

Jeremiah's Life & Work

Gary C. Kerr

Introduction and Background:

- I. Jeremiah prophesied in a time of great turmoil, from the decline of the Assyrian empire, through a brief period of Egypt's attempt at empire, through the ascendance of Babylon as the dominant empire.
 - A. The turmoil of these times and Judah's futile attempt to survive as an independent nation serve as the political context of Jeremiah's message.
 - B. However, his message is for Judah itself, in its infidelity to the covenant with God, and the inevitable destruction and exile to come because they had broken the covenant.
 - C. After these terrible events come to pass, Jeremiah provides messages of consolation and hope of restoration, with God's great promise of a new covenant.
- II. Jeremiah is almost universally known as "***The Weeping Prophet***" (also the "*reluctant prophet*," and the "*prophet of doom*") for the anguish and distress of God that he feels and communicates, as well as his own pain and depression because of how his message is received.
- III. My specific assignment is to "discuss Jeremiah's life and work as a model for our lives and work as we try to proclaim both '*the goodness and the severity of God*' (Rom. 11:22)."

Body

I. Jeremiah's Background.

- A. There is much conjecture and disagreement among scholars as to the exact meaning of the name *Jeremiah*.
 1. A name was more than just what to call a person; in Scripture, it very often captured the meaning and destiny of a person.
 2. Some suggested possibilities include:
 - a. The LORD will restore.
 - b. Yahweh shall exalt / lift up.
 - c. Yahweh loosens.
 - d. Jehovah throws or casts down.
 - e. The Lord establishes.
 - f. The Lord sends.
 - g. Whom Jehovah appoints.
- B. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family.
 1. He was the son of Hilkiah, of the priests of Anathoth (1:1).
 2. Anathoth was a village about three miles' northeast of Jerusalem; it would have taken about an hour to walk to Jerusalem.
 3. It was one of the forty-eight Levitical cities set apart for the descendants of Aaron (Joshua 21:18).
 4. Some think it possible that Jeremiah may have served as a priest.

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- a. At the very least his images are often priestly:
 - 1) The budding almond branch (1:11-12) calls to mind the budding staff of Aaron, a symbol of priesthood;
 - 2) The boiling pot (1:13) could have reflected the priest's duties of cooking some of the sacrificed meat;
 - 3) The baskets of figs (chapter 24) would have been received as a tithe.
 - b. While Jeremiah uses priestly images, he is not as focused on Mt. Zion and the Temple as was Isaiah a century earlier.
- C. Jeremiah lived during the most crucial period of Judah's existence as a kingdom.
1. He was called to the work of a prophet during the 13th year of the reign of Judah's last good king, Josiah (627 B.C.), about 100 years after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians.
 2. He witnessed the sweeping reforms of Josiah.
 - a. He repaired the temple (2 Chron. 34:8-13).
 - b. The *Book of the Law of Moses* was discovered (2 Ki. 22:8-10; 2 Chr. 34:15-18).
 - c. After inquiring of one of Jeremiah's contemporaries, the prophetess Huldah, concerning the validity of the law and its curses (2 Ki. 22:14-20; 2 Chr. 34:22-28), he required the people to conform, and made a covenant sealing his own personal intentions to walk in the ways of God (2 Ki. 23:1-3; 2 Chr. 34:29-32).
 - d. In the 18th year of his reign, the Passover was kept (2 Ki. 23:23; 2 Chron. 35:19).
 - e. He "*defiled Topheth, which is the Valley of the Son of Hinnom,*" where the worship of Molech (child sacrifice) was practiced (2 Kings 23:10).
 - f. He vigorously enforced the proper and true worship of God.
 3. Josiah was a true reformer, but his glorious and godly reign came to an ominous end in the 31st year of his reign in 609 B.C. when he tried to stop the advance of Pharaoh Necho of Egypt.
 - a. He was slain in battle at Megiddo, and his body was carried back to Jerusalem where he was buried in his own tomb (2 Ki. 23:29-30; 2 Chron. 35:20-25).
 - b. Jeremiah knew very well that with the untimely passing of this last godly king, the end of Judah as an independent nation was unavoidable.
 - c. Indeed, after Josiah's death the people soon reverted to idolatry, and Jeremiah was left to attempt to stem the tide of spiritual depravity which was threatening to undermine the nation.
 4. Jeremiah's prophetic work continued through the reigns of four more kings in Judah.
 - a. Jehoahaz (3 months).
 - b. Jehoiakim (11 years).
 - c. Jehoiachin (3 months).
 - d. Zedekiah (11 years).
 5. He saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple (586 B.C.), after he had persistently warned God's people to repent before it was too late.
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- a. He witnessed the carrying away of most of the citizens of Judah into Babylonian captivity.
 - b. When the catastrophe finally overwhelmed Judah, he was the one who bitterly lamented Israel's terrible fate in the Book of Lamentations.
 - c. At the same time, he proved to be a true friend in need, by helping his stricken people to bear the blow with courage and dignity, and by pointing out to them the path that would lead to restoration and redemption.
6. Jeremiah himself was taken to Egypt by fugitives from Judah where he died, according to legend, a martyr's death—stoned by the very people he tried so hard for so long to save!

