

JEREMIAH: A Profile of Courage

by Ray C. Stedman

What if some present-day preacher stood in his pulpit and persistently declared that God was on the side of the Communists? That God was against America and that he was raising up the Communists to be his people and his servants? That God cared nothing for the Declaration of Independence or the American Constitution or the long heritage of religious worship that our nation has had? In fact, that the things we emphasize were an offense to God? And what if this preacher even advocated that Christians renounce their loyalty to their country and join the Communist Party? And what if the preacher – subjected to house arrest, or flung into prison, or slapped in the face in public and his writings burned, or half-drowned in a pit of slime – would not only stubbornly refuse to take back one word of what he had said but would only repeat it again?

Well, this is something like the situation that is recorded in the book of Jeremiah. This is exactly what Jeremiah was called to do.

Imagine yourself as that preacher. Imagine how you would feel when no one listens to you and persecution hounds you every step of the way. You are unable to seek comfort in marriage because the days are too difficult and God has said to remain unmarried. You feel abandoned, and alone; all your friends turn from you.

And if you try to quit, and refuse to be this kind of a preacher, you find that you cannot quit – that the word of God burns in your bones and you have to say it whether or not you want to. And despite the message that you are called upon to deliver, your love for your country is genuine and deep – as you see it surrounded by its enemies and ravished and conquered and despoiled, you are overcome by a deep sorrow that breaks out in grief's lamentations.

Now, perhaps, you can understand why Jeremiah, of all the prophets, was unquestionably the

most heroic. Isaiah wrote more exalted passages and perhaps saw more precisely the coming of the Messiah and the fullness of his work. Other prophets speak more precisely concerning some of the future events that were to be fulfilled, but Jeremiah is outstanding among the prophets as a man of heroic, dauntless courage. For many years he endured this kind of persecution in his life without quitting. That is an amazing record, isn't it? As you read through this book you can see that here indeed is an amazing man.

Jeremiah lived in the last days of a decaying nation. He was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom. Judah continued on after the ten tribes of the north had been carried into captivity under Assyria. (Isaiah prophesied about sixty years before Jeremiah.) Jeremiah comes in at the close of the reign of the last good king of Judah, the boy king Josiah, who led the last revival the nation experienced before it went into captivity. (This revival under King Josiah was a rather superficial matter; in fact, the prophet Hilkiah had told him that though the people would follow him in his attempt to reform the nation and return to God, they would only do so because they loved him and not because they loved God.)

Jeremiah, then, comes in right in the middle of the reign of King Josiah and his ministry carries us on through the reign of King Jehoahaz, who was on the throne only about three months. And then came King Jehoiakim, one of the most evil kings of Judah, and then the three months' reign of Jehoiachin who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and taken into captivity in Babylon. And Jeremiah was still around at the time of Judah's last king Zedekiah, at the end of whose reign Nebuchadnezzar returned, utterly destroying the city of Jerusalem and taking the whole nation into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah's ministry covered about forty years, and during all this time the prophet never once saw

any signs of success in his ministry. His message was one of denunciation and reform, and the people never obeyed him. The other prophets saw in some measure the impact of their message upon the nation – but not Jeremiah. He was called to a ministry of failure, and yet he was enabled to keep going for forty long years and to be faithful to God and to accomplish God’s purpose: to witness to a decayed nation.

Two important things are woven into the fabric of this entire prophecy. One concerns the fate of the nation, and the other concerns the feelings of the prophet. And both of them are instructive.

First of all, the prophecies of Jeremiah that have to do with **the fate of the nation** reflect the familiar theme of all the prophets. Jeremiah reminds this people that the beginning of error in their lives was their failure to take God seriously. They looked lightly upon what he said. They did not pay much attention to what he had told them, and they did what was right in their own eyes rather than carefully examining their behavior in the light of God’s revelation and word.

As we read in the historical books, they had sunk so low in the early days of Josiah’s reign that they had actually lost the copy of the Law. As far as we can tell, no one in the land of Judah any longer had access to the Word of God, and the copy which was in the temple – and which ought to have been in the central place of worship – was lost somewhere in the back room. Only by accident was it finally found, and its discovery stimulated the revival led by Josiah.

But that is how far off base the nation had gone. They had actually lost contact with the Word of God. They had adopted the dangerous principle of doing what was right in their own eyes. What they thought was right. Many people do what they know is wrong in the sight of God. That is bad enough. But it is equally dangerous to judge for ourselves what is right for we have no ability to judge properly – and this is what was happening in Israel.

