

JEREMIAH

The Weeping Prophet, the Mystic in the Marketplace

Part One: Chapters 1-25

Historical context and division of chapters. Jeremiah, a quiet, peace-loving man is called by God to be a prophet to his own people in the southern kingdom of Judah during its final turbulent years. Like Moses, Jeremiah does not want the job. But God prevails upon him, promising to give him the words to speak and to be his champion in tough times. The problem for Jeremiah is that the words that God places in his mouth are not words a quiet peace-loving man would want to speak. He is called to rebuke royalty and to thunder warnings against his people, thereby drawing upon himself the scorn, contempt and hatred of everyone, even his own relatives. He suffers so much opposition that he is regarded as a type of the suffering Jesus. Also, like Jesus, he seems during his lifetime to be a total failure. There is no prophet whose human side we know as much about as Jeremiah. In his ‘Confessions’ he lays bare his soul. In these dialogs with God, we taste the searching, doubting, anger, self-pity, and desire for revenge that is part and parcel of every religious person’s life. The theology he lives, more than the theology he preaches, will influence the ages to follow. His life and teaching will rekindle the dying fires of Israel after the exile and prepare the way for Him who will come to cast a similar fire on earth and see it kindled in the lives of innumerable saints.

Message. Like the other prophets, Jeremiah preaches God’s love, man’s sin, the need for justice and holiness. Unlike the other prophets, he looks forward to a new covenant (31:31-34) to replace the broken Sinai covenant.

Confessions of Jeremiah. A very unique feature of this biblical book is the five so-called *Confessions* of Jeremiah (12:1-6, 15:10-18, 17:14-18, 18:18-23 and 20:7-18).

Period covered 626-583 B.C.

COMMENTARY

PART 1: JEREMIAH’S CALL (CHAPTER 1)

The word of the Lord came to me thus: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.”

“Ah, Lord God!” I said, “I know not how to speak; I am too young.”

But the Lord answered me: “Say not, ‘I am too young.’ to whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord.

Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, “See, I place my words in your mouth! This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant.” (vv 4-10)

Verses 1-3. The final editor of this book gives us the historical context for Jeremiah’s ministry. Jeremiah is born into a priestly family. During his forty or so years as a prophet (626-580), the kingdom of Judah endures one religious reform (626-609), three wars, three exiles, and five Davidic kings. During those years, Jeremiah lives through one of the brightest periods in its history (under King Josiah, 639-609) and the darkest period (609-587) in all of 433 years of the Davidic dynasty (1025-587).

Verses 4-10—The call of Jeremiah. This is one of the great call stories in the Bible, of which the *Collegeville Commentary* states:

Unless a prophet is truly called by God and sent as God’s messenger to the covenanted people, there is no good reason why the people should listen to him. Speaking about false prophets, God says through Jeremiah: “I did not send these prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied” (23:21). To establish his credentials as a prophet, Jeremiah, along with Amos (Amos 7:14-15), Isaiah (Isa 6:1-13), and Ezekiel (Ezek 1:4-3:15), reminds his readers that he was called directly by God and commissioned to be God’s messenger to them, the covenant people. That God “knew,” “dedicated,” and “appointed” Jeremiah to be “a prophet to the nations” even before he was born is the prophet’s symbolic way of declaring that God had a role for him to play not only in the history of Israel but in the history of the gentile nations as well (v.5).

Jeremiah’s excuse, “I know not how to speak; I am too young” (v.6), recalls Moses’ attempt to escape the

difficulties of the prophetic office (see Exod 4:10-13). Jeremiah knows that prophets lead a lonely life, are frequently scorned, often persecuted, and with few exceptions rejected during their lives. God, however, commands (v.7). Jeremiah's only comfort is God's promise, "I am with you to deliver you" (v.8). It is consoling to observe that God regularly promises to be "with" those who have been commissioned for difficult tasks in his service (see Exod 4:12; Josh 1:5, 9; Judg 6:16; 1 Sam 3:19, 16:13; Matt 28:20).

