

## What's the Message – Lesson 73

Today we begin our study of Jeremiah, God's prophet to Judah during the time of its decline and captivity.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Almighty God, merciful Father, in your great power you have awakened from the dead our promised Messiah, your Suffering Servant. Grant us now, through your Holy Spirit, that we will hear His voice, trust Him, and follow where He leads. Amen.

Last time we saw some of the highlights of four minor prophets, but today we must move forward and begin our study of the prophet Jeremiah, a man who began his ministry as a youth when Isaiah was already very old. But the younger prophet continued the message of the elder, chastising Judah for turning away from Yahweh.

He introduces himself to us right away in chapter one: *The words of Jeremiah the 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 Joash king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.*

In other words, while Isaiah spoke to Judah during its time of reform and prosperity, Jeremiah ministered during the decline right up to its destruction and exile into captivity. Isaiah does not tell us specifically how old he was when he began his service, but Jeremiah makes it clear he was quite young when the Lord called him. And the commissioning of Jeremiah was very similar to that of Isaiah. As we read in chapter one, verses 4 to 10:

*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. Then the Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah was brutally frank and condemned Judah for their apostasy, as shown in these verses from the second chapter: *Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But My people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the Lord. My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

What greater condemnation can be given Judah than these words in chapter 3, verses 6 – 10: *During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up to every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to Me, but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries.*

*Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but only in pretense,” declares the Lord.*

There is one more example from chapter 5, verse 1 that brings to mind another, much later search. We read: *Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.*” It certainly makes one think of the Greek philosopher Diogenes who, according to tradition, lit a lamp and walked around the market place of Athens one day looking for an honest man.

Teacher, with this background introduction it seems quite clear that Judah had not learned the lesson that Israel had to learn the hard way. It must have been a difficult time for Jeremiah to proclaim the word of God, but what’s the message for us?

Jeremiah also makes it clear that Judah not only disobeyed God, they put their trust in their own abilities and accomplishments. Consider chapter 5, verses 11 and 12: *The house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me, declares the Lord. They have lied about the Lord; they said, “He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine.”* And should we not pay attention to verse 20? *Announce this to the house of Jacob and proclaim it in Judah: Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear: Should you not fear Me? declares the Lord.*

There is still one more point that we want to bring out here. In summary it is the contrast between the external actions of ritual with real repentance. Jeremiah speaks in chapter 7, beginning with verse 1: *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message: “Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.*

*Do not trust in these deceptive words and say, This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord! . . . But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which bears My Name, and say, We are safe – safe to do all these detestable things?”*

What irony! What sarcasm! What pertinent truth – truth that applies to us today just as it did to Judah over two thousand years ago.

We will visit more chapters of Jeremiah next time.