

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH – OVERVIEW – PART 2

HIS MESSAGE was about man and about Christ. When speaking of man he talked of sin which he pictured variously as unfaithfulness, rebellion, injustice, transgression and apostasy, see chapters 2-5. He always presented sin as first and foremost an attitude to God and His word, and consequently an attitude to one another. He pictured judgement as the consequence of sin; that judgement would involve the loss of all things, chapter 15; destruction, chapter 4; and finally death. He spoke of the need of repentance, restoration, forgiveness, and being washed from our sin. He spoke also of particular issues in the lives of individuals or in the society of his day, for example slavery in chapter 34.

He presented Christ above all as the Branch, chapter 23 and 33, using the imagery of Isaiah 11:1 of new life springing from the line of David. He spoke firstly of how Christ will wash us from our sin, and secondly how He will indwell us by the Holy Spirit, in chapter 3, 31 and 33; of how with Christ within us we will no longer need others to tell us what the word of God means because He will be our teacher, our guide and our life.

He talked about the past, the present and the future - past events in the life of Israel from which they could learn, present problems and opportunities, and the future destruction that was coming on the country in the shape of Babylonians, who will take the people prisoner for 70 years but from whom they will one day return to begin a new life in their own country. This is Jeremiah's particular picture of death to our old life and resurrection life, both of which are found in Christ.

Jeremiah's audience showed no obvious reaction for many years but finally in chapters 18:18 those who rejected his message began to plot against him just as Jesus' enemies did against Him in John chapter 11. Just as with Jesus it was the priests and the teachers who were his enemies because they felt their own position of power to be threatened. At first the reaction was in words only but in chapter 20 the chief priest had Jeremiah beaten and thrown in the stocks. In chapter 26 there was a plot to murder Jeremiah, chapter 32 he was imprisoned, chapter 36 his scroll was burned, chapter 37 he was again imprisoned and in 38 thrown in a cistern but finally rescued. In chapter 43 he was hijacked to Egypt. Sometimes he was publicly opposed by other prophets as in chapter 28.

However alongside the hostility of the professional religious people there was growing private respect among those in leadership for what Jeremiah had to say. King Zedekiah on several occasions, for example in chapter 37, while publicly allowing the persecution of Jeremiah wanted to know privately if God had any message for him. The Babylonians having conquered Jerusalem showed considerable respect for Jeremiah and his message. On the one hand they persecuted, on the other hand like King Herod Agrippa in Acts chapter 26, they had a fascination with the gospel.

HIS RESILIENCE

What is impressive from our point of view about Jeremiah is how he handled opposition and persecution, and what kept him going through difficult times for more than 50 years. Above all he talked with God. He questioned what God was saying to him and whether it matched the world he lived in, for example in chapter 8:8. When he was opposed he expressed his anger to God, in chapter 18:19. In chapter 20:7 he poured out his feelings but then in verse 9, he said: 'but if I say I will not remember Him then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary of holding it in and I can not endure it.' He gives us the secret of what kept him going in the face of the worst that could be done to him. The fire of Lord's presence within him and his burning conviction that the message he had been given was true and vital meant that nothing and no-one could stop him.

He could still be depressed, as in chapter 20:14. His secret however was that he continued to tell God how he felt and to listen to what God had to say. The Lord would answer his questions, restore peace in his heart and set him going again. Before ever the hard times began he was prepared for them in his relationship with God,(chapters 11:21, 16:10).

He recognized that his message applied first to himself. He cared and was personally involved in the lives of those to whom he ministered,(8:18, 9:1). Like Peter and John in Acts chapter 4:19, 20 despite the threats against him he could not stop speaking of what he had seen and heard. For over 50 years through good times and bad times his message remained the same yet he never repeated himself.

He always had new images, new illustrations, and new ways of saying the same message. The freshness of his ministry after all those years revealed the depth of his moment by moment relationship with the Lord who commissioned him.

HIS FELLOWSHIP

The first impression on reading through Jeremiah is of how lonely his ministry was but in fact God gave him friends at just the right moment. Almost certainly his first close friend in ministry was young king Josiah. Josiah became king at 8, really started to search to know the Lord for himself at 16, and began to make a difference in his nation at 20.(II Chron.34:1-7) The following year, God called Jeremiah. Five year later, in Josiah's eighteenth year, Hilkiah the high priest, who may have been Jeremiah's father(Jer.1:1; II Chron.34:9) found the Bible or part of it while cleaning up the temple. Imagine the delight Josiah and Jeremiah may have had reading God's word together and working out its application to their God given tasks. When Josiah was killed at the age of 39 it was Jeremiah who gave the eulogy at his funeral.(II Chron.35:25) Though unrecorded it is highly likely that these two young men enjoyed a deep friendship in their spiritual partnership in which Josiah reformed the political and social system and Jeremiah provided the spiritual teaching. After 18 good years, the loss of his friend and protector must have seemed an overwhelming tragedy.

Without Josiah's protection opposition began to rise against Jeremiah,(18:18) leading on to him being beaten and put in the stocks as an object of public ridicule.(20:2) Later the leaders were so enraged at his message they wanted to kill him(26:8) but the ordinary people were so moved by his teaching that they stood up for Jeremiah. One man, Ahikam,(26:24) protected Jeremiah and saved his life.

Soon after this Jeremiah again received a message from God which just had to be written down for this and future generations. But he had a problem. Jeremiah had been banned from the temple where the scrolls were kept and the scribes who wrote and copied them were located.(36:1) Baruch, the scribe, may well have been a family friend. When asked he came to Jeremiah with a scroll and a pen ready for dictation. Not only did he write the message down but risked his own neck by reading it out in the temple. Some officials supported Jeremiah and urged him and Baruch to go into hiding while his scroll was read to the king. The word of God divides. The king and those around him when they heard the message read out, ripped it up and burned it. Jeremiah and Baruch were now wanted men but they wasted no time, rewriting the scroll. The word of God will not be silenced even by governments.

When Jeremiah was dropped into a cistern containing only mud, another friend, Ebed-Melech from Ethiopia, sought permission from the king to rescue him.(38:6-13) God has His agents in the right place at the right time. Sometimes help comes from the most unlikely sources.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Build an outline of a message which you might give from the book of Jeremiah in which you present the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to

1. A group of children aged 8-12
2. An adult audience.
3. A pastors' conference.