

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twentieth Week - Seventh Day

SYMBOL OF THE YOKES

"In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from Yahweh, saying, 'Thus says Yahweh 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. And command them to say to their masters, Thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel . . . 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. So all nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son, until the time of his land comes; and then many nations and great kings shall make him serve them'" (Jeremiah 27:1-6).

Jeremiah is remarkable among the prophets for his extensive use of material symbols. Of the many instances that occur to the reader's recollection, we may notice one which is connected with some characteristic incidents of the time. It will be borne in mind that the policy constantly enforced by Jeremiah was that of quiet submission to the Babylonians. This was the only means by which the nation could enjoy peace under its own kings and by which the land, the city, and the temple could be preserved from the ruin which would be drawn down by any attempt to shake off the yoke of that powerful and haughty people.

To enforce this doctrine of public policy, Jeremiah was instructed to make certain yokes and send them to the neighboring princes of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon by the ambassadors whom they had sent to Jerusalem. They no doubt had come to confer with king Zedekiah for the purpose of establishing some plan to thwart the Chaldean¹ power of Nebuchadnezzar. But Jeremiah's message, symbolized by the yokes, was to *wear the yoke* of

1 The Chaldeans were people who lived in southern Babylonia. Sometimes the term *Chaldeans* is used to refer to Babylonians in general, but normally it refers to a specific semi-nomadic tribe that lived in the southern part of Babylon. The Chaldeans were an intelligent and sometimes aggressive, warlike people. In 731 B.C. Ukinzer, a Chaldean, became king of Babylon; however, his reign was short-lived. A few years later Merodach-Baladan, also a Chaldean, became king over Babylon. In 626 B.C. Nabopolassar, another Chaldean, began what would be an extended period of time during which Babylon was ruled by a Chaldean king. During this time the word Chaldean became synonymous for Babylon, and we see many verses in Scripture where the word Chaldean was used to refer to Babylonians in general (gotquestions.org).

Nebuchadnezzar, into whose hand all these lands had been given. What reception this extraordinary message met with from these foreign kings we do not know. Yet it appears to have been more effective than we might suppose, for we do not find that these nations saw fit to lend any aid to the Jews in their revolt. In fact, we know that some aided the Chaldeans against the Jews and exulted in Israel's destruction.

To us it would have been a strange sight, and a singular mode of preaching to kings and courts, to see a prophet wearing a yoke upon his own neck. But this is because we cannot appreciate the force and emphasis that such symbolic representation gave to the utterances of the prophets to a people who were used to being taught by such signs and to whose genius they appear to have been peculiarly suited.

Now we do know the reception Jeremiah's message received at home and what became of the yoke he was told to wear upon his own neck. Let us first hear his own words: *"Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live! Why will you die, you and your people, by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, as Yahweh has spoken against the nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?"* This was the essence of the message he delivered before king Zedekiah and his court; and he continued to wear the yoke in public, even appearing in the inner courts of the temple to which he, being a priest, had access.

Jeremiah was one day accosted in the temple by Hananiah, who dared to deliver a counter-prophecy in the name of the LORD, declaring that the yoke of the king of Babylon was broken and that within two years all the spoils of the temple should be brought back and the captive king, Jeconiah, and all the other captives returned. What was Jeremiah's response? *"Amen! Yahweh do so."* But he warned Hananiah that the people would soon learn whether he was a prophet sent by God or not when the fulfilling of signs came to pass. Hananiah persisted, however, and snatching the yoke from Jeremiah's neck he broke it and cried, *"Thus says Yahweh: 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"* (Jer. 28:11).

And what did Jeremiah do at hearing this blasphemy and outrage? He did nothing. *"And the prophet Jeremiah went his way."* This singular self-control is rare conduct, and it is strikingly indicative of the character of the man. Jeremiah saw that the case was now out of his hands, and it behooved him to await the patience of the LORD'S decision. But he did not have long to wait. The word of Jehovah soon came: *"Go and tell Hananiah, saying, Thus says Yahweh: You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made in their place yokes of iron. For thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him"* (vs. 13,14).

Beside this, there was a word of doom for Hananiah himself. It had become necessary to show that it was no trivial matter to prophesy a lie in the name of Jehovah when the lie was framed for the very purpose of nullifying a true message and of discrediting a true messenger.

Therefore, after a solemn pause, Jeremiah speaks again: *"Hear now, Hananiah, Yahweh has not sent you, but you make this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says Yahweh: Behold, I will cast you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have taught rebellion against Yahweh"* (vs. 15,16). And what was the result? Nothing more nor less than this is said: *"So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month"* (v. 17).

This simple record of the result seems to us unequalled in that simplicity which rises to grandeur. We find here no anxiety over a minute statement as to exact fulfilment, no call to admiration at the effect of the Lord's judgment. "So Hananiah the prophet died." That is all. It was simply the most natural and inevitable thing in the world that he should die, nothing at all to marvel at when his doom had been thus denounced.

But further, take note of the date of Hananiah's death. It was important for its purpose that it should not be delayed long. Nor was it. The cursory reader may think that he was to die within twelve months, which seems too long in a case of signal judgment like this. But note that it is said he should die *this year*, before the expiration of the then current year. Now this was spoken in the fifth month and Hananiah died in the seventh month, only two months after the doom was denounced. Thus the prophecy was fresh in the memory of the people, and no doubt his death secured greater attention and respect for Jeremiah words.