

## What's the Message – Lesson 74

Today we see why Jeremiah is regarded as a man who knew firsthand the sadness of rejection and tragedy.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. As we observe Jeremiah struggle with the conflicts of a rebellious nation and the frustrations of trying to be a shepherd to them, lead us to the recognition that we cannot accomplish anything without Your guidance and help. Amen.

Last time we saw Jeremiah proclaim the house of Jacob to be a foolish and senseless people, a nation that trusted in the visible symbol of the temple in their midst, while at the same time forgetting its purpose. This takes us back to one of the major themes that we learned in our study of Genesis, the theme that material gifts from God are to be used for His purpose. Judah had forgotten that, and had made what was meant to be a means, an end in itself. Such a distortion could not be accepted by God.

But it was their persistence in continuing and extending this distortion that caused Jeremiah the greatest pain. A succession of kings followed their own selfish ways instead of obeying God's law. We can illustrate this with an event that is recorded in chapter 22. Jehoiakim was now the king of Judah, but instead of concentrating on the perilous political situation in which Judah found itself as a pawn between Egypt and Babylon, Jehoiakim decided that his father's palace was not good enough for him and he needed to build a finer one. And because he did not have the funds to pay for its construction, it would be built with forced labor!

As John Bright describes the situation: "This brought from Jeremiah his scathing best. Does that make you a king, he demands, because you fuss about with cedarwood? Then after advising this spoiled young man to consider his own father if he would like to know what really makes a man a king, he sums up the matter by declaring that Jehoiakim will one day be buried with all the honor of a dead donkey – hauled out and dumped on the garbage heap with no one in the least sorry to see him go. Clearly Jeremiah and Jehoiakim were not going to get along."

Jeremiah's life became one of continuous persecution, and it took various forms. There were mocking jeers and ostracism, plots for his assassination, being seized by a temple officer and placed in stocks overnight, and King Jehoiakim listening to a message from Jeremiah, but cutting off each part of the scroll after it was read and burning it. Once a mob (chapter 26), was incited by the clergy of the temple, who said: *This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears.* As John Bright wrote: "Had not certain of the nobles . . . been possessed of the old-fashioned notion that a prophet might not be killed for speaking the Word of God, this would have been the end of Jeremiah."

Before long, the army of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came and put Jerusalem under siege. Jehoiakim conveniently died as prophesied by Jeremiah, and was replaced by his 18-year-old son, Jehoiachin, who took the throne only to formally surrender to the King of Babylon. Whereupon he, along with the royal family, the officers of the court, and the cream of the population were deported to Babylon. This was the first stage of the Babylonian captivity. Then Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiakim's brother, Zedekiah to be the puppet king of Jerusalem.

Zedekiah behaved no better, either in regarding obeying God's Word from Jeremiah or in using good judgment in dealing with Babylon. In a few years his nobles talked him into another revolt, which led the army of Nebuchadnezzar to come again. Zedekiah asked for help from Egypt, and sufficient force was sent to require Babylon to temporarily lift the siege, but the Egyptian army was soon routed, and Jerusalem was under the siege again. Zedekiah attempted to flee, but was captured, placed in chains, blinded, and led away captive. What was left of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the best of the remaining population were taken in a second wave of the Babylonian captivity.

The nation of Israel was no more. The Northern Ten Tribes had previously disappeared, and now Judah entered the sad state of the Babylonian captivity. It was a dark time for the Children of Israel, but we have seen such a history of nations many times before and since. So what does this event mean to us? Teacher, what's the message for us today?

What you have just laid out before us is a truly dark picture, and there have been numerous times in our own world when the future appeared very dark to us. Such are times when we ask if God is still in control, or is there something out there more powerful than Yahweh, something else that we should put our confidence in? Certainly Jeremiah had to deal with a self-confident attitude. Like us they had the Word of God, they had the temple, and they were God's chosen people – so surely no evil could overtake them – and the false prophets repeatedly assured them of this. Don't we often have the same attitude? If military power and economic greatness are not the answer, then what is?

At this point it is well we consider these words of Jeremiah, found in chapter 31, verses 31 through 34: *The time is coming, declares the Lord, 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 . . . 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 all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest . . . For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*

As John Bright writes: “Here we hear of a new Israel, a spiritual Israel to which will one day accord a New Covenant and a new start. It will be an Israel wholly obedient to God's law, not because she has reformed . . . but because the law is within, written on the very heart. Here is a New Covenant which no external obedience can secure, but which is given to a people who have surrendered their hearts to God and received His forgiving grace.”

It is the New Covenant of Jesus.

Next time we shall see more of the troubled side of Jeremiah, a man of sorrows.