

Jeremiah-Ezekiel: Human Failure and Divine Success - A Study in Contrast - Lesson 1

Jeremiah: The Faithful God Rebukes and Preserves His Faithless People.

I. Call of Jeremiah (1:1-19).

A. Prophet to the Nations.

Jeremiah is often called the prophet to the nations based on the first words of his call from God. We read this in Jeremiah 1: "The Word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'" What's going on? Why this emphasis on the nations? Jeremiah lived in a time, the last few decades of the 600s or the seventh century B.C., when there were many things happening that were truly cataclysmic. It was the end of the time of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians had been the great superpower for a couple of centuries, but their time was drawing to a close.

Replacing them would be the Babylonians. Jeremiah saw that during his lifetime, and the things he says in the book at certain places reflect that changeover from one great empire to another. The Babylonians increased in power and eventually challenged the Assyrians, took over their empire, and indeed extended it further. But Jeremiah also knew that God had in mind for other empires to come, and even to go, for that matter. Part of what we see in the book of Jeremiah is the confidence that there will come a time when even the Babylonian nation, a vast superpower, would be displaced and overtaken by yet other kingdoms that are unnamed in the book (which we know in retrospect to be, for example, the Medes and the Persians).

B. Jeremiah's Reluctance

Jeremiah's call also contains this response from the prophet to his call to be a prophet to the nations: He says, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." Jeremiah was a young man but his words are the classical words of a prophet who receives a call; it is appropriate in that culture not to look too eager, not to indicate that you are overconfident. There is a tendency to say: "Really, me? Oh you do not want me; I am not able to do the job." Jeremiah was, in fact, very eloquent; he was perfectly able to speak and he did so wonderfully and powerfully in the 52 chapters that constitute his book.

II. Prophecies Against Judah and Jerusalem (2:1-25:38)

As a prophet to the nations, he prophesied also about Judah and Jerusalem. The first big section of material in this book, chapters 1-25, are prophecies of Jeremiah, mostly in poetry, about Judah and Jerusalem, about the part of Israel that was left in his day. Already in 722 B.C., the Assyrians had conquered all of the northern part of Israel, the so-called Ten Tribes; and the city of Samaria, the capital of the north, had fallen to them at that time. So Jeremiah was a preacher to the south, to Judah and to its capital, Jerusalem. It was a nation, too. It was a kingdom, after all; and so his words to it, on God's behalf, dealt with it as one of the nations of the world.

A. Entreaty, Warning, Coming Disaster (2:1-4:31)

Now from our point of view, Judah was a very small place, not big, not impressive, a tiny population compared to the rest of the world and to big powers like the Egyptians or the Assyrians or the Babylonians. But it was God's people, God's chosen people. It was the people

on the earth to whom God had entrusted His covenant, in whose hearts and minds, those who were receptive, He had placed His law, His Word of guidance. And Jeremiah spoke freely, frequently, constantly to these people. However, he was speaking at a time when a lot of what he wanted to say was not well received. For example, in chapters 2-3, he preached about how God had become angry with Israel because they had forsaken Him and how they continued to forsake Him, how His Word was not being honored and how that inevitably had to lead to destruction. And people did not necessarily want to hear it.

They did not want to be told that their nation was going down the drain. They did not want to hear that there was no further hope for them. They did not want to hear that inevitably they were going to go into exile. One of the things we observe in the book, progressively building in the early chapters, but obvious throughout, is the fact that Jeremiah was not entirely popular as a prophet. An additional factor was that there were many, many other prophets operating who were not in fact speaking God's truth. Jeremiah regularly has contact with them and is in disagreement with them.

They had the ear of this king, of that king, and these officials, and the people in the marketplace, and the priests, and the various business leaders. And by the dozen they were preaching that the Lord would never abandon His people, that the Assyrians or the Babylonians or whatever group would be defeated by the Lord, would be taken off, and would be kept away from ever destroying Judah and Jerusalem. There was a real complacency at that time. This complacency derived in part from the miraculous way that God had delivered Judah and Jerusalem for all these years, when so many other nations and city-states had fallen in the Assyrian conquest and were now part of the Assyrian Empire.

