

Jeremiah: Prophet of the LORD's Judgment

John Toppe

The life of a true prophet of the LORD is not one of ease. This was especially true of Jeremiah, the LORD's prophet during the last days of Jerusalem. For the sake of the Word of God, he suffered persecution and rejection from his fellow Jews. Yet Jeremiah continued his work for many years because the LORD had prepared him for this work and promised to sustain him in it.

I. Author

We know some basic information about Jeremiah's life. He was from the city of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin, only a few miles from Jerusalem. Jeremiah's father, Hilkiyah, was a priest at Anathoth. Jeremiah's public ministry began, "in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah." It continued "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 Jerusalem went into exile," (1:2-3) (approximately 626-586 B.C.). He spent most of his life lonely, since God had forbidden him to have wife or children (16:1-4).

We have detailed information on Jeremiah's call into the ministry by the LORD (ca.626 B.C.), an event that seems to have occurred early in Jeremiah's life. "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,'" (1:4-5). Jeremiah tried to make excuses for himself and the LORD was quick to promise his blessing on Jeremiah: "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...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," (1:7-10). In his call, God gave Jeremiah the reassurances that he would need later in his ministry when the work became very difficult.

No matter how unpleasant the LORD's work for Jeremiah seemed to the prophet, he had God's absolute assurance of blessing. "'Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the LORD," (1:18-19). So Jeremiah became a zealous prophet for the LORD, bringing the LORD's message of judgment.

When we look at the persecution that Jeremiah endured, we get a picture of him as a faithful prophet of the LORD. In 11:18ff we hear how the men of Anathoth plotted against Jeremiah. Jeremiah was unaware apparently of the extent of their hatred towards him, save that the LORD revealed it to him to protect him from their scheming (and perhaps Jeremiah was aware of their general attitude towards him: "Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands," (11:21)). The people attacked Jeremiah with their words (18:18); he was beaten and put into stocks (20:2); people watched for him to slip up so that they could betray him (20:10); preaching the Word brought him insult (20:8); he was threatened with death for speaking the Word of the LORD (26:8-9); he was imprisoned by the king (32:3); again the people beat him and imprisoned him (37:15); he was even thrown into a muddy cistern (38:6). Although he suffered all these things, Jeremiah could in no way stop proclaiming the Word of the LORD: "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," (20:9). Jeremiah said a similar thought earlier, "But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in," (6:11). Jeremiah was compelled to speak the Word of the LORD—by call, by inner compulsion, by the hand of God upon him. He had to proclaim the message he had been given, and was faithful to his call. "I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair. What passes my lips is open before you," (17:16).

Like all ministers of the Word, Jeremiah experienced both great highs and lows in his life and work. In 15:16 Jeremiah says, “When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.” Then Jeremiah continues, “I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?” (15:17-18). Here Jeremiah was despondent because of what he was suffering for serving the LORD, so that he even accused God of misleading him. Or even more pointedly, Jeremiah complains, “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 you—a son!’ ... Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?” (20:14-15, 18). In this, Jeremiah was all too human. God’s response was one of mercy—Repent, Jeremiah, don’t become like the people but rather turn them, and don’t forget the promises that I have made to you (15:19-21).

An interesting feature of Jeremiah’s ministry is that the LORD on several occasions told him *not* to pray for his people. “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them...” (7:16; 11:14; also 14:11). The LORD said this because of his people’s tremendous wickedness. The Lord was serious about the judgment they had earned, as his words make clear: “I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them,” (13:14b). Israel’s willful persistence in sin thoroughly condemned them before God. This does not negate the fact that God also shows great mercy on the undeserving. Yet God was going to use Babylon to punish many of his chosen people for their faithlessness to him.

Yet Jeremiah spoke out for his people, for his heart was moved by the judgment he saw before him. “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people,” (8:21-9:1). As well-earned as God’s judgment was, Jeremiah felt deep compassion for his people, and they rewarded his love with rejection and death threats. Although it pained him, still Jeremiah brought to the people the message of the LORD, that judgment was coming soon.

We hear of only one faithful companion to Jeremiah, his scribe Baruch. When Jeremiah was imprisoned or otherwise unable to function publicly, Baruch served as his spokesman. Baruch also had God’s promise of protection, as the LORD said, “wherever you go I will let you escape with your life,” (45:5).

