

# Lamentations of Jeremiah: Beware of Bondage

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Early in our marriage my wife, Mary, and I decided that to the extent possible we would choose activities that we could attend together. We also wanted to be prudent with our budget. Mary loves music and was undoubtedly concerned that I might overemphasize sporting events, so she negotiated that for all paid events, there would be two musicals, operas, or cultural activities for each paid ball game.

Initially I was resistant to the opera component, but over time I changed my view. I particularly came to enjoy the operas by Giuseppe Verdi.<sup>1</sup> This week will be the 200th anniversary of his birth.

In his youth Verdi was intrigued with the prophet Jeremiah, and in 1842, at the age of 28, he achieved fame with the opera *Nabucco*, a shortened Italian form of the name Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. This opera contains concepts drawn from the books of Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Psalms in the Old Testament. The opera includes the conquest of Jerusalem and the captivity and bondage of the Jews. Psalm 137 is the inspiration for Verdi's moving and inspiring "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves." The heading of this psalm in our scriptures is very dramatic: "While in captivity, the Jews wept by the rivers of Babylon—Because of sorrow, they could not bear to sing the songs of Zion."

My purpose is to review many forms of bondage and subjugation. I will compare some circumstances of our day with those in the days of Jeremiah before the downfall of Jerusalem. In presenting this voice of warning, I am grateful that most Church members are righteously avoiding the conduct that was so offensive to the Lord in Jeremiah's time.

The prophecies and lamentations of Jeremiah are important to Latter-day Saints. Jeremiah and the Jerusalem of his day are the backdrop to the beginning chapters in the Book of Mormon. Jeremiah was a contemporary of the prophet Lehi.<sup>2</sup> The Lord dramatically informed Jeremiah of his foreordination: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations."<sup>3</sup>

Lehi had a different calling, mission, and assignment from the Lord. He was not called in his youth but in his maturity. Initially his was a voice of warning, but after faithfully declaring the same message as Jeremiah, Lehi was commanded by the Lord to take his family and depart into the wilderness.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Lehi blessed not only his family but also all people.

During the years before the destruction of Jerusalem,<sup>5</sup> the messages the Lord gave to Jeremiah are haunting. He said:

"My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. ...

"... They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed ... out ... broken cisterns, that can hold no water."<sup>6</sup>

Speaking of the calamities to come upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Lord lamented, “[For them] the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and [they] are not saved.”<sup>7</sup>

God intended that men and women would be free to make choices between good and evil. When evil choices become the dominant characteristic of a culture or nation, there are serious consequences both in this life and the life to come. People can become enslaved or put themselves in bondage not only to harmful, addictive substances but also to harmful, addictive philosophies that detract from righteous living.

Turning from the worship of the true and living God and worshipping false gods like wealth and fame and engaging in immoral and unrighteous conduct result in bondage in all its insidious manifestations. These include spiritual, physical, and intellectual bondage and sometimes bring destruction. Jeremiah and Lehi also taught that those who are righteous must help the Lord establish His Church and kingdom and gather scattered Israel.<sup>8</sup>

These messages have echoed and been reinforced across the centuries in all dispensations. They are at the heart of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this, the final dispensation.

The captivity of the Jews and the scattering of the tribes of Israel, including the ten tribes, are prominent doctrinal factors in the Restoration of the gospel. The ten lost tribes made up the Northern Kingdom of Israel and were carried away captive into Assyria in 721 B.C. They went to the north countries.<sup>9</sup> Our tenth article of faith states, “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes.”<sup>10</sup> We also believe that as part of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham, not only the lineage of Abraham would be blessed but also all the people of the earth would be blessed. As Elder Russell M. Nelson has stated, the gathering “is not a matter of physical location; it is a matter of individual commitment. People can be ‘brought to the knowledge of the Lord’ [3 Nephi 20:13] without leaving their homelands.”<sup>11</sup>

Our doctrine is clear: “The Lord scattered and afflicted the twelve tribes of Israel because of their unrighteousness and rebellion. However, the Lord also [utilized] this scattering of his chosen people among the nations of the world to bless those nations.”<sup>12</sup>

We learn valuable lessons from this tragic period. We should do everything within our power to avoid the sin and rebellion that lead to bondage.<sup>13</sup> We also recognize that righteous living is a prerequisite for assisting the Lord in gathering His elect and in the literal gathering of Israel.

Bondage, subjugation, addictions, and servitude come in many forms. They can be literal physical enslavement but can also be loss or impairment of moral agency that can impede our progress. Jeremiah is clear that unrighteousness and rebellion were the main reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity in Babylon.<sup>14</sup>

Other kinds of bondage are equally destructive of the human spirit. Moral agency can be abused in many ways.<sup>15</sup> I will mention four that are particularly pernicious in today’s culture.

