

JEREMIAH

Part Two: Chapters 26-52

CHAPTER 26: Temple sermon

“Stand in the court of the house of the Lord and speak to the people of all the cities of Judah who come to worship in the house of the Lord.” (v.2)

“If you do not listen to my word, I will treat this house like Shiloh.” (v.5)

This sermon (vv1-6) is a repeat of chapter 7:1-7. When the priests and false prophets hear what Jeremiah has to say, they tell the princes that Jeremiah deserves to die for prophesying against God’s temple (v.11). But some of the elders do speak up on his behalf (v.16). While Jeremiah on this occasion is acquitted, another prophet, Uriah, is not so fortunate (vv 20-24).

CHAPTERS 27-28: Prophecies against false prophets

This message came to Jeremiah from the Lord: *“...Make for yourself bands and yoke bars and put them over your shoulders” (v.2).*

This is another example of a symbolic act by the prophet. The yoke symbolizes the power of Babylon which will dominate Judah for years to come. The king of Babylon will be God’s servant for the time being (v.6). The rest of chapter 27 has a tough word for Zedekiah (vv 12-15) and for the priests (vv 16-22). Chapter 28 is a fiery encounter between Hananiah, a false prophet, and Jeremiah, a true prophet.

CHAPTER 29: Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles

“Promote the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the Lord, for upon it’s welfare depends your own” (v. 7).

“Only after seventy years have elapsed for Babylon will I visit you and bring you back to this exile” (v. 10)

Thus says the Lord: *“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you..., plans for your welfare and not for woe, plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call to me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you.... I will bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you” (vv 11-15).*

This chapter presumes that prior to the fall of Jerusalem some Jews were already in exile in Babylon. It seems a false prophet had told the exiles that their stay in Babylon would be short. Jeremiah tells the exiles that their stay will be seventy years. Then surprisingly, he encourages the exiles to promote the welfare of their new home and to pray for it. It seems Jeremiah is telling the exiles to seek the welfare of their oppressors. He is really saying that the exile is part of God’s plan for them. If they seek the Lord during this time, good things will come their way, in God’s good timing.

The chapter continues with a threat against Zedekiah and two false prophets.

Pause: How hard is it for you to see God’s hand in the tough experiences of life?

PART 4: THE BOOK OF CONSOLATION (CHAPTERS 30-33)

CHAPTERS 30-33: A future with bright hope

These four chapters form a little book within the book, often called the *Book of Consolation*. Because of the people’s failure to keep God’s commandments, God would make a new covenant with them.

CHAPTER 31: New covenant

“He who scatters Israel now gathers them together.”(31:10)

‘In Ramah is heard the sound of moaning, of bitter weeping!

Rachel mourns her children and refuses to be consoled, because her children are no more” (v. 15).

“The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”(31:31)

Rachel weeps (v. 15). Rachel was the “mother of Israel,” the favored wife of Jacob (Gen 29:28-30) whose twelve sons formed the twelve tribes of Israel. In Jer 31:15-17, she is symbolically weeping over the death and captivity of her children – the Israelites – after the Babylonian invasion.

Rachel weeping has become an image of trauma and unrelenting grief over violence, death, and slaughter, especially when children are involved. For example, Mt 2:16-18 quotes Jer 31:15-17 in a story about the massacre of infants in Bethlehem. Project Rachel is an organized ministry for women who have had abortions. And Rachel Weeps is a holocaust exhibition recalling the murder of millions of Jewish men, women, and children.

Pause: What can help mothers (and fathers) to make sense out of the loss of a child?

31:31-34: The new covenant. This text is considered to be the most important text in the book of Jeremiah and indeed in the whole Old Testament because it speaks of a *new* covenant that God will make with his people. The early Christians saw the fulfillment of this prophecy in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Commenting on the ‘newness’ of the new covenant, *The Collegeville Commentary* states:

What is “new” about the new covenant is not the God who makes it nor the people with whom it is made—the true Israel—nor the will of God expressed in the Sinai commandments, but the results of the new covenant and the means by which those results are brought about. In contrast to the old Sinai covenant, which failed because Israel did not respond to God’s love, the new covenant will be successful. It will be successful because it will be God and God alone who will put into the hearts of the people the power to respond with love. We call this power “grace,” and as the books of the New Testament, especially the Pauline letters, and John’s Gospel, insist, it comes to us along with forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus who died for love of us. (pp 469-470)

The rest of chapter 31 speaks about the certainty of the promise of God to Israel (vv 35-37) and of his promise to rebuild Jerusalem (vv 38-40).

