

## **THE WORDS AND TEARS OF JEREMIAH**

### **(2)THE TRUTH ABOUT JUDAH**

Jeremiah 2-38 (selected)

(Jeremiah 2:4-5; 7:1-7; 19:1-4, 10-11; 20:1-2; 20:7-9; 37:17; 38:6; 31: 1-2, 11-13, 31-34)

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#### **KEY SCRIPTURE**

<sup>1</sup>Thus said the LORD: Go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, <sup>2</sup>and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. <sup>3</sup>You shall say: Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. <sup>4</sup>Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent (Jeremiah 19:1-4 NRSV)

#### **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**

Jeremiah the prophet addresses most of his messages to the people of the Kingdom of Judah. Most of these messages are found in chapters 2 through 38 of the book that bears his name. I am going to present an overview of these 37 chapters in three parts. Jeremiah's goal is the same in each part. He wants people to embrace the truth and having embraced it, live by it. This needs to be our goal as well.

#### **SCRIPTURE PART ONE**

<sup>4</sup>Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? (Jeremiah 2:4-5 NRSV).

<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>Stand in the gate of the LORD'S house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. <sup>3</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. <sup>4</sup>Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." <sup>5</sup>For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, <sup>6</sup>if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, <sup>7</sup>then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever (Jeremiah 7:1-7 NRSV).

<sup>1</sup>Thus said the LORD: Go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, <sup>2</sup>and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. <sup>3</sup>You shall say: Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. <sup>4</sup>Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. . . <sup>10</sup>Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, <sup>11</sup>and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In Topheth they shall bury until there is no more room to bury (Jeremiah 19:1-4, 10-11 NRSV).

### **1.THE TRUTH ABOUT JUDGMENT (2:4-5; 7:1-7; 19:1-4, 10-11)**

Judgment is a dominant theme in Jeremiah. He speaks clearly of the destruction of Judah because of their evil ways. But he also speaks clearly of the possibility of repentance in order to avoid the destruction.

Jeremiah believes truth is in order to goodness. Sometimes this means pointing out where goodness is absent. His observations are painfully keen, his logical analysis irrefutable, and his specific applications disturbingly personal. In short, if you have read even a handful of these chapters you are likely feeling both depressed and guilty.

God, as Creator of all that is, has the right of judgment, that is, the right to exercise justice

in response to evil. Unlike human judgment, God's judgment is based on righteousness and is incorruptible. God often uses messengers like Jeremiah to communicate his judgment. Judgment has many purposes. It can display God's glory, vindicate the righteous, defend the weak, punish sin, and turn people back to God.

In Jeremiah's day, the primary evil was idolatry. Idolatry is the practice of making and using idols. An idol is any representation, real or imagined, that we use either to displace devotion to God or to shape the content of our practice of faith in a way that is contrary to God's instructions. Idolatry can also be described as the universal human tendency to value something or someone in a way that holds back the love and trust we owe to God.

Idolatry was practiced in at least three different ways in Jeremiah's time. By worshiping more than one "god" you could play off one against the other. We learn to do something like this as kids. If mom says, "No," then we go look for dad in hopes he will say "Yes." And, of course, we don't tell him mom already said, "No." If Yahweh says, "You will not join yourself to a prostitute," then we go over to the temple of one of our neighbor's gods where prostitution is a regular feature of the worship service.

Another form of idolatry is when we go through the motions of worshiping God but rob the worship of content. Jeremiah was highly critical of religious ceremony that did not translate into righteous character – a problem that persists to the present day. People were very religious. There was a high level of participation in religious activities and ceremonies. But it did not affect how they lived their lives. They would offer vocal praise to the Lord in worship then go out and oppress the poor and the powerless. Jeremiah tells them:

<sup>4</sup>Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (7:4).

No, Jeremiah did not have a speech impediment. He is referring to a widely held belief that the Temple in Jerusalem was so important to God that so long as the Temple ceremonies continued he would never let anything bad happen. They were seriously mistaken.