First, addictions that impair agency, contradict moral beliefs, and destroy good health cause bondage. The impact of drugs and alcohol, immorality, pornography, gambling, financial

subjugation, and other afflictions imposes on those in bondage and on society a burden of such magnitude that it is almost impossible to quantify.

Second, some addictions or predilections, while not inherently evil, can use up our precious allotment of time which could otherwise be used to accomplish virtuous objectives. These can include excessive use of social media, video and digital games, sports, recreation, and many others.<sup>16</sup>

How we preserve time for family is one of the most significant issues we face in most cultures. At a time when I was the only member of the Church in our law firm, one woman lawyer explained to me how she always felt like a juggler trying to keep three balls in the air at the same time. One ball was her law practice, one was her marriage, and one was her children. She had almost given up on time for herself. She was greatly concerned that one of the balls was always on the ground. I suggested we meet as a group and discuss our priorities. We determined that the primary reason we were working was to support our families. We agreed that making more money wasn't nearly as important as our families, but we recognized that serving our clients to the best of our abilities was essential. The discussion then moved to what we did at work that was not necessary and was inconsistent with leaving time for family. Was there pressure to spend time in the workplace that was not essential?<sup>17</sup> We decided that our goal would be a family-friendly environment for both women and men. Let us be at the forefront in protecting time for family.

Third, the most universal subjugation in our day, as it has been throughout history, is ideology or political beliefs that are inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Substituting the philosophies of men for gospel truth can lead us away from the simplicity of the Savior's message. When the Apostle Paul visited Athens, he tried to teach of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of this effort we read in Acts, "For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear *some new thing*."<sup>18</sup> When the crowd realized the simple religious nature of Paul's message, which was not new, they rejected it.

This is emblematic of our own day, where gospel truths are often rejected or distorted to make them intellectually more appealing or compatible with current cultural trends and intellectual philosophies. If we are not careful, we can be captured by these trends and place ourselves in intellectual bondage. There are many voices now telling women how to live.<sup>19</sup> They often contradict each other. Of particular concern are philosophies that criticize or diminish respect for women who choose to make the sacrifices necessary to be mothers, teachers, nurturers, or friends to children.

A few months ago our two youngest granddaughters visited us—one each week. I was at home and answered the door. My wife, Mary, was in another room. In both cases, after a hug, they said almost the same thing. They looked around and then said, "I love to be in Grandma's house. Where is Grandma?" I didn't say it to them, but I was thinking, "Isn't this Grandpa's house too?" But I realized that when I was a boy, our family went to Grandma's house. The words of a familiar song came into my mind: "Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go."

Now, let me say unequivocally that I am thrilled with the educational and other opportunities that are available to women. I treasure the fact that the backbreaking work and domestic drudgery required of women has been reduced in much of the world because of modern conveniences and that women are making such magnificent contributions in every field of endeavor. But if we allow our culture to reduce the special relationship that children have with mothers and grandmothers and others who nurture them, we will come to regret it.

Fourth, forces that violate sincerely held religious principles can result in bondage. One of the most invidious forms is when righteous people who feel accountable to God for their conduct are forced into activities that violate their conscience—for example, health providers forced to choose between assisting with abortions against their consciences or losing their jobs.

The Church is a relatively small minority even when linked with people who are like-minded. It will be hard to change society at large, but we must work to improve the moral culture that surrounds us. Latter-day Saints in every country should be good citizens, participate in civic affairs, educate themselves on the issues, and vote.

Our primary emphasis, however, should always be to make any necessary sacrifices to protect our own family and the rising generation.<sup>20</sup> The vast majority of them are not yet in bondage to serious addictions or false ideologies. We must help inoculate them from a world that sounds a lot like the Jerusalem that Lehi and Jeremiah experienced. In addition, we need to prepare them to make and keep sacred covenants and to be the principal emissaries to help the Lord establish His Church and gather scattered Israel and the Lord's elect everywhere.<sup>21</sup> As the Doctrine and Covenants beautifully reads, "The righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy."<sup>22</sup>

Our challenge is to avoid bondage of any kind, help the Lord gather His elect, and sacrifice for the rising generation. We must always remember that we do not save ourselves. We are liberated by the love, grace, and atoning sacrifice of the Savior. When Lehi's family fled, they were led by the Lord's light. If we are true to His light, follow His commandments, and rely on His merits, we will avoid spiritual, physical, and intellectual bondage as well as the lamentation of wandering in our own wilderness, for He is mighty to save.

Let us avoid the despair and sorrow of those who fall into captivity and can no longer bear to sing the songs of Zion. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.