God's touching of Jeremiah's mouth (v.9) is the prophet's metaphorical way of expressing that what he preaches to the people is truly the word of God and not any human word (compare Isa 6:6-7; Ezek 3: 1-4, 10-11). Verse 10 indicates the scope of Jeremiah's message: he will deal not only with Israel but with other nations as well, and his message will be both negative and positive. He will prophesy the end of the old covenant and the existing dynasty of David, but he will also prophesy a new covenant (see chs. 30-33) and a new David (p. 458).

Verses 11-16—Two visions. The visions of the branch of the watching tree (almond tree) and the boiling cauldron foretell the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Verses 17-19 are words of encouragement for Jeremiah. He is not alone; God is with him.

Pause: By baptism, each of us is called and commissioned by God to be his disciples. When did you become aware of your call?

PART 2: JEREMIAH'S PREACHING DURING THE REIGN OF JOSIAH (CHAPTERS 2-6)

Chapters 2-6 summarize Jeremiah's message: Judah has been unfaithful and deserves a judgment of condemnation and punishment.

CHAPTER 2: Israel is accused of infidelity to God

"The word of God came to me: 'Go, cry out this message for Jerusalem to hear. I remember the devotion of your youth.... What fault did your fathers find in me that they withdrew from me?'" (vv 1-5).

"On every hill, under every green tree, you gave yourself to harlotry." (v.20)

The numerous accusations in these chapters begin and end with marital imagery: God is the bridegroom and Israel is his unfaithful bride who withdraws from God and chases after other gods. The Jerusalem Bible translation of verse 5 says: *"Vanity she pursued and vanity she became."*

Verses 6-9 accuse the people of ingratitude for forgetting the great things God has done for them at the time of the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land.

Verse 13 accuses Israel of two crimes: 1) They have abandoned God, who is the source of living water, and 2) have instead chosen to worship pagan gods—imaged "as cisterns that hold no water."

Verses 20-37. Jeremiah utilizes the language of Hosea's marital imagery to accuse Israel of breaking her relationship with God: *"Long ago you broke your yoke (of marriage), you tore off your bonds. You said, 'I will not serve'"* (v.20).

CHAPTERS 3:1 to 4:4: Plea to return to God

"Return, rebel Israel,' says the Lord. 'I will not remain angry with you for I am merciful,' says the Lord...." (3:12)

In verses 1-5, Jeremiah concludes his litany of accusations by returning to the theme of the unfaithful wife.

In the prose passage verses 6-10, Judah is accused of being just as adulterous as her sister Israel.

In 3:6 to 4:4, guilty Judah, like guilty Israel, is called upon to confess her guilt and return to God, not just externally but also internally.

CHAPTERS 4:5 to 6:30: Judgment against guilty Judah

"Proclaim it in Judah, make it heard in Jerusalem." (v.1)

"...Evil I will bring from the north, and great destruction." (v.6)

"...Your conduct, your misdeeds, have done this to you" (v.18)

4:5-31. Jeremiah summarizes God's judgment against Judah, as first mentioned in 1:13-17, namely, that enemies will come from the north and destroy Jerusalem and Judah. In 4:18, Jeremiah tells us how difficult it is for him to announce bad news to his own people: *"I am in anguish! I writhe in pain. Walls of my heart. My heart is throbbing. I cannot keep quiet"* (Jerusalem Bible).

Verses 23-28 speak about the return to chaos, an image of a people sunk in sin.

In chapter 5, Jeremiah makes his accusations and judgments and complains to God that he cannot find one upright person in Judah. *“Roam the streets of Jerusalem.... Search her public places to find even one who lives uprightly”* (v.1).

Chapter 6 continues with Jeremiah warning the people of an upcoming invasion: “Flee Jerusalem!” The disaster is about to happen because of the people’s rejection of God and his word. *“Their ears are uncircumcised.... See, the word of the Lord has become for them an object of scorn...”* (v.10).

