the valuable articles taken from the Lord's temple and the people who were carried into exile. But listen to what I say to you and to all these people. From earliest times, the prophets who preceded you and me invariably prophesied war, disaster, and plagues against many countries and great kingdoms. So if a prophet prophesied peace and prosperity, it was only known that the Lord truly sent him when what he prophesied came true." (Jeremiah 28:5-9; *New English Translation* [NET])

With a note of sarcasm, he replies that he would be thrilled if Hananiah's vision were correct—it would be a remarkable turn of events. Then he points out that the prophets before them had all prophesied calamity rather than prosperity. Hananiah's words were completely out of sync with God's pattern of warning His people through the prophets.

Prior to Jeremiah, God had sent Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Nahum to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He had also sent Jonah to the empire of Assyria. All of them warned of tragedy and disaster if the people did not turn to God. Such warnings reach all the way back to Moses, who recorded the "Blessings and Curses" of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, detailing what God will do to a people who reject Him. Further, God also warns His people to be skeptical of those proclaiming a message of peace that lacks repentance (Jeremiah 4:10; 6:14; 8:11; 14:13; Ezekiel 13:10, 16). But, as God instructs in Deuteronomy 18:21-22, if what Hananiah said did not come to pass, it would be evidence that God had not sent him.

But Jeremiah's words meant little to Hananiah:

Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke off the prophet Jeremiah's neck and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'Even so I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years.'" And the prophet Jeremiah went his way. (Jeremiah 28:10-11)

Hananiah ignored Jeremiah's words of caution and broke the God-ordained yoke that symbolized Nebuchadnezzar's authority over the kingdoms. Jeremiah probably enjoyed a measure of relief at no longer having to wear the yoke, but the gravity of what Hananiah had done overshadowed it.

Falsehood and Rebellion

Notice the event's conclusion:

But shortly after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the prophet Jeremiah's neck, the Lord spoke to Jeremiah. "Go and tell Hananiah that the Lord says, 'You have indeed broken the wooden yoke. But you have only succeeded in replacing it with an iron one! For the Lord God of Israel who rules over all says, "I have put an irresistible yoke of servitude on all these nations so they will serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And they will indeed serve him. I have even given him control over the wild animals." Then the prophet Jeremiah told the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah! The Lord did not send you! You are making these people trust in a lie! So the Lord says, 'I will most assuredly remove you from the face of the earth. You will die this very year because you have counseled rebellion against the Lord.'" In the seventh month of that very same year the prophet Hananiah died. (Jeremiah 28:12-17; NET)

God charges Hananiah with causing the people to trust in a lie, as well as inciting rebellion against Him. His transgressions were so grievous that God killed Hananiah two months later—a month for each year in his false vision.

Hananiah's prophecy urged rebellion against God in a couple of ways. First, Scripture is clear that God had installed Nebuchadnezzar in a position of power over the known world. Though not a godly man, he filled a position that God had given him, thus to resist his rule was to rebel against the God-ordained order. When Hananiah predicted deliverance in just two years, it encouraged Judeans to think that they did not have to submit to this foreign king. In this way, he encouraged them to disregard God-instituted authority.

Second, Hananiah's lie subtly altered the reason for their crisis. He redefined the foreign domination from something that God deliberately caused (as told by the prophets) into something that He merely allowed and would soon remedy. The false prophet shifted the explanation of their pitiful circumstances from something that God had orchestrated due to the sins of His people into a time-and-chance problem that He would reverse.

This removed any need for self-examination. It exonerated the nation and its leaders, removing any thought that the people had misbehaved themselves into this crisis by rejecting God. By eliminating any thought of cause-and-effect regarding sin, Hananiah was in fact encouraging them to continue in their disobedience. Without any apparent consequences for sin, the mind begins to reason that sin is not the problem. Hananiah told them everything would be fine, but God saw it as teaching His people to rebel.

Things Getting Better?

