

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART FIVE – CHAPTERS 12-19

JEREMIAH'S ON THE JOB TRAINING

Having been called by God,(1) given basic training in both the gospel(2-4) and an understanding of man,(5,6) Jeremiah had begun his ministry at the temple gate.(7-10) He had been instructed by God in the covenant, the contract between God and man, which man had broken and God was soon to replace with a new one.(31:31) He had already had a hostile reaction from his own people of Anathoth.(11)

ANSWERS TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Now he is ready to come to grips with the deeper issues which are troubling him and God, questions which only really come to the surface when we have been initiated into the task of teaching the truth. His first questions are about God's justice. We cannot convincingly present a message which does not first satisfy our own hearts. His question is the old one of why the wicked seem to get away with their sin.(Ps.10,37 and 73) How is it that they are allowed to prosper unchecked while their victims are suffering? A blast of judgement from God on the oppressors would be a popular move with ordinary people which would bring Jeremiah a sympathetic audience for what he was going to be saying.(12:1-4) God begins by reminding Jeremiah he has only just got started and already he is facing opposition from the family.(12:5,6) Next God shares His own problem, the totally unjustified unfaithfulness of His people whom He has loved so much and who are now deserving of the destruction which is coming on them.(12:7-13) Despite this He plans eventually to save and restore those who turn and listen to Him.(12:14-17)

VISUAL AIDS IN TEACHING

It is time now for Jeremiah to learn to use the first of a series of visual aids which God is going to give him to illustrate his message, pictures which for years to come will bring back his point, long after the actual words have been forgotten. A brand new waistband is left to rot by the River Euphrates instead of being around the middle of Jeremiah.(13:1-7) The people of Judah were bought out of slavery in Egypt so that they could cling closely to God. Now they are going to rot by the Euphrates as slaves of the Babylonians because they thought they could get on better away from Him.(13:8-11) The next picture is of that of jugs full of wine, a reminder of the spiritual drunkenness that is a people carried away with pride instead of being filled with God's Spirit.(13:12-14; Eph.5:18) In the light of his own message, Jeremiah grieves for his people and urges them, beginning with the king, back to God before it is too late. The heart of the problem is that they have left God out of their thinking.(13:15-27)

The next visual aid is from nature. The whole country is suffering a severe drought and everyone, man and beast, is struggling to survive.(14:1-6) Jeremiah at least is seeing this as a consequence of Israel leaving God out of their lives.(14:7-9) Again the Lord tells him not to pray for people who refuse to listen.(14:10-12) Jeremiah is once more frustrated by the false prophets with whom he is in competition for the attention of the people. Their message is a popular one, 'All is well!'. God promises that the very disasters they deny will eventually be the ones which destroy them.(14:13-18) Jeremiah confesses sin on behalf of himself and his nation, realising that only the real God can end both their natural and spiritual drought, if they turn to Him.(14:19-22)

PRAYER FOR UNBELIEVERS

Surely someone could intervene with God on behalf of Israel? Wouldn't Moses or Samuel have enough influence to change God's mind?(15:1) Both had tried in the past but in each case God's answer had not been to let His people off but to give the one who was interceding a message for them.(Exod.32:11-14; I Sam.7:9; 12:23) God was about to do the same with Jeremiah. The

coming disaster will be the result of the sin of Manasseh whose long spiritual legacy of idolatry was still doing damage nearly 60 years later.(15:2-9; II Chron.33:1-20) Jeremiah continues in conversation with God about his own sin and that of his people. Having confirmed the absolute certainty of judgement, God at the same time makes wonderful promises of blessing to those like Jeremiah who repent, search the scriptures and dare to be His spokesmen.(15:10-21)

THE MOST POWERFUL TEACHING AID IS OUR OWN LIVES

The fourth visual aid Jeremiah is given to illustrate his message is going to be his own life, single and childless. The reason is simple. The near future of which Jeremiah is warning will be a terrible place to bring up children because of war, famine and disease.(16:1-4) Paul would come to a similar conclusion about the unsuitability of his ministry for a wife and family.(I Cor.7:7,8; 9:5) Jeremiah was not to participate in the everyday activities of family life like weddings and funerals.(16:5-9) His life style choices would cause some people to ask why God was going to act against them. The answer would be the same as before, because they had exchanged God for other gods.(16:10-13) One day however they would return to their land but for the moment they would be suffering the consequence of their idolatry.(16:14,15) 'The futility of idolatry is obvious' says Jeremiah. 'That is what I want them to learn', replies God.(16:19-21)

In the next chapter the Lord again takes up the visual aid of chapter 14, the drought. He opens with yet another reminder of what the problem is, the heart attitude which clings to an idol like Asherim, 'Mrs God!' instead of the real God. The consequence will be in the loss of their inheritance, the land, when they become slaves of the enemy just as we lose our enjoyment of our inheritance in Christ and become slaves of sin.(17:1-4; Rom.6:15-23) The contrast between an idol worshipper and a true believer is like that between a bush in the desert and a tree by a stream of water. The first remains stunted and fruitless, the second grows, flourishes and fruits even through the toughest times, worry free!(17:5-8; Matt.6:25,28,34) God knows our hearts and the futility of clinging to things instead of Him.(17:9-11) As always in his ministry, Jeremiah catches on to God's message long before anyone else does. He understands the illustration of the living fountain of God's love,(17:12,13; 2:13) and wants God's healing work to begin in him first. He is confident that in this relationship with God he can stand up to persecution.(17:14-18) He is ready now for a new phase in his ministry in which he is sent to speak to the political leaders about their need to put right at least one broken commandment, concerning the Sabbath day.(17:19-27)

The potter at his wheel provides the next visual aid for Jeremiah to understand his own ministry and be able to illustrate his message to others. The process of the potter repeatedly reworking the lump of clay is like God working to shape us according to His plan. Patiently, when we resist His best, He perseveres, longing that next time we will yield in His hands.(18:1-4; Isa.45:9; 64:8; Rom.9:21) Israel has been like the lump of clay, rebelling against the hands of the Potter.(18:5-12) Their choice of other gods instead of God is like snow leaving the high mountains and expecting to remain snow. It will lead soon to them being discarded like a hard piece of clay.(18:15-17) God's action brings Satan's reaction, this time in the form of a verbal attack on Jeremiah. The religious professionals are feeling their position threatened.(18:18) The best person to tell when we are being bullied is God. Jeremiah in his prayer is now welcoming their coming judgement. It is interesting how our perspective on sin changes when we are the target!(18:19-23)

USING A VISUAL AID IN PREACHING

Jeremiah returns to the potter to buy a vessel which he takes with a group of elders to the valley of Ben-Hinnom, the Jerusalem rubbish tip, the New Testament image for hell, to smash the vessel to illustrate what God is going to do to them because they have led people away from Him. Next he preaches the same message in the temple. Now he is in BIG trouble!(19:1-15)

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1. When we first came to Christ we had big questions which the Lord answered. As we have become more deeply involved in teaching others, more questions have come. List some of the questions you have had in recent years and how God has answered them. Now list three questions you still have to which you have not yet found answers.
2. Look around you in your own world for ordinary everyday activities which can be used to illustrate the truth of the gospel. Explain how you have used them in teaching or how you might do so in future.