

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART SEVEN – CHAPTERS 26-31

TRUTH DIVIDES

Once again Jeremiah is back speaking in the temple courtyard to those who professed to be listening to God. His message is the same as usual; there is a choice – go your own way and face destruction, or turn back to God and be saved; be a curse to the world, or be a blessing.(26:1-6) At first everyone, spiritual leaders and ordinary people, is against Jeremiah. They are ready to kill him. He is in the middle of a mob and it is looking dangerous!(26:7-9) The political leaders arrive and a trial begins. The spiritual leaders are the prosecutors demanding the death sentence for giving bad news. The prisoner is allowed to speak in his defence and he simply repeats his claim that he has a message from God which gives them a choice; they can kill him if they want to – but there will be dire consequences.(26:10-15) His message convicts and divides so that the ordinary people and some of their leaders stand up for Jeremiah. They are reminded of a previous prophet, Micah, who warned a previous king, Hezekiah, in similar circumstances. That king listened and disaster was averted.(Mic.1:1) On the other hand King Jehoiakim had been warned by another prophet, Uriah, but had kidnapped him from Egypt and killed him.(26:16-23) One man, Ahikam, possibly a friend of Jeremiah's father stood up for Jeremiah and the case was dismissed.(26:24; II Kgs.22:14)

TRUTH HAS NO BORDERS

The next chapter is built around one visual aid, a yoke normally worn by oxen to attach them to a plough or a cart. Jeremiah is instructed to wear it around his own neck to underline his message which is delivered through ambassadors to the kings of the neighbouring countries, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon. Babylon will conquer the whole region. Accept that for a time that they will serve Nebuchadnezzar and live, or fight him and perish. Do not listen to the advisers and false teachers who will try to tell you that it will not happen.(27:1-11) Jesus used the same illustration to explain how accepting His cross and serving beside Him is so much less of a burden than going it alone.(Mt.11:28-30) We are not told how the neighbours responded. The same warning is given to King Zedekiah in Judah pointing out particularly that it is the false prophets with their unrealistic world view who will try to prevent this message being listened to.(27:12-16) He speaks once more to the priests and the people and invites them to test the truth of his warning by asking their 'God' to bring back the temple vessels already taken to Babylon. In fact the very opposite will happen. Even those vessels which remain will shortly be taken away. The truth works; false teaching does not.(27:16-22)

TRUTH MUST BE TESTED

One of the false prophets, Hananiah, now challenges Jeremiah by delivering a message supposedly from God which claims that the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar has been broken and that the temple vessels and the people who have already been taken to Babylon will be returned within 2 years.(28:1-4) Jeremiah's answer is very simple. If you are a true prophet, what you say will happen. If not, it will not. Let us see!(28:5-9) Hananiah responds to the challenge by breaking the yoke Jeremiah is wearing and being even more specific about his prediction.(28:10,11) Jeremiah's response is to deny Hananiah's prophecy and to warn of his death that year. He is right. There was no doubt which was the true prophet!(28:12-17)

TRUTH WILL PROVE TRUE

The people of Judah are physically divided into those already in Babylon as the result of two invasions in 605 and 597BC, and those still in their own land. They are also spiritually divided because those in Babylon are listening to God while those back home are not. Jeremiah sends a message to the first group encouraging them to continue with family life, confident of God's plan to restore them to Judah after 70 years, but to beware of the false prophets who will try to mislead them.(29:1-14) His message about the second group is a further warning of the judgement they face for ignoring Him.(29:15-20) He deals with two more false teachers, Ahab and Zedekiah, because of their wrong promises and immoral behaviour.(29:21-23) He rebukes Shemaiah who has claimed falsely to be the new high priest with power to deal with teachers he believes to be wrong. He warns that Shemaiah and his descendants will miss out on the restoration promised to the rest of Judah.(29:24-32)

RESTORATION PROMISED

So far Jeremiah's messages have been almost entirely about the coming captivity and the reason for it, the sin of Judah in listening to false teachers and worshipping false gods. There has been just a hint of the good news that after 70 years as prisoners in Babylon, the Jews would return to their own country. The next few chapters expand the promise of restoration.(30:1-3) Jeremiah first compares what is happening to a man in childbirth presumably because he would make more fuss about it! Just as the pain of birth has a wonderful ending, so the pain of the coming captivity will end with the joy of a new life.(30:4-7) The yoke of slavery will end with the destruction of the enemy and a descendant of David will rule again.(30:8-11) This will only happen when the Jews admit that their other gods could do nothing to save them and they turn to God for help.(30:12-17) When the people of Judah are restored to their own land, and family and community life re-established, their leader will be one of their own who is able to approach God on their behalf, as Jesus would do when He died on the cross.(30:18-22) Judgement on God's enemies will follow.(30:23,24)

RESTORATION THROUGH JESUS

Just what will life be like when God is again in a relationship with His people? First they will realise that it is all the result of His grace, love and kindness. Being a Christian is a cause for immense celebration.(31:1-6; Matt.9:14,15) Restoration begins with repentance and return from wherever we have wandered off to. It means a new way of living and a new source of life.(31:7-9) It means redemption by their shepherd to a life of immense blessing.(31:10-14) Like childbirth it may involve great pain and sorrow first, but remember that birth is a consequence of love.(31:15-20; Rom.8:22) Repentance means retracing our steps.(31:21,22) There will be a sense of belonging and safety.(31:23-26) The emphasis will be on rebuilding, not on judgement.(31:27-30; Matt.16:18) God will make a new covenant with His people based on complete forgiveness leading to His word being in our hearts and Him as our teacher.(31:31-34; I Jn.2:27) God will no more give up on His people than He will cease to provide sun, moon and star light.(31:35-37; Heb.13:5) His city will be rebuilt to last forever.(31:38-40; Gal.4:26; Rev.21)

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1. Consider from your experience of Christian ministry how the truth unites people at some times and divides them at others. How can we tell the difference?
2. Suggest particularly meaningful ways of illustrating the heart of the gospel message among your people. How can important modern day issues be used for this?