The third type of idolatry is perhaps the most disturbing. Judah lived in a world where people routinely sacrificed newborn children to an idol named Molech (or Melech). Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets spoke out against sacrifices to Molech. The idol of Molech was in the form of a large, hollow, metal statue. When people wanted something from Molech, they would build a fire inside of it and wait until the statue was glowing with heat. Then they would place their child on the arms of the statue. The baby

would be seared and burned to death. Sometimes child sacrifices were made to Molech on behalf of another god called Baal. These killings took place in an area just outside of Jerusalem named Topheth. Jeremiah predicted that the place would become an overcrowded cemetery during the Babylonian siege. In other words, the place where they killed their children would become their own burial ground.

If we really knew the dangers of idolatry, we would run to the Lord to find mercy. But I am afraid that many in our day do not even take it seriously, let alone see it as a substantial danger.

Hank and Dolores were not a religious couple and only went to church once a year. As they were leaving the church, the pastor said, "Hank, it sure would be nice to see you and Dolores here more than once a year." "I know," replied Hank, "Were very busy people, leading active lives but at least we keep the Ten Commandments" "That's great," the pastor said. "I'm glad to hear that you keep the Commandments." "Yes, we sure do" Hank said proudly, "Dolores keeps six of them and I keep the other four."

Now it is true that both the Old and New Testaments speak of idols as being, in and of themselves, nothing. But both Testaments also condemn idolatry and speak of the seriousness of it.

- “Goldsmiths are all put to shame by their idols; for their images are false, and there is no breath in them” (Jer 10:4).
- "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs” (Jonah 2:8 NIV).
- “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn 5:21 NIV).
- “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14 NIV).

A Christian scholar from the early church by the name of Tertullian once wrote, “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry.” John Calvin said our hearts our idol factories. Idolatry is so subtle, so expansive and so hard to detect that we must make diligent effort to seek the mercy of the Lord every day.

## **SCRIPTURE PART TWO**

<sup>1</sup>Now the priest Pashhur son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. <sup>2</sup>Then Pashhur struck the prophet Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD (Jeremiah 20:1-2 NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. <sup>8</sup> For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. <sup>9</sup> If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (Jeremiah 20:7-9 NRSV).

<sup>17</sup>Then King Zedekiah sent for him, and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house, and said, “Is there any word from the LORD?” Jeremiah said, “There is!” Then he said, “You shall be handed over to the king of Babylon.” . . .<sup>6</sup>So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud (Jeremiah 37:17; 38:6 NRSV).

## **2. THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RESPONSE (20:1-2, 7-9; 37:17; 38:6)**

Jeremiah declares the truth of God to the people. How would one describe the response? Not so good.

God is seeking to communicate through his prophet that the people are in a dangerous situation. Their evil ways have become so detestable it has reached a critical point. It is now or never. The clay jug represents the nation. It is an illustration of a level of brokenness that cannot be repaired. Jeremiah smashes it and tells them this is their future unless they change their ways.

We don’t have to wait long to learn how the people feel about Jeremiah’s preaching and his “broken jug” illustration. They beat him and put him in the stocks near the Temple and leave him overnight. We also don’t have to wait long to learn how Jeremiah feels about the situation. Jeremiah says:

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. <sup>8</sup> . . . For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long (20:7,8b).

Jeremiah did not think this would happen. God had promised to be with him and deliver him. But where was God? Jeremiah feels tricked, discouraged, betrayed and abandoned. Can you imagine what goes through his mind as the night wears on? Now try to imagine

what it was like to continue in this way for over forty years.

Like Jeremiah, all who follow Jesus and seek to be faithful to his call will learn that there are hard days along the way. Paul tells Timothy:

Anyone who wants to live all out for Christ is in for a lot of trouble; there's no getting around it (2 Tim 3:12 MSG).

Jesus exhorts:

“Remember what I told you, ‘Servants aren’t greater than their master.’ If the world harassed me, it will harass you too” (John 15:20 CEB).

One of the most difficult lessons a Christian has to learn is that patience and long-suffering are part of God’s will in the world. If you have never had a day when you wanted to give up then you’ve not been a Christ-follower for very long. But like Jeremiah, don’t be afraid to tell God how you feel. Then remind yourself Jesus is no stranger to pain, sorrow or rejection.