II. Jeremiah's Message.

- A. Jeremiah's call to the office of prophet gives an outline by which we can learn something about his primary message.
1. Called as a young man (1:6-7).
 2. Told he would be opposed (1:19).
 3. Forbidden to marry, mourn, feast, pray (16:1-9; 7:16; 11:14).
 4. Citizens of his own hometown tried to kill him (11:18 – 12:6).
 5. Officials in Jerusalem tried to kill him (26:10-11).
 6. Other instances of Jeremiah's suffering because of the message he preached:
 - a. He was confronted by false prophets (14:13);
 - b. He was cursed (15:10);
 - c. He was smitten, put in stocks and denounced (20:1ff);
 - d. His teaching was vehemently opposed (28:1ff and 29:1ff);
 - e. He was imprisoned (32:2,3);
 - f. He was beaten and imprisoned (37:15);
 - g. He was thrown into a dungeon (38:6);
 - h. He was bound in chains (40:1);
 - i. He was falsely accused (43:2);
 7. His ministry spanned a period of 40-plus years.
- B. His mission was to carry a message from God to the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem.
1. God leveled three charges against them (1:16):
 - a. They had forsaken God.
 - b. They had made offerings to other gods.
 - c. They had worshiped the works of their own hands.
 2. Through Jeremiah, God urged Judah to repent, and showed her that there was no excuse for her sins (cf. 2:36; 3:6,7,14; 5:1-6,8,28,31; 6:13-16)

