

Jeremiah: Unwinding the Covenant

If you want to get into the mind of the prophet, to know what he went through to give the Word of the LORD to a people who didn't want to hear it, the best place to look is in the prophecy of Jeremiah. When he began to prophesy, he was a young man and he describes what it was like in the first few verses:

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Judah went into exile.

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. (Jer.1:1-8)

And then God touched Jeremiah's mouth and told him that he had put His words there and that He was now sending him out, primarily with bad news for kingdoms and nations. His first calling would be "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow." His secondary mission would be to build and to plant. That's all in verse 10.

Now, what godly young person do you know who wants to spend his life telling people bad news from God, that the time for judgment has come and that it's going to be worse than they ever imagined? Not many ... including Jeremiah!

*Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth
A man with whom the whole land strives and contends
I have neither lent nor borrowed
Yet everyone curses me (15:10)*

And the Lord's response, a few verses later:

*If you utter worthy, not worthless, words you will be My spokesman
Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them
I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze
They will fight against you, but will not overcome you
For I am with you, to rescue and save you declares the LORD (15:19,20)*

Again, the young prophet expresses his frustration with this prophetic calling in chapter 20:

*O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived
You overpowered me and prevailed
I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me*

*Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction
So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long
But if I say, "I will not mention Him or speak any more in His name
His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones
I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot. (7-9)*

It's the burden of Jeremiah's life that he has to announce bad news to a people who are not eager to hear it, not eager to repent or to seek the LORD. He hates what it does to him personally, but he has no choice; he can't hold it inside or keep God's word to himself. And so he continues to bear the insults and judgments of the people and to hear them plotting against him to take his life. How does he feel about this call of God on his life? We find out later in chapter 20:

*Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed
Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
Who made him very glad, saying,
"A child is born to you -- a son!" (20:14,15)
Why did I ever come out of the womb
To see trouble and sorrow
And to end my days in shame? (20:18)*

But, even worse than the insults and threats was the pain that Jeremiah felt for the people of Judah. It wasn't like these trials were happening to someone "out there", but it was his people, and he felt their pain.

*Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain.
Oh, the agony of my heart!
My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent
For I have heard the sound of the trumpet
I have heard the battle cry
Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins
In an instant my tents are destroyed
My shelter in a moment
How long must I see the battle standard
And hear the sound of the trumpet? (4:19-21)*

The prophet sees the battle standards, hears the battle cry and the sound of the trumpet, even though the enemies of Judah are still far away, even though these events are still in the future. And the vision is so upsetting for him, as he sees his homeland vanquished and his own home ruined. He would rather talk about something more pleasant, but:

*My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble
I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine
Because of the LORD and His holy words (23:9)*

Why? Why was God so harsh on the people of Judah, the last remnant of His chosen people? What had they done to deserve His judgment, or His anger? And why were the people of Judah so angry with Jeremiah? After all, he was just delivering the message God had given him.

Let's start by looking at the reasons for God's judgment:

1. The core reason is that the people had forsaken their God. This involved the leaders, including many of the kings of Judah, and the priests as well. This is the word of the LORD from Jeremiah 16:

When you tell the people all this, and they ask you, "Why has the LORD decreed such a great disaster against us? What wrong have we done? What sin have we committed against Yahweh our God?", then say to them, "It is because your fathers forsook Me," declares the LORD, "and followed other gods and served and worshiped them. They forsook Me and did not keep My law. But you have behaved more wickedly than your fathers! See how each of you is following the stubbornness of his evil heart instead of obeying Me. So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.
(16:10-13)

Notice that the people still thought of Yahweh as their God, and seemed confused by the idea that He would be angry with them or that He would judge their actions. "What wrong have we done? What sin have we committed against Yahweh our God?" There is a spiritual blindness that comes with giving one's heart to the world, with loving what everyone else loves, with worshiping what the world worships. These people had idols in their homes, they were bowing to statues of Baal and to Asherah poles, and yet they didn't seem to know they were doing anything wrong.

Notice, too, that God doesn't just speak to their idolatry. He says, "See how each of you is following the stubbornness of his evil heart instead of obeying Me." This is a clear call to self-examination, to asking, "Am I just doing what I want to do and asking God to bless it, or am I doing what God asks me to do and asking Him to bless it." There is a huge difference, but we can easily get caught up in doing the first of those two and be blind to the condition of our heart.

Again, in chapter 22, Jeremiah raises this issue of the people abandoning the covenant that Yahweh had made with them:

People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, "Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?" And the answer will be, "Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and have worshiped and served other gods." (22:8,9)

2. But it gets worse. The second stage of rebellion that requires God's judgment on Judah is that the people have gone beyond turning their worship and their hope onto little statues that they have made themselves, but that they are putting these statues in the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem and committing themselves as a nation to submit to the gross practices of the false religions of the Canaanites:

The people of Judah have done evil in My eyes, declares the LORD. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears My Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire -- something I did not command, nor

did it enter My mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. (7:30-32)

In cultures outside of Israel, the name *Topheth* was a common noun meaning “place of child sacrifice”. It’s root may have meant “fireplace”, and it was a fire pit into which helpless infants were thrown. The Valley of Ben Hinnom was a trash dump and also a place for child sacrifice to pagan gods. From the Hebrew words Valley of Hinnom comes the word “Gehenna” which the New Testament translates consistently as “hell”. This practice of child sacrifice was prohibited by the law of Moses, but we know of at least two kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, who chose to follow the pagan gods in this way.

