

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – PART SIX – CHAPTERS 20-25

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH...

The first nineteen chapters of the book are mainly about the development of Jeremiah's relationship with God and his understanding of his message, his audience and some of the hard questions by which he was going to be troubled. Only a few times does it describe his actual preaching, first at the gate of the temple,(7:2) then at the gate of the city,(17:19) and finally back in the temple.(19:14) There are rumbles of discontent from first his family, who may have seen him as an embarrassment,(11:21-23; Mark 3:21,31) and then the religious leaders who saw him as a threat.(18:18; Mark 14:1) Presumably there was much more public ministry during the reign of his fellow believer, King Josiah, which is not recorded. In this he would have drawn on all that God had taught him. When finally the time of speaking is recorded the story has jumped ahead to the time of King Zedekiah and the whole spiritual atmosphere has changed dramatically, the stakes have increased and the opposition becomes seriously threatening.

...THE TOUGH GET GOING

The chief priest, Pashhur, has Jeremiah beaten and put in the stocks where the public could ridicule him. This is a threat to intimidate and silence him which fails totally.(20:1,2; Acts 4:3-21) He delivers a personal warning from God to Pashhur(20:3-6) and then explains to us in his prayer to God why he cannot keep quiet.(20:7-9; Acts 4:19,20) Inwardly he agonises over the treachery of his so-called friends but he knows God is there for him.(20:10-13) In a moment of panic he repeats Job's wish that he had never been born.(20:14-18; Job 3:3-6) What is important is that he shares his struggle with God.

TOUGH WORDS FOR KINGS

Following a dramatic reversal of attitude on the part of King Zedekiah, the same Pashhur is sent to Jeremiah to ask for advice from God for the king. When people are desperate they may turn to Christians who have impressed them with their steadiness during extreme adversity.(Mark 6:20) The immediate threat is the king of Babylon at the gates of Jerusalem with his army.(21:1,2) Zedekiah does not receive the answer he hoped for. He faces total defeat.(21:3-7) Jeremiah takes the opportunity to address the people of Judah as a whole and remind them of their choice, fight the Babylonians and die, or surrender and live.(21:8-10) His message for the family of Zedekiah is that the judgement coming on them will be for their abuse of power and that they still have a chance to turn back.(21:11,12) He has a final word to everyone; they are about to receive the consequence of their arrogant defiance of God.(21:13,14)

This next message is another one for a king but the story goes back in time to Jehoahaz, the first of Josiah's sons to succeed him. It may well have been an early warning right at the beginning of his brief, disastrous reign while he was still wondering whether to follow his godly father or his ungodly grandfather and great-grandfather. It gives interesting insight into what God wants of secular leaders, a just and honest administration in which the needy are especially cared for.(22:1-3) He could trust God and continue as king or follow other gods and face not only his ruin but that of his people.(22:4-9) He is warned that the wrong choice will lead to his captivity for the rest of his life.(22:10-12) Sadly he opted for idols and injustice so after three short months as king he was taken as a prisoner to Egypt.(II Kgs.23:31-34) Again Jeremiah pushes his point home. It is very easy for rulers to use their power for their own gain instead of treating workers fairly and caring for the underprivileged.(22:13-17) The chapter contains two further messages to kings. The first is to Jehoiakim, Jehoahaz' brother, who was installed as king by the Egyptian Pharaoh to extract taxes from his people on behalf of the Egyptians. He lasted 11 years before being succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, who in turn was taken off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after only three months in the

job.(II Kgs.23:24-24:17) Each depended on idols for their spiritual guidance and tried to play politics between the two superpowers, Egypt and Babylon. Each was warned by Jeremiah of the consequence of leaving the real God out, but neither listened.(22:18-30)

TOUGH WORDS FOR PROPHETS

The root of Judah's problems lies in the failure of leadership, firstly the kings who should have given example, and then all the spiritual shepherds who should have fed and cared for them but had neglected their tasks because they neglected their own relationship with God. They had not only failed the flock but they had deliberately damaged them by their false teaching.(23:1,2) History has been repeated over and over down through the centuries since. But God does not give up on His people and again and again, seemingly from nowhere, raises up a new generation of leaders who will be faithful, beginning with Jesus Christ. Jesus is here pictured as a Branch of David.(Jn.15:2) Unlike the leaders of Jeremiah's time He will be righteous, just, wise and a Saviour. He will gather God's sheep instead of scattering them.(23:3-8; Jn.10:11-16) In the rest of the chapter, God turns again to the false teachers, comparing them first to adulterers because they are following other gods and deserving of God's judgement.(23:9-15) What is so damaging about them is that they claim to have received a message from God that all is well when it is not. It is permissible for them to share their opinions but not to attribute them to God.(23:16-32) God gives permission for Jeremiah and His people to challenge so-called prophets as to whether their ideas are really from God.(23:33-40; I Cor.14:29)

A TOUGH CHOICE

In the next two chapters Jeremiah collects together several messages which God gave him about the future. They are very simple. The future could be good or bad. The first message is given when Jehoiachin is taken hostage by Nebuchadnezzar and replaced by yet another son of Josiah, Zedekiah. He is given a vision of a basket of figs, some sound and some rotten. The good ones picture the people who will respond to his message and although they will be taken captive to Babylon, God will care for them and restore them one day to their own land.(24:1-7; Matt.7:15-20) The bad figs are Zedekiah and his supporters who refuse to listen and will face the judgement of God.(24:8-10) God's judgement is no more than a confirmation by God of the choice we make.

TOUGH WORDS FOR EVERYONE

Jeremiah addresses the ordinary people of Judah. Because they have not listened to God's warning, Nebuchadnezzar is coming to take them captive to Babylon.(25:1-11) But it will not be for ever. After 70 years their descendants will return and God will then judge the Babylonians for their abuse of power. The 70 years had already begun in 605BC when the first group which included Daniel and his friends were taken away. Exactly 70 years later in 536BC God would intervene miraculously to set His people free.(25:12-14) Next Jeremiah is given a series of messages to all the surrounding nations who will 'drink the cup of God's judgement'. Judgement will one day be for the entire world.(25:15-31) The chapter concludes with yet one more warning to spiritual leaders in whose hands rests the one message which could avert the judgement of God.(25:32-38) It still does. What will we do with the opportunity?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1. Reflect on some of the tough times in your Christian life. What help have you received to enable you to cope? What happened when you accepted that help? What happened when you did not?
2. Thinking now particularly of your ministry, what have been some of the toughest audiences you have faced and what have been the hardest messages to deliver?