Something similar is happening today in a small way. Some are promoting an idea that the world is actually *getting better*. It is not a widespread belief, but some have taken such a rose-colored view of God that they believe mankind's best days are just ahead. They are convinced that there will not be catastrophe and death leading up to Jesus Christ's return.

To arrive at such a notion, one must nullify the pattern of God's prophets, just as Hananiah did. He has to find new meaning even for the words of Jesus Himself in places like the Olivet Prophecy where He plainly says that "unless those days are shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24: 22). Under this view, the bulk of Old and New Testament prophecies become either merely symbolic or already fulfilled, including all of Revelation. And a person must really cherry-pick his evidence to maintain the belief that circumstances in the world are improving! Some are actually doing this for the sole purpose of giving hope. However, like Hananiah's prophecy, it is a false hope.

In this myopic perspective, God loves His creation too much to send real, physical tribulation and destruction. Granted, God loves His creation and the peoples of Israel in particular, as Scripture shows. His love is such that He describes Israel as a cherished son:

For thus says the Lord: "Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, 'O Lord, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!' Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and the one who labors with child, together; a great throng shall return there. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble; for I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn." (Jeremiah 31:7-9)

This is one place among several where God calls Israel His son. This is an unfulfilled prophecy of the "second exodus," when God re-gathers the nations of Israel and Judah. Notice that God will bring back a remnant—all that remains of decimated Israel. They return with weeping and supplication to God. These are the ones who have survived the sword (verse 2). They have been humbled and returned to God, who returns them to His land.

Why will God humble His son in such a way? The answer is in Proverbs 3:12 (NET): "For the Lord disciplines [corrects, chastens, punishes, scourges] those He loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights." God confirms this in Jeremiah 46:28 (NET): "Though I completely destroy all the nations where I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will indeed discipline you, but only in due measure. I will not allow you to go entirely unpunished."

In Jeremiah's day (and before), God loved the Judeans so much that He would not allow them to continue on their path of self-destruction. They resisted Him strongly, but He loved them far too much to allow them to continue without a course correction that they could not ignore. It was painful and bloody. Yet, it resulted in their being humbled enough that the survivors were at least somewhat more inclined to listen to God.

The same thing is playing out in the nations of Israel and Judah today. God loves His people, and He plans a bright future for them. But He does not love their disregard of Him. He loves them too much

to allow them to self-destruct fully. He *will* allow them to make terrible decisions and reap the wretched consequences. He will also intervene to get their attention with pain that will only get worse when they try to ignore it.

Either way, conditions will continue to deteriorate as we approach Jesus Christ's return because they must. If God allowed the nations of Israel to turn away from Him without consequence, their hearts would be fully set in them to do evil. Rather than allow that to happen, God will cause many to die, knowing they can be resurrected and given a new heart. He loves them too much to allow them to become incorrigible.

We have tremendous hope, but our hope is not in the brotherhood of man becoming less dysfunctional on its own. Our hope is in the Creator God who is making man in His image, despite that effort involving pain, death, resurrection, and thousands of years in between. Our hope is in the One who will cut short the days ahead, for the sake of—for the love of—the elect. He loves His creation more than we can comprehend, but that love is sometimes demonstrated in ways that we also do not comprehend.

As the times continue to darken, we do not need to quake in terror. We should be motivated to attend all the more diligently to our walk with God and entrust our lives to Him, for He can watch over them far better than we can. Only He knows what we need to endure to be prepared for His Kingdom and eternal life with Him. Sometimes that means, like Judah, wearing a yoke that we have rightfully earned and submitting to the consequences of turning away from God. Sometimes that means, like Jeremiah, wearing a yoke that we did not necessarily earn but that God gives us to wear because of what He is working out in our lives or in the lives of those around us.

Whatever the case, the proper response is to look to God, to turn back to Him if we have strayed, and to ensure that our hope does not involve twisting the Word of God.