B. Reasons for Judgment (5:1-31)

Judah's unusual and exceptional independence tended to cause people to think that they were pretty well off, and that maybe Yahweh, as the Hebrew name has it, the Lord, the God of Israel, was pretty much able to take care of them as their national God. Now, they were worshiping any number of gods and goddesses as personal gods and family gods and as local deities, and so on. But, when it came to national events, many of them thought that the Lord was doing a pretty good job and would be able to preserve His people in spite of the various threats that were on the horizon as result of the international politics and pressures and rivalries between potential empires. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of both inviting the people to return to the Lord, as he does for example in chapter 4, and also telling them, as he does in chapter 5, that he could not find anybody who was upright and righteous. In other words, he stood over against his whole culture, everybody in that chosen nation, and he said, "You have all gone the wrong way; this is what the Lord is saying through me."

C. Jerusalem Will Fall (6:1-10:25).

The other prophets were saying just the opposite: the Lord likes His people, the Lord favors His people, and the Lord would never abandon His people. In chapter 6, Jeremiah predicts the siege of Jerusalem; he predicts that a time is coming when enemy soldiers will surround the city and will starve out its inhabitants, with children crying and dying in the streets, people not having enough food to eat and gradually getting sicker and sicker, and so on. That is not what people wanted to hear. People never like to hear the negative, even if it is true. They love to hear

things that make them feel good, things that reassure them, that give them a sense of hope, that are not too demanding upon their moral lifestyle. And so, this kind of thing was difficult. He stood essentially as a lone prophet without many friends or supporters.

In chapter 7, he talks against the false cult worship that the people were engaged in. They worshiped all right, but it was hollow, phony, going through the rituals; and it was not accompanied by obedience to the covenant law that God had revealed through Moses and that every Israelite was supposed to be keeping assiduously. In chapters 8-10, he concentrates on the coming destruction of Judah. He says from the least to the greatest, prophets and priests alike, that they are all greedy for gain; they all practice deceit. And he speaks of the snorting of the enemy's horses heard from north to south; they have come to devour the land and everything in it, the city and all who live there.

D. Discouragement, Warnings, and Laments (11 :1-17:27)

This kind of preaching was at a time when people were nervous about what might be coming in the future, when people did not want to hear the negative, when his kind of wording and his constancy in pronouncing it was not very favored. It was not nice in the minds of everybody from the monarchy down to the common people, and eventually produced a plot against Jeremiah. The people wanted to kill the guy or at least somehow get him out of the way. He brought these concerns to the Lord, but it was a difficult time. It was for him a time of challenge, a time of discouragement, a time when it seemed like he was virtually friendless. Later those plots increased and were redoubled. We find even the official government policy to be to suppress the preaching of this faithful and honest and straight prophet.

Chapter 12 has a lament over Israel for its sad coming destruction on the basis of its sad present behavior. Chapters 13-17 are filled with parables and warnings and laments of various kinds, in which Jeremiah eloquently portrays the degeneration of the people he loves so much, God's precious people.

E. Sign of the Potter's House (18:1-20:18).

Chapter 18 is interesting because it contains a rather well-known passage in the book, Jeremiah goes to a potter's house, and there is kind of a symbolic or allegorical value to his experience there. He visits the potter and he sees that the potter can make out of a piece of clay. He can shape it the way he wants, and then if he likes it he can keep it. But if it is not what he wants, if it is not the shape he wants, if it is not as even as he wants it to be, he can just smash it down again and make something else out of it. From this observation that God caused Jeremiah to have, God then used that object lesson to explain that He, too, could do the same thing to Israel. "This is what the Lord says: 'Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'" But God says they will reply, "It is no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart." So in effect, God would have to smash that pot and make a new one.

