

Jeremiah

"Gird up thy loins! Arise and speak! Be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them"—Jer. 1:17.

Jeremiah's life is one of the loneliest and saddest in Scripture. His personal experiences were bitter; the message of disaster he had to proclaim was depressing and unwelcome; and the times in which he lived were of unparalleled national calamity.

His efforts were foredoomed to failure. It was a lost cause from the beginning. He was everywhere hated and misunderstood. While intensely loving and grieving for his countrymen and his nation, he was despised and persecuted as an enemy and a traitor.

But amidst all this background of thick gloom, there shines—in a few chapters in the center of the book—the glorious picture of the eternal Kingdom of Righteousness that will finally triumph, and in which this rejected prophet will have an honored part:

and "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise up unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper and execute judgment and justice IN THE EARTH.

"In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely."

"He that scattered Israel shall gather him, and keep him as a shepherd doth his flock."

Jeremiah was born in the closing years of the long, evil reign of Manasseh. This king's reign sealed the doom of the kingdom and brought to an end God's much-tried longsuffering and patience. Jeremiah records in ch. 15:

"I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for all that which he did in Jerusalem . . . I am weary with repenting."

The evil Manasseh was born during the 15 years that were added to Hezekiah's life when he pleaded with God. Far better for Hezekiah and for Israel if Hezekiah had submitted to God's wisdom and gone to his rest with his glorious record of faith un-sullied, as God in His mercy had planned!

Jeremiah begins his ministry in the reign of the good king Josiah. It was a bright, brief interlude of righteousness—but it did not last. Josiah began to reign when he was 8. When he was 16 he dedicated himself to serve God, and when he was 20 he set about purging Judah from all their wickedness and idolatry.

Jeremiah began his ministry in the next year—the 13th of Josiah's reign. Jeremiah would be about the same age as Josiah—about 20. It is truly a touching picture of these 2 young men—king and prophet—laboring to turn the nation to righteousness as the smoldering judgments of God hovered over the land, just as 2 young men, a prophet and a king—John and Jesus—did in the days of the nation's final judgment.

It is notable that Jeremiah's ministry began just 40 years before the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple by the Babylonians. We remember that Jesus began *his* ministry just 40 years before the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple by the *Romans*. In each case, a 40-year period of final probation was given the city.

Jeremiah's mission was to witness for God against apostate and worldly Israel. The Jews today still jealously preserve and revere the prophecy of Jeremiah, though it contains their condemnation as a nation, and the record of God's pleading in vain with them to turn and be saved.

Jeremiah's work was not only as a witness of condemnation. It had a far more glorious purpose. *It was to encourage and strengthen the scattered, faithful remnant*—of his own day and of all ages since. And in this sad time of present crisis for the Truth, its message of comfort has great and sustaining power.

When the terrible judgments came, it would appear that God had completely repudiated Israel, and that all hope was gone. But the lonely prophet with his message of eventual glory was a symbol that God was still concerned with them though they were unfaithful, and his prophecies gave comforting assurance that those who held fast would never be forgotten, and that though these dreadful evils were to come, still the latter end would be blessing and peace.

The name Jeremiah has become in the world proverbial for a kill-joy, for one who foresees only doom and disaster. But we know Jeremiah better than that. The world hates those who call attention to its wickedness and folly, and who raise their voice to warn of the judgments that will come upon it.

The Jews of Jeremiah's day are typical of human nature everywhere. Though they recognised that he was sent by God, still they blindly hated him for his faithful testimony, and resented his forebodings of disaster.

* * *

The world powers at the beginning of Jeremiah's time were Assyria and Egypt, but during his ministry the Assyrian Empire was completely obliterated and its mighty and splendid capital Nineveh—long the wonder and terror of the whole earth—was levelled to the ground so completely that it was soon forgotten and lost, and only in modern times have the ruins of Nineveh been found and identified.

And during Jeremiah's span, Egypt was cast down from its age-old pre-eminence and has ever since been a base kingdom, enslaved and ruled by foreigners.

Jeremiah's day marked the beginning of the great image of Nebuchadnezzar—the kingdom of men—*just now running out*.

Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of Judah's last 5 kings—Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. (The chapters of the book of Jeremiah are not in chronological order—unless this is noted and effort is made to get the right sequence of events, it will be quite confusing to attempt to place these various kings in relation to each other.)

