

THE WORDS AND TEARS OF JEREMIAH

(1) JEREMIAH THE MAN

Jeremiah 1:1-19

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SCRIPTURE

¹The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ²to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” ⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” ⁹Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” ¹¹The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” ¹²Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”

¹³The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north.”

¹⁴Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. ¹⁷But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before

them. ¹⁸And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you (Jeremiah 1:1-19 NRSV).

PROLOGUE TO THE SERIES

Today marks the beginning of a series on the Book of Jeremiah entitled, “The Words and Tears of Jeremiah.” Jeremiah was a prophet who, for over forty years, proclaimed the message of God to the people of God. His sermons and oracles were compiled by his faithful secretary, Baruch, and that is how we ended up with the Book of Jeremiah. It is the largest book in the Bible. The Book of Psalms has the most chapters (150) but Jeremiah has the most words.

It is the book with the most words and the book with the most emotional protagonist. Although his ministry proclaimed judgment throughout the land, he came to be known as the weeping prophet. Though his words were hard, his heart was not:

“Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!
(Jer 9:1 NRSV).

Jeremiah's life and teachings had a profound impact on the development of both Judaism and Christianity. In the New Testament we read that both Jesus and Paul not only embraced key themes from Jeremiah but gave them a central place in their preaching and teaching. Indeed, the whole idea of a New Testament or New Covenant is drawn almost exclusively from Jeremiah. For this reason, and many others, Jeremiah is often regarded as the greatest of the Hebrew prophets.

PRAYER

Holy God, you knew us before we knew ourselves. You consecrate us even now to be your servants. Create in us hearts worthy to be your messengers that we might go where you send us, and speak the Word that you give us. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, place your words upon our lips and your grace upon our hearts so that we might pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant, as you, alone, have commanded. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The late Ann Landers, syndicated advice columnist, used to receive upwards of 10,000 letters a month from people asking for help with their various problems. She was once asked if among all those letters there was one problem that predominated over all others.

She said, “Yes. Fear. Fear is the most frequently cited problem.”

Fear is not a new problem. Jeremiah the prophet struggled with fear. He was born into a fearful age near the end of the reign of the monstrously wicked King Manasseh. Later, as a teenager, Jeremiah had to come to grips with his own fears when God appointed him to be a prophet.

Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet is found in the opening chapter of the book that bears his name. This call to serve God includes three images: a child in the womb, an almond tree, and a boiling pot. Each image expresses both Jeremiah’s fears and God’s encouragement. They also serve as reminders how through God’s help we can overcome our fears.

1. A CHILD IN THE WOMB

FEAR SAYS: “I CAN’T DO THIS!”

GOD SAYS: “I AM WITH YOU.”

The first image is that of a child in the womb – surely the epitome of helplessness. When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet Jeremiah replied, in effect, “Oh I can’t do that. I am only a child!” The word that Jeremiah uses for “child”¹ is the same word used in Exodus to describe Moses when he was a mere baby. Jeremiah was saying he was as helpless as a baby. If Jeremiah entertained any hopes that this would thereby excuse him from service, such hopes were quickly dashed when the Lord said, “Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’” But the Lord was aware of Jeremiah’s timidity and so God also said, “Do not be afraid. I am with you.”

God had a purpose for Jeremiah from the beginning:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” declares the Lord (1:5).

And God was going to fulfill the purpose he had for Jeremiah. God has a purpose for each one of us. We can trust God to fulfill this purpose. Come what may in this life, we can say with Paul:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6 NRSV).

God said to Abraham, “I am with you.” God said to Jacob, “I am with you.” God said to Moses and later Joshua, “I am with you.” But this idea of fellowship with God reaches its

¹Translated by the NRSV as “boy.” The NIV uses “too young.”

zenith in Jeremiah. In many ways, Jeremiah was a tragic figure. His was an emotional personality, that knew the depths of despair. He had conflicts within and without. Within himself he fought against fear, self doubt and depression. From without he found himself in conflict with his peers, and both the religious and civil authorities. It was these conflicts that drove him to find solace in God. The Old Testament scholar J. G. S. S. Thompson commented, "Thus the Old Testament ideal of communion with God comes to its finest expression in Jeremiah."

It was because of his fellowship with God that Jeremiah was (eventually) able to withstand the erosive effects of timidity, anguish, helplessness, hostility, loneliness, despair, misunderstanding and failure. If you have ever experienced any of these, then Jeremiah is the prophet for you.

The conversation between God and Jeremiah bears a remarkable likeness to the conversation between God and Moses. Moses offered God an excuse. Jeremiah offered God an excuse. God did not buy Moses' excuse. And Jeremiah fared no better.

In point of fact, such a conversation between God and one of God's people goes on all the time. You may have had such a conversation with God. You may have offered up your own excuses, "I'm too young. I'm too old. I'm this. I'm that." But God says, "Do not say that. For I am with you."

The late Norman Vincent Peale said, "Affirm always by the grace of God you are more than equal to any fearsome situation. Keep uppermost the powerful thought and fact of all, 'I am not alone. God is my friend, my support. He is always with me.'"

2. AN ALMOND TREE

FEAR SAYS: "I DON'T KNOW WHAT'LL HAPPEN!"

GOD SAYS: "I WILL DELIVER YOU."

The second image is that of an almond tree. Where Jeremiah lived this was the first tree to blossom in the spring. It became a metaphor for watching for the future. In Hebrew there is a play on words in this verse. The terms for "almond tree" and for "watching" sound the same.

