

Jeremiah – The Prophet Of Doom

Jeremiah prophesied later than Isaiah - around 600 BC. He lived through the last years of the Kingdom of Judah. He was in Jerusalem during the final siege, and saw its horrors, and his people led away into captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah is usually associated with messages of gloom, because so much of his long book warns of judgments about to fall on unrepentant Judah. But he actually has some really lyrical prophecies about the Kingdom of God, when the Lord will forgive and restore His people. Like Isaiah, he lived in Jerusalem, although his family came from a village called Anathoth, three miles (5 km) away. He seems to have been a lonely man - he was not married, and had few friends. Yet for over 40 years this prophet faithfully brought to his people the Word of the Lord, receiving in return only abuse, beating and imprisonment.

Jeremiah was commissioned, like Isaiah, as a young man. Like Isaiah, he saw a hand from God touch his mouth. "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth", said the heavenly messenger. "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:9.10. Notice there are both negative and positive elements in this command. God would first pull down, in judgment, but then build and plant in restoration and forgiveness.

The prophet uses brilliant metaphors to drive home his message. One of the most striking, which runs through the first five chapters, likens Judah to God's wife, married to Him by a vow made at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses. The Lord, unhappy at their worship of other gods (the equivalent of adultery), warns them He will have to put them away. Even at

this late stage, when His patience was almost exhausted, He was prepared to put the clock back and start again, if they would come home to Him. But time was fast running out. Captivity loomed. "*As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land*", God warned, "*so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.*" Jeremiah 5:19

In chapter seven Jeremiah is told to stand in the gateway of the Temple and address the crowds. They came there to worship every Sabbath, and thought they had done their duty. But back at home they each had their own favourite gods, and their lives denied their claims to be God's people. "Amend your ways!" he cried. It is the same today. People persuade themselves that if they turn up at church three times a year, or kiss a few icons and repeat 'Hail Mary!' God will protect them. But He demands our obedience all the week, not just on Sundays.

In chapter 13 the prophet is made to act out his message. He had to buy an expensive new linen belt, and wrap it round his waist. Then he had to walk hundreds of miles to the River Euphrates, dig a hole and bury it. A long time afterwards, he was told to repeat the journey, and dig it up. It was, of course, ruined by damp. What, they must have asked, was this all about? The answer he gave them was that the belt stood for the people of Judah, once as close to God as a girdle. Now they were spoiled by their idolatry, and soon they would make the long march to the Euphrates, on their way to captivity in Babylon.

Two chapters later Jeremiah was so depressed at the hostile reception he received to his utterances he really wanted to give up. "*Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me*", he cried, "*a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me*".

Jeremiah 15:10. But God had not yet given up on His people. There might still be one here or there who would listen and respond to His grace. So Jeremiah must plod on, He said, and He would guarantee his life would be preserved from their hatred.

There are more acted parables in Jeremiah's casebook. Chapter eighteen has him walking down to the field south of Jerusalem where the potter had his workshop. Here he saw a lump of clay spinning round on the wheel. But the clay was stiff and unyielding, and the potter gave up, squashed it into a ball, and started again. So, came the message, God works with nations. He has the skill to make soft human clay into characters of beauty and utility. But if people are hard hearted, and fail to respond to the pressure of His fingers, He will turn them out and start again. This He would do, of course, centuries later, when He opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles. Next Jeremiah had to carry a pottery vessel to the Valley of Hinnom. Here the families of Jerusalem queued up to burn their children in the fire to Moloch, the god of the Moabites. That is how bad things were. He was told to smash the pot to pieces. "So", he roared, "God will break this people and this city". Later the prophet would be ordered to wear a wooden yoke across his shoulders, every day for three years, to indicate that God would put Judah and the surrounding countries under the yoke of Babylon, until the time of Nebuchadnezzar's grandson (see Jeremiah 27:2-7).

In chapter twenty, the chief priest Pashur arrested Jeremiah for his prophecies, and shackled his feet in the public stocks. He was utterly humiliated. This was when he decided to stop speaking in the name of the Lord, but found he could not.

