

SESSION #43

JEREMIAH

1. Setting

In Session 34 we looked at the first of the “major prophets”, Isaiah. The other three are Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel, plus the Book of Lamentations. Jeremiah’s ministry overlapped that of Habakkuk and followed Isaiah by about 100 years.

He lived during the lifetime of five kings of Judah and has been called “*the prophet of Judah’s midnight hour*”. As you can see on the chart, he is the very last prophet God sends prior to the people of Judah going into captivity to Babylon...the midnight hour for them indeed!

During the time that Jeremiah was ministering Judah had continually been tempted to make an alliance – political, economic, military, security-wise – either with Assyria (of all people!) or in the other direction, with Egypt, depending on which nation is threatening them at the time. Being caught geographically between these two powers, Judah would lean towards one or the other. When one of those powers seemed to be the major threat, then Judah would try to make a treaty with the other power.

Into this situation, Jeremiah comes with a message from God basically saying, “*Never mind all these treaties. Don’t lean on these other nations or trust in some other means for your own security. These nations are all broken reeds; when you lean on them they’ll puncture your hand. Trust God. Get right with Him. Allow Him to be your Shield, your Protector, as He has planned to be all along.*”

2. Jeremiah the man

There’s much more to his ministry, but let’s first take a look at Jeremiah as a person. He was an unusual prophet for many reasons. One is that even before he was born, God called him to be a prophet to the nations. His unusual call is recorded in 1:5 where God says, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified*

you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” Being God’s prophet, however, resulted in a lot of very difficult experiences for Jeremiah.

At one time, King Zedekiah permitted some of Jeremiah’s enemies to put him into an empty cistern where he sank down into the mud. He could have died there, but an Ethiopian palace official heard about this and managed to rescue Jeremiah out of his miserable situation.

On another occasion God required him to carry a heavy oxen yoke around his shoulders as a living demonstration of what would happen to Judah when Babylon came and conquered them.

Jeremiah was a man of great sympathy, first of all for God’s position and then also for that of the people. As a result he is called “*the weeping prophet*”. We noted in Session 33 that the final prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel was Hosea – a man who gave God’s message through the tears of his own personal tragedy. Now here’s another prophet with lots of tears; the final prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah before they go into captivity to Babylonia.

He empathizes with God because God’s people have continually disobeyed God and gone against Him. At the same time, Jeremiah can’t help but identify with his own people. So as he gives God’s message of judgment, he stands on God’s side and understands to some extent how God feels.

But he also stands on the receiving end of those messages because he is one of the people of Judah and must hear this tough message along with them. He hurts to deliver that kind of message and it hurts to hear the prophecy of judgment. He is, therefore, a man with tremendous sympathy but who also has a difficult ministry in which to exercise that sympathy.

It required enormous perseverance. He was a fulltime prophet for more than 40 years and never once had a positive response! Never once, a positive response to any of his messages! Can you imagine persevering in any ministry or task where all the responses are negative...for 40 long years? By his patient perseverance in continuing the ministry I

think he shows us very clearly that God doesn't count the worth of our service in terms of what we so easily think of as success.

In terms of however we might want to define success, Jeremiah was not a success. At least as far as people were concerned. And sometimes not even as far as he was concerned – he was a terrible failure. That's how he felt very often. But not in the economy of God! Because God had called him, God had given him the message and Jeremiah's task was simply to faithfully proclaim it regardless of the outcome.

God's 'bottom line' has to do with faithfulness, not outward measures of so-called success. His utter faithfulness in doing that through the ups and downs of his own personal emotions is another astonishing thing. He declared God's difficult message to a stubborn people even though he hated to give that message.