As a result, they adopted the values of the worldlings around them and ended up worshipping the gods of the other nations. This brought on, as it always does, a torrent of bickering and strife and lowered morals and perverted justice. They made military alliances with godless nations around

them, and the country gradually sank deeper and deeper and lower and lower on the moral scale.

It was to this people that Jeremiah came. And the message that he was told to proclaim was judgment: that the national rebellion would lead to national ruin. Throughout this whole book you find these prophecies clearly delineated as he told exactly how God was raising up a terrible and godless people, a fierce and cruel people, who would sweep across the land and destroy everything in their path. They would be utterly ruthless; they would break down the walls and destroy the temple and take all the things that the nation valued and Israel would be carried away into captivity. Thus God would judge Israel.

But Jeremiah also makes very clear throughout these passages of judgment that God judges with a sorrowing heart, a weeping heart, and then the prophet looks beyond the 70 years of captivity he predicts. (Later on, while reading this very book of Jeremiah, the prophet Daniel realized that God had predicted that the captivity would last exactly 70 years. That is how Daniel knew that the end of the time was coming and he could look forward to seeing the nation restored again to the land.) Jeremiah looks beyond the captivity to the restoration of the people and then, in that peculiar way that prophets suddenly extend their view from immediate to far-distant events, he looks even further beyond – to the ultimate dispersion of the peoples of Israel, and then to the final regathering of the nation into the land. He looks to the days that will usher in the millennial reign when Israel – restored and blessed and called by God – shall be the world’s center.

In the middle of this book, in Chapters 30 through 33, is an amazing and beautiful prediction written when Jeremiah was in a dungeon. He was in a deep slime pit, the mud two or three feet thick on the bottom and only a little bit of daylight trickling through from above. In the midst of those depressing and deplorable circumstances, the prophet was led of the Spirit of God to write the flaming vision of the days when Israel will be called back again, and God promises to be their God and to walk among them and put away their sins. There in the middle of Chapter 31 is the great promise of the new covenant which will be made with Israel.

These words are picked up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (cf, Heb 8:8-12). Also, our Lord himself referred to this same prophecy when

he gathered with his disciples on the night before the cross and instituted the Lord's Supper. As he took the cup after the bread and held it up to them, he said, "For this is my blood of the [new] covenant," (Matt 26:28a). He was referring back to the days of Jeremiah's prophecy of the covenant that God would make with his people in that far-off day yet to come.

Now in the ultimate sense the fulfillment of that covenant is still in the distant future. God is fulfilling it today among the Gentiles in the church (which is made up of both Jew and Gentile), but the ultimate fulfillment of it for the nation Israel remains in the future, as Jeremiah predicted:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." {Jer 31:31-34 RSV}

What a wonderful picture that is. This is the fulfilling of the vision that was given to Jeremiah, in Chapter 18, when God told him to go down to the potter's house. That is a strange place for a prophet to go but that is where God sent him.

As Jeremiah watched the potter at work, he saw him making a vessel on his wheel, and as the wheel turned the potter shaped the vessel. And as Jeremiah watched, the vessel in the potter's hand was marred and broken. Then the potter took the vessel and once more pushed it all down into a lump of clay, and shaping it the second time, made it into a vessel after the potter's heart.

All through this book you will find visual aids, or object lessons. The prophets are good at giving such lessons, and Jeremiah does that here. This is God's great object lesson of what he does with a

broken life. He takes it and makes it over again – not according to the failures and foolish dreams of an individual, but after the potter's heart, for the potter has power over the clay to shape it as he wishes. Jeremiah speaks a prophecy of ruin – of desolation and destruction and judgment – but beyond that is the hope and glory of the days when God shall reshape the vessel. This applies not only to the nation but to the individual as well.

Now, the second theme in Jeremiah relates to **the feelings of the prophet**. There is a great lesson for us in Jeremiah's honest reactions to the situations he faces. You will find that he constantly fights a battle with discouragement. Who wouldn't with a ministry like his? He sees absolutely no signs of his ministry's success and the grim specter of discouragement and depression dogs his footsteps through all those forty years.