PART 3: PROPHECIES DURING THE REIGN OF JEHOIAKIM (CHAPTERS 7-20)

CHAPTERS 7:1 to 8:3: Temple sermon

“Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with his neighbor; if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm, will I remain with you in this place, in the land which I gave your fathers long ago and forever.” (vv 5-7)

“This is a nation that does not listen to the voice of the Lord, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.” (v.28)

Jeremiah’s sermon at the Temple gate is regarded as one of the most important sermons in this book. Commenting on the sermon scripture, scholar Lawrence Boadt writes:

Soon after Jehoiakim became king and began to turn back from Josiah’s reform, Jeremiah went to the temple to proclaim a word of warning. This “temple sermon” was so powerful and shocking that the editors included two different accounts of it, once in chapter 7, and again in chapter 26. He shocked his audience of religious people who had come to the temple to pray by declaring that their trust in God’s protection was in vain. Instead, Jeremiah declares, God will wipe out the Jerusalem temple just as he had earlier destroyed the sanctuary of Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant had been kept in the time of Samuel. Chapter 7 develops Jeremiah’s arguments at great length, pointing out the constant idolatry and hypocrisy of the people, and promising that the wrath of God’s justice cannot be stopped. (Reading the Old Testament, p.368)

CHAPTERS 8:4 to 10:25: Accusations and judgments

“My grief is incurable; my heart within me is faint.” (8:18)

We hear of more accusations and judgments similar to those found in chapters 2-6, with one difference: no longer is there a call for the people to repent, no longer is there any expectation that they will. Some brief comments:

“When someone falls, does he not rise again...? Why do these people rebel with obstinate resistance?” (8:4-12)

In matters spiritual, we tend to act with perversity which is quite unlike how we exercise our common sense at other levels. Physically, if we fall we pick ourselves up; if we miss the way, we turn back, but spiritually, we can be so stubborn.

8:18-9:3 are verses of a dirge or lament. There is a mingling of cries from the prophet (v.18) and the people who wonder if the Lord has abandoned them (v.19). Also the African-American spiritual *“There is a Balm in Gilead”* is based on Jeremiah 8:18-22.

CHAPTER 9

God wants to remove himself from Israel and go in the desert so he does not have to listen to her lies and deceptions. Verses 10-21 call upon the wailing women to come and sing a dirge for a fallen Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 10

This chapter is divided into three parts: 1) The folly of idolatry (vv 1-16); 2) Defeat and exile of Judah by the Babylonians (vv 17-22); and 3) Jeremiah’s prayer of intercession for his wayward people (vv 23-25).

CHAPTERS 11-13: Rebuke for those who broke covenant with God

“Speak to the men of Judah and to the citizens of Jerusalem....” (11:2)

Jeremiah tells the Lord:

“...Why does the way of the godless prosper...?” (12:1)

“...Pick them out like sheep for the slaughter, set them apart for the day of carnage.” (12:3)

The Lord says to Jeremiah: *“Go buy yourself a linen loincloth; wear it on your loins...”* (13:1).

It is believed that the book of Deuteronomy was found in the Temple during the religious reform of King Josiah (see 2Kgs 22:8-23:15) who used it to further his reform. This chapter has a very deuteronomic flavor to it, e.g. “*Cursed be the man who does not observe the terms of the covenant*” (v.3). Chapter 11:1-8 presents an example of the type of sermon Jeremiah preached when he participated in Josiah’s religious reform.

11:18 to 12:6—First confession of Jeremiah. The five so-called “confessions of Jeremiah” are very powerful conversations between the prophet and God. During these exchanges, Jeremiah a) laments his misfortunes; b) considers giving up his hopeless mission; c) pleads with God to avenge his enemies; but in the end, d) places his hope and trust in God. Few people in the history of religion have exposed with such nakedness their innermost objections to God’s way of dealing with them.

In Jeremiah’s first confession, he raises the age-old complaint that God seems to reward the wicked and ignore the righteous: “*Why does the way of the godless prosper?*” (12:1). Then he asks God to destroy and butcher his enemies (v.3, also see v.20). Oops! Sometimes we can be so angry at someone that we may wish them evil. Jeremiah’s ‘confessions’ are wonderful examples of honesty in prayer.

Rather than promising to avenge the prophet’s enemies, God tells Jeremiah that things are about to get worse. Even the members of his own household will turn against him.

Pause: How easy or hard is it for you to tell God exactly how you feel?

12:7-13—God’s complaint. Just as Jeremiah’s house has turned against him, so has the house of Judah turned against God. God laments the devastation which has come to Judah.

13:1-11—Parable of the linen loincloth. Actions speak louder than words. At times Jeremiah uses action parables to get his message across. The loincloth, an intimate piece of clothing, connotes intimacy that Judah once had with God. The main point of the parable is spelled out in verse 9. But despite her closeness to God, Judah’s pride will cause her to rot just as the loincloth had rotted in the cleft of the rock.