CHAPTER 32: Jeremiah Prays. We find Jeremiah in prison because he dared to prophesy that Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Babylonians.

Jeremiah is instructed to buy a field from a relative who wants to get rid of it seeing that his country is under siege. Jeremiah buys the piece of land not as an asset but as a way of professing his faith in God’s

promise to restore Judah (vv 6-15). This acquisition of land is another parable in action.

Then follows a long prayer by Jeremiah (vv 16-25) in which he praises God and recounts God’s goodness towards Israel despite her failure to listen to and obey God’s word: *“They entered and took possession of it, but they did not listen to your voice”* (v.23).

Verses 36-41 speak about God’s plan to bring home the exiles and enter into an everlasting covenant with them: *“I will make with them an eternal covenant”* (v.40).

Chapter 33: A bright future for Jerusalem and Judah. Verse 8 captures the central message of this chapter: *“I will cleanse the people of all the guilt they incurred by sinning against me....”* The chapter is a prophecy of hope for the people when their city was under siege and Jeremiah was in prison.

PART 3: CONTINUED – PROPHECIES DURING THE REIGN OF ZEDEKIAH (CHAPTERS 34-45)

As stated in the introduction, chapters 21-29 and 34-45 are Jeremiah’s prophecies during the reign of Zedekiah. They were interrupted with the Book of consolation in chapters 30-34.

CHAPTERS 34-39: Disobedience and destruction

“If you obey the word of the Lord, Zedekiah . . . you shall not die by the sword. You shall die in peace and the people will lament you . . .” (v. 34:4).

“The king burned the scroll (God’s word) in the fire” (36:23).

“The princes were enraged and had Jeremiah beaten and thrown in prison” (37:15).

The theme of disobedience to God and God’s prophet, which results in destruction, clearly dominates and unifies these chapters.

34:1-7. Jeremiah announces that during Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem, the city will fall and Zedekiah will be captured, but if he obeys God (which he doesn’t), he will die in peace.

In 34:8-22. Jeremiah pronounces doom on those who freed their slaves but then took them back again.

Chapter 35. This is the story of how the Rechabites, a small group of Israelites, disdained the settled and luscious life of their kinsfolk after moving into the

Promised Land. The obedience of the Rechabites to their founder is contrasted to the disobedience of the Israelites to God.

Chapter 36. King Jehoiakim shows utter contempt for the word of God by burning the scroll on which the word is written. In response, Jeremiah pronounces condemnation on the king.

Chapter's 37-38. In chapter 36 we read how the king showed contempt for God's word. In these chapters, we read about the princes who utter contempt for God's prophet by throwing him into a cistern. Fortunately, a courageous man in the king's palace, Ebed-melech, has Jeremiah pulled out of the cistern (ch.38). Another piece of story in chapter 37 is about the weak and vacillating King Zedekiah. He would frequently ask Jeremiah for a word from the Lord but when Jeremiah obliged, the king refused to listen. The weakling king knows in his heart that Jeremiah speaks God's word, but he is too cowardly to act on it.

Pause: If you have ever experienced a time of darkness who or what helped you to get out of it?

Chapter 39: Sacking of Jerusalem and the capture of Zedekiah. When the Babylonians enter the city, Zedekiah tries to flee, but is captured. The last thing he sees before his eyes are gouged out is the murder of his sons. Jeremiah's life is spared. He in turn has a good word for Ebed-melech, who drew him out of the cistern.

CHAPTERS 40-41: Gedaliah & Ishmael

"The king of Babylon gave Gedaliah . . . charge of the land of Judah" (40:7).

"Ishmael and the ten men who were with him, rose up and attached with swords Gedaliah . . . and killed him" (41:2).

At Mizpah, a Babylonian appointee named Gedaliah, sets up his provisional government and offers a brief glimmer of hope for Jeremiah and those who submit to him. When Gedaliah is informed that one of his people, Ishmael, is plotting to kill him, he does not believe the informer. Gedaliah's refusal to believe costs him his life. Then Ishmael massacres another group of pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. When pursued by Johanan on his way, Ishmael escapes and goes to Egypt.