When the zealous young men Josiah and Jeremiah set out together to bring Israel back to God, the picture looked very promising. In cleaning up the Temple (which during Manasseh's long evil reign had become broken-down and neglected) there was found the Book of the Law. It is hard to realize that the Book of the Law had been so completely forgotten that Josiah, though seeking God, was unaware of its contents. How impressive is the lesson that this could happen in one generation!

This was 6 years after he had begun his great reformation, and still when this Book was discovered and read to him, he rent his clothes and sent in haste to enquire of God what should be done to avert the evils therein prophesied.

God's answer to Josiah was that *it was now too late!* The evils were on their way and could not be turned aside—but because he was faithful and God-fearing it would not come in his day. It is testified of Josiah that—

"All his days the children of Israel departed not from following the Lord."

What a wonderful tribute! *What better record could any man leave behind him than that?*—that all his days his zeal and example and influence were such that he had kept his people wholly in the right way!

As a result of finding the Book of the Law, Josiah kept a great Passover in Jerusalem—the greatest and most solemn Passover since the days of Samuel. *Did the people who flocked to that celebration realize that this was the end?*

They had received—and taken for granted—God's forbearance and mercy for so long. But this Passover was terribly ominous in its seeming peacefulness and sense of endless blessing. God had always been there to welcome and forgive whenever Israel tired of sin and its consequences.

But this Passover was different, as time was soon to prove. It was the final burst of divine glory and witness before the long Gentile night closed down on them. They partook of this feast all unheeding that they were on the brink of the chasm into which they soon were to be cast.

The providential finding of the Book of the Law, the provision of a righteous king and a faithful prophet, and this great Passover—all these combined to make God's last great manifestation of mercy to them before their impending national destruction.

But all this had no permanent effect. They *seemed* very enthusiastic and sincere while Josiah lived, but it was all on the surface, it did not reach to the transforming of their heart. They were still just ordinary human people, like the countless millions that have come and gone. Though there was a great show of piety, *they failed to make contact with the Spirit of Life.*

Thirteen years after this Passover, Josiah met his death in a strange and tragic way. He was still only 39. What caused Josiah to go out against the host of Egypt, and to persist in joining battle with Pharaoh even when the latter warned him away and assured him that he had no quarrel with him? It is very hard to fathom.

The record strongly gives the impression that God was warning Josiah through Pharaoh. This, too, is very strange—but perhaps in keeping with the circumstances. We wonder why such a man as Josiah would not seek counsel of God before setting out to defeat a great empire. But there are other cases of very good men neglecting to follow divine guidance in matters of great importance and, while well-meaning, bringing themselves and others much trouble.

The incident seems to come under the heading of a tragic mistake, rather than a sin. Pharaoh had entered God's land (though just to pass through) and Josiah, strong in faith, went out to oppose the invader. But God did not desire him at that time to set out to conquer his mighty neighbors. The defeat of Egypt by Judah did not fit into God's purpose. But apparently the time had come for Josiah to be removed, so the determined course of history could proceed.

It is recorded that Jeremiah lamented for Josiah. Well he might, for he above all would realize that with Josiah's death the last curtain fell on the happiness and wellbeing of Judah. *The nation now had 23 appointed years of existence left—and they were to be a terrible 23 years.*

The most prominent part of Jeremiah's ministry now begins. We know little of his life up to this time, but now he finds himself at increasing variance with his nation and its rulers as they plunge down the path of destruction.

All Josiah's reforms and arrangements were soon swept away, and the illusion of national righteousness that had been maintained by the power of the king's zeal and influence dissolved before the ugly realities of hatred and bitterness.

The people made Jehoahaz, Josiah's son, king—but he lasted only 3 months. The king of Egypt took him prisoner and set up his brother Jehoiakim in his stead. A heathen presumed to designate the ruler of God's Kingdom! But Egypt was to pay dearly for this presumption. Foreigners were to set up *her* rulers (Eze. 30:13) *and so it has been for over 2000 years.*

Jehoiakim reigned 11 years, and Jeremiah had much to do with this ungodly man. In the first year of his reign Jeremiah was commanded to stand in the court of the Temple and proclaim to all the people that came to worship, that unless they put away their wickedness God would make the Temple a desolation and the city a curse to all the nations of the earth.