CHAPTERS 14:1 to 15:4: The Great Drought

“*Judah mourns, her gates are lifeless.*” (v.1)

“*Even if Moses and Samuel stood before, my heart would not turn toward this people.*” (15:1)

The drought described in verses 2-6 causes a national emergency. Twice Jeremiah pleads with God to help his people (vv 7-9, 17-22), and twice God says ‘No.’ In fact, he tells Jeremiah not to intercede for the rebellious people. God will not respond to the prayer for an unrepentant people.

CHAPTER 15: Jeremiah’s second confession

“*Woe to me, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man of strife and contention to all the land....*” (v.10)

“*When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart....*” (v.16)

“*Though they fight against you, they shall not prevail, for I am with you.*” (v.20)

Verses 10-18 are another powerful look into Jeremiah’s soul. He sees himself “as a man of strife.” Life for Jeremiah has become one long hassle. He is continually at loggerheads with his community.

Verse 16 expresses Jeremiah’s great love and commitment to God’s word. He “devours” it (See also Eze 2:2).

Verses 17-18 express the deep loneliness in Jeremiah’s life. Because of the tough message he is called on to deliver, he has been excluded from the social life of the community.

In verse 18, Jeremiah wonders if God’s word is really true. “*Do you mean to be for me a deceptive stream with inconstant waters?* (Jerusalem Bible). It is like a preacher doubting the word he preaches. How painful!

God’s response in verse 19 is a rebuke to Jeremiah. God says that Jeremiah needs to repent and weigh well his response to God. If he does, he will continue to be God’s “mouthpiece,” and God will be with him against his persecutors (v.20).

Pause: What speaks to you most in Jeremiah’s second ‘confession’? Can you identify with his sentiments?

CHAPTER 16: Jeremiah is told to remain unmarried

“This message came to me from the Lord: ‘Do not marry any woman; you shall not have sons or daughters in this place....’” (v.1)

Jeremiah’s unmarried state is symbolic of the day Judah will be without a spouse. Commenting on God’s order to Jeremiah to remain celibate, *The Collegeville Commentary* states:

God commands Jeremiah to be celibate, not because celibacy is better than marriage but because in the days of thirst, starvation, and destruction that would accompany the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah would be spared the anguish of witnessing the terrible suffering of a beloved wife and children. In addition, like the children of Hosea (see Hos 1:4-9) and Isaiah (see Isa 7:3; 8:1-4), Jeremiah would be a living symbol of the unhappy fate of Judah and Jerusalem (vv 1-4). He is not to mourn with the mourners (vv. 5-7) nor celebrate with those who sit eating and drinking (vv 8-9), because Judah and Jerusalem are to be punished for forsaking God and God’s covenant law” (p.463).

Verses 16-18 continue the message of doom.

CHAPTER 17: Jeremiah’s third confession, true wisdom

“More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it? I, the Lord alone probe the mind and test the heart.” (v.9)

Verses 1-13. This series of sayings contrasts the true Israelite with the false Israelite. Sin begins in the heart, and Judah’s guilt is undeniable.

17:14-18—Jeremiah’s third confession

This confession should be interpreted in the light of Jeremiah’s observations concerning the mysterious workings of the human heart mentioned in 17:1, 5-10. As in his first and second confessions, Jeremiah begs God to heal him (v.14), to observe the blasphemous scoffing of his enemies (v.16), and to remember how he did not press for his enemies’ total destruction (v.16). Naturally, he prays that his enemies and not he himself be confounded (vv 17-18), for only then will it be seen that God is a just God. (*Collegeville Commentary*, p.863)

Verses 19-28. Jeremiah preaches on the importance of the Sabbath.

CHAPTER 18: Jeremiah’s fourth confession, Parable of the Potter

“Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.”(v.6)

God is the potter, Judah is the clay. God works with Israel to make it a good and suitable vessel. Judah will work with the Potter and repent, and she will be saved from destruction (v. 8). But verse 12 tells us that Judah has no intention of repenting and changing her ways.