II. Political scene

As with the other prophets, an understanding of the historical context of a prophet helps to understand the prophet’s message. Jeremiah’s work spanned many years and he outlasted several kings. A brief survey of the political scene is in order.

Josiah (II Chronicles 34-36:1)

Josiah was the last godly king in Judah. He came to power in 640 B.C. as a young child. During his reign he reformed the Temple and its worship. The Book of the Law was rediscovered during these reforms, but unfortunately Josiah’s successors undid much of the good he accomplished. Josiah was killed in battle with Pharaoh Necho of Egypt at Megiddo in 609 B.C.

Jehoahaz (Shallum) (II Chronicles 36:2-4)

This son of Josiah was king only a short time in 609 B.C. before Necho took him into exile where he died. II Kings 23 says that, “he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his fathers had done,” (v.32). Jeremiah recorded the LORD’s judgment on Jehoahaz: “He will never return. He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again,” (22:11-12).

Jehoiakim (Eliakim) (II Chronicles 36:5-8)

Jehoiakim was also a son of Josiah, but very opposite his father in character. II Chronicles says of him that “he did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God,” (36:5). Nevertheless the LORD let him rule for

some 11 years. He was installed as a puppet of Pharaoh but changed allegiance to Babylon when it appeared that Egypt was weak. Later his treachery towards Nebuchadnezzar led to his arrest, although he died before being exiled. Jehoiakim's attitude toward Jeremiah is clearly seen in chapter 36, where he burned up piece by piece the scroll of Jeremiah's words, thus showing again how he did not have his father's attitude toward the Word of God. The LORD's response to the scroll burning and Jehoiakim's unbelief was to say, "He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night.¹ I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened," (36:30-31). Jeremiah had to fear for his life during Jehoiakim's reign. It was also at this time that Judah fell under the control of Babylon and the first Jews were taken into captivity.

Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) (II Chronicles 36:9-10)

Like his father Jehoiakim before him, Jehoiachin did evil in the sight of the LORD. The LORD had harsh words for Jehoiachin, saying, "'As surely as I live,' declares the LORD, 'even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. I will hand you over to those who seek your life, those you fear—to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to the Babylonians... You will never come back to the land you long to return to,'" (22:24,25,27). Jehoiachin ruled only a few months in 597 B.C. before his faithlessness toward Nebuchadnezzar led to deportation.

There is a two-fold happy ending to the story of Jehoiachin, however. Chapter 52 tells how after 37 years of exile and a change of power in Babylon to Evil-Merodach, Jehoiachin was released from prison and was treated with honor, eating at the king's table and receiving a regular allowance until he died (vv. 31-34). But the other happy ending occurs 600 years later. In his genealogy of Jesus, Matthew records one Jeconiah who was the father of Shealtiel (1:11). The genealogical lists of I Chronicles identify Jeconiah as Jehoiachin, father of Shealtiel (3:17). So the LORD showed this evil king tremendous mercy and blessing, and made him an ancestor of the Savior.²

Zedekiah (Mattaniah) (II Chronicles 36:11-14)

After taking Jehoiachin captive, Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah, also a son of Josiah, king. Zedekiah was a weak king who sometimes persecuted Jeremiah. At other times, he gave his officials a free hand to abuse the prophet. Zedekiah often looked to Egypt for help, a strategy that Jeremiah warned was contrary to the LORD's will. Zedekiah turned to the LORD as a last resort "magic weapon." In chapter 21 we hear Zedekiah's request to Jeremiah, "Inquire now of the LORD for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us," (v.2). He was finally taken prisoner in 587/586 B.C. by the Babylonians who killed his sons in front of him before putting out his eyes. Zedekiah spent the remaining years of his life in a Babylonian prison.

Post-Zedekiah

Nebuchadnezzar made Gedaliah, an Israelite of non-royal blood, governor over Judah. However, a few months later Ishmael, who was of royal blood, assassinated him. Ishmael, in turn, was driven out of the land by Johanan, a military officer. Despite Jeremiah's words to the contrary, Johanan led a large group of Jews, including Jeremiah, down to Egypt to flee Nebuchadnezzar. This was a futile effort to escape the Babylonians since they later reached Egypt and punished the Israelites just as the LORD warned, (42:13-18).