CHAPTER 42: Johanan seeks a word from the Lord

"It is the Lord who has spoken to you, remnant of Judah; do not go to Egypt." (v.19)

Johanan and others approach Jeremiah seeking a word from the Lord and promising to act on it even if it is difficult. But the truth is that they had already decided to flee to Egypt, no matter what Jeremiah said. Johanan's action is another example of disobedience.

CHAPTERS 43-44: Jeremiah in Egypt

"I will take away the remnant of Judah who insisted on coming to dwell in Egypt, so that they shall be wholly destroyed."(v.12)

The people once again show contempt for God's word and God's prophet. Jeremiah's symbolic act in 43:8-13 drives home the point that the people's flight into Egypt is contrary to God's word and will therefore not save them. The king of Babylon will go after them and destroy them.

CHAPTERS 45: Message for Baruch

Jeremiah has a word of consolation for his friend and secretary, Baruch. Despite all the bad things that will be happening around him, his life will be spared.

PART 5: ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS (CHAPTERS 46-52)

The basic theme of the oracles against the nations is that God is the God of all the nations and that their destinies, like Israel's, lie in the hand and design of God. The universal extent of God's power, majesty, and sovereignty is what the poet strives to impress upon readers.

In its introduction to this final section of Jeremiah, *The Collegeville Commentary* states: *In reading the oracles, the reader should be aware of the fact that Semitic poetic expression revels in the symbolic, indulges in gross exaggerations, and frequently sees things only in black and white, with no regard for fine distinctions and careful qualifications. The universal extent of God's power, majesty, and sovereignty is what the poet strives to impress upon the readers. To this all the language, symbolism, and details are subservient. In short, the oracles against the nations are impressionistic rather than realistic.* (p.476)

Chapter 46 is an oracle against the Egyptians who are defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

Chapter 47 is another oracle against the Philistines who are overrun by the Babylonian army on their way to Egypt.

Chapters 48-49 are more oracles against Moab, Ammon, Edon, Damascus, Arabia and Elam.

Chapters 50-51 contain two oracles against Babylon. No other nation has such lasting influence over Judah than Babylon so it is no wonder that the longest oracle is against this nation. As a result of Babylon's invasions, Judah ceases to exist, its temple is burned and its people are taken into exile.

Chapter 52: Conclusion

The material in this chapter was already covered in chapter 39.

The Collegeville Bible Handbook states: *“This chapter is an appendix. It was perhaps added to reinforce both the negative and the positive messages of Jeremiah. By once more describing the fall of Jerusalem (vv.1-30), the editors remind readers how unerringly Jeremiah’s predictions of destruction came to pass. By including the good treatment accorded to Jehoiakim, the last king of Judah, by the king of Babylon (vv.31-34), the editors remind readers that Jeremiah predicted not only destruction and exile but return from exile and the rebuilding of the nation (p.106).*

Pause: What do you think it was like for the people to see their holy city and temple destroyed? What is like that today?

The influence of Jeremiah

Concerning the influence of Jeremiah in the life of Israel, Peter Ellis writes:

There is no simple measure of the influence of Jeremiah. In time his words, like a two-edged sword, penetrated the marrow of Israel, stirred the heart of the nation in exile, and reverberated through sacred writ even into the books of the New Testament.

Like Moses before and Jesus after him, Jeremiah lived at a turning point in his people’s history and bridged the gap between the old and the new. In his inaugural vision he was set “over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and

to demolish, to build and to plant” (1:10). He fulfilled his mission to the letter. He saw Assyria disappear from the stage of history and Babylon take over center stage. He preached the funeral oration for Judah and the Sinai covenant and at the same time foretold the institution of a new covenant. He declared the Davidic kings rejected but heralded the coming of a new David.

Of Jeremiah it can be said: no man did more for his nation and was treated worse. The mystery, however, is not in the prophet’s suffering but in the resurrection of the nation that died and was buried in Babylon in fulfillment of his prophecies. (Collegeville Bible Commentary, pp 479-480)

Jeremiah’s lesson for us. Jeremiah teaches us the virtues of fidelity and perseverance. He shows us that great people can experience moments of despair and share their feelings honestly with God. Jeremiah’s life, with all its suffering and persecution, foreshadows the life of Christ and teaches us to bear suffering courageously. Jeremiah reminds us that even in the worst of times, there is hope because God is forever faithful.

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- Reading the Old Testament, Lawrence Boadt
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament – Peter Ellis