

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART ONE

Jeremiah has acquired a most unfair image as a miserable, negative character. In fact he is a most inspiring example of a man of God who had amazing courage, patience, imagination and perseverance over more than 50 years. He even had a sense of humour. His life and ministry give us one of the best insights in the whole Bible into how to be an effective Christian worker.

The historical background,(chapter 1) describes how Jeremiah was dragged protesting into his ministry as a prophet when a young man, probably in his late teens or twenties. The Bible background to his times is to be found in the second half of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. He prophesied during the reign of five kings of Judah and continued for a number of years after the last king was deposed, while being held hostage by Jewish exiles in Egypt. According to Jewish tradition which appears to be substantiated by Hebrews 11:37, Jeremiah's ministry came to an end when his captors could stand his preaching no longer, pushed him in a hollow log and sawed it in half.

Josiah became king at the age of eight and reigned for 31 years from 640-609 B.C. Despite his ungodly father and grandfather he was an ardent and sincere believer who was responsible for the Bible being rediscovered when the temple was spring-cleaned.(II Kgs.22:1-8) It was read, believed and acted upon producing a profound spiritual revival during his reign. Jeremiah's ministry began in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign and so the first eighteen years of his ministry would have been in comparatively easy times when his message would have had a good reception.

Following the tragic death of Josiah, three of his sons and one of his grandsons reigned in quick succession for a total period of 22 years.(II Kgs.23:31-25:7) Jehoahaz lasted only 3 months before being taken away by the king of Egypt. Jehoiakim, the second son, lasted 11 years before being taken prisoner by the king of Babylon. His son Jehoiachin was a king for just 3 months before he was too taken to Babylon. The third of Josiah's sons, Zedekiah, was king under the watchful eye of the king of Babylon for a further 11 years until he also was taken away to Babylon. The last thing he saw before he was blinded by the Babylonians was his own sons being killed. That was in 586 B.C. at which time Jerusalem was finally destroyed. Most of its inhabitants were taken captive to Babylon; a few escaped to Egypt taking Jeremiah with them against his will.(Jer.43) So after 18 good years under Josiah, Jeremiah continued to minister through 22 immensely difficult years in Judah and about 13 more as a prisoner in Egypt. During the second half of his ministry it seemed at times like almost no one was listening. He continued however to be absolutely faithful to the task God gave him despite the seeming lack of response.

HIS METHOD OF MINISTRY

1. His ministry started with listening to what God had to say. See for example 1:1-4,11,13. He listened, looked up his Bible, learned what God's word meant and lived out what he learned in his own experience.

2. At numerous times, for example 5:1, God sent him out among people to observe their lives and learn from first hand experience of the real world what the problems and needs were to which his ministry would be addressed. We too need not only to know Christ but to know man.

3. His teaching was built around a magnificent range of visual aids. For example in chapter 1 - the almond tree and the boiling pot, chapter 2 - the broken cistern instead of the fountain of living water, chapter 13 - the garment that rotted in the wet ground, chapter 17 - the tree that flourished by a stream, chapters 18 and 19 - the potter and the clay, chapter 24 - the figs, chapter 27 - the yoke, chapter 43 - the stones and so on. Some of his illustrations are humorous as for example in chapter 30 when he asks if the men are in childbirth. Sometime he becomes the visual aid as in chapter 16 where he is told not to marry or to have children because of what is going to happen. On the other hand in chapter 32 he is told to buy a field to indicate his confidence that the people will one day return to their own land. All these pictures are common ones throughout the Old and sometimes the New Testament. These are some of the amazing ways in which the Holy Spirit guards truth by putting it into a picture language which, though it needs unravelling, remains constant in meaning throughout time and different cultures. We too need ordinary everyday ways of illustrating vital spiritual principles.

4. He ministers to the public at large as in chapters 11, 25 and 26. At the same time he frequently is sent privately to individuals as in chapters 20, 21, 22, 28, 29, 34, 37, 42. If we have a public ministry we should still be available to individuals as God directs us. As a wise pastor Jeremiah knew how to keep in confidence what was shared with him. We need to learn the same lesson. See for example chapter 38.

5. As well as the spoken word he used the written word, chapters 30, 36 and 45. When his written message was burned he kept on writing, chapter 36.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Read through the whole book of Jeremiah. You may find a modern translation easier to read.

1. When you have done so, write down your first impression of Jeremiah himself and his message in just a couple of paragraphs.
2. Then read the last few chapters of II Kings and II Chronicles from the time of King Josiah onwards. Again write in a paragraph the glimpse this gives you of the times in which he lived and worked.
3. Put yourself in his position. How would you have coped?