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- C. Jeremiah's mission and work is summed up in 1:10—he was called “*to pluck up, break down, destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant*”—this message can be broadly summed up under four general headings.
1. **Condemnation.**
 - a. God had revealed Himself & His will to His people, but they forsook Him and walked in their own ways.
 - b. Sin must be punished (6:9-13; 21:7; 25:11).
 - c. It was a death sentence (15:2-3).
 - d. On a number of occasions, Jeremiah spoke of “*famine, pestilence, and sword,*” terrors that he saw coming and over which he anguished (4:19-22).
 - e. Jeremiah compared the coming destruction to the undoing of the Creation (4:23-28).
 - f. The deaths of many would symbolize the failure of Judah and Jerusalem's false gods to save them (8:1-2).
 2. **Invitation.**
 - a. Repentance brings a blessing; the people were called to mend their ways (7:3; 18:7-10).
 - b. Not all within Judah were guilty, and there were some who would listen to Jeremiah.
 - c. Anyone who knew the Lord and knew Jeremiah to be His spokesman had options that led to safety during those trying times (21:8-10).
 - 1) This is not to say that safety meant life as usual, or that it did not mean suffering.
 - 2) Anyone who believed Jeremiah's message had freedom to leave the city and become the captives of the Chaldeans.
 - 3) This, of course, meant exile and the loss of home, but it was a path of hope for those who took it.
 - d. King Zedekiah ignored this message of hope (38:17-18).
 - e. The bottom line in Jerusalem was that nobody had to suffer “*famine, pestilence, and sword.*”
 - f. Such words branded Jeremiah as a traitor, and several tried to take his life, but Nebuchadnezzar treated Jeremiah favorably.
 3. **Consolation.**
 - a. Glory will follow the doom.
 - b. Judah will be restored after 70 years.
 - c. Glimpses of the coming Messiah (30-33).
 4. **A message to encourage the first two groups of exiles!**
 - a. Two times before the fall of Jerusalem (605 & 597 B.C.), Nebuchadnezzar took captives from Jerusalem and Judah.
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- b. God used these first two waves to prepare homes and a reception for the final devastated group at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's Jerusalem campaign.
 - c. Jeremiah's words to these exiles, in the form of letters, was in stark contrast to his words to the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem.
 - d. These letters were full of hope, promise, and encouragement (cf. 29:4-14).
- D. Jeremiah was especially adept at using figures of speech and symbolic behavior to drive home his points—the following list is not exhaustive.
1. The wearing, burial, and retrieval of a linen waistband (13:1-11).
 2. He observed a potter mar a piece of clay, and then reshape it into a perfect vessel, applying this to Judah to submit herself to God to reshape her (18:1-11).
 3. The acquisition of a clay jug and the breaking of the jug in front of the religious leaders of Jerusalem (19:1-13).
 4. The wearing of an oxen yoke and its subsequent breaking by a false prophet, Hananiah (27 - 28).
 5. The purchase of a field in his hometown of Anathoth for the price of seventeen silver shekels (32:6-15).
- E. Jeremiah sometimes resists the call to preach this very challenging and *negative* message, complaining to God about the misery and the rejection by the people who remained hard-hearted.
1. Jeremiah loved his country and his people, and he did not want them to have to endure the catastrophe to come.
 2. There are strong notes of anguish and melancholy, as well as anger and wrath communicated by Jeremiah.
 3. The reader gets some feeling of the dilemma of the prophet, who must accept the call, and yet is overwhelmed by the experience and responsibility of it (20:7; more on this passage later).
- F. In summary, Jeremiah had an extremely difficult prophetic calling in a time of turmoil in the nation of Judah, and the struggle of empires to ascend and dominate.
1. He suffered intensely because of the message he came to deliver, as God used him as a teacher and guide for the days of woe and catastrophe.
 2. Jeremiah never saw gratitude for his work.
 - a. While all the other prophets were prophesying of peace and prosperity, he spoke of war, captivity, and death (6:13-14).
 - b. Yet, he knew that he was doing the Lord's work, and no matter how unpleasant it was, he could not abandon it.
 - c. There was a "*fire in [his] bones*" and he could not hold back (20:7-9).
 3. He is also a prophet of hope in God's fidelity to Judah, with a message that there would be a purification and restoration, and better days ahead.
 4. Recalling Israel's earliest history as a nation, when, full of faith, the people had followed Moses into the desert, Jeremiah pictures Israel's loyalty to God as that of a
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newly-wedded bride to her husband (3:1-5), and wonders what has happened to his people that they have turned away from God.

5. He sadly decries Israel's ingratitude and faithlessness and warns them that it spells their doom (2:2-7,13; see also 7:34).
6. All of Jeremiah's suffering will result from the fact that the people of Judah rejected his message—they didn't like the message, so they took out their frustration on the messenger!