For example, here's one of his complaints in 20:7 – *“Oh Lord, you deceived me and I was deceived. You overpowered me and prevailed. [You forced me into ministry – I didn't want to go this way.] ...I'm ridiculed all day long. Everyone mocks me.”* That was Jeremiah's experience. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, he was given a nickname and you'll see it hinted at in this verse 7. Even the children of Jerusalem picked up his nickname. When they saw him coming they would shout to one another, *“Ah, here comes old 'terror on every hand'!”* Why this name? Because all his messages were about terror, God's judgment. The people of Judah didn't believe it; they didn't think God was going to bring the judgment which Jeremiah constantly spoke about. And so they mocked him, young and old.

3. Structure

It isn't very clearly structured so we won't take much time here. Basically, the first 39 chapters are written before the fall of Jerusalem; the remaining chapters, 40 through 52, are written following the fall of Jerusalem. As you read through this book at least have this major break in view.

4. Message

His message was in two parts, as so many of the prophetic messages were. First of all, a message of judgment – God says, *“I will punish.”* Chapter 1:10 – *“See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down...”* There will be wrath from God to the full measure, to the end...as required by the situation of the time. That is half of Jeremiah’s message.

But the other half is very different as seen in the final phrase of verse 10: *“To build and to plant.”* God is saying, *“I will restore.”* Not only will there be wrath to the ultimate limit, to the end; but having done that judging there will be a love that also extends to the end. So, the message of Jeremiah carries a great sense of hope even though so much has to do with judgment.

Part of that hope involves the fact that God’s people will some day be regathered to the land again after the Babylonian Captivity. They will once again possess the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 30:10 – *“He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.”* Verse 12: *“Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, Streaming to the goodness of the LORD...”* And God will send His own Messiah-King to reign over them in that Land. And the glory of His reign will be never ending.

Jeremiah’s message which was written down twice – one of the kings destroyed the whole scroll once and Jeremiah had to rewrite it again – provides a tremendous sense of hope not just for people in centuries since, but more specifically for the people who got carried away to captivity in the middle of his ministry. Babylon comes, destroys Jerusalem, carries the people away into captivity to Babylonia and Jeremiah’s first 39 chapters, already written up in a scroll, gets sent along with them. Then his later chapters are sent over to those exiles a little later on.

The contents of these two scrolls provide the exiles with a great deal of hope. And Jeremiah became a national folk hero because what he had said about Babylon and Jerusalem prior to the destruction came true exactly as he had said it would. And he was

the only one proclaiming that message at that time. As a result, they knew he was a man sent from God.

He became a folk hero not only because his message was true, but also because it gave such hope to a people in captivity, far away from their own nation. His message of hope was that they would return to their Land after 70 years (29:10). And someday the Messiah would come and be their King.

5. Two Lessons

There are many applications which could be drawn from the book of Jeremiah, but here are just a couple.

First, all national deterioration and disaster is due fundamentally to the disregarding and disobeying of God. It's a lesson that comes up over and over again in the history of the OT people of God. And it's a truth that applies not only to nations, but to individuals like you and me as well.

Secondly, persistent sin will always harden people. And we see such persistent sin, not just by the Ninevites (in Nahum's message), but especially by God's own people of Judah. In 22:21 God declared that in their prosperity, in the good times, they refused to hear His message. Therefore, in adversity they will be unable to hear His message (6:10). Sin, when persisted in, always has that effect.

When things are going well and we have opportunity to hear the Word of God, if we refuse to listen and put as it were our hands over our spiritual ears, then we become hardened and deafened to the message of God. And later on, when our own situation may take a turn for the worse and we realize we're in trouble, then we cry out to God. Ah, but in adversity, perhaps like the people of God in Jeremiah's day, we cannot hear because we have hardened our own hearts and closed our ears to such an extent that we don't have a sensitivity to God's word and God's voice any longer.

Persistent sin did that to the hearts of these people. It hardened their hearts, it blocked their ears. It will do the same thing to us. Our sin not only breaks God's great heart, it hardens ours. And some day when we most want to hear something from God we will be

unable to do so because we have blocked His message in better times. It's a scary lesson to consider.

Our next session takes us to a book which is also associated with Jeremiah, the book of Lamentations.