Some chapters of Jeremiah are out of chronological order. However, he always

dates his prophecies by the year of the king that was reigning at the time, so it is easy to check the sequence. Chapters 22 and 25 jump back to the time of King Jehoiakim, but chapter 24 returns to the reign of the last king, Zedekiah. In this chapter we have a vivid figure of speech. The prophet saw two baskets of figs, one juicy and ripe, and the others quite bad. The good figs were the captives that were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. They were fortunate, although they might not see it that way! A merciful God, knowing the end was coming on the Jewish state, was sending them away to preserve them, so that in years to come a remnant could return to the land. The bad figs, the rebellious ones, would die in the siege. Chapter 25 is particularly interesting in this respect, because here the prophet declares plainly that the duration of their captivity would be seventy years –

"This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD". Jeremiah 25:11, 12

As we discovered in the historical books, this remarkable prophecy came true in the Return under Joshua and Zerubbabel.

The most amazing prophecy of all, however, is found from chapters 30 to 33. Here Jeremiah states that God will never cast off the Jews. He would punish them for their hard heartedness, but eventually He will regather them to their land. This prophecy had a primary fulfilment in the return from Babylon, of course, but like Isaiah, Jeremiah is looking into the distant future as well. How do we know? Well, in chapter 33:14-21 God insists a king is going to sit on David's throne again –

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I

made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne”

Now, when the captives returned from Babylon, they had no king. The throne of David has been vacant, non-stop, for 2,500 years. But when Jesus was born, it was promised to him. *“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son”,* the angel said to Mary, *“and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.”* Luke 1:31, 32. So the prophecy of Jeremiah belongs to our future, to a time when Israel is regathered from dispersion, and Jesus, the Branch from the tree of David, will bring joy to God’s people.

The scariest story about Jeremiah is the time when he was put in the dungeon. He had told the people that if they wanted to save their lives they should leave Jerusalem and surrender to the Babylonians. This way they would avoid the inevitable siege. But Jeremiah’s enemies saw this counsel as treason, and had him arrested. They did not like to shed his blood – after all he was a prophet of the Lord – so they lowered him into a large water cistern underneath the city. Here he sank into deep, sticky mud. They put a stone lid over the cistern, and left him to die, standing up in the darkness. God had promised him that his life would be preserved from his enemies, but now his faith in that assurance was sorely

tried. He shouted, but nobody heard. He prayed, but nothing happened. Hours passed. At last he heard a noise above his head. Daylight appeared. It was Ebedmelech, a black man, servant of the king, who had learned of his plight and come to rescue him. God had kept His word, after all.

There are two more extraordinary prophecies in Jeremiah. One is a statement in chapter 46:28 –

“Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the LORD, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished.”

‘Jacob’, of course, is a synonym for Israel. They have certainly tasted the bitterness of God’s discipline, over the centuries. But the fact remains; they are still here in the world today. There is a State of Israel in the United Nations. But where are the Babylonians today, or the Assyrians, or the Romans who would finally drive them from their land? They are nonentities. They have disappeared into the sands of history, just as Jeremiah said they would.

The other great prophecy comes at the end of the book. Jeremiah had an assistant, who recorded all his words for posterity: *“Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah”,* says chapter 36:4, *“and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him.”* We can be thankful for his patient work. Now, Baruch had a brother called Seraiah, who had to go on an official visit to Babylon with the king, perhaps to pay tribute (see Jeremiah 51:59). Jeremiah wrote a special message for Seraiah to take with him. When he got to Babylon,

the prophet said, he must stand next to the great river Euphrates that ran through the heart of the metropolis, and read out aloud the words on the scroll. We should remember that at this time Babylon was the largest city in the world, covering 200 square miles (500 sq km), and protected by high walls 90 feet (27m) thick. It was the centre of international trade, with mighty ships piling into the river quays to unload their cargo. It had some impressive buildings. The Hanging Gardens (an artificial mountain covered with trees) were one of the Seven Wonders of the World. There was a massive ziggurat (stepped temple tower), and the half mile (0.8 km) long Processional Way was lined with 120 enormous lions and over 500 dragons and bulls made from glazed tiles.

The little Jew from Jerusalem stood amongst the crowds, and bravely unrolled his scroll. Loudly he declared that Babylon would be destroyed so completely that nothing would be left. Then he tied a stone to the scroll, hurled it into the river, and cried "*Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more*". Jeremiah 51:61-64. It must have seemed ludicrous to the bystanders. Imagine someone from Africa saying something like that in the centre of London! The city breathed power and permanence. But the fact is, God's word came true. Babylon today is a heap of ruins in a vast desert plain, but Jeremiah's people are alive and in their own land.

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