Exactly the same charges were brought against Jeremiah by the priests and false prophets as were brought against Christ—that he had spoken against and threatened the Temple of God. They said: "*Thou shalt surely die.*" But at this time the princes and people saved him from the priests, for in God's purpose he had much work yet to do. This was just one year after Josiah's death—the first year of Jehoiakim.

In the 4th & 5th years of Jehoiakim a very significant chain of events occurred—one of the great turning points of history. We are told in Jer. 25 that the 4th year of Jehoiakim was the *first year of Nebuchadnezzar*. (This, incidentally, is a very important connecting link between scriptural and profane history.)

In indication of the great change in God's relationship to Judah, Jeremiah proclaims to the nation that he has now warned them for 23 years and that they have not hearkened, and that consequently the long-foretold evil is about to begin. *Judah has now 18 years.*

It is at this time that the Spirit reveals through Jeremiah that the captivity by Babylon will last 70 years. At the same time, Jeremiah is commanded to write all his prophecies in a book, and to have it read before all the people as a solemn witness.

This was completed in Jehoiakim's 5th year. The book was publicly read as commanded, and the princes who heard it immediately took the matter before the king, and began to read it to him. When 3 or 4 columns had been read, the king seized the book, cut it with a knife, and threw it into the fire.

That was the point at which the nation's doom was finally sealed. That event ranks in significance with the rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah. "His blood be upon us and upon our children," they cried, as the Living Word was cut asunder, and he was cast into the sacrificial fire. Jeremiah records with sadness and wonder that—when the roll of God's holy Word was derisively cut and burned—

"Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king nor any of his servants that heard all these words."

At the same time, in this 5th year of Jehoiakim, which was the 2nd year of Nebuchadnezzar, another event of immense importance took place which—though a long way away and under very different circumstances and surroundings—we can see was directly connected with, and dependent upon, this final appeal and witness by God, and His rejection by the Israelitish nation.

As Israel was rejecting God, God was revealing to an alien that He was rejecting Israel—that the Kingdom of God was to be cast down, and the Kingdom of Men was to be given unrestricted sway for *seven times*—2520 long, evil years.

For it was in this fateful year, we are told, that Nebuchadnezzar received his dream of the great and terrible Image, and he is told that it represents the Kingdom of Men that is to rule the world

(with violence, bloodshed and lust) until God's rejected Kingdom is re-established. Measuring from this event (604 BC), it was *exactly 2520 years to 1917, when the last desolator was driven out.*

Because of the proclamation of Jeremiah's book of prophecy, Jehoiakim sought to seize Jeremiah, but it is recorded that "the Lord hid him." He was commanded to write the book again, and to "*add many words unto it.*"

More evils were included because of Jehoiakim's insolent rejection. Among them may well have been the prediction that this king—of all the long line of mostly evil kings—should have the crowning indignity of the burial of an ass, his body cast out to abuse and insult.

Jehoiakim doubtless felt that he was quite a hero in daring to flaunt the Word of God, as is the custom of modern thought today. But God is not mocked, and the final end of the matter will show where wisdom lies.

All who reject God's Word will suffer the same end—the *burial of an ass*, or, as David expresses it:

"Like sheep are they laid in the grave. Death shall feed on them, and the righteous shall have dominion over them in the morning."

We can afford to wait in patience, seeking humbly to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. Popular ideas of *manliness* are the direct opposite of *godliness*.

Now that this final written testimony of God has been nationally rejected, a new phase begins. Jeremiah is commanded to *keep himself separate from this people*, as a witness of their rejection. He is forbidden to join with them either in mourning or in feasting. He found himself in the same isolated position as the faithful find themselves in the world today.

Much contention may stir up such feeling as to defeat its own purpose. But a silent, consistent, public course of action is a continual reminder that may eventually provoke sober thought, and accomplish good. God often used the personal lives of the prophets in this way—living examples and object lessons.

Like Jeremiah, God's people today are required to manifest a striking difference in their lives from the surrounding world, so that they will be unmistakable beacon-lights of Truth.

Jeremiah was forbidden by God to marry. To the natural mind it may seem hard and unfair to impose this restriction on a faithful man through no fault of his own, but wisdom will realize that all pleasures and comforts are from God and He will surely see that none of His obedient servants will ever lose out because of their obedience.

There was no fatted calf in Jeremiah's life to make merry with his friends, but he was among that few who live close to God and of whom it is transcendently true that "*Thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.*" There was a deeper and more satisfying bond between Jeremiah and God than could ever be conceived of in the natural relationships of human beings.