One of the amazing things about this prophet is that when he is in the public eye, he is as fearless as a lion. He speaks to kings and murderers and captains who hurl enraged threats against him, and he is utterly fearless. He looks them right in the eye and delivers the message of God that speaks of their own destruction. But when he is by himself, all alone with God, he is filled with discouragement and depression and resentment and bitterness, and it all comes flooding out. The prophet turns to God and cries:

**Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? {Jer 15:18a RSV}**

That is, "This problem just keeps after me all the time. It never stops. It never gets better; it is unceasing, refusing to be healed." And then he says to God:

**Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? {Jer 15:18b RSV}**

Or, as another translation has it,

**Wilt thou be to me like a liar,
like waters that fail?**

He is accusing God of being a liar and undependable. Strong words? Undoubtedly. Honest words? Absolutely. He is pouring out exactly how he feels. He has begun to wonder if the trouble

might after all be with God that he cannot be depended upon. As you look back through this brief account, you will see that what is bothering the prophet first of all is persecution:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

Here is a man who is being hounded everywhere he goes. Not only does he suffer persecution but also mocking scorn, and contempt:

**In thy forbearance take me not away;
know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

The third element of his problem is loneliness:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me,
for thou hadst filled me with indignation.
{Jer 15:17 RSV}**

Aren't these usually the ingredients of discouragement for us? We feel put upon. We feel persecuted. We feel that we have tried to do the right thing but everybody either just disregards it or comes back to make trouble for us. Or they mock and deride us and we are weighed down by loneliness and depression of spirit. We feel forsaken.

Ah you say, "I know the trouble with this man. He's obviously permitted himself to backslide." Disobedience – that is the quick and easy answer we glibly hand somebody who is suffering like this. But that isn't the case with Jeremiah. Notice that this is a man who is praying:

**O Lord, thou knowest;
remember me and visit me. {Jer 15:15a RSV}**

And he is feeding on the word:

**Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by thy name,
O Lord, God of hosts. {Jer 15:16 RSV}**

He is reading his Bible, feeding on the word. And he is witnessing.

**know that for thy sake I bear reproach.
{Jer 15:15b RSV}**

He has been talking to them about the Lord. And he is separated. Look again at Verse 17:

**I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice; {Jer 15:17a RSV}**

This is not a backsliding man, is it? For these are the very things you need to do if you get discouraged and depressed. You need to pray and read your Bible and witness to others and keep away from evil. Isn't that the answer? Isn't that the formula? But here is a man who is doing all these things and he is still defeated, still discouraged. Well, what is the problem?

The problem is that he has forgotten his calling. He has forgotten what God has promised to be to him. So God calls him back to it:

**Therefore thus says the Lord:
"If you return, I will restore you, ..."
{Jer 15:19a RSV}**

In Scripture, God always gives that answer to a heart that has grown discouraged. "Come back," God says. "Return. Go back to the beginnings, to the original things." And he says:

**"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what
is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,**

**says the Lord.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the
wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the
ruthless." {Jer 15:19b-21 RSV}**

That is what God said to him at the beginning. Notice this man's call back in Chapter 1:

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you:
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
{Jer 1:4-5 RSV}**

And Jeremiah said:

**"Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." [He was probably about seventeen years of age when this call came to him.] But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord."
Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations
and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." {Jer 1:6-10 RSV}**

And when from a mire of depression and discouragement, the prophet is called back to the promise of God; when he is reminded that God is greater than circumstances and that no matter how

depressing they may be, or how negative, the God who calls him is the God who is able to sustain him in the midst of it; when he gets his eyes off himself and back on to God (like Peter walking on the water), he begins to walk again.

And in the strength he receives through this lesson he continues with his ministry, through all the discouraging circumstances, to at last be taken as a prisoner to Egypt, where he died. We have no record of his death, but Jeremiah was faithful to the end as he learned to walk in the strength of the Lord his God. And he gives us this wonderful prophecy of the grace of God in restoring lives and taking broken, battered, wounded, defeated spirits and making them over again into vessels pleasing to him.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for the encouragement of this great prophet as we see the decay in our own nation, and the defeat of so many endeavors undertaken for your name's sake. We see the scorn and contempt for your word and for the things concerning you. We pray that you will help us to realize and remember that you are the God who opens and no man shuts and who shuts and no man opens, who does your will in the nations, who sets up and overthrows, who builds and plants, and who accomplishes all your purposes. May we get our eyes off ourselves and our circumstances and on to you and to your great purposes and be strong in you and in your power. We ask it in your name. Amen.