III. Lessons From Jeremiah For God's Messengers In The World Today.

- A. For just a moment, imagine that you are in Jeremiah's place.
 1. Called by God to preach to a corrupt nation.
 2. Assured before you even begin that those to whom you preach will not only reject your message, they will physically assault you for daring to preach it!
 3. How would you feel if you learned that the citizens of your own hometown—neighbors and kinfolk—were plotting against your life?
 4. Do any of us seriously doubt that we are living in a world—and more specifically in a nation—that is a “twin” of Judah in so many bad ways?
- B. Jeremiah prophesied during the tragic period of Jerusalem's decline leading up to the inescapable destruction by the Babylonians.
- C. Jeremiah denounced the Jews for forsaking God and His Law and turning to idolatry, and he called upon the people to surrender to Babylon and accept God's punishment for their sins,
 1. For which he was viewed as a traitor.
 2. Even though he spoke of the destruction of the Jewish nation, he emphasized the temporary nature of the destruction and looked to the return of the Jews to their land.
 3. Jeremiah must have had a “bad” reputation among the people to whom he preached because of what would certainly have been viewed as “negative” preaching.
- D. As a result, on more than one occasion, Jeremiah was so discouraged that he was tempted to quit his unpopular work of proclaiming God's message.
 1. *“O that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them!”* (9:2)
 2. *“Righteous are you, O LORD, when I complain to you; yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”* (12:1)
 3. *“If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”* (20:9)
- E. How can a man such as Jeremiah endure being despised, rejected, hated and persecuted?
- F. I would suggest that we consider the following **five** qualities found in the life of Jeremiah.
 1. Qualities which made it possible for him to endure these adverse circumstances.
 2. Qualities that can help us deal with challenging and difficult circumstances that arise in our work of proclaiming God's message to the lost and to the saved.

G. Jeremiah the man—*his character*.

1. **Jeremiah was a sensitive man—a man of tears.** (4:19-20; 9:1-2)

- a. “He was of a sensitive nature, mild, timid, and inclined to melancholy...He was uncommonly bold and courageous, although it was unpopular and subjected him to hatred and even to suffering wrong ... He is also called the weeping prophet.” (Tidwell, p. 118)
- b. He describes himself as the “*man who has seen affliction*” (Lamentations 3:1).
- c. He stood like a solid rock outwardly but inwardly his heart was breaking for God's people.
- d. Pride was one of the sins that was a problem in Judah (13:9).
 - 1) This text includes the story of the marred girdle.
 - 2) Notice Jeremiah's reaction — “*But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive.*” (13:17)
- e. False prophets were deceiving the people (14:13-14).
 - 1) God would judge the people for believing them.
 - 2) Notice Jeremiah's reaction — “*Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter of my people is shattered with a great wound, with a very grievous blow.*” (14:17)
- f. Do the sins of other—especially our brethren—move us to tears?

2. **Jeremiah was a man of sympathy.**

- a. He knew what it meant to be persecuted and rejected, and much of the time he was dejected and lonely (cf. 15:10,15-18).
- b. He was not allowed to marry and have a family, although God had done this to spare him further grief (16:3-4).
- c. His heart was heavy and his eyes filled with tears as he preached the message of doom for his beloved people and his land (4:19; 8:18-22).
- d. Being sympathetic to the hard times of others helps us in our hard times.

3. **Jeremiah was a man of courage.**

- a. He could face life with confidence that God was with him (1:17-19).
- b. He did not give in at the threat of his own life—even when sorely tempted to do so—because he stood courageously with God.

4. **Jeremiah had overwhelming and unshakable faith and conviction in God.**

- a. He had been called of God and spoke God's word (1:4-5).
- b. His message was a message of doom but he was also a man of hope.
- c. When Jerusalem was besieged, Jeremiah demonstrated great faith in God by buying a field (32).
- d. He could see beyond the immediate hardships to the ultimate return and restoration of Israel (16:14; 32:37).

- e. We also must look beyond troubles with faith and conviction in the God of heaven.

