

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART THREE – CHAPTERS 1-4

CHAPTER ONE – GOD’S CALL OF JEREMIAH – without which there would have been no ministry and no book.

First Jeremiah introduced us to his family.(1:1) His father, Hilkiah, may have been the high priest responsible for cleaning up the temple and finding the book of the Law.(II Chron.34:9) His own people from Anathoth turned against him later.(11:21-23) This must have been a cruel blow.

We have already seen the historical setting of the reign of Josiah, a believing king, who was followed by 4 unbelieving kings who were hostile to Jeremiah’s message. In the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign the king would have been 21 years old, so Jeremiah as a youth,(1:6) may well have been about the same age.(1:2,3) God’s plan for us begins even before we are born which indicates the importance of the unborn child to Him. He was to have a ministry not only to his own people but to other nations.(1:4,5)

Jeremiah expressed his fear to God that he could not be a prophet because he was too young to know how to be a public speaker.(1:6) His example encourages us to tell God our doubts about His plan for us. The Lord did not write him off or punish him for his honest question. He had nothing to fear if he depended on God for his instructions and the words to say. Like the disciples in Matt.28:20, his secret would not be his ability but the Lord’s presence, the source of his authority.(1:7-10) God now gave Jeremiah two illustrations. The almond rod was a reminder of the time in Numbers 17 when God caused Aaron’s rod to bud and fruit while the other leaders’ rods did not. He was to show the people that because Aaron was God’s chosen mouthpiece, his ministry alone would be fruitful.(1:11,12) The boiling pot would be a cooking pot as in Ezekiel 11:3,7. An enemy would invade from the north who would ‘cook and eat’ the Jews. The reason was very simple – they had changed gods and left God out of their lives.(1:13-16)

Finally God told Jeremiah to get on with the job. He was to ‘gird up his loins’ which in their culture described being dressed for action. Ephesians 6:14 quotes Isaiah to remind us that ‘truth’ is what compels us to action with the gospel. The Lord welcomes our questions but in the end when He has answered He wants us to move. We are not to be put off by the audience’s response. We have His strength and His words because of His presence.(1:17-19)

CHAPTERS 2-6 – GOD GAVE JEREMIAH BASIC TRAINING FOR HIS MINISTRY – because if we are not crystal clear as to what our message is we can be sure that our audience will not understand it either.

THE PROBLEM DEFINED – in the chapters which follow the first priority is to define and illustrate sin.

1. It is like the unfaithfulness of a bride who turned away from the bridegroom of her youth. The illustration is of Israel who trusted the Lord to lead them out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the Promised Land but then became unfaithful. Those most responsible were the leaders who should have pointed people to God and His word and been an example, but did not.(2:1-8)
2. It is like changing gods from the real God to one who does not exist and cannot help us. The illustration is of switching our water supply from a fountain of fresh water to a broken empty water tank.(2:9-13) Jesus uses the same illustration to explain our relationship with Him.(Jn.4:10,14)

3. It is like a slave who has run away from his master to become prey to wild animals in the desert. Egypt or Assyria looked more attractive as masters but Israel would learn the hard way the consequence of having no fear of God.(2:14-19)
4. It is like the behaviour of a harlot with a passion for immorality, a wild vine trying to live without the true vine,(Jn.15:1-8) a camel or a donkey on heat. Every effort by God to persuade us to turn back to Him had been ignored.(2:20-25)
5. It is like a thief caught in the act and therefore embarrassed. In the same way the secular and spiritual leaders should be shamed by the consequence of their idolatrous teaching and example, but they were not.(2:26-28)
6. It is like persistent law-breakers who refuse to respond to punishment. In their rebellion and unfaithfulness they still protested their innocence though the evidence of guilt was all over them.(2:29-37)

THE PROBLEM FOR GOD – what should God do about their sin? He had three alternatives according to chapter 3.

1. As the husband He could simply welcome back His wife whom He had divorced because of her unfaithfulness and continue as if nothing had happened. The Lord had already said in His law about divorce that this was not an acceptable solution because it does not work.(Deut.24:1-4) Tolerance of sin is no answer for a holy God.(3:1-5)
2. Again as the husband He could write her off and have no more to do with her. Judgement and hell is not the choice of a loving God. He longs to restore the relationship.(3:6-10)
3. There was only one solution therefore, forgiveness and restoration based on repentance. One individual here and there would respond to His invitation. Faithful leaders would be appointed to teach. An earthly tabernacle would no longer be needed. Jerusalem would become God's capital. Unity among believers would be restored. We would be counted as His sons with an inheritance. God longs with a deep sorrow for us to choose this path and find salvation in Him because sadly He knows that most will refuse.(3:11-25)

THE PROBLEM OF THE HUMAN HEART – by which we even deceive ourselves. Just what is involved in returning to God? Chapter 4 explores some of the issues.

1. Returning does not just mean saying it, but doing it. This includes rejecting for ever the false gods and values we clung to before, and then committing ourselves to God to depend on Him alone to let Him live in us in such a way that He can be seen and recognised by people of any nation.(4:1,2)
2. Returning means opening our hearts only to His message in future like well ploughed ground. In the same way it can be pictured as circumcision where the old is cut off and thrown away, not just on the outside but the inside.(4:3,4)
3. Returning means taking refuge only in God from the enemy who prowls like a lion.(4:5-9; I Pet.5:8) Jeremiah protested that God had not told them before how bad things were. God repeated His warning of judgement.(4:10-13)
4. Returning means coming to God to be washed inside from all the rebellious thoughts not just the actions. It is urgent!(4:14-18) Jeremiah realised the enormity of the problem which affected him and his people.(4:19-22)

God gave Jeremiah a glimpse of how terrible His judgement would be,(4:23-26) and why He could not forever allow His unfaithful 'bride' to continue in her adultery.(4:27-31)

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1. Review frankly how God first called you to Him and then to Christian ministry. Recall the early questions and objections you had and how God answered them.
2. Outline how God showed you the real needs of His people and how you were to be part of the process of meeting their needs.
3. Describe some of the illustrations you find helpful in ministry to explain to people what their true problems are and how they can be dealt with.