God is clearly angered by this affront to His Name and to His character. He declares that the people have defiled His temple in Jerusalem by setting up their detestable idols in its courts. And He tells them that their practice of killing their children in order to honor false gods is to their shame and will be punished. The Babylonian armies will fill the Valley of Ben Hinnom with the bodies of the dead.

And the LORD asks Jeremiah to announce to the people of Judah that they have broken the covenant that the LORD had made with them. Once a covenant is broken by one party, it’s impossible to demand that the other party abide by the terms of the covenant, and so God says that He will no longer bless Judah, but will punish them:

They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers.

Therefore this is what the LORD says: I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to Me, I will not listen to them. The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they will not help them at all when disaster strikes. (11:10-12)

And Jeremiah has the job of announcing all this to these people who do not want to hear the message.

Of course, the people refuse to take all this bad news lying down. They plot against Jeremiah and God reveals their plot to His prophet (remember that He promised protection if Jeremiah would faithfully deliver His message):

I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying, “Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more. (11:19)

Jeremiah calls out to God to take vengeance on the people who are plotting against him and God replies:

Therefore, this is what Yahweh says about the men of Anathoth, who are seeking your life and saying, “Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands” -- therefore this is what Yahweh Almighty says: “I will punish them. Their young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters

by famine. Not even a remnant will be left of them . . .” (11:21-23)

When we started this journey, I told you that Jeremiah’s first calling was “to uproot and tear down, to destroy and over-throw”, but that there was a secondary calling, and that was “to build and to plant.” What we’ve seen so far is that God’s judgment on the idolatry of Judah would be severe; what we haven’t seen yet is that God’s punishment would have a redemptive purpose. God is not interested in vengeance, in punishment for punishment’s sake, but in redeeming his people from their self-destructive ways, from the kind of evil mindset that would allow them to sacrifice their own children. Now we need to turn to that part of Jeremiah’s message.

The exile was necessary in order to show the people of Judah the consequences of rebellion against God. They had to be woken up out of this spiritual slumber that said, “Any god is as good as our God.” And they were awakened! Once they had woken up and begun to take Yahweh seriously, they needed help. They needed forgiveness and strength, encouragement and hope. And Jeremiah had good news to give them, although it started a bit badly for him.

His first piece of news was to tell the exiles in Babylon, in chapter 29, to settle down, build houses, marry and raise families, because they would be there for 70 years. This caused some to accuse Jeremiah of being a traitor to the cause of Judah and to ask that he be put in prison -- but their message was intercepted by the priest and nothing came of it. By the way, this is the passage which has those famous verses in them:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD; “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” (29:11)

That was good news coming to people who are finding life very challenging and wondering if God would forsake them forever.

The next four chapters contain words of assurance and hope. They start in 30:3:

The days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess.

And later in that chapter, God’s prophetic word continues:

In that day I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds; no longer will foreigners enslave them. Instead, they will serve Yahweh their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. So do not fear, O Jacob My servant; do not be dismayed, O Israel. I will surely save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security and no one will make him afraid. (30:8-10)

In chapter 31, God speaks tenderly to His people in exile and promises them that they will return with shouts of joy on the heights of Zion. He speaks to them of His former work of tearing down and uprooting and how it will soon be replaced with building up and planting. Then He promises to do a new thing:

“The time is coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest.” (31:31-34)

In chapter 32, we are taken back to the time when Jerusalem was surrounded by Babylonian soldiers, when Jeremiah had been imprisoned for prophesying that Judah would fall to Babylon, when things were looking dark ... and the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah and said, “Buy a field.” God says there is a future for Judah, that He has plans for His people. His word is a warning against being too pessimistic, empty of all faith, and to see current hard-ships as being temporary.

In chapter 33, God promises to heal His people, to cleanse them from every sin they have committed, to return them from captivity and to rebuild the nation.

Then this city will bring Me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it. (33:9)

There’s lots more we could say about the longest book in the Bible ... in terms of the number of words ... but let’s grab some conclusions and applications to close it off.

1. Hebrews tells us that the ones God loves He disciplines. There are things we learn from going through hard times that we would never learn otherwise. There are things we have to learn here on earth if we are going to be ready for heaven. Don’t get discouraged by challenging circumstances, but ask God what He wants you to get out of the difficulties. Don’t think that the reality of struggle means that God isn’t with you, or that He doesn’t love you. Be as positive and full of faith as you can be about every challenge you face in life, because you will be sure to grow from them.

2. We, above all people, should be a people of hope. We have the promises of God that He will restore, that He will bring blessing, that He will rebuild what has been broken down and that He will plant new life all around us. We’re so much of the mind that if we can’t see the evidence of all this happening right now, it must mean that the promise isn’t for us, or that we failed to take hold of it, or that God has changed His mind about blessing those who love Him. We have to recognize our own impatience and resolve to wait for the Lord, to continue to trust in Him, and to believe that He will use our faith as part of His redeeming acts on earth. He’s for us, not against us. He will bring light into the darkness, hope to those who have no hope and life to those whose daily existence is walked out in the shadow of death.

3. Jeremiah was a young man who loved God’s word and was eager to serve ... he just wasn’t always excited about having to serve in a way that caused people to hate him or try to kill him. Be ready if God asks you to do hard things for His sake. Don’t

reject that calling, but allow God to show Himself faithful to you in the midst of it.