From the depths of his hurt, Jeremiah’s heart shows though. In spite of what has happened, he is still ready to follow the God who formed him in his mother’s womb. In the midst of back-breaking discouragement he cries out:

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (20:9).

In other words, Jeremiah is saying, “I can’t stop even if I wanted to. God’s truth is like a fire in my soul. I must speak for God. I must press on.”

I’d love to tell you things get better for Jeremiah but they do not. They get worse. He is put into a filthy dungeon for a long time. Then one day he is released in order to have a private audience with King Zedekiah. The king leans over and asks Jeremiah the most ironic question in the long history of ironic questions: “Is there any word from the LORD?”

If I had been Jeremiah I would have shouted back, “Where have you been? What do you think I’ve been doing all these years? Is there a word from the Lord!?”

But Jeremiah does not reply that way. He simply says: “Yes, there is! You shall be

handed over to the king of Babylon.”

How do you think that goes over? Ah, you are catching on. This time they throw him into a cistern. A cistern is not the same as a well. A well is a natural source of underground water. A cistern is a man-made cavity in the ground used to collect rainwater – especially in arid regions like the area around Jerusalem. Abandoned cisterns were smelly, awful places teeming with leeches and bugs. Jeremiah was thrown into one and we can be sure it was not a pleasant experience.

Eventually his friends rescue him. They pull him out, clean him up, and set him free. Then what does Jeremiah do? He goes out and again declares the truth of God to the very people who have rejected him.

### **SCRIPTURE PART THREE**

<sup>1</sup>At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. <sup>2</sup> Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest. . . <sup>11</sup> For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. <sup>12</sup> They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. <sup>13</sup> Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. . . <sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31: 1-2, 11-13, 31-34 NRSV).

### **3. THE TRUTH ABOUT HOPE (31: 1-2, 11-13, 31-34)**

There is not a lot of hope in Jeremiah but what hope is there is profound. Even in the midst of suffering and death the prophet reminds the people that there is always hope with

God. He dares to proclaim a new hope in a new covenant that God will author in the hearts of God's people, one that will overwrite the old covenant that has been broken.

Many people in Jeremiah's day seemed to treat the covenant with God as though it were some externally imposed international treaty – important to some officials perhaps but having little to do with ordinary, everyday life. They separated their lives into two categories: religious activities and all other activities. When they were doing religious things they embraced the Law of God – at least verbally. When they were doing anything else they lived according to personal inclination or the influence of prevailing culture. Little has changed in 2,600 years. According to pollster George Gallup 93% of professing Christians in America are guided by personal preference or prevailing culture rather than Scripture or the teachings of their faith.

But it does not have to be this way. The New Covenant means not only the fulfillment of the promise of salvation but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. God's personal and powerful presence comes into our lives. We can recognize the truth and embrace it. Or as Jeremiah puts it, God will write it on our hearts.

The New Covenant also means new motivation.

A cowboy in his pickup truck together with his dog in the back and his horse in the trailer behind failed to negotiate a sharp turn on a country road. A terrible crash ensued. The cowboy ended up with a broken leg, a broken arm, three cracked ribs and numerous cuts and bruises. The dog and the horse were also seriously injured. A while later, a State Trooper arrived on the scene. He first came upon the dog writhing in great agony. Being an animal lover himself, the Trooper took out his gun and put the dog out of its misery. Next he found the horse with three broken legs and in obvious pain. One bullet ended the suffering. Lastly, he found the cowboy and asked, "Are you okay?" The cowboy brightened and said, "Never felt better!"

Fear can be a motivator but love is an even more powerful motivator. The motivation for keeping covenant with God has been transformed by Jesus Christ. The New Covenant contemplated by Jeremiah would be one of the spirit rather than the letter (see 2 Cor. 3:6). It would be a response to God's amazing love (*hesed*) and it would spring forth freely from the depths of our being. If we realize what Jesus Christ has done for us this results in a deep surge of joyful gratitude and a desire to embrace the truth and live a life that pleases God.