5. **Jeremiah was a man of prayer.**

- a. Jeremiah obviously knew that doom and destruction were coming, and he felt totally helpless (6:11, 24).
- b. He called on the people to repent, to no avail.
- c. Even though he could not convince them to repent, there was one thing he could do, and that was pray.
- d. And we know that prayer was, indeed, a vital part of Jeremiah's "defense mechanism" to deal with discouragement and persecution.
- e. Prayer must have been an important part of his life, because at one point God admonishes him to stop (7:16-20).
 - 1) God warned him again, sometime later (11:14), but he continued to pray (14:7-9).
 - 2) God warned him for a third time to stop praying for Judah (14:11-12).
- f. At least 14 times in the book we are told that Jeremiah talked with God—in other words, he prayed (cf. 1:6; 4:10, 19-21, 23-26; 5:3-6; 8:18 – 9:2; 10:19-26; 11:18-20; 12:1-4; 14:7-9, 13, 19-22; 15:10-11, 15-18; 16:19-20; 17:12-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18; 32:16-25).
- g. Not all of these prayers are classic examples of the kind of "sanitized" prayers that often characterize the prayer-life of God's people today.
 - 1) The prayers we have recorded in the book very often reflect Jeremiah's frustration and discouragement.
 - 2) He pours out his frustration, anger, and sometimes even bitterness, in the words he offers to God in prayer.
 - 3) The prayers of Jeremiah reflect feelings of despair, perplexity, vengeance, vindication, pain, and anger.
- h. **Example:** Jeremiah 20:7 (prayed while Jeremiah was being held in stocks as a prisoner, in the 4th year of the reign of Jehoiakim).
 - 1) *"O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me."*
 - 2) Some commentators believe that most modern English Bible translations are weak in the way they translate 20:7.
 - a) The word translated "*deceived*" (Patah) suggests the idea of **deliberate** deception.
 - b) In Exodus 22:15 it is of enticing a woman to engage in pre-nuptial intercourse, but she submits willingly.
 - c) "*Stronger than I*" (ESV; "*overcome*," NASB) is the word *hazak*, which means to submit a woman to extramarital/non-marital intercourse against her will and it is used this way in Deuteronomy 22:25.

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- d) According to Heschel a more accurate translation of Jeremiah 20:7 would be: “*O Lord, Thou has seduced me, and I am seduced; Thou hast **raped** me and I am overcome.*”
 - e) Paraphrase: “God, you have deliberately deceived me, and have overpowered me and had your way with me!”
 - f) The word translated “*prevailed*” is used in Judges 16:5 (where the word *patah* also appears) to show what the Philistines intended to do to Samson—overpower him and render him helpless.
- 3) This powerful statement clearly shows Jeremiah’s sense of being enticed and overpowered.
 - 4) Ray Stedman says about this cry that it “is on the verge of blasphemy!”
- i. **Point**: Jeremiah did not take out his pain, his anger, his frustrations, his bitterness, on the people to whom he was preaching—he poured out his heart to God in prayer!
 - j. Lessons for us from the examples of Jeremiah’s prayers.
 - 1) The importance of *frequency* in prayer.
 - 2) The importance of *intensity* in prayer.
 - 3) The importance of *honesty* in prayer.
- H. May God help us in the work we do that we might be able to develop these qualities in our own lives: *Sensitivity; Sympathy; Courage; Faith and Conviction; and Prayer.*

Conclusion.

- I. The life of the prophet *Jeremiah* should be an inspiration to all Christians today, but perhaps especially to those of us—**elders and preachers**—who undertake to do the same work of preaching and teaching God’s message of repentance to a lost and dying world!
- II. God gave Jeremiah a job to do.
 - A. He did it, in spite of enormous obstacles.
 - B. Just like Peter and John did many years later (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).
 - C. He kept on doing it even when he desperately wanted to quit.
- III. May God strengthen our hands to have the same faith and courage as we take His message into the world today!

Gary Kerr
 1732 Kenilwood Way
 Bowling Green, KY, 42104-4777
 gary.kerr@mightyisthelord.com

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**All Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (2011 edition) unless otherwise noted in the text.*

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