Babylon/Nebuchadnezzar

¹ Or as the LORD says more vividly in 22:19, "He will have the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem."

² It is interesting in connection with these blessings to note the words of the LORD concerning Jehoiachin. Jer. 22:30: "Record this man as childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah." The word "as" helps to clarify what is meant: Jehoiachin had seven children, but none of them served as king on David's throne.

Babylon was the new empire in the Near-Eastern world. Nabopolassar had successfully rebelled against Assyria, and now Nebuchadnezzar his son was working on a perennial trouble spot—Judah. He destroyed the power of Egypt by defeating them in 605 B.C. at Carchemish and in the same year also besieged Jerusalem for the first time, returning in 598/597 B.C. Finally he captured Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Interestingly, Nebuchadnezzar treated Jeremiah very well. Nebuzaradan, commander of the royal guard, took good care of Jeremiah, even finding him among the exiles and personally freeing him, (40:1-6). Nevertheless, because they ruthlessly destroyed Jerusalem and Judah, the LORD was going to bring judgment on Babylon, as chapters 50-51 announce.

Egypt

Egypt was a world power whose dominance ended during the service of Jeremiah. Pharaoh Necho controlled the kings of Judah for a time but was decisively beaten by Nebuchadnezzar in the battle of Carchemish in 605, thus ending for nearly a century Egypt's power in the Near East. When the rebellious and headstrong Jews fled to Egypt under Johanan after the fall of Jerusalem, Pharaoh Hophra was king over Egypt. The LORD told the Jews not to trust in Hophra, for the LORD was going to hand him over to his enemies (44:30). It was also to Pharaoh Hophra that Zedekiah had appealed for help when the Babylonians threatened Jerusalem (37:5,7). Jeremiah spoke against Egypt in chapter 46.

III. Jeremiah's message of law

Jeremiah's message was primarily one of judgment. This was not because the LORD was unloving towards his people, but rather their actions and their persistent rebellion against the LORD brought upon the Israelites the just punishment for their sins. Accordingly, Jeremiah has several recurring messages of the LORD to bring to the people of Judah.

First, Jeremiah reminded the people of their sin and urged repentance. "Return, faithless Israel," declares the LORD, "I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful," declares the LORD, "I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me," declares the LORD," (3:12-13). Jeremiah repeats this call to repentance in 6:26, 7:5ff, 26:13 and 36:3.

In his condemnation of Judah's sin and in the prophecy of destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, the LORD makes it very clear that the people are the ones responsible for the disaster to come. They cannot try blaming someone else. They, the people of Judah, are to blame. Jeremiah gives many examples of this: "*Your own conduct and actions* have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is!" (4:18); "*Your wrongdoings* have kept these away; *your sins* have deprived you of good," (5:25); "And if you ask yourself, 'Why has this happened to me?'—it is because of *your many sins* that your skirts have been torn off and your body mistreated," (13:22); "Through *your own fault* you will lose the inheritance I gave you," (17:4); "*You* have brought harm on yourselves," (25:7b); "Because of *your great guilt and many sins* I have done these things to you," (30:15b).

No matter what confusion came during the siege of the Babylonians, the people of Judah could have been certain of why disaster befell them. Even the Babylonians saw that the sins of Judah led to their downfall. Nebuzaradan told Jeremiah, "All this happened because *you people sinned* against the LORD and did not obey him," (40:3b). Indeed, the guilt of Judah was great.

Jeremiah listed many instances when the people had not obeyed the LORD or listened to him. Jeremiah spoke of how the people broke the covenant made with the LORD (11:1-17), a covenant that brought curses for those who did not keep it. He frequently mentioned Judah's addiction to idolatry. In 2:11,13 the LORD said, "Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols...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." Repeatedly Israel indulged in idolatry, of trusting in "broken cisterns" rather than the "spring of living water." Jeremiah had to warn them again and again of the consequences of their actions, but they would not listen. "You said, 'It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them,'" (2:25); "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?" (8:19b); also 3:6-

10; 7:22-26; 32:29. When people wondered about the great destruction inflicted upon Judah, they would know that it was because the people broke the covenant with the LORD and worshipped other gods (16:10-13; 22:8-9; 44:2-3,8, 17-19, 25-27).