In chapters 19-20, there are more predictions of defeat and also a story of Jeremiah's imprisonment. The priests were very much against Jeremiah; he was stirring up the people to be worried, and they wanted a peaceful situation. They wanted people comfortable with their lives, secure, bringing in plenty of offerings and sacrifices, which of course were the essential means by which the priests were paid and supported. The prophets were furious at Jeremiah.

Here, they were purporting to speak for God, and he was saying the very opposite. They were saying "peace," and he was saying "no peace." They were saying, "We will take care of the problems"; and he was saying, "There is no way you can." They were saying God loves us and would never punish us, and he was saying, "God's going to punish you severely, indeed bring to an end your time of blessing and place you into the curse of exile." The prophet ends up for a time even in prison.

F. Warnings, False Prophets, and More Warnings (21 :1-25:38)

In chapters 21 -23, he gives oracles, that is prophetic speeches, against Judah, and as well, against some of the false prophets that he encountered. This was a difficult row to hoe; here he was, one person attacking the majority. But you know, he had a wonderful message in the prediction of the righteous Branch in chapter 23: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness." That, of course, is a prediction of Jesus Christ. It is a prediction of the one true son of David, the real King, the worthy inheritor of the throne. It is a great word of comfort; but you know, along with Jeremiah's prophecies of immediate doom, it does not seem to have won him too many fans.

In fact, in chapters 24-25 he gives other warnings for Judah and Jerusalem. He predicts in chapter 25 that they would go into captivity and be there for a lifetime, seventy years. Many of his contemporaries at that time may have thought that when he predicted a captivity for the people of Israel of seventy years, he was speaking roughly and roundly, generally seven decades, generally a life span. But, in fact, it turned out that to the very year his words were precise and accurate, because the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. and was not rebuilt finally, formally ending the exile, until 516 B.C., exactly seventy years.

III. Biographical Account (26:1-45:5)

After that point, a new section of the book begins: it is chapter 26 through chapter 45, where one finds the biographical section of the book. This does not mean that it is only about Jeremiah's personal life, but rather the prophecies of various kinds are interwoven with accounts about his own experiences, the kinds of things that happened to him.

A. Conflicts with Religious Leaders (26:1-29:32)

Conflicts with other religious leaders are described in detail in chapters 26-29, and many of those religious leaders wanted him put to death. As a legitimate Israelite prophet, he was supposed to enjoy a kind of diplomatic immunity; a true prophet was regarded as an ambassador from heaven. And in the same way that we give ambassadors to our country diplomatic immunity, we do not convict them of crimes. The most we can do is deport them; they are not subject to our laws in the same way citizens are. Jeremiah should have been treated that way; that was the general prevailing attitude.

Unfortunately, even basic cultural assumptions, like the prophetic immunity idea, were breaking down in his day. And so, there were plenty of people who were considering ways to get rid of him at this stage as well, and among the options was simply to kill him. Other options included imprisonment, which did indeed eventually happen to him.

But in the midst of it all, he was a preacher of good news, because good news was to follow the exile. Jeremiah was inspired to give his audience not only a picture of the immediate future that did include doom and gloom, the proper kinds of punishments for the disobedient nation of Israel, but also in the long run to speak of the days coming of the new covenant. After that time of curse from the covenant had been completed, God would institute great times of rejoicing and blessing and fulfillment of the most wonderful hopes of His people.

B. Consolation and a New Covenant (30:1-31:40)

In chapters 30-31, we read about the new covenant coming. We read about how that new covenant would not simply be engraved in tablets of stone as the Ten Commandments were, but would be written on the hearts of the people. The people would not have to teach somebody else this long list of rules and say, "Here are the guidelines that keep you in place." The people would know God personally, from the least to the greatest. Jeremiah is speaking of our age, the age in which the Spirit of God comes into a person who accepts Christ as Savior and transforms the person and gives that person an inner direction, an inner guidance, that is far more valuable and helpful than any number of rules and regulations under the old covenant.