When God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah became concerned about the future, especially his own. To express it in modern, almost stereotypical language we would say that Jeremiah was a good Jewish boy who came from a good Jewish family and he had a promising future until this "prophet" business came along. He could have been a doctor but no! Actually he was trained to be a priest like his father. But God had other

plans. He was not to marry. He was not to have children. He would lose most of his friends. Worst of all, God appointed him to preach repentance to a people seemingly incapable of contrition. It was like being sent out on a quest that was doomed to fail. What kind of life is that?

Jeremiah was not only concerned about his personal future but the future of his own people. He was keenly aware that events could change quickly, dramatically and for the worse. In this sense, not much has changed in 2,600 years.

But too often our fear of what *may* happen causes more trouble than the thing that was originally feared. Some years ago the AP had a story about a kidnaping case that was triggered by a Massachusetts store employee who found a note in the Ladies' washroom. The note said: "Help! Kidnaped. Call Highway Patrol" and then it listed two Oklahoma phone numbers. The FBI determined the phone numbers belonged to an elderly couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Rupp who were supposed to have been on vacation. The authorities sent out an APB. A massive search was initiated. A photograph of the couple was printed in several major newspapers and shown on television. The two daughters waited anxiously for any news.

There was no news until one day the office manager, from the place where Mr. Rupp worked, took a phone call from a man who said, "We have a lovely view of the ocean." The voice belonged to Mr. Rupp. The office manager asked, "Where are you?" Rupp replied, "On vacation at Martha's Vineyard - where'd you think we'd be?" The office manager then said, "You have no idea what's been happening, do you?" Indeed the Rupps did not and they were so embarrassed to learn that people thought they were kidnaped and that the whole thing had escalated into a major ordeal.

Now it turns out there is more to the story. Mrs. Rupp dreads going to new and strange places. In fact, her biggest fear is that she will be kidnaped. So in preparation for their trip she had decided to write out a help note ahead of time just in case her worst fears materialized. But the note fell out of her purse when she went into the store bathroom!

Too often our fear of what *may* happen causes more trouble than the thing that was originally feared. Someone close to me often reminds me that 98% of the things we worry about never come to pass.

Jeremiah was afraid of the future. So God showed him the branch of an almond tree. This gesture was intended to convey a message to Jeremiah. In effect, God was saying, "Look, let me worry about the future. Whatever I say will come to pass and in time I will deliver you." Centuries later, Jesus would say to his followers:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3 NIV).

3. A BOILING POT

FEAR SAYS: "WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS THINK?"

GOD SAYS: "TODAY I GIVE YOU STRENGTH."

The third image is that of a boiling pot – a symbol of judgment. God was going to judge his people because they had worshiped other gods and committed heinous acts, especially under King Manasseh.

Jeremiah pictures this pot as tilting from the North. The judgment would come from the North. But there was no major threat to Judah at this time from the North. So Jeremiah's prophecy was considered suspect and he left himself open to ridicule. Babylon was a threat to Judah but Babylon, an ascending power in the region, was to the East. Yet we know from history that the Babylonian army did not attack Judah from the East but went up and around and came down from the North, just as Jeremiah had predicted.

Jeremiah was afraid of those in authority. When Nikita Khrushchev was the Premier of the former Soviet Union, he held a public meeting in which he denounced the atrocities of his predecessor Joseph Stalin. A heckler in the crowd shouted, "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you say something when you had the chance?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. The room went silent. No one dared to move. After several agonizing moments Khrushchev quietly said, "Now you know why I did not say anything!"

Jeremiah was afraid of his own people. In theory they were on the same side. They were supposed to be God's people, God's servants. But in reality many turned *against* Jeremiah because they had turned *from* God. Those whom he loved hated him; a loyal patriot they branded him a traitor.

Some years ago the American public learned of a species of bird called the Spotted Owl when environmental groups in the West charged that this owl was threatened by certain logging practices. But according to a (relatively) recent article in *Newsweek*, the Spotted Owl has a far more menacing enemy than loggers and this other enemy threatens the very existence of the Spotted Owl. This threat is the Bard Owl. It used to be that Bard Owls were found only East of the Mississippi but they have been expanding westward and

taking over areas traditionally inhabited by the Spotted Owl. The Bard Owl is more aggressive and adapts more easily to its environment. So the Spotted Owl's greatest threat comes from one of its fellow owls. As I read the article I thought of how this is also true of the church. So often the greatest threat to the church comes not from the outside but from within, from people who profess to believe in God but reject his purposes.

Jeremiah was painfully aware of this as his own people turned against him. But God showed him this boiling pot to remind him that God was aware of the injustices. God was going to judge the people but he was not going to judge Jeremiah. He was going to strengthen Jeremiah and make him like a "fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall." With these metaphors God was not promising Jeremiah that he would never suffer. Rather, that the suffering was not punishment and would not last. In the end, it did not matter what the people thought of Jeremiah but what God thought of Jeremiah. Just as it does not matter what people think of you but what God thinks of you.

Ultimately, God would see to it that Jeremiah was vindicated. Years later, Jesus would express a similar encouragement when he said:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have great trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

CONCLUSION

FEAR SAYS: "I CAN'T DO THIS!"

GOD SAYS: "I AM WITH YOU."

FEAR SAYS: "I DON'T KNOW WHAT'LL HAPPEN!"

GOD SAYS: "I WILL DELIVER YOU."

FEAR SAYS: "WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS THINK?"

GOD SAYS: "TODAY I GIVE YOU STRENGTH."