Verses 18-23—Jeremiah’s fourth confession, a prayer for vengeance. Jeremiah is outraged at his enemies because they plot to destroy him. In reaction Jeremiah prays a prayer of vengeance: *“Deliver their children to famine.... Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men die of pestilence... (v.21). Forgive not their crime...”* (v. 23).

What are we to make of this prayer of Jeremiah? First, we might be grateful that it is recorded in scripture. When our emotions swing from love to hate, we know we have a friend in Jeremiah. While Jeremiah has been compared to Jesus, we know he is not Jesus. Rather, he is a flawed human being like the rest of us. In his prayer, Jeremiah asks that his enemies’ sin *not* be forgiven (v.23). On the cross, Jesus pleads that his enemies be forgiven.

CHAPTER 19: The symbolic earthen flask

“I will smash this people in this city, as one smashes a clay pot so that it cannot be repaired.”(v.11)

The horrible carnage that Jeremiah predicts in these verses occurs twice: in 586 BC when the Assyrians destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, and in 70 AD when the Roman Emperor Titus burns Jerusalem.

PART 4: PROPHECIES DURING ZEDEKIAH’S REIGN (CHAPTERS 21-29 & 34-35)

CHAPTER 20: Jeremiah’s fifth confession

“You duped me, O Lord, I let myself be duped; .I said to myself, I will not mention him, I will not speak his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.... Cursed be the day I was born....” (vv 7, 9, 15)

Of the five confessions (interior crises) of Jeremiah, the fifth is the best known and most dramatic.

In verses 1-2 we are told that the priest Pashhur, a representative of the king, “had the prophet scourged and placed in stocks” (imprisoned). As a result of his ordeal, Jeremiah nicknames Pashhur “terror on every side” and then prophesies that terrible things will happen to Pashhur and his family.

Verses 7-18. Commenting on the fifth confession of Jeremiah, *the Collegeville Commentary* states:

Goaded to despair, Jeremiah, in a magnificent passionate soliloquy, accuses God of seducing him into accepting a mission that brings only “derision and reproach all the day” (v.8). His gloom and doom message makes him a hated person amongst his own people. Jeremiah even contemplates abandoning his vocation. “I say to myself I will not speak in his name no more” (v.9). But then he has another amazing experience. He says that the word of God “becomes like a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones” and the effort to not speak it only wearies him (v.9). Despite all of his misgivings about God and his vocation, he experiences God’s presence. “The Lord is with me like a mighty champion” (v.11). With a burst of confidence he once again asks God to avenge his enemies (vv 12-13). Finally, emotionally, he curses the day he was born (vv 14-18).

No other prophet has spoken so much about his spiritual trials and “dark nights of the soul.” The next section of this book explains the reason for his inner trials, namely, his conflicts with the monarchy and the false prophets of his time.

Pause: What speaks to you most in Jeremiah’s fifth ‘confession’?

CHAPTER 21-25: Prophecies against the kings and false prophets

“This is the word you shall speak to Zedekiah... ‘I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm...I will strike the inhabitants of the city with...pestilence.’”(21:3-6)

Chapters 21-25 are a series of prophecies against the last kings of Judah and the false prophets who worked with them. These chapters begin and end with prophecies against Zedekiah, the last king of Judah.

21:1-10. Zedekiah foolishly decides to rebel against the powerful Nebuchadnezzar. Then he seeks a word

from Jeremiah whose response is not comforting: “*The city will fall to the Babylonians*” (vv 3-7), and “*Only those who surrender will survive*” (vv 8-10).

21:11-22:30 contain a series of oracles against the successors of David. Each warning begins with a reminder of what God expects of the kings, and ends with a threat of destruction.

23:5-6. Jeremiah describes a future ideal king whom God will raise up.

23:9-40. Jeremiah condemns the false prophets of Judah.

CHAPTER 24: Good and bad figs

Surprisingly, Jeremiah thinks the good figs are those who have been deported to Babylon and the bad figs are those who stayed in Jerusalem. Jeremiah believes that the future lies not with those who stayed in Jerusalem, but rather with the exiles. God will purify the exiles, bring them home and make them the foundation of a restored Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 25

This is a sort of summary of all the previous chapters, which affirms that since the people refused to listen to the word of the prophets, destruction by foreigners would be their fate and that they would be taken into exile for seventy years.

Pause: What could help us to detect false prophets in our midst?