C. Buying a Field (32:1-44)

Chapter 32 describes Jeremiah's buying a field. Why does he buy a field? Here it is very close to the time when the Babylonians are about to conquer the city of Jerusalem, most of Judah is already in their hands. They are surrounding the city. And this guy buys a field! It is a field you cannot even get to farm at the moment because of the siege. But he buys it as a symbol of the fact that the exile will not last forever. There is a good future for God's people, and one day they will return from exile. When they do, they will be able to farm again. But much more than that, they will be a people who have learned their lesson and will be by God's great mercy restored to Him and will be in on the blessings that the new age, the new covenant, will bring for them eventually. So Jeremiah is a prophet of doom, a prophet of woe; but he is also a prophet of good times to come, that is, of restoration and of weal. It is just that the one has to precede the other, and he has to tell it like it is.

D. Restoration and Warning (33-34:22)

In chapter 33, he predicts more of the restoration, but gives warnings in chapter 34 about how King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was certainly far from the Lord and was going to experience danger in his own life. Indeed, this happened to King Zedekiah when Jerusalem was finally captured, the walls broken through in the siege ended by the Babylonians. He was taken out with his sons to a place outside the city and his sons were put to death before him, and then he was blinded so that the last thing he would have seen in his life would be the death of his children. That is the kind of people that the Israelites had brought into their country by their disobedience to the Word of God.

E. Good Example / Bad Example (35:1-36:32)

Chapter 35 is an interesting little interlude where Jeremiah goes and observes a group of people called the Recabites. And these Recabites, though country people, kind of semi-nomadic, were people who were keeping the covenant of God. They were an example of people taking seriously the Word of God; if only the nation as a whole had done it. With chapter 36 comes a bit of a flashback. It is the story of how Jeremiah was preaching the Word

of God and had preached it so much that he knew it by heart. When he could not preach publicly because he was jailed, he wrote it down on a scroll.

A friend of his named Baruch, who was in the government, was one of his few supporters; but he was an avid and enthusiastic supporter and helped Jeremiah with many things, including the production of that scroll. As it was read before King Jehoiakim, however, the king just had sections of it cut, threw them in the fire, and just kept himself warm with the Word of God as he gradually burned it, showing his disdain for the truth.

F. Prison, Fall of Jerusalem, Aftermath (37:1-45:5)

In chapters 37-40, Jeremiah is in prison again, this time under Zedekiah, the last king. The siege and fall are described; and then interestingly in chapters 40-45, we read about the aftermath. What happened was that not everybody was taken into exile, though many, many people were, by the thousands and thousands. Jeremiah went with a group that got themselves in trouble by an assassination and fled to Egypt. Here he lived during the empire of the Assyrians, and then also the Babylonians. Now, he was going to the third superpower of the day, Egypt; and he went there still preaching and teaching the Word of God.

IV. Prophecies Against Foreign Nations and Fall of Jerusalem (46:1-52:34).

His oracles against the various foreign nations are collected in chapters 46-51, and then the book ends in chapter 52 with a little description of the fall of Jerusalem. This that Jeremiah had said would happen, did happen. This terrible, tragic event that he had faithfully predicted did, in fact, take place. This thing that all the other prophets had said would not take place, was just a myth God would never allow, in fact had occurred. The book ends in the same way that 2 Kings ends: with stories of how so many people went into exile, and how there was a loss of the independence and of the happiness and prosperity that once characterized Judah and Jerusalem.

Now the city lay in ruins, the countryside devastated, now just incorporated into the Babylonian Empire. But you know, even then, there was hope. So, the final little bit that we have in the book of Jeremiah is about the release of King Jehoiachin, an earlier king who had been taken into exile in 598 B.C. by the Babylonians. He is released from prison and is shown great favor, probably by reason of the influence of Daniel on the Babylonian kings of the time. Even in exile, there are little tastes of hope, little predictions of the way that God will again visit His people for good.