Of particular note here is the horrible worship at the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, (condemned in 7:30-34; 19:5-6; 32:35). This was a place of human sacrifice where people threw their children into the fire as offerings to Baal or Molech. The extreme nature of this sin is shown by the LORD's comment on it in all three instances cited. In each case he says that he never commanded anything like this sacrifice, not did it enter his mind at all to command such a thing. The phrase "nor did it enter my mind" only occurs in the Old Testament in these three instances, highlighting the unique nature of this sin.

Another example of Judah's stubborn sinfulness is found in chapter 34. Jerusalem was under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, and King Zedekiah made a covenant with all the people of Jerusalem to free all the Hebrew slaves. This was something they should have done a long time ago, for through Moses the LORD had commanded that Hebrew slaves be freed every seventh year in memory of their slavery in Egypt. Finally the citizens of Jerusalem did something the LORD wanted them to do. They set the slaves free. But then we read, "Afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again," (34:11). When it looked like God was going to punish them, the Israelites were ready to do right. But when the Babylonian siege lifted temporarily and the Israelites thought they might escape, they went right back to their evil ways. Jeremiah brought to them the LORD's response: "Therefore, this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the LORD—'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth," (34:17).

A third example of Judah's rejection of the Word of the LORD is how Judah refused to surrender to Babylon. God had warned them of the disaster to come (34:21-22), and repeatedly promised the people that if they surrendered to Babylon, they would survive. "This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; he will escape with his life," (21:8-9). Jeremiah was told to bring this same message to "Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon," (27:3), all who had come to Zedekiah. "If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I destroy it by his hand," (27:8); "Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live," (27:17b). Jeremiah again brought this message specifically to King Zedekiah, saying for the LORD, "If you fight against the Babylonians, you will not succeed," (32:5). The good of the whole city of Jerusalem depended on the actions of Zedekiah, as the LORD said, "If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from their hands," (38:17-18). In chapter 52 we hear how Zedekiah tried to escape (vv.7-8) and how Nebuchadnezzar captured him, killed his sons before him and put out Zedekiah's eyes before imprisoning him for life (v.9-11). Zedekiah had refused to obey the LORD, and he suffered for it.

But the Israelites accused Jeremiah of preaching a "traitorous" message. Jer. 38:4 shows the officials' response to Jeremiah: "This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin," (38:4). How wrong these men were! Rather than heeding God's saving Word, the officials encouraged Judah to remain insolent. And, of course, Judah did not obey the message Jeremiah brought them.

A major reason they did not listen was because they felt secure because of the temple—"This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" (7:4). The people superstitiously held to the temple as a magical means of protection. As long as they had the temple, they thought they were safe. But God reminded them that he saw their evil actions. He directed their attention

to Shiloh (7:12) where once the tabernacle resided until God punished the people because of their sin. What happened once can happen again.

Tragically, the people of Judah refused to learn from their mistakes. They had been warned not to fight against Babylon, or Jerusalem would be destroyed. They fought, and Nebuchadnezzar captured them and burned down Jerusalem. As mentioned above, in the days after Jerusalem's fall, through Jeremiah the LORD warned Johanan and the survivors not to go to Egypt. The people made pious sounding promises: "Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God...so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the LORD our God," (40:5-6). The LORD's clear answer was blessing for them if they stay in the land of Judah, and cursing for them if they went to Egypt (40:10-18). What was the response of the people? "Azariah son of Hoshaiiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, 'You are lying! The LORD our God has not sent you to say, "You must not go to Egypt to settle there." But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon,'" (43:2-3). The LORD's response to such disobedience was to again bring destruction upon the people. "I am determined to bring disaster on you and to destroy all Judah...they will all perish in Egypt; they will fall by the sword or die from famine...None of the remnant of Judah who have gone to live in Egypt will escape or survive to return to the land of Judah, to which they long to return and live; none will return except a few fugitives," (44:11,12,14). Egypt itself also came under condemnation from the LORD in chapter 46.

There are only a few bright spots of obedience recorded by Jeremiah. For example, in chapter 35 the LORD used the Recabite clan as an example for the people. They refused to drink alcohol because their forefather Jonadab son of Recab commanded them never to drink wine, and they kept that command. The LORD lamented that his people continually refused to listen to him and obey his commands, though he spoke to them again and again by his prophets. Then the LORD blessed the Recabites for their faithfulness. Another hint of obedience on the part of the people is found in the letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon (chapter 29). The LORD urged them to settle down, build homes, plant gardens, and even pray for the prosperity of Babylon, for the fortunes of Babylon would affect them.³ At least some of the people finally listened to the LORD. For one, Ezekiel (Eze. 8:1) lived in his own home. But such examples of obedience are few and far between.

Another message Jeremiah frequently brought was condemnation against false prophets. While Jeremiah risked the penalties for treason by telling the people to surrender, there were plenty of men willing "in the name of the LORD" to predict good times and blessings. "A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way," (5:30-31); "Then the LORD said to me, 'The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds...I will pour out on them the calamity they deserve,'" (14:14,16c); see also 23:16-40; 27:14-15, 16-18; 28:5-8, 15-17; 29:8-9, 24-32.

One danger of false prophets is their refusal to warn sinners and preach God's law to the unrepentant. "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say when there is no peace," (6:14; 8:11). Notice what the LORD has to say about what a true prophet would do in contrast to what the false prophets were doing: "If they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and *would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds,*" (23:22). But instead we read, "They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness," (23:14b). God said he would punish them: "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!...Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," (23:1-2).

³ The false prophet Shemaiah spoke against Jeremiah for telling the exiles to settle down in Babylon; the LORD in turn punished Shemaiah for prophesying lies in his name (29:28, 32).

IV. Jeremiah's message of gospel

The preceding was only a portion of Law that Jeremiah proclaimed to the people of Judah. That is what their stubborn hearts needed to hear. Yet Jeremiah also presented beautiful Gospel, particularly in chapters 30-33, but there are Gospel promises scattered throughout the book. The LORD promised restoration to the remnant of his people: "Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them... They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart," (24:5-7); "For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you," (29:11-12); 3:14-18; 12:15-16; 16:14-15; 46:27-28.

With great beauty the LORD described the forgiveness which he would give to his people: "'In those days, at that time,' declares the LORD, 'search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare,'" (50:20). How astounding is the love God shows his people! His anger over the people's sins was great, but his love was greater. God's wrath towards the sins of Judah was not satisfied by sending them into exile; rather it was stilled because of the work of Christ, so that now this message of forgiveness can be proclaimed to all people.

The Gospel core of the book, however, is found in chapters 30-33. As is typical for the prophets, Jeremiah blends pictures of physical restoration from the exile with pictures of the kingdom of Christ. They will plant again, but they will also serve "the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them," (30:9). Now God's people clearly see his love and faithfulness: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness," (31:3); "So you will be my people, and I will be your God," (30:22); "'Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,' declares the LORD," (31:20); "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them... I will rejoice in doing them good," (32:40, 41).

Also significant in these chapters is the LORD's promise of a "new covenant." It would not be like the old covenant, which was repeatedly broken as Israel failed to fulfill its side of the agreement; rather it would be a unilateral covenant based on the forgiveness (31:34) Christ has won for the world. Blessing would flow from this covenant for all God's people. In a prophecy of the coming Messiah, God also promised a "righteous Branch," (33:15-16). The LORD then guaranteed all these promises and the covenant, saying that they shall last as long as night and day continue. How great is the blessing of our God!

V. Preaching on Jeremiah

Jeremiah's powerful message is not neglected in the Lectionary, but neither is it exhausted. There are many excellent texts from Jeremiah not chosen for regular use. Here is a brief listing of how the church has included the words of Jeremiah in the church year.

Verses	Church Year	Theme
Jeremiah 1:4-10	Epiphany 4 C; Pentecost 6 O	The call of Jeremiah
Jeremiah 7:1-7	Epiphany 8 C	Repent of your sins and don't rely on the temple
Jeremiah 8:4-7	Last Judgment O	The people refuse to repent
Jeremiah 11:18-20	Pentecost 18 B	The Lord saved Jeremiah from the plots of enemies
Jeremiah 15:15-21	Pentecost 15 A	Joys and sorrows of a prophet of the LORD
Jeremiah 17:5-8	Epiphany 6 C	Trust in the LORD rather than man
Jeremiah 18:1-11	Reformation Sunday B	The LORD as potter can do as he pleases
Jeremiah 20:7-13	Pentecost 5 A	Troubles of a prophet; the LORD's protection

Jeremiah 23:1-6	Pentecost 9 B	Warnings of false shepherds; Righteous Branch
Jeremiah 23:2-6	Christ the King C	Righteous Branch to rule for David
Jeremiah 23:16-24	Pentecost 9 O	Warnings against the false prophets
Jeremiah 23:23-29	Pentecost 13 C	Warnings against false, and urging for true, prophets
Jeremiah 26:1-6	Last Judgment C	Jeremiah preaching repentance
Jeremiah 26:1-9, 12-15	St. Stephen	Threatened with death for speaking for the LORD
Jeremiah 26:7-16	St. Simon and St. Jude	Threatened for speaking, but recognized as prophet
Jeremiah 26:8-15	Lent 2 C	Threatened with death for speaking for the LORD
Jeremiah 28:5-9	Pentecost 6 A	Prophet recognized by fulfillment of prophecies
Jeremiah 29:11-14	Easter 6 O	Promises of blessing and restoration
Jeremiah 31:7-9	Pentecost 23 B	Glorious restoration by the LORD
Jeremiah 31:15-17	Holy Innocents	Voice weeping in Ramah
Jeremiah 31:15-20	Christmas 2 O	Repentance and forgiveness
Jeremiah 31:31-34	Lent 5 B; Reformation Sunday C	The LORD's new covenant with his people
Jeremiah 33:14-16	Advent 1 C	Righteous Branch
Jeremiah 33:14-18	Advent 1 O	Righteous Branch to rule for David

The LORD through Jeremiah shows himself to be a master of symbols and visual aids for the people. At his call, Jeremiah saw an almond branch, for the LORD was “watching to see that my word is fulfilled,” and a boiling pot tilted from the north, for “from the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land,” (1:11-14). A ruined belt symbolized the pride of Judah and Jerusalem who would become as useless as that belt (13:1-11); a visit to a potter (18:1-10) served as a reminder that the LORD can shape the future of nations according to whether they listen to his word or not; a smashed jar represented the way the nation of Judah would be destroyed (19:1-12); two baskets of figs represented those who trusted in the LORD and those who rejected the LORD’s word (24); Jeremiah wore a yoke to clearly show what the LORD’s will was for the nations in regard to Babylon (27); Jeremiah bought land (32) to be a sort of firstfruit of the activity that would occur after the restoration of the exiles; buried stones in Egypt served as a warning to the Jews there that one day Nebuchadnezzar, whom they thought that they had escaped, would catch them in Egypt and there bring upon them the punishment that they had earned (43:9-13). Because they are such vivid sections, these illustrations of Jeremiah would make excellent texts, though most of them would require the importation of Gospel.

Also suitable for preaching are any of the many Gospel sections of Jeremiah noted above. But there are other worthwhile texts throughout Jeremiah. One such text which works quite well homiletically is 3:6-13, which has a condemnation of sin, a call to repentance, and a promise of blessing from the LORD. Another excellent text that would be quite suitable for graduation/confirmation is Jer. 9:23-24: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.”

An idea for a series from Jeremiah is to look at one of the repeating themes; namely the picture of shepherd. About one quarter of all Old Testament references to shepherd(s) is found in Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks condemnation of those who were false shepherds of the people—50:6,44 (49:19); 10:21; 12:10; 22:22; 25:34-36. God promised to send faithful shepherds: 3:15; 17:16—or even be that Shepherd himself (31:10). Chapter 23:1-4 forms an excellent unit by itself on the Shepherd theme, leading up to a prophecy of the Righteous Branch of David in verses 5 and 6.

Another idea for a series would be to look at a number of the kings of Judah in Jeremiah and see their attitude towards the word of the LORD—Josiah shows love and obedience for the Word; Jehoiakim shows opposition and rejection to the Word; Zedekiah shows a hesitant attitude that leads to destruction.

In short, there is much excellent material in Jeremiah. The LORD speaks his Law in all its severity and his Gospel in all its sweetness. Let us not neglect this book in our reading, our preaching or in our teaching of God’s people.

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